

Escalation, Naval Deployments and Geopolitical Conflict in the South China Sea

By [Brian Kalman](#)

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On July 12, 2016 the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague ruled in favor of the Republic of the Philippines in its arbitration case against The Peoples Republic of China. The intervening weeks have seen a marked escalation in military deployments, activities and political rhetoric from China, the United States, Japan and quite interestingly, Vietnam. The Philippines has made efforts to deescalate the highly charged situation since its legal victory at the PCA.

China has instituted the practice of regular combat patrols over the disputed islands in the South China Sea, beginning with the first such patrol carried out on July 18th. In addition, China has dispatched numerous maritime surveillance vessels and civilian fishing fleets to the waters around Scarborough Shoal. These combat air patrols are to continue into the foreseeable future. China continues to develop its manmade islands' military capabilities and continues to launch powerful naval vessels at breakneck speed.

The United States has heralded the PCA ruling as the definitive ruling on the dispute and has called on China to accept the the will of the international community and abide by international law. This, quite hypocritically, coming from one of a handful of nations that has refused to ratify the treaty. The U.S. has taken the unprecedented measure of stationing THAAD missile systems in South Korea, ostensibly aimed at defending this country from North Korean ballistic missiles. China has seen this move as one that changes the strategic situation in the region, and putting it at a distinct disadvantage. The U.S. announced the deployment of additional B-52 Stratofortress bombers to Guam on August 12th. More importantly, the additional deployment of B-1 and B-2 strategic bombers to the island was also announced. This marks the first time these nuclear-capable strategic assets have been deployed to Guam.

Vietnam quietly deployed defensive rocket artillery systems to a number of islands that it has occupied in the Spratly Archipelago. China almost immediately announced that Vietnam's actions were a "terrible mistake". It is hinted that the rocket artillery batteries will target the airfields built on Chinese occupied islands in the Spratlys.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration Ruling

The South China Sea Crisis took a decidedly ominous turn when the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favor of the Philippines in the arbitration initiated by that nation on January 22, 2012. The Court ruled that it did have authority to rule on the arbitration, that China need not take part in the arbitration for it to be legitimate and binding, and that China's "Nine Dash Line" was not valid as it did not comply with the UNCLOS (whose

authority supersedes any historic rights), that China had taken actions to aggravate and not alleviate the dispute between it and the Philippines, and that no entitlements granted by islands within a nation's EEZ or continental shelf can be obtained by artificial islands built on previously low-tide elevations. The PAC also ruled that Mischief Reef is within the EEZ of the Philippines.

China predictably refused to acknowledge the validity of the ruling or the authority of the PCA to preside over the arbitration in the first place. China officially went on record in 2006, a full six years before the arbitration was put forth by the Philippines, declaring under Article 298 of the UNCLOS that, "The Government of the People's Republic of China does not accept any of the procedures provided for in Section 2 of Part XV of the Convention with respect to all the categories of disputes referred to in paragraph 1 (a) (b) and (c) of Article 298 of the Convention."

The United States wasted little time in officially supporting the ruling and calling on China to abide by it. A State Department spokesman said that it "*hopes and it expects*" both parties to abide by the ruling. Chinese President Xi Jinping stated flatly that, "The islands in the South China Sea have been Chinese territories since ancient times. China opposes and will never accept any claim or action based on these awards."

Many main stream media outlets have praised the PCA ruling and have concluded that it deals a heavy blow to the legitimacy of China's actions in the South China Sea. Commentary from a cross section of the MSM seems to draw the conclusion that China must now abandon its "Nine Dash Line" claim, halt island reclamation efforts, and surrender the occupied Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal, or face mounting international diplomatic and legal pressure. They fail to either acknowledge or realize that the "Nine Dash Line" claim was never a serious territorial claim on the part of China, but a time-gaining policy of "strategic ambiguity" from the outset, that allowed China the time and diplomatic wiggle-room to establish a real and concrete military presence at key points in the region. Following age-old naval strategy, China has been busy occupying the "central position" in the region, fortifying this position to take advantage of internal lines of communication, movement and logistics, and establishing a viable and robust A2/AD umbrella over the entire South China Sea. To China, the "South China Sea Dispute" has been a wonderful cover that has provided an effective distraction from its very real, strategic build-up in the area. China is playing a very different game than the Philippines or the United States, and it has spent decades strengthening its strategic position in the South China Sea, a region rich in oil and natural gas, fish and other marine life, and that facilitates over \$5 trillion USD in maritime trade traffic annually.

