



**SOUTH CHINA SEA STRATEGIC SITUATION
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**Strengthening Peripheral Bases,
Promoting Forward Deterrence**
——the Analysis and Prediction of
Recent US Military Operations in the South China Sea

Chen Yong

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ABOUT SCSPI

The South China Sea is located in the world's most important shipping lane. Nearly 40% of the global trade of goods is shipped through the lane, which makes the waters crucial for global economic prosperity. The surrounding areas of the South China Sea boast the largest population density in the world. The stability and prosperity of the waters impact the fate and well-being of nearly two billion people. From 2009 to 2016, tensions over the waters escalated coupled with major incidents and crises breaking out all the time, which attracted extensive attention to the area.

Currently, all of the parties involved in the South China Sea disputes have now come to understand the significance of “shelving differences” and communication through dialogue. Under the “dual-track approach”, tensions over the waters are easing progressively. However, the root cause of the South China Sea disputes has not been entirely settled: claimants still hold different opinions about the sovereignty over islands and the delimitation of waters, and the contention over the exploitation of space and resources is becoming increasingly fierce; the competition between Chinese and US maritime strategies has come to the fore, and the South China Sea has become a major field of such contentions. Countries outside the region, such as Japan, Australia and the UK, are paying more attention to the waters with a stronger presence, which further complicates the situation. Now the future of the South China Sea holds more strategic relevance in today's world, because it not only concerns the safety and prosperity of Southeast Asia and the future of China-US relations, but could influence the strategic bearing of the entire Asia-Pacific region as well.

To continue the push for a more desirable situation in the South China Sea, we should first gather all the trends and news about the waters from an objective perspective and accurately observe the area within the parameters of its military, political, economic and environmental contexts.

With a view to maintaining and promoting the peace, stability and prosperity of the South China Sea, Peking University Institute of Ocean Research has launched the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPI). The Initiative aims to integrate intellectual resources and open source information worldwide and keep track of important actions and major policy changes of key stakeholders and other parties involved. It will provide professional data services and analysis reports to parties concerned, helping them keep competition under control, and with a view to seek partnerships.

The SCSPI is mainly funded by social donation and non-profit investment, the majority of which will be sourced from Peking University Education Foundation at the outset. We would appreciate only non-politically affiliated donations. The SCSPI sincerely invites experts and scholars, research institutes and other organizations from across the world to join us. We would also appreciate individuals, companies, institutions and international organizations willingness to share data and information with us, in accordance with the relevant laws of corresponding countries and international law.

About the Author

Chen Yong serves as assistant research fellow at the Institute of International Relations, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS). He received Ph.D. degree from Peking University. His Research interests focus on United States Navy, China-US Maritime Security and International Security. He has published a number of papers and reviews in *World Economics and Politics*, *The Journal of International Studies*, *The Journal of International Studies*, and *Lianhe Zaobao*, etc.

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Strengthening Peripheral Bases , Promoting Forward Deterrence

——the Analysis and Prediction of Recent US Troops’ Military Operations in the South China Sea

Chen Yong

Following the end of the war on terrorism, the US has shifted the focus of its national security strategy back to great-power competition and now considers China the most significant threat. Then, it becomes the top priority of US force’s global strategy to reinforce deployment in the South China Sea and surrounding areas.

US strategy documents, such as the *National Security Strategy 2017*, the *Summary of the National Defense Strategy 2018*, and *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019* show great concerns about China’s military modernization, play up China’s increased military clout in the Indo-Pacific region, and accuse China of seeking military superiority over the US in the “gray zone” of the South China Sea. In line with adjustments of the national security strategy, US military branches have proposed various operational concepts such as “distributed lethality,” “combat cloud,” and “multi-domain operations”. And the South China Sea is becoming the focal region for the US force to verify these concepts and prepare for the battlefield.

