The U.S.-Japan-ROK Strategic Triangle & Maritime Security

Building Capacity in Northeast Asia and in the Broader Indo-Pacific Region

Charles M. Perry
Bobby Andersen

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Acknowledgments

This report summarizes key findings and policy recommendations developed by the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis (IFPA) over the course of a two-year research and workshop project on the prospects for and future direction of U.S.-Japanese-South Korean maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Funded by the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation, this project, formerly entitled “The U.S.-Japan-ROK Strategic Triangle and Maritime Security: Building Capacity in Northeast Asia and in the Broader Indo-Pacific Region,” included substantial in-house and field research efforts by IFPA staff, extensive interviews conducted by IFPA principals with top subject-matter experts, policy officials, and relevant military commanders from all three countries, and two high-level trilateral workshops held in Washington, D.C. Both workshops – one in June 2015 and another in June 2016 – were organized in collaboration with the Asia Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and were convened at the Endowment’s conference center. The U.S. Naval War College also served as a co-sponsor and collaborator for the June 2016 workshop. In this context, we owe a particular debt of gratitude to James Schoff, Senior Associate at the Endowment’s Asia Program, his support staff at the program (especially Alexander Taylor), and Dr. Toshi Yoshihara, John A. van Beuren, Chair of Asia-Pacific Studies at the War College. Details on the agendas and attendee lists for both workshops are available on the IFPA web site at http://www.ifpa.org/confrncNworkshp/confrncNworkshpPages/JapanTriLatJune2016/japanTrilat0616.php.

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Dr. Charles M. Perry
Ms. Bobby Andersen
IFPA
This report focuses on the prospects for improving and expanding U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea (ROK) trilateral cooperation by promoting and building upon greater opportunities for maritime collaboration between and among these three critical allies. The logic, importance, and timeliness of such an effort are quite clear. On one hand, while improving U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation has been viewed by Washington as a strategic priority for a number of years now, it has proved difficult to establish and hard to sustain. Indeed, far too often in the past, historical animosities, competing territorial claims, differences over how best to manage a rising China, and the combined effect of these factors on domestic politics, among other issues, have stood in the way of closer Japanese-ROK relations, despite the importance of such improvements to the security of both nations and to the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. As a result, American brokered efforts to promote trilateral security coordination among Japan, South Korea, and the United States – aiming to create a virtual (if not actual) “alliance of three” – have been on-again, off-again affairs, without much lasting effect.

On the other hand, while tensions between Tokyo and Seoul have never fully dissipated, there have been growing indications over the past three years that the tide may be turning with regard to U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateralism, especially in the maritime security arena, all of which could have a profound impact on Asian security more generally. Indeed, even in the midst of the perceived snubs and strained relations involving Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye that came to a head in the second half of 2013, the navies of Japan, the ROK, and the United States completed a wide-ranging series of naval drills off the southern coast of the Korean Peninsula in October of that year, underscoring the importance of the drills to regional stability and signaling...
their intent to repeat them on an annual basis. Just one month later, moreover, Japan and South Korea, with support from the United States, chose to confirm their opposition to China’s unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea by conducting a joint search-and-rescue (SAR) exercise explicitly within that area, deploying destroyers and helicopters without submitting flight plans to Beijing. More recently, the agreement reached by Abe and Park in December 2015 to resolve the longstanding “comfort women” dispute removed a chief stumbling block to Japanese-South Korean – and, by extension, trilateral – cooperation, while North Korea’s nuclear provocations in both 2015 and 2016 provided (as detailed in chapter 2) increasingly strong incentives to pursue such cooperation.

The reasons why trilateral progress in the maritime realm may be easier to achieve than in other sectors, while also serving as a springboard to broader trilateral and multilateral efforts in the future, are several. First, given ongoing South Korean sensitivities over the potential deployment of Japanese military forces on (or close to) ROK territory, joint naval training and exercises conducted well off-shore, out of the public eye, are much less likely to trigger any serious South Korean opposition. This could emerge as an especially attractive attribute of maritime collaboration as the three allies take additional steps to ease lingering ROK-Japanese tensions and to reinvigorate trilateral cooperation. Second, trilateral maritime activities have emerged as near ideal tools for developing common skills in a number of mission areas – such as ocean surveillance, sea-lane protection, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) from the sea, as well as SAR by naval and coast guard units – that remain top priorities for Japan, South Korea, and the United States, given the largely maritime nature of the Northeast Asian security environment and the need to safeguard seaborne trade passing through its waters.

Third, and quite apart from cooperating at sea in and around Northeast Asia, the prospects that Japan, the ROK, and the United States can (and will) extend joint naval activities farther afield into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean are also increasing, opening the door for these three countries to work together, bilaterally and trilaterally, on building maritime capacity and partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific region. In this

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1 Since both Japan and the ROK remain highly dependent on trade shipped along the key sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) that pass through the Indian Ocean and the Southeast Asian maritime zone, Tokyo and Seoul have increasingly identified efforts to improve sea-lane security and overall maritime security in both areas as top national defense priorities. A desire and intention to contribute more directly to these specific mission areas beyond Northeast Asia – and to do so in cooperation with the United States and with other regional powers – are explicitly emphasized in
context, their support to local navies in the fight against piracy along the Straits of Malacca, together with their joint counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, have been especially successful and instructive. Fourth, and finally, over time, maritime collaboration along these lines could pave the way to wider-ranging multilateral collaboration on key naval tasks (such as sea-lane security and maritime safety) and to broader trilateral cooperation writ large. Eventually, such cooperation could also become a critical component of a larger regional security architecture better able to cope with the full range of traditional and non-traditional risks and challenges to stability that are likely to come to the fore in this strategically vital region in the years ahead. In this way, trilateralism, fueled in large part by maritime cooperation, could justifiably be viewed as a critical component of the “principled security network” in the Indo-Pacific called for at the June 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore by Ashton Carter, U.S. secretary of defense at the time.  

The prospects for extending joint naval activities into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean are also increasing.
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Indeed, as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel put it, even before the Shangri-La Dialogue, in testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “strategic cooperation among the United States, Japan, and the ROK is essential to building the security order in Northeast Asia” and beyond, and, for that reason alone, “no one,” he went on to caution, “can afford to allow the burdens of history [as reflected in the ups and downs of Japanese-South Korean relations] to prevent us from building a secure future.”

To the extent that trilateral collaboration in the maritime realm offers a pragmatic and politically acceptable way to kick-start cooperation among the three allies in Northeast Asia, in the Indo-Pacific region more broadly, and in time on key non-maritime security missions, it needs to be more assiduously explored, and the sooner the better. The timing for such an effort, moreover, is near perfect, following the rapprochement between Abe and Park brokered by President Obama at the March 2014 nuclear security summit in The Hague (which was reaffirmed at the March 2016 follow-on summit in Washington, D.C.), the previously mentioned comfort-women deal reached by Abe and Park in December 2015, and an ongoing series of ministerial and working-level meetings among U.S., Japanese, and ROK officials to help move forward the trilateral agenda that these and related developments have facilitated.

This report, the final product of a two-year research and dialogue initiative led by IFPA and funded by the MacArthur Foundation, provides just such an assessment. Chapter 2 analyzes the current status and future direction of trilateral security cooperation, highlighting why and how it can be advanced most easily over the near term in the maritime realm. Chapter 3 then takes a close look at the growing maritime power and assertiveness

Maritime cooperation can help kick-start broader efforts to build up security structures in the Indo-Pacific as a whole.

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5 Indeed, during the first defense trilateral held in Washington, D.C., on April 17-18, 2014, to follow up on The Hague meeting, U.S., Japanese, and ROK officials agreed that cooperation on HA/DR, counter-piracy, and other non-traditional security issues remained a priority, and that new ways to promote such cooperation should be explored more fully. The Nelson Report, April 19, 2014. Subsequent trilateral meetings at the deputy secretary/vice minister level in 2015 and 2016 have done just that, focusing on maritime security issues in the Indo-Pacific (and especially the South China Sea), as well as on North Korean issues and other matters of global concern. See http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/04/240545.htm and http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/849716/us-rok-japan-leaders-conduct-trilateral-meeting-at-honolulu.
of China, especially in the South China Sea, and at how the United States and its key partners and allies in the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan and South Korea, might best respond. Against that backdrop, chapter 4 examines the requirements and opportunities for defense-minded capacity building by the United States, Japan, and South Korea among Southeast Asian states that have felt pressured (if not directly threatened) by China’s rising maritime capabilities and by Beijing’s willingness to wield those capabilities in support of its dubious claims of sovereignty within the South China Sea. More specifically, this chapter examines what steps Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul might take (or expand on) to strengthen the ability of these states to defend their maritime zones, and how the three allies might better coordinate such efforts in order to make the best use of their respective areas of expertise and to avoid unnecessary duplication and waste of resources. Finally, chapter 5 summarizes the project’s main conclusions and offers a number of policy recommendations for fine tuning and sustaining U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation in the maritime security realm, which could lead in time to wider collaboration in other critical security sectors, be it on a trilateral, mini-lateral, or broader multilateral level.
For the better part of 2016, strategic ties between the United States and its two key allies in Asia, Japan and South Korea, showed promising signs of improvement. Certainly, the seeming freefall in South Korean-Japanese relations appeared to have been arrested – at least until recently – by the agreement between South Korean President Park Geun-hye and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo on December 28, 2015, to attempt to resolve the contentious “comfort women” issue that has dogged bilateral relations for years. At the same time, closer cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo – and with that, greater opportunities for cooperation at the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral level – was given an additional boost by yet another series of provocations by North Korea, including two more nuclear tests and multiple missile launchings. Given that an effective response to Pyongyang’s ongoing pursuit of a more potent nuclear capability requires, at minimum, a carefully coordinated approach on the part of the United States, Japan, and South Korea, a return to trilateralism in 2016 was a logical turn of events, and one made all the easier by the December 2015 agreement.

