



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation**

***“China’s Maritime Ambitions.”***

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**June 24, 2020**

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Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Yoho, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today. U.S. policy toward the South China Sea has been remarkably consistent for decades. That is because successive administrations from both parties have recognized the same three American national interests at stake. The United States has historically defended freedom of the South China Sea as guaranteed by international law; upheld U.S. security commitments to Southeast Asian allies and partners while remaining neutral on sovereignty disputes; and ensured American military access to this international waterway. Time and again U.S. policy has been drawn to this same list of interests.

Unlike American interests, China's claims and strategy in the South China Sea have shifted radically over the decades. Beijing's demand for historic rights and special prerogatives have expanded greatly since the 1990s. As a result, its claims have grown ever more inconsistent with international law. These excessive demands combined with China's greater ability to project power far from shore are steadily infringing on the rights of its neighbors and of the international community at large.

At the end of 2013, China launched a campaign of artificial island-building and militarization that rapidly accelerated the disputes. As a result, Chinese naval, coast guard, and paramilitary forces are now a constant presence throughout the South China Sea. The pressure they are placing on American partners and allies, and on the law of the sea itself, is becoming unbearable. There are only three potential endgames in these disputes. If nothing changes, the South China Sea will become a Chinese lake, with serious consequences for U.S. national interests. Or Beijing or Washington could severely miscalculate, sparking a violent escalation neither wants. Alternatively, United States could help lead an international campaign to bend China toward compromises that would be acceptable, if unpalatable, to all sides. But time is running out for the latter.

### **U.S. Interests in the South China Sea**

American support for freedom of the sea is older than the Republic itself. The United States inherited its commitment to international maritime law from the British. Its earliest military engagements—the Barbary Wars against Tripoli and Algiers, and the War of 1812 against Great Britain—were driven in whole or in part by perceived violations of American rights at sea. The United States sent its first naval vessels to the western Pacific in 1835 as part of the East India Squadron to protect U.S. commercial rights. Except for a brief interlude during the Civil War, the U.S. Navy has operated in Asia ever since.<sup>1</sup>

U.S. policy on the South China Sea stretches back more than a century to the earliest days of Sino-French wrangling over the Paracel Islands. Since at least 1915, the United States has refused to take sides in sovereignty disputes over the islands, believing that none of the parties

<sup>1</sup> Hunter Stires, "They Were Playing Chicken"—The U.S. Asiatic Fleet's Gray-Zone Deterrence Campaign against Japan, 1937–40," *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 142, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8046&context=nwc-review>.

has an airtight claim.<sup>2</sup> The sole exception to this is Scarborough Shoal, which U.S. officials considered to be American territory from at least the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> That reef became part of the Philippines upon its independence and Manila's control over it went largely uncontested until China seized it in 2012. Aside from Scarborough Shoal, neutrality on territorial sovereignty has been the most consistent aspect of U.S. policy in the South China Sea.

After those earliest days, U.S. policy in the South China Sea evolved through a series of crystallizing moments. In 1939, Japan seized the Paracel and Spratly Islands from French control. This was the first time that the United States decried an illegal maritime claim in the South China Sea, informing Tokyo that it rejected the effort to claim all the rocks and reefs of the Spratlys as part of a single island group—a claim which Beijing repeats today.<sup>4</sup> After the war, the United States took no side in the arguments between France, the Republic of China (ROC), and the People's Republic of China (PRC) over who Japan should return the islands to. It similarly took no position in 1956 when the ROC, Philippines, and South Vietnam began jockeying for position in the Spratlys.

The United States' primary concern in the South China Sea remained balancing its neutrality with security commitments to its three allies—the ROC, Philippines, and South Vietnam—all of whom were claiming the Spratlys. The islands were an irritant, but manageable. That all changed in the 1970s. Control of the Paracels had been split between the PRC and South Vietnam since 1956. In 1974, the PRC suddenly invaded the western Paracels and drove the Vietnamese out. The United States was ill-prepared and by the time it knew how to react, it was too late. A year later, Saigon fell and North Vietnamese troops replaced their southern counterparts in both the Paracels and Spratlys. Suddenly the disputes weren't just between bickering U.S. allies.