For this purpose, the US troops take measures from three aspects, i.e. strengthening peripheral military bases surrounding the South China Sea, promoting flexible deployment on the coast of the South China Sea and intensifying frontline military activities. These measures may enhance the deterrent and operational ability of the US forces to the largest extent and serve their geopolitical goals. The three categories of activities are coherent in action, correlated in logic, and make up a grand picture of US military operations in the South China Sea. It helps us to understand and estimate the *status quo* and developing trend of US troops’ operations in the South China Sea if we analyze the measures meticulously.

I . Strengthening Significantly Peripheral Military Bases of the South China Sea

With South China Sea as the center, US military bases can be divided into two types: those located along the coast and those located in peripheral areas. *The US Base Structure Report* (BSR) specifies that, among military sites owned, leased or used by US troops, only those larger than 10 acres or with a Plant Replacement Value (PRV) greater than 10 million dollars are considered as military bases, while sites failing to meet the criteria are aggregated as “Other”.¹

By these criteria, most US military bases related to South China Sea are located in peripheral areas which largely fall on the Second Island Chain, and only one — Singapore Area Coordinator— is located along the coast of the South China Sea.²Nearly all of those located in peripheral areas are established in Guam or Japan, and the US ships and planes performing military activities in the South China Sea are usually dispatched from these bases.

By the end of 2018, the number of US military personnel in active duty stationed in Japan is 56,213 and those in Guam is 6,242, increased by 25% and 48% respectively from last year.³Meanwhile, the US cut down the military personnel stationed in Spain, Bahrain, Kuwait and other countries.

Guam is an oversea territory of the US, representing a significant strategic foothold of US troops in the Pacific Ocean. During the Cold War, the US established a large complex of naval, air and Marine Corps bases in Guam, equipped with a complete set of military functions. After the year of 2010, in order to cope with China’s rising military presence, the US invested heavily to transform and upgrade facilities in Guam-based military bases, so that they can meet new demand for accommodating nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and countering ballistic missile attacks. However, the use of Guam bases indicates that the US has not considered Guam as the principal field for its military buildup.