With regard to that agreement more specifically, it essentially prompted Prime Minister Abe to make an unprecedented statement acknowledging Imperial Japan’s coercion of Korean women into sexual servitude during the Second World War in exchange for a pledge from President Park that South Korea would never bring up the “comfort women” issue again in official talks. The fact that such an agreement was a prerequisite for enhanced defense ties between Tokyo and Seoul underscores how significant the history factor is in determining the extent to which the two countries can cooperate with each other and the United States in the security realm, even in areas where there is an obvious overlap of strategic interests. To be sure, President Park’s decision to separate history disputes from matters of national security, dating as far back as her Independence
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Day speech in August 2014, helped set the stage for a revival of trilateral security cooperation, but without the December 2015 agreement little progress was likely to occur.

With the comfort women issue somewhat diffused through much of the past year, the common interests that Japan, South Korea, and the United States all share in working together to try and halt (if not reverse) North Korea’s drive to acquire a serious nuclear weapons arsenal could come to the foreground. Pyongyang’s most recent efforts in this regard make it abundantly clear that only the most tightly coordinated response by the three allies has a chance at success. Among the more troubling developments over the past year were the North’s demonstration of new and more advanced missile launching capabilities, particularly at sea, as well as its fourth and fifth nuclear tests on January 6 and September 9, 2016. These provocative acts demonstrate that the regime in Pyongyang is as determined as ever to pursue nuclear and missile programs in defiance of multiple UN resolutions. As usual, the regime is also attempting to use these provocations to divide the international community, particularly the U.S.-led network of alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. As one former senior official from South Korea has put it, in its push in particular for a nuclear-tipped ICBM capability North Korea is pursuing a “triangular decoupling” strategy whereby a credible ability on its part to target U.S. cities would in effect decouple South Korea and Japan from their American security umbrella.1

The response this time around from the international community to the North’s brinkmanship, however, has been increasingly severe. In the wake of the North’s nuclear tests in January and September, as well as subsequent missile tests, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolutions 2270 and 2321, imposing increased sanctions on the regime. China not only endorsed these tougher sanctions but also was more vocal than ever in criticizing Pyongyang’s actions. Meanwhile, after months of hand wringing, South Korea announced its decision in July 2016 to deploy a joint Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system with the United States – thus determining that concerns about North Korea’s missile development ultimately outweighed China’s vocal objections to a new U.S.-led missile defense system in its backyard. No doubt, that message came through all the more clearly in the wake of the first-ever U.S.-Japan-ROK sea-based missile defense exercise conducted in June 2016 on the sidelines of the semi-annual RIMPAC naval exercises held off Hawaii.2

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1 Off-the-record comment by a former senior South Korean foreign ministry official at an IFPA conference in Washington, D.C., June 17, 2016.
As noted earlier, it was in part against the backdrop of heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula in 2015 that the December 28 comfort-women agreement between President Park and Prime Minister Abe was reached. Until that point, bilateral relations were sinking under the weight of historical grievances, principally revolving around the comfort-women issue and suspicions in Seoul that Prime Minister Abe is a nationalist leader intent on whitewashing the past. In the eyes of a vocal minority in South Korea (including some influential news outlets), steps taken by the Abe administration to develop a more forward-leaning defense posture capable of supporting a wider range of military missions more distant from Japan’s home islands suggested as well (however inaccurately) the possibility of a future Japan that could once again pose a threat to Korean security. For the first several years of their respective administrations, therefore, President Park refused to meet one-on-one with Prime Minister Abe until he dropped his “revisionist” claims. It was only after U.S. President Barack Obama brokered a meeting between the two leaders on the outskirts of The Hague Nuclear Summit in 2014 that they met one-on-one essentially for the first time.

The comfort-women agreement, it must be acknowledged, is non-binding, inconclusive and hastily executed, but it achieved one important purpose: it created a floor for keeping the ROK-Japan relationship from deteriorating further in 2016 and, by extension, impeding trilateral cooperation with the United States. Whether that floor will be solid like concrete, cracked, or somewhat elastic, however, will likely determine how the bilateral and trilateral dynamic might evolve from here on out. If the floor is solid like concrete, it could help prevent the relationship from falling to lower levels of discord. If cracked, then it might only be a temporary restraint on this freefall. And if it were to have some elasticity, it could perhaps be a springboard for greater defense cooperation moving forward. In that event, moreover, cooperation in the maritime realm would appear to be an excellent first step, not the least as it would never require the deployment of Japanese troops on Korean soil, which few, if any, South Koreans would ever tolerate.

By the end of 2016, the agreement, it must be admitted, began to draw increased opposition after showing great promise throughout most of the year. Up until that point, however, the agreement appeared to have elements of the elasticity noted above, bringing about a modest rebound in ROK-Japan relations as well as some tangible progress in U.S.-ROK-Japan defense cooperation. Not long after the December 28, 2015, agreement was reached, all three nations signed onto a trilateral information-sharing agreement (TISA) by which Japan and the ROK can share military
intelligence via U.S. channels. This is in lieu of a bilateral Japan-ROK general sharing of military intelligence agreement (GSOMIA) that famously fell apart at the last minute in 2014. Further, as mentioned already, all three nations deployed AEGIS-equipped surface ships in an unprecedented joint missile-tracking exercise in the waters off Hawaii in June 2016, an important step toward trilateral coordination in response to advancements in North Korean missile systems. As with maritime operations more generally, this exercise, dubbed Pacific Dragon, had the additional appeal of being conducted well offshore, out of the public eye, and hence was less likely to trigger any domestic opposition (especially, again, in South Korea.) Finally, in November 2016, Tokyo and Seoul completed a bilateral GSOMIA, in what is the most promising sign yet that the two sides can deepen their defense cooperation.

All of these developments would be difficult to achieve under more contentious circumstances. Indeed, while it would be an exaggeration to attribute too much credit to the December 28 agreement for causing this new level of trilateral cooperation, it is hard to imagine trilateral cooperation advancing at all (or perhaps as quickly) if not for a requisite improvement on the comfort-women issue. This points to a peculiar paradox: that the U.S.-Japan-ROK strategic triangle is only as strong as its weakest link (in this case, the Japan-ROK leg), yet improvements in bilateral defense ties often require the cover of trilateral cooperation to gain momentum. Indeed, as the first round of (failed) ROK-Japan GSOMIA talks and the (successful) U.S.-Japan-ROK TISA experience suggest, what cannot be achieved on a bilateral basis can sometimes be achieved under the political cover of trilateral cooperation. In other words, trilateralism has, at times, served as an important proxy for bilateralism between Japan and South Korea, with the United States playing a crucial go-between role in bringing the two together.

This is not an altogether unwelcome trend, as long as it leads to net improvements in strategic cooperation among all three sides. But it signals that even with overlapping security interests, Tokyo and Seoul are largely unable to bring themselves to higher levels of cooperation without some intervention and involvement from the United States. In particular, South Korean sensitivities remain about cooperating directly with Japan on matters of national security given widespread mistrust of Japanese strategic intentions as a result of its colonial legacy. As alluded to earlier, moreover, this underlying mistrust was at times heightened in recent years by Tokyo’s adoption under Abe of a more activist-minded security policy less restrained by old notions of limited self-defense operations confined primarily to the areas immediately surrounding Japanese territory. Presumably, Japan’s ties to and reliance on the United States would, it was

Better defense ties between Tokyo and Seoul often require the cover of trilateral cooperation to move forward.
generally acknowledged in Seoul, keep in check any potential revival of Japan’s past militarism, but a good number of South Koreans still wondered (and worried about) what Japan’s new policy of collective self-defense (CSD) under Abe might mean in the event of a conflict contingency on the Korean Peninsula.

In reality, it is entirely possible that defense reforms and policy adjustments now underway in Japan could actually have rather direct beneficial effects on South Korean security in ways that are not well understood in Seoul. Under the new guidelines on U.S.-Japan defense cooperation approved in 2015, for example, Japan’s Self-Defense Force (SDF) can now provide logistical support not only to U.S. military forces, but to those of third nations as well, a policy change that clearly opens the door to closer cooperation with the ROK in an area of defense support that could be critical in the event of a conflict contingency on the Peninsula. So, too, when Japanese national security is affected, the SDF is now authorized to conduct CSD and exercise the use of force in such critical mission areas as minesweeping and compulsory ship inspections and searches, both of which could prove to be quite important to the defense of South Korea. But the bottom line is that the new defense guidelines, together with the emphasis in Japan’s new national security strategy released in 2014 on expanding cooperation with regional partners and allowing the SDF to become a “pro-active contributor to peace,” has multiplied the opportunities for cooperating with South Korea on both a bilateral and trilateral basis.

