



# **U.S. Military Involvement in the South China Sea: A Policy Perspective**



**Jack Beery - Chief Senior Policy Analyst - TPI**

[jackbeery11@gmail.com](mailto:jackbeery11@gmail.com)

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**Highlights** ➤ South China Sea (SCS) aggression disputes ➤ Chinese expansionism hurt surrounding countries' domestic policy, hurt US interest ➤ U.S. respond through military action benefit policy ➤ US respond through diplomatic action in region ➤ Combat suppression + communism.

**Keywords:** China, United States, U.S, South China Sea, Foreign Policy

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**Abstract:** As the United States continues to approach a standoff with aggressive countries like the People's Republic of China and Russia, policy solutions need to be developed in order to combat the threats to hegemony that these countries pose to the United State's western allies. The goal of this paper is to discuss possible solutions in order to resolve the conflict appearing in the South China Sea in the status quo. It is found that through both diplomatic and militaristic power the United States can drastically improve its current position as an ally of countries residing in the South China Sea. Diplomatic actions such as peace treaties and diplomatic meetings are found to drastically increase collaboration with countries, while military action effectively prompts fear and retaliation, but also expands relations with the countries the action country is seeking to protect in this situation.

## Introduction

**Background:** In 1949, Communist Party head Mao Zedong led the charge and rose to power as the Leader of the newly established People's Republic of China, beginning a new era of relations that would have drastic effects on global politics. The fleeing previous government landed on an island thirteen hundred miles away from the coast, settling the Republic of China and starting a conflict in itself before the mainland's hierarchical authority was even finished setting itself up.

When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, the Communist Chinese supported the similarly communist North Korean government, sending waves of conflict through its western counterparts, and planting the seeds for future strife. Even after the war had reached an end, and a peace agreement was secured between all participating countries, strife still continued out of not only spite, but the United State's newfound call to action in the fight against communism

globally. As the United States built up weapons on its own soil as well as that of its crucial allies, so too did the communist “red” nations, headed by world superpowers Russia and China. This great power competition would continue for decades into modern day, where we would see this same conflict take on new technological developments as well as reflect new ideologies that are telling of our time<sup>1</sup>.

Without proper policy, though, this conflict will no doubt continue to escalate to the point of no return, at which point the United States and its rivals will have to determine which drastic action to take. As such, it is important to investigate possible solutions to implement long before this action needs to be taken, in order to maintain peace, security, and prosperity globally.

**United States Interest in the South China Sea:** The main facets of the modern United States international agenda involve the search for democratic protection, upholding of international law, as well as international industrial capability and energy production<sup>2 3</sup>. Each represents a large goal for the United States to achieve on individual timeframes set by the intensity of the issue at hand, or by how fast the United States can actually respond or implement.

**Regional Stability:** Regional stability in its generalized form is what all previously listed benefits that the United States gains stem from. When U.S. allies in the region experience regional instability, these benefits are nullified by the shifting of assets by these allies to protect their own domestic agendas. However, United States allies are not the only entities heavily involved in the U.S. economy.

Countries such as China are not only heavily involved in the United States economy, but are to some degree reliant on some of the goods produced within

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<sup>1</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. (2023, February). *Timeline: U.s.-china relations*. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved March 1, 2023, from <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>

<sup>2</sup> While democratic protection and the upholding of international law are mainly global incentives for the United States, both industrial capability and energy exploration and production are very domestically beneficial goals, as pursuing them directly benefits the United States economically.

<sup>3</sup> Glaser, B. S. (2012, April). *Armed clash in the South China Sea*. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved March 1, 2023, from <https://www.cfr.org/report/armed-clash-south-china-sea>

the United States' national borders as well as the borders of U.S. allies that may reside within the South China Sea region. China, though, as a malevolent actor within the region, in certain cases values its own sovereignty and regional policy over its economic ties with western countries such as the United States. With its large and still developing economy, it is clear to see that China may not remain the economically reliant country it has been in the past. Specifically, though, this economic connection as it stands will be almost impossible to break completely, with the United States' reliance on Chinese manufacturing being one of the largest trade relationships globally<sup>4</sup>.