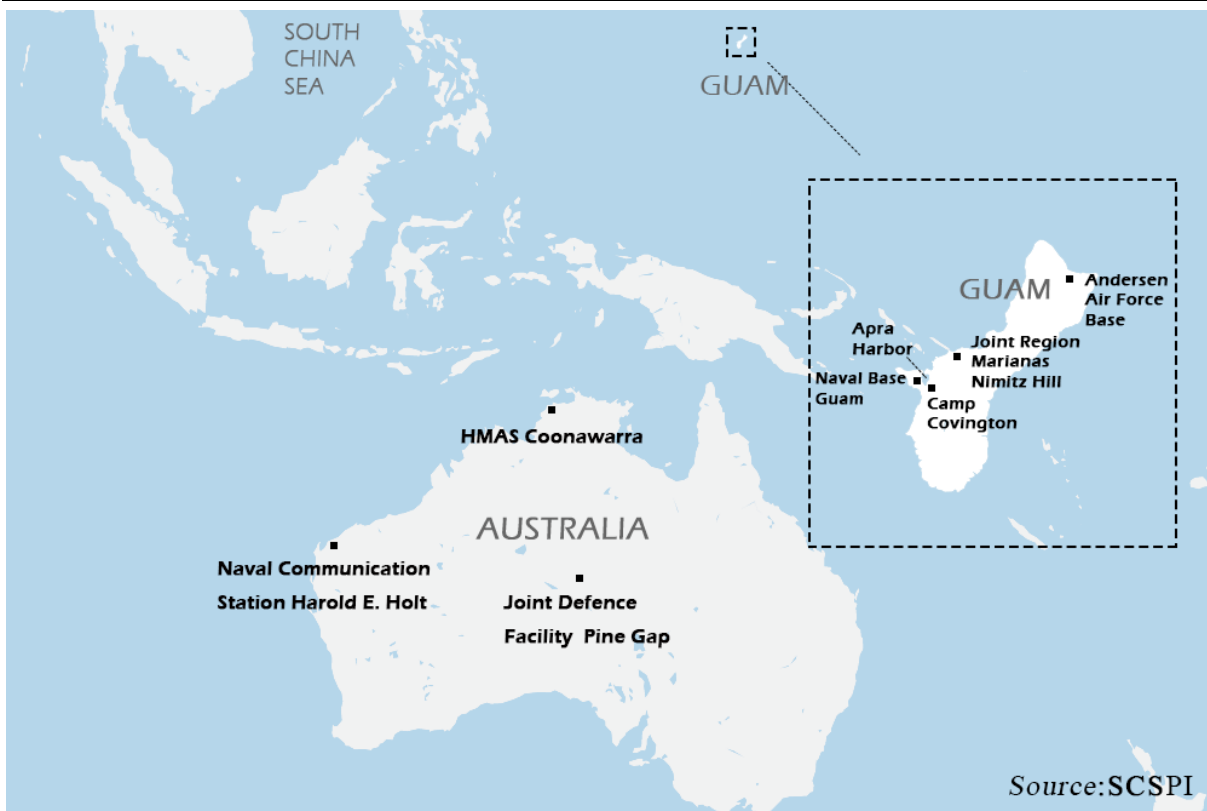


Chart 1. Distribution of US Military Bases in Guam

The Andersen Air Force Base is the only US military base in the western Pacific Ocean where strategic bombers can be deployed. Since 2004, B-52H, B-1B and B-2 bombers have taken turns to execute the Continuous Bomber Presence Mission in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region at the base.⁴ This ensures the US's frontline air force strategic deterrence capability and strike capability. Among warships in the US Seventh Fleet, only nuclear submarines and submarine tenders are based at the Apra Harbor, and other large warships dock there only for rest and supplies. Although the Naval Special Warfare Unit One (CTF-71), the Navy Expeditionary Forces Command Pacific (CTF-75) and the part of the Special Forces under the command of the Seventh Fleet are stationed at the Apra Harbor and the Camp Covington, ground forces which are largely comprised of the US Army and Marine Corps are hardly seen in Guam.



Chart 2. Distribution of the US Military Bases in Japan

As Guam is far away from the South China Sea, US warships and aircrafts are usually deployed from its military bases in Japan to the water. Japan is a hardline ally of the US in the Indo-Pacific region, which is evidenced by the US military bases located across Japan. According to the *Base Structure Report – Fiscal Year 2018 Baseline*, the US has 121 military sites in Japan, second only to Germany in terms of size. Among them, 87 are military bases and 34 are categorized as other sites.⁵ These military bases are used either solely by US troops or jointly by US troops and the Japan Self-Defense Force.

Areas of responsibility of the Seventh Fleet include most parts of the western Pacific and northern Indian Oceans. Naturally, the Seventh Fleet is the major US naval forces active in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and the Ports of Yokosuka and Sasebo are home ports for the Fleet's large surface ships. The US Fleet Activities Yokosuka in Kanagawa Prefecture is the largest US navy base in the western Pacific Ocean, boasting the only US repair facilities of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in the region. Apart from the Command, Battle Force (CTF-70), and Submarine Force (CTF-

74) of the Seventh Fleet, the aircraft carriers, cruisers, and destroyers of the Carrier Strike Group 5 are all based in Yokosuka. The Seventh Fleet's amphibious command ship USS Blue Ridge (LCC-19), nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76), guided missile cruiser USS Antietam (CG-54), and USS John S. McCain (DDG-56) always pose a flamboyant presence in the South China Sea. Most renowned US warships which have captured headlines are often sent from Yokosuka.

The US Naval Forces Japan is also headquartered in Yokosuka, responsible for protecting and administering onshore naval facilities. But there is no affiliation between it and the Seventh Fleet. The amphibious combat ships and mine countermeasures ships of the Seventh Fleet, such as the assault ship USS Wasp (LHD-1) and the USS Warrior (MCM-10), are deployed in the US Fleet Activities Sasebo in Nagasaki Prefecture, while the Amphibious Force (CTF-76), which is in command of these ships, is set up in the White Beach Naval Facility in Okinawa Prefecture. In addition, ships of other fleets and institutions which enter the area of responsibility of the Seventh Fleet should be subject to its command, such as the amphibious assault ship of the Third Fleet USS Essex (LHD 2) and the survey ship of Military Sealift Command USNS Bowditch (T-AGS 62) which perform activities in the South China Sea. The base of the Fleet is also responsible for providing logistics support to US military ships temporarily in the area.