In this context, a few American military planners have even begun to explore how the Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM), established under the new U.S.-Japan guidelines to facilitate whole-of-government collaboration at the U.S.-Japan bilateral level, might be utilized to support U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation. A precedent of sorts, they argue, already exists in the joint meetings that occasionally occur between senior South Korean military and defense ministry officials and top commanders at UN Command Rear (UNC Rear) in Japan, which would manage most of the troop reinforcement and supply missions required to support a serious combat operation on the Peninsula. The goal of these meetings has been to help explain to ROK attendees the key role that UNC Rear (and Japan’s support for it) plays in support of Korean security, and to demonstrate how closely U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) coordinate with UNC Rear and with Japan as the command’s host country. Developing a way for UNC Rear to plug into the ACM process, therefore, could help to bring Korean security issues more fully into U.S.-Japan defense cooperation dialogues, while at the same time helping to champion trilateralism. This would be true, especially if ROK officials were invited
to join any UNC Rear-ACM exchanges when serious matters of Korean security were under discussion.3

Of course, an inter-alliance-based approach to enhanced trilateral cooperation along these lines would still be vulnerable to several factors, not least of which is the increasingly critical role of the United States in coaxing its two Asian allies to overcome some of their differences for the sake of enhanced strategic cooperation. Although the December 28, 2015, agreement was largely the product of top-level negotiations between Tokyo and Seoul, U.S. policy makers privately (and not inappropriately) took some credit for encouraging both sides to reach the agreement. Indeed, U.S. officials have long engaged in quiet but concerted diplomacy to encourage the reconciliation of historical differences between the two nations. But this level of U.S. commitment and engagement in the affairs of its allies is no longer a foregone conclusion. During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, for instance, Donald Trump repeatedly criticized U.S. alliance commitments around the world, singling out the security arrangements with South Korea and Japan in particular. If Trump's campaign rhetoric is to be believed, then there could be profound implications for U.S. diplomatic and strategic engagement in Asia – and, by extension, trilateral cooperation – now that he is president.

Indeed, the prevailing discourse on security affairs seems to take for granted certain orthodoxies, particularly the continuity of domestic political behavior and its impact on foreign policy and diplomacy. However, these are unorthodox times, as Trump's presidential victory makes abundantly clear, and it can no longer be assumed that alliance commitments will be upheld now that he has won the White House. At this writing, there are still many outstanding questions about whether the incoming Trump administration will attempt to follow through on its controversial campaign proposals or take a more pragmatic course as it transitions to power. These questions are already sending shock waves across the Pacific and raising questions about the future of the U.S. strategic commitment in the region.4 It seems quite possible that a major rupture in the U.S.-led alliance system would have severe consequences for the prospects of enhanced trilateral cooperation among the

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3 The trilateral component of such discussions would be more powerful still if South Korea were willing to approve Japan as a UNC Rear contributing nation, giving it a role beyond just serving as a country host for the command. Off-the-record comment by a senior U.S. defense official at an IFPA conference in Washington, D.C., June 12, 2015.

United States, ROK and Japan, let alone for delicate U.S. diplomatic efforts to reconcile ties between its two Asian allies.

Of course, the influence of domestic political factors on trilateral considerations is not limited to the United States. Although the July 2016 upper house elections in Japan likely gave Prime Minister Abe at least two more years in office, he remains somewhat vulnerable to further economic downturns and no clear political successor seems in the wings when he eventually steps down from power. Thus, while the Abe government seems on terra firma for the time being, there is some underlying uncertainty about the Japanese political situation in the post-Abe era. Whether the next prime minister will honor the spirit of the December 28 comfort women agreement, or any other measures to reconcile historical differences with South Korea, remains to be seen. So, too, given the ongoing and deep-seated pacifist strain in Japanese politics and public opinion, it cannot be assumed that a future government – especially one led by the Democratic Party – would pursue close security partnerships with the ROK or any other regional powers to the degree that the Abe administration advocates. Nor can it be assumed that a future Japan led by the opposition would automatically play a more active support role in a Korean conflict contingency or be willing to conduct defense operations well beyond the areas immediately surrounding Japan, as Japan’s new security policies under Abe appear to propose.

Perhaps even more damaging is the political turmoil in South Korea following the impeachment vote against President Park Geun-hye in December 2016 in the wake of reports that a personal confidant of hers, Choi Soon-sil, was given classified information and other political favors as a result of her close ties to the president. At this writing, President Park remains in the Blue House but is in political limbo as the impeachment process goes through judicial review, and as various political contenders in the opposition and ruling camps vie to succeed her. In the midst of this ongoing turmoil, South Korean activists erected a statue in late December 2016 commemorating the comfort women outside the Japanese consulate in Busan, thus causing Prime Minister Abe to recall the Japanese ambassador and consul general in Busan in protest and calling off other high-level economic talks. Needless to say, this represents a serious setback for the December 28 agreement and other efforts to improve bilateral ties in the coming year, let alone the support for trilateralism that existed earlier under Park’s watch.

At the very least, it is possible that after President Park steps down, a new ruling party in Seoul would make adjustments to North Korea policy that might leave it out of step with Tokyo and Washington. Indeed, one of the key factors facilitating trilateral security cooperation of late has been a relative convergence of views and approaches on the North Korean threat
among the three allies, as evidenced by their joint statements and diplomatic coordination in the wake of the recent DPRK missile and nuclear tests. All three sides have coordinated efforts to pass UN Security Council Resolution 2270, imposing tough sanctions on North Korea, and they are working on another UNSC resolution in the wake of the regime’s fifth nuclear test. Again, as noted earlier, trilateral security is essential to achieve and enforce an effective response to Pyongyang, and this will become more (rather than less) the case with each step the North takes toward a more potent and useable nuclear weapons capability.\(^5\)

To be clear, South Korean analysts do not foresee a return to the Sunshine Policy of former President Kim Dae-jung, but a new administration in the Blue House might emphasize engagement over pressure with the North and taking a more conciliatory approach when the regime acts out. In this sense, while a more left-wing government in Seoul may not (as some in Tokyo fear) adopt a more openly critical policy toward Japan that would scuttle trilateralism, it is very likely to espouse, these same analysts suggest, a more active, less flexible “engage the North” platform that could have the same net effect. Indeed, such a platform could easily result in serious divergences among the three allies, or at least the appearance that the united front the allies have tried to present against Pyongyang is beginning to crack.\(^6\)

Still another potential point of divergence among the three allies is over relations with China. While rising tensions in the East and South China Seas are aggravating Sino-U.S. and Sino-Japan relations, South Korea has assiduously tried to avoid antagonizing Beijing on geostrategic matters. China is not only South Korea’s largest trading partner, but it also holds much sway over the long-term strategic direction of the Korean Peninsula. Seoul has therefore signaled that it is not always willing to follow Washington and Tokyo as they confront China on a range of contentious regional security issues, including the disputes that have arisen over China’s actions in the South China Sea.\(^7\) In fact, South Korea’s reluctance to ruffle China’s feathers was a primary reason, it is argued by leading South Korean scholars, why Seoul very explicitly declined to endorse or flesh out a “regional dimension” to the U.S.-South Korean alliance in the famous 2009 Joint Vision Statement on an expanded scope for the alliance,

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5 Off-the-record comment by a former senior U.S. Department of State official at an IFPA conference in Washington, D.C., June 17, 2016.

6 Off-the-record comment by a former senior South Korean foreign ministry official at an IFPA conference in Washington, D.C., June 17, 2016.

the final text of which spoke only of a common interest in peninsula security and global security, foregoing any specific mention of shared interests in regional security beyond the Korean Peninsula.\textsuperscript{8}

Hence, while differences over China policy have been relatively manageable so far, over time they could develop into more severe cleavages in allied coordination. The delicate balance that Seoul must manage between maintaining its alliance with the United States while accommodating China’s increasingly dominant regional role may not be sustainable over the long run. Certainly, a real or perceived South Korean drift into the “Chinese camp” would present an existential challenge to the U.S.-led strategic triangle in the region, particularly if accompanied by any kind of political discord among Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo. This is one reason why some security experts in South Korea suggest that it is now time to adjust the Joint Vision formulation to make the U.S.-South Korean alliance more regional in scope, but to do that in a way that doesn’t make it appear “too regional” in focus so as to build as much political support for this shift as possible. How exactly to pull that off remains unclear, but advocates of this approach point to Article 3 of the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty – which talks about dealing with an armed attack in the Pacific, not just on the Peninsula – as evidence of a pre-existing, if somewhat implicit, regional dimension to the alliance.

Of course, it is important to keep in mind that South Korean views about China have always been more nuanced and more complicated than many who worry about Seoul’s reluctance to unduly anger Beijing might acknowledge. On that score, one should remember, it is argued by a top South Korean strategist, that China has invaded Korea more than nine hundred times, but it has never invaded Japan, so, while South Koreans, he readily admits, may not speak as openly and as intensely about a Chinese threat as the Japanese do, they do (in his words) “feel it more deeply.”\textsuperscript{9} This historical memory, a U.S. expert on Asian security has gone on to note, acts as a kind of “geopolitical gyroscope” in the minds of many South Korean leaders, so that when Seoul seems to be leaning too far in China’s direction, sooner or later there is almost always a corrective lean back in the other direction.\textsuperscript{10}

Additional evidence for this inclination, still others point out, can be found in the sharp contrast between public opinion polls taken in South Korea in 2014 and 2015. According to the 2014 polls, North Korea and Japan

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\textsuperscript{8} Off-the-record comment by a former senior South Korean foreign ministry official at an IFPA conference in Washington, D.C., June 17, 2016.
\textsuperscript{9} Off-the-record comment by a former senior South Korean foreign ministry official at an IFPA conference in Washington, D.C., June 12, 2015.
\textsuperscript{10} Off-the-record comment by a former senior U.S. Department of Defense official at an IFPA conference in Washington, D.C., June 12, 2015.
}
were seen, respectively, as the number-one and number-two threats to South Korean security, with China a more distant third. Similar polls taken in 2015, however, indicated that 68 percent of South Koreans polled now saw China as a clear military threat and 63 percent as a serious economic threat. That same 2015 poll suggested as well that the younger generation in South Korea was warier of China’s intentions over the longer run than their elders were. Perhaps more interestingly, by 2016 the same pollsters who had conducted the 2014 and 2015 surveys suggested that fully 70 percent of the South Korean population understood the importance of trilateral security cooperation and approved of efforts to expand it.