After 1975, both Washington and Manila worried that the Philippines could face an attack that might require American intervention. The Philippine government began demanding clarification that the U.S. commitment under Article V of their Mutual Defense Treaty covered the South China Sea. It made that clarification a precondition of renegotiating the U.S.-Philippines Military Bases Agreement. The State Department and Ford White House came to an internal understanding that the United States would not necessarily defend Filipino forces on disputed islands but considered the treaty to apply to an unprovoked attack at sea.<sup>5</sup> The Carter administration accepted that consensus and by 1979 Manila grudgingly put the question to rest, for a while.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The 1915 version of the *Asiatic Pilot* published by the U.S. Navy noted that the Paracels had been “annexed by the Chinese government in 1909,” meaning that a claim had been made but not accepted as lawful by other parties. See U.S. Navy Hydrographic Office, *Asiatic Pilot* Vol. IV (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1915), 119.

<sup>3</sup> See Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Letter to Secretary of War Harry Woodring concerning Scarborough Shoal, July 27, 1938, quoted in *Bajo de Masinloc: Scarborough Shoal Maps and Documents*, ed. Jay L. Batongbacal and Efren P. Carandang (Taguig City, Philippines: National Mapping and Resource Information Authority, 2014), 59-62.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of Intelligence Research, “Islands of the South China Sea,” Intelligence Report 7283, August 17, 1956, 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> See Memo from National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft to President Gerald Ford, No. 4286, “Key Issues in Our Base Negotiations with the Philippines,” October 1976.

<sup>6</sup> See Telegram from Ambassador Richard Murphy (Manila) to State Department, No. 461, “Amendment to Military Bases Agreement – Letter from Secretary Vance to Foreign Minister Romulo,” January 8, 1979; Telegram from

The next crystallizing moment came in 1988, when China for the first time established six bases in the Spratly Islands. This included Johnson Reef where PRC forces killed dozens of Vietnamese troops in a one-sided battle.<sup>7</sup> The fallout from these developments, combined with Vietnam's rapid rapprochement with its members in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), led the organization to take up the cause of the South China Sea. In 1992, it issued its first statement on the South China Sea. Two years later, China occupied its seventh reef in the Spratlys, establishing a facility on Mischief Reef near the Philippines. The development spurred greater activism from ASEAN, which launched talks with China on a proposed code of conduct in the South China Sea.

Unfortunately, Beijing was not particularly amenable. China had just formally declared rights to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and continental shelf from all islands and reefs in the South China Sea, as well as ill-defined "historic rights." That term exists nowhere in prior Chinese claims, and continues to haunt efforts to resolve the disputes. In practice it meant that Beijing was claiming some kind of jurisdiction over all waters, airspace, and seabed within the "nine-dash line"—a cartographic device that had been used since 1947 to officially denote its claims. This is the point at which the *territorial disputes* over the Spratly and Paracel Islands became *maritime disputes* over the entire South China Sea, and really started to affect the interests of the wider international community. In line with these vast historic rights, Beijing proposed a ban on all third-party military activities and demanded fishing rights in its neighbors EEZs, in clear contravention of international law.<sup>8</sup> In 1995, this rapid expansion of the disputes led the State Department to declare,

The United States strongly opposes the use or threat of force to resolve competing claims and urges all claimants to exercise restraint and to avoid destabilizing actions...Maintaining freedom of navigation is a fundamental interest of the United States. Unhindered navigation by all ships and aircraft in the South China Sea is essential for the peace and prosperity of the entire Asia-Pacific region, including the United States. The United States takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims to sovereignty over the various islands, reefs, atolls, and cays in the South China Sea. The United States would, however, view with serious concern any maritime claim or restriction on maritime activity in the South China Sea that was not consistent with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.<sup>9</sup>

A quarter century later, this remains the essence of current U.S. policy in the South China Sea. Washington opposes the use of force, not least because of its alliance with the Philippines,

Ambassador Richard Murphy (Manila) to State Department, No. 2594, "FonMin Romulu on Amendment of MBA," February 6, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> See Shen, "International Law Rules and Historical Evidence," 56; "South China Sea Features," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, accessed November 22, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/scs-features-map/>; Vuving, "South China Sea.