The US Air Force, Navy Force, and Marine Corps stationed in Japan all have their own aviation units. They coordinate with each other when engaging in military operations, and the deployment of bases is not restricted by categories of troops. The Fifth Air Force is the backbone of US Air Force in Japan, and its commander also assumes command of the US Forces Japan. Its major units include the 374th Airlift Wing at the Yokota Air Base, the 35th Fighter Wing at the Misawa Air Base in Aomori Prefecture, and the 18th Wing at the Kadena Air Base in Okinawa Prefecture. The aviation units of Navy Force mainly include the Carrier Air Wing Five which is based in Naval Air Facility Atsugi in Kanagawa Prefecture and the Patrol and Reconnaissance Force (TF-72) which is based in Kadena. The aviation units of Marine Corps mainly include the

1st Marine Aircraft Wing which is in command of the III Marine Expeditionary Force and based in the Camp Foster.

At present, US military aircrafts operating in the South China Sea deployed from Japan are largely reconnaissance and patrol aircrafts. Aircrafts like P-8 Poseidon, P-3 Orion, EP-3, and RC-135 which depart from Kadena and Misawa would frequently encounter the military aircrafts of Chinese Air Force and Navy Force in the East China Sea, and also fly to the South China Sea to carry out tasks like anti-submarine operations, patrol, reconnaissance, and exercise. Nevertheless, due to the long distance, combat aircrafts, helicopters, and other planes with short flights cannot carry out routine activities in the South China Sea unless they are attached to aircraft carriers or amphibious assault ships.

The ground troops of the US Army and Marine Corps are paying more attention to military operations in the South China Sea. Therefore, their impact on the situations in the area should not be underestimated. Both the headquarters of the US Army Japan (USARJ) and I Corps (FWD) are currently located at Camp Zama. The USARJ is largely stationed in Japan with barely 3,000 soldiers without any armored forces. The US Marine Corps in Japan have now been basically incorporated into the III Marine Expeditionary Force, currently headquartered at Camp Courtney, Okinawa. Almost all the ground troops under its command, encompassing tens of thousands of soldiers, are stationed in Okinawa. Compared with the USARJ which is incapable of ground combat operations, the Okinawa-stationed Marine Corps is the most important ground force poised to be called on by the US for missions regarding the South China Sea. It should also be noted that the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade is now assigned to the Seventh Fleet as its Landing Force — CTF-79.

Furthermore, some US military bases located in South Korea (Chart 2) , Diego Garcia, and Australia(Chart 1) also potentially influence the South China Sea, not to mention the fact that the US is seeking to build new military bases. The ports of the Commander, US Fleet Activities Chinhae and Busan Naval Base in South Korea serve as important docking sites and supply bases for the Seventh Fleet. As the primary US

military base in the Indian Ocean, the island of Diego Garcia is home to the headquarters or offices of the US Navy and Air Force and different branches of troops. The US Marine Rotational Force-Darwin deployed in Australia is accompanied by the jointly established monitoring and surveillance platform. In November 2018, US Vice President Mike Pence announced that the US would join forces with Australia to expand the Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island of Papua New Guinea which is currently used by the PNG Defense Force. ⁶

Through published facts and data, it is not difficult to find US troops deploy a mass of naval and air forces which are capable of dealing with middle or low intensity conflicts in the South China Sea. For another, under modern war conditions, especially with the so-called Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) tactics and development of weapons, the limited space of Guam and Okinawa and other peripheral bases will inevitably obstruct military operations and are easily exposed to the first-round firepower blow from their counterparts. What's more, these peripheral bases are too far away from the South China Sea to respond in an expeditious, flexible and effective way. Therefore, US troops are strengthening peripheral military bases building and seeking to deploy more military forces around the South China Sea.