It is worth noting, moreover, that some of the 2014 results, especially the notion that Japan posed a greater danger than China, can be traced, it has been argued by one South Korean expert familiar with the polling process, to the fact that the survey was taken shortly after the Abe government had unveiled its plans for a more robust defense posture and a capacity to undertake collective self-defense missions, policy adjustments that raised concerns in South Korea and other countries that had experienced Japanese aggression in the past. The 2015 results, taken after Japanese officials had invested considerable time and energy to explain to their South Korean counterparts why they had little to fear about (and could actually benefit from) these changes, gave a more accurate picture, he argued, of how South Koreans generally viewed China. They also helped to explain, he added, the rise in South Korean public support for trilateralism detected in 2016.

All that said, one way or another, the “China factor” will clearly continue to have a defining influence on the scope and direction of trilateral cooperation, especially in areas where China perceives its core interests to be at stake. As the recent turnaround in Filipino-American ties under President Duterte implies, sensitivity to Chinese interests and power in the South China Sea on the part of the new Filipino president, for example, could very well disrupt efforts by the United States, Japan, and South Korea to coordinate defense-oriented capacity-building projects with the Philippines and other key Southeast Asian countries that have been under pressure from Beijing. Should China ever succeed (or appear to be succeeding) in peeling Manila away from the U.S. alliance network, serious questions could certainly arise as well about the durability of new partnerships being developed by the United States and by its major Asian allies, Japan and South

11 Off-the-record comment by a former senior South Korean Blue House official at an IFPA conference in Washington, D.C., June 12, 2015.

12 Ibid.
Korea, with others in the region. How this particular scenario plays out remains to be seen, but it illustrates how China could affect trilateralism in unexpected ways.

So far, however, wariness over Beijing’s reactions – leading at times to contrasting approaches to China by Seoul, on the one hand, and Tokyo and Washington, on the other – has not acted as a real barrier to trilateral cooperation. Indeed, as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel R. Russel made clear in his congressional hearing on September 27, 2016, the trilateral relationship was, in his view, “increasingly strong,” noting that the recently begun series of trilateral meetings held at the deputy secretary of state level had emerged as an excellent and productive forum for advancing cooperation among the three allies on a range of regional and global issues.13 This included, he went on to say, collaboration on relatively non-controversial matters such as the conduct of joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations, as well as the development of common positions on more sensitive matters of policy. This last category included, he noted, joint support for the resolution of territorial disputes in the South China Sea in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and for the principle of freedom of navigation within the global maritime commons, issues on which China has often expressed a contrary view.

Notwithstanding the current political headwinds affecting regional diplomacy, leveraging this cautious optimism for trilateralism into further tangible progress at the strategic and operational levels is the next step. Fortuitously, there has been a growing range of issues on which the three sides can and should collaborate, but a number of roadblocks to deeper cooperation between South Korea and Japan at the policy level still need to be removed, most notably in the area of information and intelligence sharing, if broader collaboration on concrete military activities is to be achieved. One important step Tokyo and Seoul have taken, as mentioned earlier, is the signing of their own bilateral GSOMIA in November 2016,14 thus finalizing an agreement they attempted to achieve in 2014. The finalization of a bilateral GSOMIA now significantly enhances information and intelligence sharing directly between Japan and South Korea (without either having to go through a U.S. middle-man channel),

14 “South Korea, Japan Agree Intelligence-sharing on North Korea Threat,” Reuters, November 23, 2016.
making cooperative responses to the North Korean missile threat, for example, more feasible, timely, and effective.

A similarly important step would be for Tokyo and Seoul to reach an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) that would pave the way for greater coordination on logistics, resupply, and a host of other defense support services that could be crucial in the event of a real crisis or conflict contingency involving the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, in peacetime, an ACSA could provide the legal framework for wider-ranging and more frequent joint training exercises and more realistic drills. Here, again, to build confidence, the focus might first be on soft security missions such as search and rescue (SAR), maritime domain awareness (MDA), and HA/DR operations, expanding later into harder-edged mission areas such as anti-submarine warfare (ASW), sea-based missile defense (building on the trilateral missile-tracking exercise conducted in June 2016), and non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs) in a crisis. In a Korean conflict scenario, an ability to work together, bilaterally and trilaterally with the United States, on a NEO would be an especially high priority, given that over 37,000 Japanese and 130,000 American civilians living in South Korea would need to be evacuated, and that upwards of 100,000 North Korean refugees might need to be rescued at sea.

As these examples illustrate, moreover, collaboration on maritime security, which is the primary focus of this study, is an area that holds particular promise for enhanced Japan-ROK as well as trilateral security cooperation. As pointed out in the introduction to this report, the reasons for this are several, rooted in the fact that the Asia-Pacific security environment is largely maritime in nature, that all three allies – as major seaborne trading nations – rely on the region’s critical sea lines of communication (and on unfettered access to the high seas through which they pass), and that each, as a result, has taken a number of steps in recent years to boost its maritime capabilities and to improve the prospects for naval cooperation, both among themselves and with other regional partners. For Japan and South Korea in particular, this has included developing a greater capacity to operate at sea and to contribute to global missions (e.g., anti-piracy) well beyond their home shores, all of which has created, in turn, a wider range of opportunities for cooperating with other Asian-Pacific navies (including the U.S. Navy), whether in a bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral format.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that broader cooperation on maritime security is increasingly seen by senior officials in all three countries as one of the best avenues for promoting trilateral security cooperation on a wider range of issues and at a higher level of coordination. Following their trilateral defense ministerial at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2016, U.S. Secretary of Defense Carter, Japanese Defense Minister
Nakatani, and South Korean Minister of National Defense Han affirmed the utility of the Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) framework as a way to encourage closer cooperation on security matters of mutual concern, singling out joint efforts to ensure and improve maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region as a priority focus. Secretary Carter and Minster Han then took it a step further at the conclusion of their bilateral talks in October 2016, announcing that trilateral cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan would expand in 2017, with an emphasis on maritime security and intelligence sharing, as well as on cyber security. More specifically, Washington and Seoul pledged to create an “integrated research team” to identify specific areas for maritime cooperation that ought to be pursued more fully, ideally on a trilateral as well as a bilateral basis. Echoing a theme he first mentioned in September 2016, Carter went on to say that he considered such cooperation – particularly that between the naval forces of the three allies – to be a key component of what he called “the third phase of the rebalance to the Pacific.”

The prospects, therefore, for increased and wider-ranging trilateral security cooperation – propelled forward in large measure by expanded cooperation in the maritime realm – looked, until quite recently, better than ever before. This was certainly the sentiment expressed, it is worth noting, by experts and officials from all three countries who participated in a high-level workshop organized by the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis in Washington, D.C., on June 17, 2016. At the same time, the point was also made by more than one workshop attendee that steady forward progress on the trilateral front is not guaranteed, and that concerted effort will still be required to make the case for trilateral security cooperation both at the official level and before the general publics of each country (but especially in Japan and South Korea). At the top leadership level, the importance of trilateralism, it was said, must be underscored at every major diplomatic meeting, including at UN General Assembly, APEC, and G20 gatherings, not just at the Shangri-La Dialogue and ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting (ADMM) Plus sessions or at the conclusion of bilateral ministerials. This point seems all the more prescient given the potential retrenchment of U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration as well as the political uncertainties in Seoul. There should also be regular exchanges on trilateral security at the working levels of the foreign and defense ministries of all three countries, so that policy planners at this

level – some of whom will rise to top leadership positions over time – are fully aware of the benefits of trilateral security cooperation, and become advocates for it, early on in their careers.

With regard to Japan and South Korea more specifically, while some progress has been made on this front, more needs to be done, it was also suggested, to render the alliance relationships each has with the United States more transparent to one another. Giving each country a better understanding of how the other’s alliance with Washington really works, what obligations it entails, and how it might help to improve their own security could do a world of good for trilateralism. In this context, there could be considerable merit as well in exploring more fully how defense officials and military commanders from Japan and South Korea might participate in ongoing coordination sessions between USFJ and USFK, thereby broadening the trilateral dialogue at the operational level. To the extent that such cooperation could include, as discussed earlier in this chapter, an ACM dimension, the trilateral effect could be greater still. At the very least, initiatives along these lines could help counter the view, sometimes expressed in Tokyo and Seoul, that trilateralism was being pushed more for the benefit of the United States than for Japan or South Korea.