Chinese Escalations

Following the PCA ruling in the middle of July, China has taken a number of steps that would seem, on the surface, to be retaliatory in nature. Western media has largely portrayed these actions in just such a manner; however, many of these apparent escalations have been years in the making and do not directly coincide with the arbitration ruling.

Bomber and Fighter Combat Patrols

Beginning on July 18th, just days after the PCA ruling, China began combat air patrols over the disputed regions of the South China Sea. These air patrols consisted of both strategic bombers, aerial tankers and air superiority fighter aircraft. H-6K bombers (based on the

Soviet Tu-16), which are capable of carrying nuclear armed bombs and cruise missiles, were dispatched along with Su-30 air superiority fighters and aerial re-fueling tankers (most likely HY-6 or even IL-78 aircraft). The H-6K has six under-wing hard points that can carry either DF-10 nuclear capable Land Attack Cruise Missiles (LACM) or YJ-12 Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles (ASCM).



Image: Chinese Air Force H-6K flies by Scarborough Shoal in mid-July.

Launching of New Navy and Coast Guard Vessels

Although the timing of the building schedules of additional Type 052D destroyers and a new China Coast Guard cutter based on the Type 054 frigate are merely coincidental with the PCA ruling, they do highlight the rapid speed at which China is acquiring new naval warfare platforms. Since March of this year, at least nine PLAN vessels of significant size and capabilities have been commissioned. The China Coast Guard also continues to grow.

On March 7th, three Type 072A Landing Ship Tank (LST) were commissioned in a single day. They have been assigned to the East China Sea Fleet, the area of operations of which cover the Senkaku Islands. The adding of this new amphibious landing capability sends a clear message to both Japan and Taiwan that China is modernizing and expanding its amphibious assault capabilities.

On May 30th, a Type 054A Class Frigate (FFG) was commissioned (# 536), with an additional Type 054A commissioned (#551) just one week later on June 8th. On the very same day, the Type 056A Corvette (#508) was also commissioned. That amounts to three modern surface combatants commissioned in one week. Also in June, the China Coast Guard took delivery of its own Type 054A frigate, in this case modified as a large Cutter with the 32 cell VLS removed.



Image: Newly commissioned Type 903A replenishment vessel. The PLAN continues to expand its complement of logistics support vessels.

On July 15th, the PLAN saw the commissioning of two new Type 903A replenishment vessels, #963 and #964. These vessels are crucial in providing logistics support to fleets dispatched for long periods of time, or during times of war when ammunition and fuel are consumed at higher rates. They will prove necessary for any future aircraft carrier strike group (CSG) deployments. Perhaps of greatest significance, the fourth Type 052D Destroyer (DDG), #175 *Yinchuan*, was commissioned on July 12th. This vessel will be followed soon by the # 117 *Xining* which is currently undergoing sea trials. Six more Type 052D DDGs are currently built and being fitted out at the Dalian and Jiangnan shipyards. These vessels represent the most advanced and potent vessels in the PLAN's inventory.

Increased Presence near the Senkaku Islands

Japan has issued a stern official protest to the Chinese government for the recent incursion of Chinese survey vessels, Coast Guard vessels and dozens of civilian fishing boats into the territorial waters of the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands. Japan summoned the Chinese

ambassador to voice their concern and submit a formal protest. The Chinese ambassador, Cheng Yonghua, stated in an interview with the press, "I told him that ... it is natural that Chinese ships conduct activity in the waters in question. I also told him both countries need to work on dialogue through diplomatic channels so as not to make things more complicated and escalated."



Image: A Japan Coast Guard Cutter confronting a China Marine Surveillance vessel within the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands. Such incidents have increased in recent weeks.

The recent increase in Chinese pressure on Japan in the East China Sea follows closely on the heels of the PCA ruling, and after Japan's official communication in support of the award in favor of the Philippines. Japan has gone on record supporting the Philippines in their position, even sending the *JS Oyashio* attack submarine and two guided missile destroyers, *JS Ariake* DDG 109 and *JS Setogiri* DDG 156 to Subic Bay in a show of support during the multi-national training exercise *Balikitan 2016* in April.

