**Problem Statement**

In 2030, tensions in the South China Sea have escalated to a near-crisis state, threatening regional stability and U.S. national interests. China has intensified its coercive strategies to assert territorial claims in the Spratly Islands, leveraging military posturing, economic influence, and information operations to undermine the sovereignty of neighboring nations and challenge international norms. These actions disrupt freedom of navigation, jeopardize critical global trade routes, and erode the credibility of U.S. security commitments in the INDOPACOM region.

Despite efforts by U.S. allies and partners to counter Chinese aggression, regional responses remain fragmented and insufficient. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) struggles to present a unified stance due to divergent national priorities and economic dependencies on China. Concurrently, China exploits these divisions to establish de facto control over disputed territories through militarization, artificial island construction, and enforcement of its self-declared maritime boundaries.

The operational environment is further complicated by the presence of non-state actors, such as maritime militias and transnational criminal organizations, which exploit the instability for illicit activities. Additionally, misinformation campaigns and cyberattacks by China seek to weaken regional trust in the United States while fostering narratives favorable to Beijing’s strategic objectives.

U.S. INDOPACOM faces the challenge of aligning its actions with the Joint Strategic Campaign Plan objectives while preventing escalation to armed conflict. The desired end state involves restoring a stable, rules-based regional order, preserving freedom of navigation, and ensuring the sovereignty of Indo-Pacific nations. However, achieving this requires overcoming significant obstacles, including the absence of a comprehensive multinational strategy, limited access to critical bases and logistics nodes, and a constrained political and economic environment that complicates efforts to mobilize and sustain coalition responses.

The problem, therefore, is how to synchronize U.S. and allied capabilities to deter Chinese aggression, strengthen partner capacity, and restore regional stability without provoking further escalation or undermining international norms.

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