Finally, at the more political and public debate levels, given, as also noted earlier in this chapter, the negative effects that domestic political factors in all three countries could have on the scope and pace of trilateral security cooperation, greater efforts also should be made to build support for trilateralism within each country’s legislative branch and across party lines. Such efforts should be buttressed, moreover, by more consistent steps to get the message out to key national media about the real benefits of trilateral cooperation, especially in Japan and South Korea, where the popular press has often painted an inaccurate and quite negative picture of what Tokyo or, as the case may be, Seoul hopes to achieve via such cooperation. Absent such initiatives, security cooperation among the three allies could fall victim to the same mixture of historical animosities and mutual mistrust between Japan and South Korea that has bedeviled trilateralism in years past. Add to that the very serious and profound implications of steps that the Trump administration may take to restructure, rather than to continue as they are, long-held U.S. foreign policy approaches, and the prospects for such cooperation in the future may seem dimmer still. Looking ahead, therefore, it will be more important than ever to draw attention to the ongoing need for trilateral security cooperation, and to new opportunities to expand it over time. Improved maritime cooperation offers much promise in this regard, and it is to a fuller examination of this proposition that the report now turns.
Over the past four years, China has pursued an increasingly assertive, and often quite provocative, set of policies, designed to promote its maritime sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, and there is little reason to expect that this will change any time soon. After all, such assertiveness is entirely in keeping with, and a near perfect illustration of, Beijing’s declared long-term strategy of conducting offshore active defense within the waters west of what it refers to as the “first island chain,” a string of islands running roughly from the southern tip of Japan along the Ryukyu Islands to Taiwan, the northern part of the Philippines, and then to Borneo. Encompassing the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea, this sweeping maritime zone, through which run the vital sea lanes linking the Persian Gulf to Northeast Asia and Northeast Asia to North America, is viewed by China as its “near seas,” key to its economic security and national defense. The South China Sea alone, thanks to its central location, is host to more than $5 trillion in commercial shipping, including over half of the world’s oil-tanker traffic, annually. Hence, in a crisis or conflict situation, having a proven capability to deny a potential adversary easy access to these crucial waters, or, should access be achieved, being able to complicate an aggressor’s ability to operate effectively within them, has become a strategic priority for China. Beijing’s aggressive behavior and its growing willingness to threaten and use limited force in the South China Sea, therefore, fit quite well into that broad geostrategic design.

More specifically, achieving maritime dominance in the South China Sea via offshore active defense and related activities – including the building of artificial islands and laying the groundwork for their militarization – appears to be viewed by the Chinese as a critical and logical first step to setting in place an anti-access and area denial (or A2/AD) capability, primarily aimed at limiting the ability of U.S. forces to intervene effectively in a given conflict, and doing so within waters that stretch over...
an area some 90 percent of which China already claims as sovereign territory. The projection that these waters could hold as much as 7 billion barrels of oil and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas deposits (not to mention large reserves of fish), combined with the fact that the ownership of these resources is still contested (notwithstanding China’s arguments to the contrary), simply provides an additional powerful incentive for Beijing to establish greater control. Importantly, moreover, the coastal and maritime landscape of the South China Sea – including the central position of Hainan Island, home to a number of China’s most advanced military systems such as its long-range anti-ship ballistic missiles (or ASBMs) and its nuclear-powered submarines (or SSBNs) – makes it a near-perfect operational setting within which to deploy and exercise the types of military assets required for A2/AD missions, and to perfect the PLA’s evolving concepts for how best to use them. In essence, the South China Sea theater is an ideal testbed for systems and strategies that China would hope to deploy and use throughout its near-seas environment.

What’s more, building and testing an A2/AD network first in the South China Sea, where China enjoys a greater freedom of maneuver compared to what is possible in the northern half of the first island chain above Taiwan – where the United States and Japan have a relatively stronger and more constant presence – simply makes sense as a way to “iron out the kinks” in a fairly permissive environment before investing full throttle in such a network elsewhere along China’s coast. That said, once the PLA perfects its South China Sea test, it would be much easier for Beijing to expand and improve A2/AD deployments in other portions of China’s near seas that lie to the north, and to extend coverage out to what is known as the “second island chain,” which stretches from the Japanese coast near Yokosuka south and east along the Bonin and Mariana Islands to Guam and then southwest to the Palau Islands and the western tip of New Guinea. A more robust capacity to reach out to the second chain, based in part on control of the South China Sea, would be a particularly gratifying development for China, as the area between the first and second island chains is where the PLA would ideally want to halt or disrupt any

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1 Robert Kaplan, “Why the South China Sea is so Crucial,” Business Insider, February 20, 2015.
American naval advance toward (and eventually through) the first chain in a future confrontation, especially one involving Taiwan.

In addition to being a central component of the country’s overarching strategy of active defense, China’s assertiveness also enjoys growing domestic support and is heavily promoted by a wide range of influential local experts as well as top members of the Chinese leadership itself, who argue that such a policy is in fact preferable to any alternatives. Since he came to power, for example, Chinese President Xi Jinping has frequently stressed in public the critical importance of assertiveness and a strong military to advancing national interests and achieving what he calls the “China Dream” of regional dominance. Accordingly, Xi has devised a much more hardline approach vis-à-vis territorial disputes, and instances of Chinese coercion have markedly increased under his rule. Similarly, key officials from Xi’s cabinet and other observers have highlighted that the new approach is more “practical and effective” at commanding respect and convincing others to increasingly accommodate Beijing’s preferences. As one Chinese major general argued in late 2014, “principles of harmonious coexistence and peaceful development do not resonate with many countries.” Echoing that sentiment, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has emphasized in recent speeches that China must firmly stand its ground when engaged in maritime disputes or in defense of its territorial sovereignty claims. After all, according to Chinese thinking, although many nations might be uncomfortable with China’s aggressive behavior, the costs of any negative international perceptions remain unclear and have been quite manageable to date, while at the same time, as some analysts point out, the PLA’s tactic of provoking and exploiting ambiguous incidents with other countries in disputed waters has been hugely successful in strengthening China’s maritime claims so far.

Yet another key motivator driving the rise of Chinese assertiveness is the fact that Beijing considers the South China Sea to be an increasingly important seaward gateway into the Indian Ocean and to the littoral areas of Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Arab Gulf, and even East Africa. The waters of the greater Indian Ocean host the sea lines of communication (or SLOCs) that carry the critical energy supplies and other raw materials on which the Chinese economy depends. They also provide China with access to a number of countries – notably, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka – with which Beijing seeks to partner (and over which it hopes to gain

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.
political and economic leverage) via what it calls a “maritime silk road.” Access to and through the Indian Ocean from the South China Sea is also critical to the ability of the PLA Navy (or PLAN) to perform a variety of tasks that Chinese military authorities now categorize as “far sea protection” missions, such as SLOC defense in distant waters, counter-piracy, and the rescue of Chinese nationals working abroad. Each of these out-of-area missions and likely others will become more frequent and necessary as China continues to build up an ocean-going navy and strives to participate in naval operations well beyond its near seas.

Taken together, these observations suggest that Beijing sees control of the South China Sea as extremely important in its own right and as a way to achieve essential strategic goals within the near-seas zone as a whole and even well beyond. Signs of Chinese assertiveness, therefore, including expansive maritime claims, large-scale land reclamation and militarization of features in the South China Sea, disruptive diplomacy aimed at undermining a common ASEAN response, continued disregard for international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and growing reliance on economic policies and maritime paramilitary forces to coerce other states in Asia, will likely persist and intensify in the foreseeable future. What’s more, by attempting to unilaterally change the accepted rules allocating jurisdiction over geographic features, Beijing is expertly creating problems for its Asia-Pacific neighbors and the United States, all aimed at fostering a new, China-led security order in the region, in which it holds a key position as an arbiter. This certainly accords with the view of the commander of U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Harry Harris, who recently stated as fact in a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing that the PRC is seeking “hegemony in East Asia. Simple as that.” And as Chinese expert Shi Yinghong, who has served as an advisor to the State Council, China’s cabinet, for the past five years, made clear in April 2016, China’s resurgence “will be based on an arms buildup and the strategic ability to go tit-for-tat with the U.S.” so as to force Washington to finally “recognize Chinese preponderance” and cede a sphere of influence to Beijing, particularly in the South China Sea.5


China’s resurgence “will be based on an arms buildup and the strategic ability to go tit-for-tat with the U.S.”
forces. The document further underscored China’s offshore active defense strategy and urged a greater Chinese maritime presence outside territorial waters, stating that the “traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.” The ultimate goal of PLA strategists is to counter American naval superiority and a potential U.S. military intervention across the Pacific, triggered perhaps by a regional contingency, such as a conflict over Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, or a clash spawned by China’s efforts to limit or deny lawful military endeavors in international waters and skies, among other possibilities. Significantly, Chinese leaders have demonstrated recently a willingness to tolerate much higher levels of regional tension and to risk short-term reputational costs to maximize longer-term strategic gains with respect to sovereignty claims. In essence, as many analysts argue, China hopes to gain a free hand in its home region by successfully convincing Washington to “restrain itself,” or essentially impose on itself an anti-access strategy, with respect to any confrontation involving Chinese maritime interests in the Asia-Pacific, or else risk escalation and direct conflict with the PLA.

China’s Rapid Military Modernization

Largely in pursuit of this key objective, Beijing has embarked on a massive reorganization and modernization of its armed forces, with significant investments in the types of naval and air capabilities that would enable the PLA to operate at greater distances from the Chinese mainland, and even beyond the Pacific, as well as to defeat or counter third-party (including U.S.) power projection or intervention during a crisis in the East and South China Seas. As noted in the Pentagon’s latest report to Congress, released in May 2016, China’s sweeping military modernization is aimed at producing capabilities “that have the potential to reduce core U.S. military technological advantages.” As part of these modernization efforts, the PLA is rapidly improving integrated air defense networks for theater contingencies and is also developing and testing new intermediate- and medium-range conventional ballistic missiles as well as long-range, land-attack, and anti-ship cruise missiles, which once operational would further extend the Chinese

China’s military budget has risen at a steady rate of roughly 10 percent annually over the past decade.