II. Promoting Flexible Deployment along the South China Sea Coast

The US has built many military bases with tens of thousands of soldiers stationed in the peripheral areas of the South China Sea. In contrast, the US military installations along the coast of the sea seem to be quite inadequate. Hence, the US always strives to shorten the distance and obtain military bases to deploy naval and air forces in the front. However, current situation falls short of the US's expectation. According to the *DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications*, released by the US in December 2018, a total of 658 military personnel are permanently stationed in the six countries and regions of the South China Sea, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong, among whom 449 are in active duty. ⁷The total scale cannot even match that of a small US military

base in other areas. Except some military diplomats, most of them assume military duties, which enables them to represent the military presence of the US on the forefront of the South China Sea, to a certain extent.

Generally, Singapore houses US permanent military forces along the coast of the South China Sea, while those in other countries merely maintain the conditional presence of military personnel in the form of defense cooperation and military exchanges. The US military base in Singapore is the backbone of US military presence along the coast of the South China Sea (Chart 3). Despite of the small size, the US military base in Singapore plays a pivotal role in supporting its military operations in the South China Sea. Notably, both the Commander, Logistics Group, Western Pacific (CTF-73), one of the eight task forces of the Seventh Fleet, and the Commander, MSC Far East are stationed at the Sembawang Port to deliver logistics support to US warships on military operations in the Pacific Ocean and Southeast Asia. Due to limited capacity of the Sembawang Port, large ships, including aircraft carriers could only dock at the Changi Naval Base located in the northeast of Singapore. It is also currently the only base to provide supplies for US aircraft carriers along the coast of the South China Sea. The 497th Combat Training Flight is currently assigned to the Paya Lebar Air Base, where its mission is to provide training exercises for carrier-based aircrafts deployed to Singapore.



Chart 3. Distribution of US Military Bases in Singapore and the Philippines

The US has made some progress on the cooperation with the Philippines in recent years. In particular, the US and the Philippines reached an agreement in 2016, allowing the US troops to utilize five Philippine military bases, which stands to reason that it may reverse the inadequate military presence of the US on the forefront of the South China Sea.⁸ When the US withdrew from military bases in the Philippines in the end of 1992, it could not find any sound reason to deploy military forces to the former colony anymore, until the signing of the “Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA)” in 1998 and the “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)” in 2014. As put in the agreement, the US Navy could dock at the Subic Bay as visiting forces; the two countries began to conduct joint military exercises; the rotational deployment of US military forces in the country is allowed. In particular, the “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement,” which is effective for ten years, allows the US to access five military bases in the Philippines, namely the Antonio Bautista Air Base in Palawan, Basa Air Base in Pampanga, north of Manila, Fort Magsaysay in Palayan in the center of

Luzon, Lumbia Air Base on Mindanao and Mactan-Benito Ebuena Air Base in the central Philippine city of Cebu (Chart 3). The US could store and deploy weapons at these bases and revamp relevant facilities if necessary. In this way, it is possible that the 14-day stay of the US troops deployed to the country could be extended to a permanent stay.

Nevertheless, in operational level, the efforts of the US to upgrade and utilize military bases in the Philippines have largely remained stagnant. In March 2016, a joint declaration was made by the two countries, announcing that the US military forces could gain access to five Philippine military bases. The original plan of the US was to upgrade the Basa Air Base in that year and then re-develop the other four similarly obsolete bases. However, ever since Rodrigo Roa Duterte began his presidency, he has been less supportive of EDCA. He pointed out that the US could only utilize these military bases for the purpose of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The storage of weapons or the deployment of US military forces in the country is not allowed. In March 2017, the Philippines even removed the Antonio Bautista Air Base from the list. Some analysts suggest that it might be because President Duterte does not want to provoke the nerves of China since the air base is in the closest proximity to the Nansha Islands. It was not until April 2018, after several rounds of setbacks, that the US launched a project for the construction of a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) warehouse at the Basa Air Base.⁹ In late January 2019, the Philippines noted that the US could build another warehouse of its kind at the base once it is financially capable.¹⁰

