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Claimant Tactics in the South China Sea: By the Numbers

BY CHRISTOPHER YUNG AND PATRICK MCNULTY

Christopher Yung and Patrick McNulty, former researchers at National Defense University in Washington, explain that “The Chinese argue that the U.S. ‘pivot’ to Asia emboldened China’s rivals to act provocatively in the region, thus triggering Chinese actions... [but this] is not borne out by the data.”

In 2012 the Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University embarked on a year-long effort to examine the tactics of the rival claimants to the South China Sea maritime dispute. NDU collected data on and categorized the types of tactics being employed by the various claimants between 1995 and 2013 through an extensive open source internet search. The data was then entered into a comprehensive data base and the results analyzed to discern patterns of claimant behavior. The results provide important findings as tensions in the South China Sea continue to be acute.

The first noteworthy finding is that China is the most extensive user of the tactics identified by this research. In terms of sheer volume of numbers of actions, China accounted for over 500 actions dating back to 1995. The Philippines registered just over half of that number with just over 300 actions. Vietnam undertook about 150 actions, and Taiwan, about the same, whereas Malaysia took just over fifty and Brunei registered the smallest number of actions with fewer than twenty. China is also the most active user of both military and paramilitary actions to protect its maritime territorial claims. The research found 89 and 59 uses of military and paramilitary actions respectively in support of China’s maritime territorial claims between 1995 and 2013. This comprised 55% of the total incidents of the use of military and paramilitary actions in support of maritime claims in the South China Sea. The Philippines registered 43 and 17 uses of military and paramilitary actions in the same period and Vietnam registered under 15 combined uses of military and paramilitary actions in the same time period. We recorded Malaysia as using military and paramilitary actions 9 times and Brunei 5 times. Taiwan was recorded to have used paramilitary actions 10 times and the military 22 times. In evaluating this data it is important to recall that this is unclassified data. It is likely that many more military and paramilitary actions have taken place and these have not been publicly recorded. The one category of action where China’s actions are exceeded by one of its rivals is in the legal sphere. The Philippines initiated sizably more legal actions than did China between 1995 and 2013.

One of the persistent topics of hot debate is: what is the origin of the tensions in the South China Sea? The Chinese argue that the U.S. “pivot” to Asia emboldened China’s rivals to act provocatively in the region, thus triggering Chinese actions. U.S. observers have argued that in the 2009 timeframe (prior to the “Rebalance to Asia” policy announced in 2011) China started acting aggressively. The data bears out this latter assertion. The Chinese claim that it was responding to greater aggressiveness of its rivals is not borne out by the data . Although the Philippines registered more actions in

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2008 than in previous years, the specific actions recorded do not suggest they would prompt China to ramp up military/paramilitary actions in the South China Sea.

When the research team examined both the ADMM+ and the DoC/CoC negotiations it found a wide array of diplomatic activity being employed. China vigorously pursued an approach that we labeled “Coalition Diplomacy” in which it either sought to build coalitions or break up coalitions against it (Vietnam and Philippines seeking to have ASEAN issue a joint statement identifying the South China Sea as a security problem needing resolution). China was eventually successful in preventing the issuing of such a communique. The smaller states of Malaysia and Brunei actively supported ASEAN statements and positions on the territorial disputes, even though they were reluctant to specifically state these positions themselves. All of the claimants actively pursued “dispute management” diplomacy by agreeing in principle that maritime territorial disputes should be resolved peacefully, but China would not agree to a binding code of conduct.

A number of U.S. policy implications are derived from this research. The broad policy instruments that China seems to have been willing to use to advance China’s claims suggests that the U.S. must be prepared to be equally nuanced in its policy response. At a minimum, a greater inter-agency approach to U.S. management of the South China Sea appears to be in order. Also, given the Chinese use of a wide range of tools to advance China’s claims, the United States and its partners in the region will need to think through the possible repercussions and benefits of using a wide range of policy instruments of their own as sticks as well as carrots; or to put it another way, whether there is something to be gained from horizontal escalation if China’s behavior becomes too aggressive.

Second, and related to this first point, the U.S. may need to think carefully how it might utilize the U.S. Coast Guard as a possible response to Chinese extensive use of maritime law enforcement vessels to advance China’s claims. This policy recommendation is much more complex than it sounds because at present the U.S. Coast Guard enjoys a very good relationship with the Chinese Coast Guard and the former will not want to needlessly sacrifice the good working relationship. A third implication is that China appears to be willing to take action to bolster its position in the SCS while eroding or directly challenging U.S. credibility in the region. This strongly suggests that the United States needs to pay particularly close attention to its alliance partnerships and emerging relationships with friends in the region. It also strongly suggests that in order to forestall the erosion of U.S. credibility the United States national security establishment should internally engage in thinking through thresholds of Chinese activities, beyond which the U.S. would need to consider a more forceful response. Fourth, China appears to have one “soft spot”—legal actions. That suggests that the U.S. can and probably should be even more encouraging to put these territorial disputes before international courts and the U.S. should strongly consider directly aligning its policy stance on management of South China Sea territorial disputes directly with international law. The recent State Department paper on its legal analysis of the South China Sea claims is a solid step in this direction. Finally, since it is apparent that China’s diplomatic efforts are designed to keep the ASEAN states divided and off balance, it is in American interest to promote the exact opposite. Anything the United States can do to assist the ASEAN countries in increasing the political and diplomatic costs to Chinese intransigence is a good thing.

Christopher Yung is an independent consultant and Senior Advisor at Asia Taktik, LLC. He was formerly a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University. He can be reached at cdyung@aol.com. Patrick McNulty, at the time of writing, was a contract researcher at the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, National Defense University. He now works at the George Washington University’s Language Center. He can be reached at pmcnulty@gwmail.gwu.edu.