Other malevolent actors or unstable entities such as North Korea also need to be taken into consideration. North Korea not only has large economic ties to both China and Russia, having developed missile systems and other large scalable weaponry and yet still having a significant amount of their population struggling in poverty, but also has a very weak government structure based on preemptive decision making that could endanger U.S. assets and allies<sup>5</sup>.

With all of these entities struggling for power in this region, it is important to consider the ripple effects military or even diplomatic action may have on the stability of the region.

**Democratic Protection:** The United States as a large western democratic superpower, has always found international intervention as one of its main foreign policy objectives. Countries across the world that seek to initiate or sustain a feasible democratic government can find themselves under the care, protection, and aid of western countries such as the United States to help them do so. This is not something that is particularly new to the United States foreign policy agenda, having sought to have completed the same goal in countries like Vietnam, Korea, and Afghanistan.

However, the practical policy implemented in these past situations has always been to either fund and aid a resistance movement seeking to institute a democratic government, or instead directly send United States military forces to the area to ensure a democratic takeover. Crucially, though, every single

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<sup>4</sup> Deng, Yulong, and Feng Pan. "Dependence Analysis of Sino-US Trade." *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, IOP Publishing, Mar. 2019, p. 042093. Crossref, doi:10.1088/1742-6596/1176/4/042093.

<sup>5</sup> French, Paul. *North Korea: State of Paranoia: A Modern History*. Zed Books, 2014.

example previously listed had either ended in a stalemate and peace treaty, or a major loss on the side of the United States. As such, new policy action either needs to be focused on military stalemate before practical combat can occur, or diplomatic discussion and reclamation.

Many democratic nations that seek to stay democratic or become even more stable exist within the South China Sea in the status quo. The Republic of China, often referred to as Taiwan, is one of the most prominent democratic nations in the South China Sea region, representing an oppressed and endangered democracy by constant threat of Chinese expansionism. Specifically, recent growth in Chinese military power (China has expanded its military power in terms of growing air to air combat capability with the creation of next generation fighter aircraft, growing sea capability with its new South China Sea naval fleet, and growing land capacity with the increased number of soldiers and vehicles within the People's Liberation Army [PLA]) has threatened the sovereignty of the nation of Taiwan<sup>6</sup>. Other democratic nations within the South China Sea already have a long history of collaboration with the United States, and are still being put in the hot seat by China. Japan is the most prominent, having long endured both ties with the United States, and antagonistic claims from China<sup>7</sup>.

The Japanese government is also one of the most important governments to keep intact in the South China Sea region. Critically, the Japanese government has the ability to influence regional politics (aside from China and North Korea) because of its large political, economic, and military backing from the United States<sup>8</sup>. If Chinese expansionism is allowed to continue, it may threaten the sovereignty of nations such as Japan and Taiwan, and with it, threaten the stability of the region.

North Korea again shows itself to be unpredictable in a way that poses a threat to all nations and assets in the South China Sea. Although it has a much smaller military force and missile command than that of a country like the United States, its unstable leadership and government make sure that any proactive military action is possible.

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<sup>6</sup> Ross, R. S. (2005). Assessing the China Threat. *The National Interest*, 81, 81–87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42897576>

<sup>7</sup> Mochizuki, M. M. (2007). Japan's shifting strategy toward the rise of China. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30(4-5), 739–776. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390701431832>

<sup>8</sup> Yuzawa, T. (2007). *Japan's Security Policy and the ASEAN Regional Forum: The Search for Multilateral Security in the Asia-Pacific* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203964972>



**Upholding of International Law:** As members of NATO, The United Nations, and various other international peace and trade organizations, the United States holds itself to be a superpower nation in international policing and intervention, maintaining peace while also pushing its western democratic agenda on nations that may not align with it. The South China Sea holds many opportunities for the United States to remain a powerhouse of policing while also maintaining stability in the region.

Continued aggression from China into the South China Sea region has been characterized by increased naval force near unowned territory, unprompted missile tests without warning, and condemnation of regional military operations from other surrounding countries<sup>9</sup>. However, much of this aggression from China has been conducted in areas that are protected under the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS). This provides the opportunity for countries like the United States to step in and protect international law by conducting missions in the area. These missions practically focus on flying planes or steering ships through contested territory that China claims as their own, but in reality are international waters. Doing this allows the United States to keep China somewhat in check, but China continues to ignore UNCLOS and expand their naval and air capabilities into a greater portion of the South China Sea. As such, the United States needs to either increase their own naval presence, or return to large diplomatic proceedings to calm the conflict.