Completion of Type 054 Frigate based Cutter for Coast Guard

Mentioned earlier in connection with Chinese vessel commissionings in recent months, the acquisition by the China Coast Guard (CCG) of a Type 054A Frigate is quite significant. Pictures appeared in the media of the vessel in June, bearing pennant # 46301. It appears that the vessel maintains the deck gun and close-in defense weapons of the frigate design, but dispenses with the 32 cell VLS. The additional space in the bow section will most likely be utilized to accommodate life-saving equipment or aids to navigation support, more in line with Coast Guard duties.



Image: The newest CCG Cutter based on the Type 054A FFG. The first of how many?

China already operates the largest Coast Guard in the region, having expanded the service to approximately 200 vessels of all sizes. The China Coast Guard already operates the two largest vessels of any Coast Guard in the region. The CCG #2901 and CCG #3901 displace between 12,000 and 15,000 tons, both larger than the Japanese Coast Guard *Shikishima* Class Cutters, at 6,500 tons. At around 4,000 tons displacement, the new vessel is smaller than these Cutters, but it represents a balance of endurance, range and speed that will greatly improve the capabilities of the CCG. At a cruising speed of 18 knots, the operational radius of the vessel is approximately 8,000 nautical miles without replenishment.

U.S. Escalation

The United States has taken an adversarial stance against China in its island building activities in the South China Sea from the start, and has lead a number of freedom of navigation cruises by US Navy warships and over-flights by both surveillance aircraft and even B-52 bombers, starting in December of last year. The United States has supported both the Philippines and Vietnam politically, and increasingly through military aid and arms sales. The United States officially ended its arms embargo of Vietnam on May 23rd of this year, dispatched two Carrier Strike Groups to the region to take part in military exercises in conjunction with the Philippines this summer, and has made numerous official statements

that it expects China to abide by the ruling of the PCA. It is very interesting to note, and almost never reported in the main stream media, that the United States did not ratify the UNCLOS, citing threats to U.S. sovereignty rights as chief amongst its concerns. As much as it exclaims the preeminence of international law, it refuses to surrender itself to the restrictions and requirements of UNCLOS.

Deployment of THAAD to South Korea

On July 7th, the U.S. and S. Korea officially agreed to the deployment of Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems to South Korean territory. Although the reason given is to defend South Korea from an increasingly belligerent North Korea and its arsenal of nuclear capable ballistic missiles, China has accurately interpreted the move as a threat to its own security and the nuclear balance of power in the region. U.S. anti-ballistic missile systems forward deployed to the Korean peninsula are more of a threat to China, in their ability to shoot down long range ballistic missiles fired from China on their upward trajectory, than they can defend against short range missiles fired from North Korea at its estranged southern neighbor. Either China will respond in kind, perhaps beginning nuclear deterrent patrols with its new ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) fleet closer to U.S. territorial waters, or the deployment of THAAD will encourage China to act unilaterally or in concert with South Korea in reigning in North Korea's military provocations.

Deployment of B-52, B-1 and B-2 Bombers

Just this week, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that for the first time ever, B-52, B-1 and B-2 strategic bombers will all be stationed at Andersen Air Force Base in Guam at the same time. B-52 Stratofortresses have been deployed to Guam on a rotational basis for many years; however, this will be the first deployment of both B-1 Lancer supersonic and B-2 Freedom stealth bombers to the island. The only way to interpret such a deployment, is that the U.S. is bringing to bear increasingly capable assets to the Pacific region. These B-1 and B-2 bombers were both designed to be able to penetrate advanced enemy air defenses to deliver both nuclear munitions and precision guided conventional weapons. The deployment of such assets greatly escalates an already volatile situation.



Image: B-52, B-1 and B-2 bombers all parked on the tarmac at Andersen Air Force Base on the island of Guam.

Japanese Escalation

For its part, the Japanese government has made a number of provocative announcements since the PCA ruling was made public on July 12th. Perhaps in response to Chinese actions in the East China Sea, or in conjunction with the United States in a larger defensive strategy, these announcements are sure to aggravate a Chinese government increasingly assailed by a concerted effort to contain and countermand it. It appears that Japan is increasing its cooperation with both the United States and the Philippines in its defense posture towards China.