<sup>8</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, "South China Sea: Background to ASEAN-China Code of Conduct," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, April 26, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State, Daily Press Briefing, May 10, 1995, quoted in Michael McDevitt, *The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future*, CNA Occasional Paper (Arlington, VA: CNA, November 2014), 1, [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/IOP-2014-U-009109.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/IOP-2014-U-009109.pdf).

remains neutral on sovereignty, refuses to recognize any claims that are inconsistent with legal freedom of the seas, and is determined to maintain its access to a vital international waterway.

The Chinese seizure of Mischief Reef also triggered a new round of heartburn in Manila regarding the scope of the United States' treaty commitments. In 1998, this led Secretary of Defense William Cohen to clarify again that an attack in the South China Sea (but not necessarily on troops on disputed islands) was covered by the Mutual Defense Treaty.<sup>10</sup> This didn't, however, put an end to Filipino concerns about American credibility. Years later, they resurfaced after China seized control of Scarborough Shoal and President Barack Obama refused to specify that the South China Sea was covered by the Mutual Defense Treaty (after he had assured Japan that its treaty protected the disputed Senkaku Islands). The question wasn't finally put to rest until March of 2019. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo traveled to Manila and assured Philippine officials that any attack on Filipino "armed forces, public vessels or aircraft" anywhere in the South China Sea was be covered by Article V.<sup>11</sup>

### China Upends the Status Quo

The churn of the 1990s was temporarily calmed in 2002 when China and ASEAN signed the non-binding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. But Beijing continued to steadily assert its authority farther and farther south. The calm broke in 2009. Malaysia and Vietnam submitted claims for their extended continental shelves in the South China Sea in May 2009—a deadline set by the parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), included China.<sup>12</sup> Beijing responded to their submissions by declaring its sovereign rights over the entire South China Sea and, for the first time, formally submitted the nine-dash line to the United Nations as the limits of its claim.<sup>13</sup> This set off a chain reaction of escalations that continues to this day.

In 2010, Vietnam as ASEAN chair elevated the issue to the top of the regional agenda. At the urging of most of the ASEAN members, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi that the United States had a "national interest" in freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea in accordance with international law.<sup>14</sup> In 2012, China seized control of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines despite a botched American attempt to negotiate a mutual withdrawal. This prompted the Philippine government in 2013 to file a landmark arbitration case against China under Article

<sup>10</sup> "DFA Chief Clarifies US Support Under Mutual Defense Treaty," *Philippine Star*, May 10, 2012,

<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2012/05/10/805080/dfa-chief-clarifies-us-support-under-mutual-defense-treaty>.

<sup>11</sup> Claire Jiao and Nick Wadhams, "We Have Your Back in South China Sea, U.S. Assures Philippines," *Bloomberg*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-01/pompeo-says-u-s-is-committed-to-keeping-south-china-sea-open>.

<sup>12</sup> Malaysia and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Joint Submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf: Executive Summary, May 6, 2009,

[https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs\\_new/submissions\\_files/mysvnm33\\_09/mys\\_vnm2009executivesummary.pdf](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/mys_vnm2009executivesummary.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, Note Verbale CML/17/2009, May 7, 2009, [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs\\_new/submissions\\_files/mysvnm33\\_09/chn\\_2009re\\_mys\\_vnm\\_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/chn_2009re_mys_vnm_e.pdf);

Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, Note Verbale CML/18/2009, May 7, 2009, [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs\\_new/submissions\\_files/vnm37\\_09/chn\\_2009re\\_vnm.pdf](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/vnm37_09/chn_2009re_vnm.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Hillary Clinton, "Remarks at Press Availability," U.S. Department of State, July 23, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

VII of UNCLOS. And that, in turn, convinced Beijing to launch an unprecedented campaign to dredge the seabed and build artificial island-bases in the Spratlys (as well as expanding the size of many of its holdings in the Paracels).