**International Industrial Capability:** As the United States and other western countries continue to remain heads of the industrial world, these countries (and the companies and corporations that reside within them) continue to seek cheaper areas of production, as well as regions that apply well to production logistics (IE: Flat land for factories, cheap labor, ease of transportation, etc.). Many of these areas are heavily influenced by the United States foreign policy, as they seek to protect their assets and investments.

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<sup>9</sup> Santoro, David. "Beijing's South China Sea Aggression Is a Warning to Taiwan : China's Salami-slicing Tactics Can Be Countered—if Taipei Stays Smart." Foreign Policy, Sept. 2019, [www.viet-studies.net/kinhte/SCSeaWarningTaiwan\\_FP.pdf](http://www.viet-studies.net/kinhte/SCSeaWarningTaiwan_FP.pdf).



Many production areas exist within the South China Sea (SCS) region that are crucial to the United States economy. The Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam are all crucial centers of production (usually textile) for the United States and its allies. These countries also unfortunately exist in close proximity to previously mentioned unstable actors such as China. Chinese expansionism not only threatens the domestic agendas and citizens of these countries, but the United States also threatens its investments. Specifically, when Chinese expansionism in the SCS region threatens industrial production, prices of production go up (wages), while job retention goes down (people leaving jobs to avoid danger)<sup>10</sup>. United States economic interest in the region prompts military or diplomatic responses to resolve the situation.

**Energy Production:** Countries that reside in the SCS region have many unique natural resources that provide themselves to beneficial technologies in the energy sector<sup>11</sup>. Taiwan specifically is home to many rare earth metals that can be used in semiconductor manufacturing<sup>12</sup>. Semiconductors pose a great deal of potential and importance to the United States and its allies going forward, as semiconductors are able to power capable technologies that can be used in almost every industrial sector.

One of the most important industries for the future is green energy production. Semiconductors are one of the key components needed to produce and install solar panels, wind turbines, hydroelectric power, and other types of renewable energy systems<sup>13</sup>. As the world at large approaches a climate-affected future, solutions need to be developed to combat it.

Chinese expansionism into the SCS region inhibits a green future by limiting production of industry (prev.), and in doing so limiting production and

<sup>10</sup> Ba, A. D. (2003). China and Asean: Renavigating Relations for a 21st-century Asia. *Asian Survey*, 43(4), 622–647. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2003.43.4.622>

<sup>11</sup> The United States Should Prioritize Energy Cooperation With Taiwan - Center for American Progress. (2022, January 19). Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-united-states-should-prioritize-energy-cooperation-with-taiwan/>

<sup>12</sup> Tsai, T., & Cheng, B. (2006). The Silicon Dragon. *RePEc: Research Papers in Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781847203137>

<sup>13</sup> P. Leteinturier and C. Mueller, "Power Semiconductors – the Keys for a Future Green Mobility," 2020 32nd International Symposium on Power Semiconductor Devices and ICs (ISPSD), Vienna, Austria, 2020, pp. 5-9, doi: 10.1109/ISPSD46842.2020.9170040.

trade of semiconductors which are needed for green energy system production. In order to create a green future globally, Chinese expansionism into the SCS region needs to be stopped.

## Capabilities ||

**U.S. Regional Capabilities:** The United States' ability to compensate or dominate in the SCS region is one of the key prerequisites for enacting policy solutions. Before the U.S. can actually inhibit regional instability, they need the assets and power to do so. As the U.S. has one of the largest military forces in the world, it seems like this will not be a hard task. The United States' military forces are becoming comparable to that of unstable or rogue actors such as China and Russia, with next generation military technology being put to the test for possible future combat. As the United States has wide access to a variety of different countermeasures within the region, many different options are available for what action can be taken. However, in order to guarantee de-escalation and not increased escalation, the United States should focus on diplomatic measures combined with routine military exercises in order to keep rogue actors in check.