Attitudes of other Southeast Asian countries tend to be more intricate. Malaysia now allows the US Navy forces to dock in the port of the Sepanggar Naval Base for supply. However, Malaysia has also extended the access to China and Japan, and it does not seem to be passionate about the request of the US for local naval bases. Indonesia and Vietnam have given access to US military forces to the port of Sumatran and Cam Ranh Naval Base only as visiting forces. They are hesitant about discussing the possibilities of building US military bases on the ground, saying that such an act is unconstitutional. However, the bombers, reconnaissance aircrafts and patrol aircrafts

of the US can use some airbases of the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and other countries in a non-operational way.

III. Strengthening Frequency and Intensity of Frontline Troops' Operations

As part of US politicians are driving the whole government and society to exert pressure on China, and considering limitation of the peripheral bases and sluggish progress of military deployment surrounding the South China Sea, the US Troops choose to enhance operational strength of frontline military forces and promote frequency and intensity of military operations in order to increase more military existence and pressure in the South China Sea. Thus, the US navy stay for nearly 900 ship-days in the South China Sea and the air forces fly more than 1000 sorties to this sea area. These frontline dynamics are backbones of US troops' varied operations in the South China Sea.

the *An Incomplete Report on U.S. Military Activities in the South China Sea*, published by *South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative* (SCSPI), clearly illustrates the US forces' freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), reconnaissance flights, frontline presence operations, strategic deterrence, military drills and so on. It is found the pertinence and intensity of these activities were increasing.¹¹ Taking FONOPS for example, according to public reports, the number of the US navy entering 12 nautical miles of islands and reefs stationed by Chinese in 2017 and 2018 were four and five times respectively. In 2019, however, the US troops took similar actions 4 times in less than half a year.

As for operational intensity, the US troops are dissatisfied with the patrolling and frontline presence, the activities targeted China are increasingly aggressive. For example, USS Wasp amphibious ready group and the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit held a large-scale and highly intensive live-fire drill on September 27, 2018. Within the drill, ship-based, aircraft-based and tank-based weapons consumed ammunition, practiced multiple tasks, such as naval attack, air defense and landing support.¹² In April

2019, USS Wasp carrying ten F-35B entered waters near the Scarborough Shoal and carried out take-off and landing trainings.

A merchant seaman recently revealed that an Aegis destroyer of the US navy had a live-fire drill on the sea lane about 40 miles southeast to Fiery Cross Reef at morning of June 1, 2019. The US navy informed the passing ships to detour and managed traffic direction. It is a new trend that deserves our high attention. If true, it indicates to a certain extent that the US has substantially upgraded its military display and operational readiness in the South China Sea. Further, it not only violated the provisions of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) regarding the early notification of navigation-ban activities, but also transmitted a strong signal of war preparation. Presumably, the destroyer might be USS William P. Lawrence attached to the 3rd fleet of US navy. According to website of U.S. Naval Institute and information on USS William P. Lawrence's Facebook page, the warship was the only US destroyer acting in the South China Sea in that time. Meanwhile, USS Boxer amphibious ready group was also navigating in the near waters. Therefore, we do not know whether it was the group or the destroyer that carried out the live-fire drill.

Conclusion

In general, the US, in principle, will not build new overseas military bases after 2015, limited by the plans of the US Department of Defense for the reduction of military bases. Moreover, the coastal states in the South China Sea generally are unwilling to provide permanent bases to the US troops, and most of them are reluctant to take side in the great power's competition. The US will face great resistance in strengthening military presence along the South China Sea coast in the short term.

Against this background, the US will deploy more forces on peripheral bases, strengthen frontline presence, and exploit potentialities of frontline operational forces to exert pressure on China. In particular, the US will focus on strengthening the frequency and intensity of warships and aircrafts operating in the South China Sea. With the development of Sino-US relations, the US may initiate some dangerous moves and

wander on the edge of conflicts. It will increase the risk of frontline troops from both sides confronting one another in the South China Sea, which is worthy of focus on and do more research.

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