China’s growing emphasis on maritime power as a way to achieve global reach and influence is clearly reflected in the constantly expanding capabilities of the Chinese navy. Over the past few years, for instance, the PLAN has significantly increased in size, and today it possesses “the largest number of vessels in Asia [excluding the U.S. Navy], with more than 300 surface ships, submarines, amphibious ships, and patrol craft.”10 China commissioned its first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, in 2012 and has already begun construction of its first indigenous aircraft carrier, which is expected to have larger hangar space to accommodate more aircraft. In addition, Chinese forces are operating at a higher tempo, in more places, and with greater sophistication than ever before. To complement the Liaoning, Chinese shipyards are constructing the country’s first cruiser-sized warship and several new classes of guided-missile destroyers (DDGs), frigates, and patrol boats, including Type 052C and Type 052D destroyers, supplemented by a larger Type 055 guided-missile cruiser, and Type 054A frigates. Equipped with active phased-array radars, these vessels will provide Chinese carrier strike groups with long-range anti-aircraft warfare (AAW) support, thus addressing Beijing’s longstanding problem of weak air defense and making its navy more formidable in the face of possible opposition from Japan or other Asian naval and air forces.11 Indeed, according to military observers, if current rates of production continue, by 2018, the PLAN will likely procure more phased-array radar-equipped destroyers than its largest competitor in the region, Japan, with the ability to concentrate more such vessels than the U.S. Navy.12 Additional naval assets and small combatants, including the new, highly capable Type 056 corvettes, are being upgraded to anti-submarine warfare (ASW) variants with a towed array sonar that will further augment the PLAN’s littoral warfare capabilities. Together with the many Type 022 missile-armed fast attack craft, which are equipped with anti-ship cruise missiles and

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low-radar signature, these vessels pose a substantial threat to any ships entering the China seas or adjacent waters.

Meanwhile, the Chinese air force, which is already the largest in Asia and the third-largest in the world, continues to modernize its naval aviation with newly built airframes that can mount sea-skimming supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs). The PRC is also the only country other than the United States to be pursuing two concurrent stealth fighter programs, and China’s fifth-generation fighter force, which could enter service by 2018, will significantly improve its existing fleet of fourth-generation and 4.5-generation aircraft, such as the J-10, J-11, and Su-30, allowing it to support regional air superiority and strike operations. At the same time, the PLA is investing heavily in its ever-expanding submarine force, with newer, more capable submarines continuously replacing older ones. China’s strategic capabilities, in that regard, are significant. The Jin-class ballistic missile submarine (Type 094), for example, which carries the JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missile capable of reaching parts of the continental United States, stands as Beijing’s first credible sea-based nuclear deterrent. Moreover, China has now deployed the new YJ-18 anti-ship cruise missile on a number of PLAN submarines and other naval platforms. The YJ-18 ASCM’s supersonic speed and reported range of 290 nautical miles (nm), nearly fifteen times more than the 20 nm range of its predecessor (the YJ-82), combined with China’s long-distance submarine deployments in recent years, will pose serious challenges for U.S. Navy surface ship operations in the region and could hold at risk a carrier strike group in the Western Pacific and perhaps as far away as the Indian Ocean. As noted in a 2015 congressional commission report, “it appears that China’s increasing ASCM inventory has increasing potential to saturate U.S. Navy defenses.”

Of course, these substantial gains and advancements in capability do not imply that the Chinese military has acquired a global reach or that it has caught up to U.S. forces in terms of overall quality, sophistication, or numbers of high-end systems. In fact, by many standards, the PLA continues to lag far behind the U.S. military in a number of important areas and platforms. For example, it is only now readying its first aircraft carrier, while the United States already operates ten full-sized carriers, backed by nine additional amphibious assault ships capable of supporting fixed-wing aircraft. However, as illustrated in one influential 2015 report, the

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15 Eric Heginbotham et al., The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and
The U.S.-Japan-ROK Strategic Triangle and Maritime Security

Chinese military does not necessarily have to catch up to, or overtake, the U.S. military “in terms of quality, or even the number of high-end naval or air systems,” in order to mount a serious challenge to U.S. forces and potentially emerge victorious in a conflict.\(^\text{16}\) Indeed, fighting near the Chinese mainland endows PLA forces with enormous geographic and operational advantages. This is especially true in the near seas, including the East and South China Seas, where the PLAN, which already outmatches every regional navy, can both succeed in establishing control of the waters out to the first island chain and at the same time engage in sea-denial operations, potentially overwhelming any response from an adversary even today.\(^\text{17}\)

What’s more, Beijing does not need to fully close any capability gaps to have a decisive impact, since it is already shaping events in the South China Sea (SCS) and elsewhere through the imaginative use of military and paramilitary instruments, such as the increasingly capable Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia elements, including fishing boats, which have emerged as the frontline forces for China’s assertive policies around its littoral. As noted in the Pentagon’s 2016 report, Chinese leaders are now frequently leveraging tactics short of armed conflict to coerce Southeast Asian states and challenge other claimants into making concessions with regard to China’s massive territorial and maritime sovereignty claims inside its ambiguous “nine-dash line,” which encompasses most of the South China Sea. These “gray zone” activities, calculated to fall below the threshold of provoking the United States or its allies and partners, are effectively concealing Beijing’s hard power behind the seemingly more benign image of white-hulled coast guard and law-enforcement forces, even though the PLA equips many of them with arms and is deploying those forces as weapons in both greater numbers and

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\(^{17}\) Ibid.

Cheng, “China’s Pivot to the Sea.”

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Indeed, Chinese fishing boats, as well as unarmed and lightly armed surveillance and law-enforcement ships, acted as an unofficial auxiliary to Beijing’s measures in the 2012 standoff with Manila at Scarborough Shoal, an atoll within the Philippine exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and are playing an important role in the PLAs current pressure on the Philippine presence at Second Thomas Shoal, among others.19

As the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, remarked in a statement in February 2016, by growing a fleet of white hull ships and fishing vessels, whose purpose is to “dominate the area without the appearance of overt military force,” China is taking actions that create new facts on the ground and is unilaterally changing the status quo in the SCS through “coercion, intimidation, and force.”20 Even more alarmingly, rather than admit that parts of the South China Sea are contested – thus granting fellow claimants some measure of legitimacy – China behaves as though its sovereignty is fact, holding its military might “in reserve as a recessed deterrent or coercive option” that Southeast Asian states know would be deployed if they challenge Beijing’s wishes. According to a prominent U.S. military expert, the Chinese leadership may in fact believe it has found a winning formula in the use of this so-called “small-stick diplomacy,” a similar version of which it has also applied against Japan in their dispute over the Senkaku Islands, refraining thus far from deploying the “big stick of its naval force.”21

Chinese Maritime Claims in the SCS

In addition to this comprehensive force modernization, in recent years, China has also steadily accelerated the velocity and extent of its enormous land-reclamation efforts in the South China Sea. Chinese officials have long claimed “indisputable sovereignty” over features and outcrops in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, as well as elsewhere within the waters bounded by the legally ambiguous nine-dash line inscribed on Chinese maps of the region, even though Beijing has never publicly explained or published the exact coordinates of this line. Chinese commentators frequently refer to China’s “three million square kilometers of blue territory,” which envelopes about 90 percent of the major seas within the first island chain, and President Xi Jinping declared before China’s Politburo in January 2013 that

18 Cronin, “Maritime Asia: Responding to the China Challenge.”
19 Holmes, “A Competitive Turn.”
21 Holmes, “A Competitive Turn.”
“no foreign country should ever nurse hopes that we will bargain over our core national interests.” As part of its campaign to secure acceptance for its maritime claims, China has embarked on a flurry of land reclamation projects in the South China Sea, and in less than two years, Beijing was able to transform seven of its eight Spratly features from previously submerged reefs into artificial islands. According to the U.S Department of Defense (DoD), between December 2013 and late 2015 alone, China added more than 3,200 acres of land to the seven outposts in the Spratly archipelago, while other SCS claimants, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Taiwan, reclaimed about 50 acres of land over the same period.

The PRC’s massive island-building activities have sparked growing environmental concerns as well, as the sand and gravel that Chinese dredgers have been depositing on the atolls may have permanently destroyed the coral reefs beneath, damaged the surrounding fisheries, and breached international law on protecting the fragile ecosystem of the South China Sea. As noted in a U.S. commission report to Congress, published in April 2016, prominent marine biologists and ecologists have called this the most rapid rate of permanent loss of coral reef area in human history.

The PLA is now well on its way to turning these artificial island projects into operating bases for forward-staging military capabilities, under the rubric of being civilian facilities. Significantly, China has begun installing military equipment and facilities at all seven of the reclaimed bases, including new or improved radars, sophisticated communications systems, anti-aircraft batteries, deep-water port facilities, and at least three airfields, each with 3,000-meter-long runways capable of accommodating any Chinese fighter jet, long-range strategic bomber, or other military aircraft. In April 2016, for example, China landed a military plane on its man-made airbase at the disputed Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratlys, where civilian aircraft began test flights several months earlier, in January 2016. U.S. officials and analysts widely expect that additional substantial infrastructure, including surveillance systems to improve situational awareness, will be built on these features in the coming year. Elsewhere in the South China Sea, in February 2016, Beijing placed advanced HQ-9 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) on the
contested Woody Island in the Paracel Islands group, located north of the Spratlys and about 250 miles southeast of Hainan Island, which is home to one of China’s main submarine bases. Just months earlier, in late 2015, China also deployed sixteen advanced J-11 fighter jets on the island, giving it the ability to control the airspace around the Paracels as well as to operate deeper into the South China Sea by hundreds of miles. As U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) Commander Admiral Harris pointed out in his recent testimony before Congress, the sheer scale and scope of these projects “are inconsistent with China’s stated purpose of supporting fishermen, commercial shipping, and search and rescue.”