China finished most of the dredging and island building to expand its South China Sea bases in 2016—the same year that the Philippines won its arbitration case, proving that Beijing’s maritime claims are inconsistent with international law. China built over 3,200 acres of new land in the Spratlys and hundreds more in the Paracel Islands, where the last documented landfill took place in mid-2017.<sup>15</sup> By late 2017, Beijing had largely completed the installation of military infrastructure on the islands. This included airstrips, helipads, hangars, harbor facilities, fuel and ammunition storage, and radar and sensor arrays across both the island groups.<sup>16</sup> For the last two years, there has been little new construction.

Between 2017 and 2018, Beijing moved into the deployment phase of its plan to militarize the South China Sea and project power throughout the nine-dash line. During this period, the first military patrol and transport aircraft landed on its new airbases on Subi and Mischief Reefs in the Spratlys, jamming platforms were deployed to Mischief and Fiery Cross Reefs, and surface-to-air and anti-ship cruise missiles were emplaced at all three of those facilities. China also began more frequently rotating J-11 fighter jets through Woody Island in the Paracels, landed an H-6K bomber on that feature for the first time, and increased the number of anti-ship and anti-air missile systems deployed to it. And throughout the South China Sea, the port facilities at China’s bases allowed an ever-greater presence by the People’s Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN), the China Coast Guard, and the maritime militia.<sup>17</sup>

The latter two forces are the real vanguards of China’s aggression in the South China Sea. Beijing has no interest in fighting a military conflict with the United States or its neighbors if one can be avoided. Its strategy instead rests on use of coercion below the level of military conflict. It seeks to use CCG and militia vessels to intimidate, harass, and occasionally attack its neighbors. CCG vessels now patrol around important reefs off the coasts of Malaysia and the Philippines day in and day out. They show up whenever Southeast Asian states engage in new oil and gas drilling and play a high-stakes game of chicken with civilian supply vessels contracted for such

<sup>15</sup> “China’s Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels,” AMTI, Updated August 9, 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/paracels-beijings-other-buildup/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.; “A Constructive Year for Chinese Base Building,” AMTI, December 14, 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/constructive-year-chinese-building/>.

<sup>17</sup> See Frances G. Mangosing, “China Military Planes Land on PH Reef,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 18, 2018, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/165824/china-military-planes-land-ph-reef>; Michael R. Gordon and Jeremy Page, “China Installed Military Jamming Equipment on Spratly Islands, U.S. Says,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-installed-military-jamming-equipment-on-spratly-islands-u-s-says-1523266320>; Amanda Macias, “China Quietly Installed Missile Systems on Strategic Spratly Islands in Hotly Contested South China Sea,” CNBC, May 2, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/02/china-added-missile-systems-on-spratly-islands-in-south-china-sea.html>; “An Accounting of China’s Deployments to the Spratly Islands,” AMTI, May 9, 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/accounting-chinas-deployments-spratly-islands/>; People’s Daily, China (@PDChina) Twitter account, May 18, 2018, cited in “China Lands First Bomber on South China Sea Island,” AMTI, May 18, 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/china-lands-first-bomber-south-china-sea-island/>; “Exercises Bring New Weapons to the Paracels,” AMTI, May 24, 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/exercises-bring-new-weapons-paracels/>.

work. They also escort flotillas of Chinese fishing ships throughout the South China Sea, including in the waters of Indonesia which is not a party to the territorial disputes over islands.<sup>18</sup>

The maritime militia—not a term of art, but rather a formal component of China’s military as mandated by its Military Service Law—takes part in all of these operations. Hundreds of militia boats, some full-time and some part-time, operate daily in the Spratly Islands. They collect intelligence, intimidate Vietnamese and Filipino vessels, and sometimes engage in outright violence while giving the government in Beijing a degree of deniability should things get out of hand.<sup>19</sup> The goal of these campaigns by both the CCG and the militia is to make it prohibitively risky for Southeast Asian states to engage in the rights to which they are lawfully entitled in the South China Sea. And to do so while keeping the United States and other outside parties sidelines. It is working.