**Naval Capability:** The United States Navy has a wide array of operational abilities and measures able to be taken specifically in the SCS region. United States Naval power has historically been very strong in the region, with not as many naval bases in the region, but a strong presence nevertheless<sup>14</sup>. In modern day the United States has a much stronger presence even compared to past precedence, with large bases in allied territories that allow the United States to conduct military exercises in international waters that force other rogue countries to respect those same international waters set out in the UNCLOS treaty. Specifically, the United States operates twenty-three naval bases on coastal

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<sup>14</sup> HeinOnline. "About | HeinOnline." *HeinOnline*, 8 Mar. 2021, [heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/fora15&div=46&id=&page=](https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/fora15&div=46&id=&page=).

japanese harbors in order to carry out these operations, in addition to the seven national military defense bases that Japan operates themselves<sup>1516</sup>.

## Operational Perspectives / Conclusions |||

**Operational Suggestions:** Given the large Naval presence of the United States within the South China Sea region, and the pursuit of peace rather than conflict and injustice, the best pursuit for tension resolution lies within a combination of diplomatic procedure and naval intimidation. As China continues to expand their own military forces, a US response should be similar, but with a growth in presence in the SCS region to match. Aside from routine UNCLOS checking procedures and practice operations, the US should also increase investment, research, and development into the creation of new naval technology and the creation of more ships to add to the already existing and already large naval fleet. Doing so would allow the US to increase its combat and defense capabilities in the SCS region while also maintaining its already strong presence in already operated areas.

By keeping the Navy's current standing strong while also expanding its capabilities into the SCS, the US would be able to effectively establish a larger military anchor than it already has in the SCS region. In addition to a naval expansion and measured response, an aerial response may also be used. A stationing of multiple fighter and/or first response radar aircraft at a nearby base (IE: Guam, Japan, Philippines) could be used in addition to a naval response to gauge even more information about China's whereabouts and strategic strategies, in order to gain even more of an advantage and to discourage Chinese action in the first place.

<sup>15</sup> "US Military Bases in Japan | 23 US Bases | MilitaryBases.com." *Military Bases*, 7 Mar. 2018, [militarybases.com/overseas/japan](http://militarybases.com/overseas/japan).

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Forces Japan. "About USFJ." *U.S. Forces Japan*, [www.usfj.mil/About-USFJ](http://www.usfj.mil/About-USFJ).

In order to accomplish these tasks, a significant price tag may be associated with this development and stationing. However, this price would ultimately be warranted due to the easing of tensions via military “Big Stick Diplomacy” and the showing off of the US’s military might.

On the other hand, a more diplomatic or soft power action from the United States would be helpful as a secondary policy or secondary plan if necessary. By increasing the number of diplomatic trips to China, the US would be able to calm political tensions while increasing military dissuasion tactics.

A combination of both of these tactics will allow the United States to ease tensions with China while gaining a stronger hold on the South China Sea Region, getting a better grip on the industries, governments, and people that reside within.

While this very well may be within the status quo, the United States should also prepare itself for a conflict-esque situation in which very many people could die, as both a result of conflict within the south china sea as well as a possible invasion of Taiwan.

As such, to maintain the sovereignty of Taiwan and to protect US interests therein, the United States has a variety of operational moves to make in anticipation (or more likely, premonition) of Chinese attacks.

The most beneficial to all parties involved is the soft option of increased trilateral diplomacy between China, Taiwan, and the United States. Ceasing of freedom of navigation operations at their current operating capacity and instead focusing more funds and resources into focused diplomatic efforts different than those currently held will be the best strategy for moving forward with decreasing tensions and building relationships in the region.

Diplomatic talks have been on a steady decline between the two nations, with more and more conclusions being drawn from research, innovation, and military might than from soft power alone as it has been in the past. This changes comes at the cost of sacrificing that same soft power in favor of more military strength too strong arm the other into beneficial policy. This approach not only unnecessarily risks war and conflict over use of militaries, but also becomes less productive in any way shape or form compared to sit down talks between diplomats and negotiators. As such, it is our recommendation that both the nations of China and the United States take increased responsibility for

diplomatic efforts and solutions for the conflict between them and concurrently in the South China Sea going forward.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## **Notes on Contributor**

Jack Beery is a Senior at Plano Senior High School in Plano, Texas, and a rising freshman undergraduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park. He plans to study Government & Politics and double minor in International Relations and Journalism. He is a co-founder and the Chief Senior Policy Analyst of The Pranav Institute.

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