Adoption of THAAD

It was announced on Japan's national broadcaster NHK on the 9th of August, that the government is considering purchasing and deploying the U.S. THAAD system in an attempt

to bolster its Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) defense. This announcement follows the North Korean launch of two *No Dong* intermediate range ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan. One of the missiles reportedly splashed down within the 200 mile EEZ of Japan. Whether this announcement was aimed at North Korea or China (or most likely both) is not clear, as Japan also announced its intention to develop a short range, surface-to-surface anti-ship missile system intended to defend the Senkaku Islands from waterborne attack.

Anti-Ship Missiles for Deployment in the Senkaku Islands

The Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper reported on Sunday, August 14th, that an internal Ministry of Defense report calls for the development of a shore based anti-ship guided missile system to defend the Senkaku Islands from waterborne threats. The missiles will have a range of approximately 190 miles (300 km.) and should be ready for deployment by 2023. The Japanese Ministry of Defense has not made any comments supporting nor denying the newspaper's claims. If true, the program acknowledges Japanese resolve not only to defend what it views as its sovereign territory, but also to base defensive missile systems on the islands themselves.

Although Japan has the capacity to defend the Senkaku Islands via warships and aircraft, the deployment of missile systems to the islands would confirm a plan to garrison troops there, something that has been resisted in the past. Perhaps elements of the Ground Defense Forces Western Army Infantry Regiment, trained in amphibious and air assault, will be based on the Senkaku Islands in the near future. Japan intends to build an amphibious brigade around the nucleus of the Western Army Infantry Regiment, complete with 52 AAVs and 17 V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft.



Image: Japanese troops from the Western Army Infantry Regiment train with U.S. Marines in Hawaii in conducting amphibious assault with AAV7s, August of 2014.

Vietnamese Escalations

For its part, the Vietnamese Armed Forces have remained relatively quiet in the face of current escalations in the South China Sea. It is important to recognize that Vietnam has fought at least two naval skirmishes with China, both in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Following the Johnson South Reef Skirmish of 1988, Vietnam moved to fortify the islands that it occupies in the South China Sea. Vietnam maintains defensive garrisons on a number of islands, having engaged in limited land reclamation projects of its own. Immediately after the July 12th ruling by the PCA, Vietnam took measures to further arm a number of these island bastions.

Deployment of Rocket Systems to the Spratly Islands

Although Vietnam's Foreign Ministry vehemently denies the fact, a Reuters report published on the 11th of August, details the positioning of mobile rocket launchers on a number of Vietnamese occupied islands in the Spratly Island chain. Citing a number of "Western official sources", these rocket launchers are aimed at neighboring Chinese defense installations, most notably airstrips and aircraft support installations. Chinese state-run media responded to the report in an article that alluded to the military clashes between the two nations over islands in the South China Sea in the past. An article run in the Global Times stated, in very direct terms that, "*If Vietnam's latest deployment is targeting China, that would be a*

terrible mistake. We hope Vietnam will remember and draw some lessons from history.”

Conclusion

The weeks immediately following the PCA ruling at The Hague, regarding the arbitration brought forth by the Philippines against China, have been marked by an increasing escalation of both the South China Sea Crisis and the territorial dispute between China and Japan in the East China Sea. The broader crisis has even effected the Koreans and Japan in terms of their greater strategic defense posture. It is interesting to note that all parties involved, with the exception of the Philippines, have taken steps to escalate the crisis and increase tensions in the region. The Republic of the Philippines, perhaps the least belligerent of all nations involved in territorial disputes in the South China Sea, has acted to deescalate the situation, even reaching out to Chinese officials to negotiate a bilateral agreement that would help resolve the issues involved. This is doubly surprising given the inflammatory reputation of the new President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte.

Increasing escalation in the region will continue until the various parties to the multitude of disputes come to an honorable and equitable solution, or a number of lines are crossed. These ‘trip-wires’ include: China beginning land reclamation on Scarborough Shoal, China or Japan militarily occupying the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, or Vietnam threatening China’s major installations in the Spratly Islands with a build-up of weapons systems. Considering the current pace of escalation, the world has weeks or months to wait to see if any of the parties involved are willing to engage in open military confrontation to advance their claims and interests in this most heated global crisis.

***Brian Kalman** is a management professional in the marine transportation industry. He was an officer in the US Navy for eleven years. He currently resides and works in the Caribbean.*

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