Given the latest evidence, he added, “China is clearly militarizing the South China Sea and you’d have to believe in a flat Earth to think otherwise.”

Undoubtedly, with its newly built islands in the Spratlys, China will markedly bolster its power projection capabilities and its ability to patrol the southern portion of the South China Sea. More specifically, airstrips and high-capacity water ports on Fiery Cross and Mischief Reefs in the archipelago could serve as diversion and resupply points for Chinese military ships and planes that otherwise would not have the range to operate safely in the South China Sea.

Similarly, the PLA could use the new high-frequency radar facilities being installed on the islands to “scramble fighter jets to intercept, tail, and attempt to evict” incoming military or other aircraft over these hotly contested waters, a scenario that could turn the SCS into a dangerous theater of frequent near-misses and even clashes. The missiles on Woody Island, on the other hand, would not only defend China’s base there, but can also potentially threaten U.S. military flights in airspace extending over one hundred miles from the island, a move that Beijing could easily follow up by placing anti-ship missiles to target U.S. Navy vessels. And even though...

24 Adm. Harry B. Harris Jr., statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Pacific Command Posture.
experts agree that the artificial islands do not provide China with additional, legally recognized sovereignty rights over neighboring waters, the new installations will effectively allow China to maintain a persistent and flexible coast guard and military presence in the area, greatly improving the PLA’s capacity to detect and challenge activities by rival claimants or third parties, while at the same time widening the range of its capabilities and reducing the time required to deploy them.

Taken together, all of China’s recent actions in the SCS speak to the country’s long-term anti-access strategy, and each new outpost in that regard can be viewed as a useful stepping stone for Beijing to systematically extend its network of militarized bases throughout its claimed territories in the South China Sea, and perhaps beyond. Moreover, if the PLA deploys SAMs and jet fighters on its larger artificial islands in the Spratlys, as many anticipate, China will effectively be establishing control over the airspace throughout nearly the entire South China Sea, seriously threatening freedom of overflight.28 Given that none of China’s neighbors and rival claimants can currently match its military buildup or forcibly eject it from its new bases on contested features, Beijing, according to analysts, is in fact betting that its actions will result in the neutralization of any opposition over time and that all regional capitals will eventually accept its predominant position in, and control over, this energy-rich and heavily trafficked sea.

Indeed, these military developments are already expanding Beijing’s strategic reach and boosting its confidence. By May 2015, for example, the PLA was actively moving to restrict freedom of navigation and overflight over its occupied outposts, with radio operators openly challenging foreign ships and planes that are operating in the area, warning them to stay away, according to U.S. officials. In a mid-May 2015 incident, the Chinese navy delivered repeated warnings to a U.S. Navy P-8A *Poseidon* aircraft, which was flying through what is widely seen as international airspace over the disputed Spratly Islands, telling it to leave immediately. At least one of the verbal challenges came from an early-warning radar station located close to the new airstrip on Fiery Cross Reef, according to U.S. personnel on board the aircraft. The Philippines has complained that similar warnings were delivered to its own civilian and military aircraft throughout the same year, even over Philippine territory in the SCS. Mayor Eugenio Bito-onon, the leader of the community on Philippine-administered Thitu Island in the Spratlys, has called the PLA’s radio warnings an “act of intimidation” that illustrates “the threat to freedom of flight in the region.”29

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28 Ibid.
29 Jim Gomez, “Philippine Plane Warned by ‘Chinese Navy’ in Disputed Sea,” Associated
More recently, in March 2016, a Chinese frigate sent a threat warning to the U.S. Navy cruiser *Chancellorsville*, which was sailing near Mischief Reef in the Spratlys, where the PLA is building a military base in defiance of claims by Vietnam and the Philippines. The frigate, which repeatedly disregarded freedom of navigation rules, was accompanied by a Chinese helicopter and later replaced by a destroyer, all of which followed the American vessel until it left the South China Sea. Just weeks later, two Chinese fighter jets flew “dangerously close,” within fifty feet, of an American surveillance aircraft that was on patrol in international airspace. A spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs later told a daily news briefing that Beijing “requests that the United States immediately halt this kind of surveillance, thereby avoiding the recurrence of such incidents.” Amid rising tensions as well, in April 2016, China denied a U.S. carrier strike group’s request for a routine port visit to Hong Kong, even though five Chinese warships were given public permission by Washington the previous year to operate in the Bering Sea, within twelve nautical miles of the coast of Alaska, and China has repeatedly sent intelligence collection ships inside undisputed U.S. EEZs around Guam and Hawaii. These and similar events have caused widespread concern among U.S. officials and regional governments that China may be close to declaring an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over parts or all of the South China Sea, much as it did in 2013, when it unilaterally proclaimed an ADIZ above contested waters in the East China Sea.

**Responding to the China Dilemma**

Against this backdrop, many officials have started wondering how Asia-Pacific countries and the United States should best respond to China’s growing assertiveness and abrasive behavior in maritime disputes. Compounding the problem is the fact that Beijing appears quite comfortable in escalating the military competition in the region and has so far refused to back down in response to the hesitant and at times fickle moves by the Obama administration to push back against Beijing’s expanding presence in the area. Although the Pentagon’s new *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*, released in August 2015, details China’s destabilizing activities in the East and South China Seas, critics have pointed out that it falls short of articulating a dedicated strategy to impose significant costs on

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the PRC. As a result, several recent U.S. measures designed to safeguard the freedom of navigation, America’s chief stated interest in the South China Sea, have been unsuccessful so far at countering China, and senators from both sides of the aisle in Washington have repeatedly called for a more robust U.S. response to China’s maritime expansionism, arguing that Beijing is not paying any price for its actions while regional allies are questioning American commitment to Asian security. The chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Senator John McCain, commented recently that the PRC is behaving less like a “responsible stakeholder” and more like “a bully” in the Asia-Pacific region, charging that the Obama administration’s risk aversion has failed to adapt to the challenge and to prevent China’s coercive behavior.

Meanwhile, the White House and the Pentagon have made clear that they do not want a war with China over a group of uninhabited rocks and islands, something the Chinese leadership had calculated and counted on, correctly, from the start. However, administration officials fear that if China remains undeterred in its pursuit of maritime hegemony, Washington could eventually be forced to cede the South China Sea to Beijing. As the U.S. director of national intelligence, James Clapper, warned in an unclassified February 2016 letter to the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, by early 2017, if not sooner, “China will have significant capacity to quickly project substantial offensive military power to the region.”

Washington is also worried about getting involved in a possible clash with China’s risk-taking leadership in the wake of the decision in July 2016 by a UN-appointed arbitration panel in The Hague that China was indeed making excessive claims about its maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea, especially in the Spratly Islands area. Administration officials were particularly concerned that a conflict could erupt between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal that could drag in the United States, given that the shoal was clearly within the Philippines’ EEZ, that Beijing’s seizure of the shoal in 2012 was clearly illegal (and confirmed as such by the Arbitral Tribunal), and that the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty committed both parties to support each other if either one was attacked by an external party. For its part, China had declared well before the July ruling that it would not accept or abide by any decision issued by the Arbitral Tribunal that went against the PRC, threatening that it might also cease cooperating with the UNCLOS dispute settlement process and with other international institutions with which it disagrees. Even

[B]y early 2017, “China will have significant capacity to quickly project substantial offensive military power to the region.”

32 Huxley and Schreer, “Standing Up to China.”
after the Philippines’ newly elected president, Rodrigo Duterte, announced during a state visit to China in October 2016 that he was “separating from the United States” and aligning with Russia and China, the Chinese foreign ministry, for example, reiterated Beijing’s claims of sovereignty over Scarborough Shoal, and stressed that China’s jurisdiction over the shoal would not change. If China holds to this view and appears ready to back it up with military force, the administration, according to former assistant secretary of state for Asia, Kurt Campbell, could soon be facing “another red line moment where it has to figure out how to carry through on past warnings.”