## Policy Options

Beijing has engaged in a years-long campaign to militarize the South China Sea, deprive American partners and allies of their lawful rights, and in so doing paint the United States as a paper tiger. If it succeeds, all three of the national interests that successive administrations have pursued in this waterway will be severely compromised. U.S. partners and allies in the region will rightly wonder what benefit they gain from supporting a forward-deployed U.S. military presence if it cannot help them defend their legal rights. China will set a precedent that will undermine key components of the freedom of the seas and UNCLOS, not least the idea that all states are entitled to the same rights regardless of size or strength. And with reduced military access in partner-nations, the United States will find itself with less and less ability to operate freely within the South China Sea.

<sup>18</sup> See “Signaling Sovereignty: Chinese Patrols at Contested Reefs,” AMTI, September 26, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/signaling-sovereignty-chinese-patrols-at-contested-reefs/>; Paterno Esmaguél II, “China Chopper Harasses PH Rubber Boat in Ayungin Shoal – Lawmaker,” *Rappler*, Updated May 31, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/203720-chinese-helicopter-harass-rubber-boat-ayungin-shoal-spratly-islands>; Patricia Lourdes Viray, “China Coast Guard Blocked Resupply Mission to Ayungin Shoal – DND,” *Philippine Star*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/09/19/1953204/china-coast-guard-blocked-resupply-mission-ayungin-shoal-dnd>; China Risks Flare-Up Over Malaysian, Vietnamese Gas Resources,” AMTI, July 16, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/china-risks-flare-up-over-malaysian-vietnamese-gas-resources/>.

<sup>19</sup> See Gregory B. Poling and Murray Hiebert, “Stop the Bully in the South China Sea,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/stop-the-bully-in-the-south-china-sea-11567033378>; Laura Zhou, “As Coastguard Boats Circle, Vietnam Prepares for Bigger Challenge in South China Sea,” *South China Morning Post*, October 12, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3032536/coastguard-boats-circle-vietnam-prepares-bigger-challenge>; Nguyen Hong Thao and Ton Nu Thanh Binh, “Maritime Militias in the South China Sea,” Maritime Awareness Project, June 13, 2019, <http://maritimeawarenessproject.org/2019/06/13/maritime-militias-in-the-south-china-sea/>; Project, June 13, 2019, <http://maritimeawarenessproject.org/2019/06/13/maritime-militias-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>19</sup> Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, “From Frontier to Frontline: Tanmen Maritime Militia’s Leading Role Part 2,” Center for International Maritime Security, May 17, 2016, <http://cimsec.org/frontier-frontline-tanmen-maritime-militias-leading-role-pt-2/25260>; Gregory B. Poling, “Illuminating the South China Sea’s Dark Fishing Fleets,” CSIS Stephenson Ocean Security Project, January 9, 2019, <https://ocean.csis.org/spotlights/illuminating-the-south-china-seas-dark-fishing-fleets/>; Under Pressure: Philippine Construction Provokes a Paramilitary Response,” AMTI, February 6, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/under-pressure-philippine-construction-paramilitary-response/>.

This crisis has been a long time coming. And in fairness, prior administrations did not sit on their hands. The Obama Administration provided valuable diplomatic support to ASEAN and the Philippines in particular, stepped up military capacity building for Southeast Asian claimants, increased the visibility of U.S. naval operations in the South China Sea, and deterred China from taking more aggressive action. Under the Trump Administration, capacity building and naval operations increased further, but the diplomatic effort dropped away for at least two years. The Pentagon and INDOPACOM were left to run America's South China Sea policy. But they cannot by themselves counter a Chinese strategy that purposely avoids military confrontation. The State Department is now growing more active in its messaging, but it has had little success rallying international support. Partially this is the fault of the Philippines, whose government has refused to advocate on its own behalf under President Rodrigo Duterte. But it is also the fault of the United States for devaluing international cooperation and paying too little attention to Asia beyond North Korean issues and trade disputes with China.

The only way the United States can secure its interests and those of its partners in the South China Sea is through a sustained campaign of diplomatic and economic pressure, backed up by military deterrence, that will alter Beijing's calculus. If China's leadership sees that its activities in the South China Sea undermine its larger interests in being a global leader, they will be more likely to accept compromise with Southeast Asian states. But that pressure cannot come from the United States alone—it must include a coalition of like-minded partners from Asia, Europe, and beyond. The effort to bend China toward a more acceptable policy and secure U.S. interests in the South China Sea will take years. To start, the United States should step up in three areas.

1. U.S. officials need to put the South China Sea back on the top of the international agenda. In 2016, over 50 countries had gone on record saying they would demand China comply with the arbitral ruling in the Philippines' case. But since the ruling was handed down, fewer than 10 have actually done so. That is partially Manila's fault, but Washington shares some of the blame. U.S. officials stopped putting the South China Sea at the top of their talking points, even in ASEAN forums. The issue also disappeared from the top line of Group of Seven discussions, where it previously received strong support, and has not been mentioned prominently in any UN settings. The United States needs to help Southeast Asian parties, especially Vietnam, which has become the most vocal in defense of its rights, raise the profile of the South China Sea. The silence from Europe has been particularly deafening since 2016. Only the United Kingdom has publicly backed the 2016 arbitral award, and only grudgingly. The United States should put much greater diplomatic pressure on European states who had previously stood up for Southeast Asian claimants to do so again.
2. The United States should launch an interagency effort to name and shame illegal Chinese paramilitaries in the South China Sea and explore financial sanctions against their beneficiaries. The militia is the most numerous, and arguably the most effective, of China's weapons in its South China Sea campaign. Without their anonymity and deniability, they would lose much of their value to Beijing. INDOPACOM should undertake the same kind of surveillance operation against these actors that it has conducted in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea to unmask vessels violating sanctions against North Korea. And like that operation, this one could include an array of partners



like Australia and the United Kingdom. This should be just a first step. The militia is supported by a well-connected web of business and government elites within China. Those networks should be traced and the beneficiaries excluded from international financial networks and otherwise sanctioned for their violations of international law. The United States should at the very least treat those who support the Chinese militia the same as it has those who support Russia's militia in eastern Ukraine.

3. U.S. officials at the highest levels need to prioritize rebuilding a credible and effective alliance with the Philippines. That does not mean giving human rights abuses a pass. But the alliance must not be allowed to atrophy from neglect. The United States needs the ability to quickly and effectively respond to crises in the South China Sea and deter Chinese aggression at the lower rungs of the escalation ladder (where China is currently dominant). The United States cannot currently do that. The closest U.S. ground-based aircraft or firebases are over 1,300 nautical miles from the Spratly Islands. Admiral Philip Davidson has recognized this mismatch, which is why he has requested support for shifting more mobile, adaptable U.S. assets to rotational deployments along the "first island-chain" around China. The proposed Pacific Deterrence Initiative would have a similar goal. But there is only one place along the first island-chain south of Japan that it is at all feasible to rotate U.S. forces—the Philippines. The 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was negotiated to allow such U.S. rotations through Philippine bases. President Duterte's ascendance put most of those plans on hold. His more recent efforts to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement would strike a further blow to U.S. force posture in the region. It may not be possible to gain the rotational access needed while Duterte is in office through 2022. But the U.S.-Philippines alliance is more important than any single leader. Senior U.S. officials should make every effort to prevent further deterioration in the alliance while planning an engagement strategy to fully implement EDCA in a post-Duterte Philippines.