One of the great concerns about the South China Sea is whether China will seek to cut off or control international navigation on water and in airspace. The United States has carried out several so-called freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in recent months, sending Navy destroyers near Chinese-claimed man-made islands and features as a way to demonstrate that free passage is still open to all nations. In the fall of 2015, for example, after months of verbal protestations without action, Washington finally sent the USS Lassen into the twelve-nm area claimed by China around the artificial landmass at Subi Reef, in the Spratly Islands group. In February 2016, the USS Wilbur conducted a FONOP within twelve nautical miles of Triton Island, a PRC-held feature in the Paracels also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan, and a month later, the aircraft carrier John C. Stennis and four other American warships sailed into the South China Sea for routine exercises, designed to convey the message that the United States is still the dominant military power in the region. Unfortunately, Washington’s ambiguous description of the voyages, calling them innocent passages (or IPs), has raised new questions about U.S. seriousness and commitment. Significantly, the distinction is of great importance, since a FONOP is conducted in normal operating mode and concedes nothing on sovereignty to an unlawful claimant, while an IP, by contrast, acknowledges that a ship is passing through a claimant’s territorial waters and does so in a non-challenging manner, for example with weapons and radar systems deactivated. Critics have therefore charged that if the United States and China have secretly reached a modus vivendi, whereby both can claim to have achieved their essential goals, then Washington has conceded too much to Beijing, as such an arrangement would effectively legitimize China’s excessive claims and encourage more

34 “China’s Assertiveness in the South China Sea,” IISS Strategic Comments, 22, comment 34, November 2016.
of the same, with potentially far-reaching consequences for other adversaries elsewhere in the world.\textsuperscript{37} Perhaps in part to refute such a charge, the Pentagon took pains to emphasize that the U.S. Navy’s fourth FONOP, conducted in October 2016 by the guided-missile destroyer USS \textit{Decatur} in the vicinity of the Chinese-occupied Paracel Islands, was not an IP.\textsuperscript{38}

Complicating the situation, according to one prominent naval strategist, is the very real issue that it is no longer a foregone conclusion that the U.S. Pacific Fleet and its associated forces can actually get into the Asia-Pacific theater and concentrate superior manpower there at the decisive place and time. This is partly due to the fact that in 1992, the U.S. Navy issued its first post-Cold War strategy, called \textit{From the Sea}, in which it essentially declared an “end to history,” given that no other nation at the time was even remotely capable of challenging America’s command of the sea. Today, the U.S. Navy is in essence gradually waking up from that bureaucratic lag in the system and is now confronting a paradigm shift and a change in the way it intends to manage the world. As Admiral Scott Swift, the senior officer for the Navy’s Pacific Fleet, commented recently, China’s current behavior and activity can be described as an arc, “but we’re not sure where that arc is going to terminate…”\textsuperscript{39}

To make matters worse, partly because the U.S. Navy proclaimed an end to history, it has fallen woefully behind within the tactical and hardware dimensions as well, and particularly in areas such as countering the sheer number and types of Chinese anti-ship cruise missiles. U.S. military forces, officials and experts agree, are desperately outranged by the Chinese navy’s missile-firing platforms. China already has the ability, for example, to launch anti-ship strikes with cruise and ballistic weapons from ranges as far as twenty-five hundred miles away, allowing Beijing to launch massive swarms of different types of A2/AD missile platforms at U.S. naval assets and thereby greatly complicating U.S. strategy. As one Naval War College expert explains, Chinese missiles “only need to reach the fleet’s defensive envelope for the \textit{Aegis} [America’s naval-based missile defense system] to engage the incoming threats, thus forcing the defender to expend valuable ammunition that cannot be easily resupplied at sea under

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\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{38} “China’s Assertiveness in the South China Sea,” \textit{IISS Strategic Comments}. The \textit{Decatur} did not sail within twelve nautical miles of the islands involved, but the operation was notable in that one of the islands, known as Woody Island, hosts a recently expanded PLA air base and HQ-9 air defense missile batteries. In this sense, the \textit{Decatur} FONOP was likely meant to signal a toughening of the U.S. position on freedom of the seas in the wake of the UN tribunal’s July 2016 decision.
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}
combat conditions,” and leaving the U.S. surface fleet defenseless against further PLA actions.\textsuperscript{40} Former Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, echoed this growing fear in the surface warfare community when he said recently that he recognized a long-term concern that the United States might be “out-sticked” by the PLAN in the Asia-Pacific, adding that he was “impatient” to field systems in the near term with the range and survivability that can close the gap and bolster U.S. anti-ship capability.\textsuperscript{41}

Yet another challenge that U.S. policy makers face in responding to the new normal that China is fervently constructing is the problem of alliance and coalition unity. Although there is general consensus that freedom of the sea is an underlying principle of the international system that ought to be protected and many countries in the region have begun strengthening their defense ties with the United States and with one another, Asia-Pacific nations have struggled so far to band together in response to China’s tough tactics. Beijing’s rival claimants in the SCS, in particular, have long hoped that their regional club – ASEAN – can mount a united front. Yet to date, the ten-member bloc has been unable to speak cohesively and to even show a common rhetorical stance on the issue both at its semiannual gatherings and at a series of recent summits, much less to organize any sort of mechanism for punishing the PRC’s provocations. China strongly prefers to negotiate with (and bully) ASEAN members individually, and it skillfully exploits the bloc’s internal differences.\textsuperscript{42} Even at an unprecedented summit in February 2016, hosted by President Obama in California, ASEAN nations “danced around” an explicit condemnation of China’s behavior, and the lack of specific mention of Beijing or even the South China Sea after the summit made clear the lingering divisions in the group.\textsuperscript{43}

China has also prevented claimant and other states from embracing outside powers too heartily by employing a divide-and-conquer, or sometimes called “salami-slicing,” strategy to disrupt cohesion in the bloc, often

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\textsuperscript{40} Toshi Yoshihara, quoted in Harry Kazianis, “The U.S. Navy’s Real Challenge: An Anti-access ‘Swarm’ Strike,” \textit{Asia Times}, February 25, 2016.
\textsuperscript{43} Dan de Luce and Keith Johnson, “Crunch Time for Washington and Beijing in the South China Sea,” \textit{Foreign Policy}, February 17, 2016.
\end{flushleft}
leveraging its massive economic clout and much-needed infrastructure investment funds to coerce individual states. Beijing is therefore expertly mixing the carrots, or incentives, of trade and finance with the sticks of information warfare and mounting military deployments and operations in the South China Sea. In that regard, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, according to analysts, have come under increasing pressure from China to water down any ASEAN position on the maritime disputes. At the same time, Vietnam and the Philippines, both of which have overlapping territorial claims with China, have felt highly constrained in their options to push back and have remained wary of taking more decisive action against Beijing, given their overwhelming economic dependence on Chinese investments and trade. No doubt, this particular consideration has influenced Philippine president Duterte’s inclination to adopt a more accommodating posture toward China on Scarborough Shoal and related matters, despite the ruling by the UN Arbitral Tribunal that Manila’s position on the Scarborough Shoal question. To date as well, Southeast Asian governments and other allies have been hesitant to take part in any multinational FON exercises around disputed features in the South China Sea to check Beijing’s moves to carve out zones of exemption from the law of the sea in expanses that it deems important. What’s more, regional powers have shown little willingness to expend scarce resources in an open-ended endeavor to defend the principle of freedom of the seas from a powerful and aggressive challenger, an issue that in turn is threatening to reduce what should clearly be a much broader maritime dilemma for all seafaring nations to simply a narrow U.S.-China problem.

Beijing's assertive and expansive policies are thus forcing the United States to decide whether to push back forcefully, even if that heightens the risk of military confrontation, or fall back and allow the PLA to gradually bend the diplomatic and strategic setting in its favor. Many officials and top U.S. lawmakers from both parties have been urging the White House in recent months to show more resolve with China. In late April 2016, senators even introduced a bill that called for Washington to move beyond “symbolic gestures” and a tread-softly approach and to launch instead a robust freedom of the seas campaign. As Senator Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) stated that same month, for too long “the United States has played the role of observer, or perhaps protestor, but not yet actor.” Admiral Harris and other Pentagon officials have also been arguing for a more confrontational approach to counter China’s strategic gains in the South China Sea, appeals that have been met so far with resistance from the White House at

44 Cronin, “Maritime Asia: Responding to the China Challenge.”
45 Dan De Luce, “Lawmakers to White House: Get Tough with Beijing over South China Sea,” Foreign Policy, April 27, 2016.
nearly every turn. Some of the proposals include launching aircraft and conducting frequent close patrols and military operations within twelve nautical miles of China’s artificial islands, increasing the number of sailing days that U.S. warships spend in the SCS, expanding joint exercises, and continuing with ocean surveillance patrols to gather intelligence throughout the western Pacific. U.S. Navy officials would also like to increase the number of amphibious ships in the Asia-Pacific by one or two, which would allow Marines and sailors to train and interact more with allied nations in the region. In other words, as Senate Armed Forces Chairman John McCain summarized in February 2016, “the United States should consider additional options to raise the costs on Beijing’s behavior,” adding that to really push back against China’s aggressive moves in the region, Washington must adopt fresh policies “with a level of risk that we have been unwilling to consider up to this point.”

The U.S. mindset, therefore, requires a fundamental shift to accept greater risk and the possibility of escalation in the Asia-Pacific without being reckless, if America’s response is to be successful. It is also critical for Washington to develop new platforms and refine operational concepts designed to defeat China’s A2/AD policies, such as the Pentagon’s Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver on the Global Commons (JAM-GC), which relies on the innovative use of joint forces to gain and maintain freedom of access to the global commons, as well as the alternative concepts of offshore control, which would seal off the first island chain from the PLAN and impose a distant blockade on China’s seaborne imports of natural resources; archipelagic defense, which employs the imaginative use of islands and passages by U.S. and allied forces to counteract an opponent’s advantages in numbers of ships, aircraft, or manpower; and the so-called third-offset strategy, largely based on harnessing innovation, experimentation, and adopting new ways of operating to address the gap in technological superiority. Firming up the unity, power, and purpose of the U.S. alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and other Asia-Pacific stakeholders, along with building up a regional system rooted in the shared interests of like-minded seafaring nations opposed to Chinese threats, is also an important element for maintaining an effective U.S. security posture and ensuring continued support in the region.

Nevertheless, even though America’s current efforts to boost its military capabilities and anchor its presence in Asia, as part of the Obama

“the United States should consider additional options to raise the costs on Beijing’s behavior,” including fresh policies “with a level of risk that we have been unwilling to consider up to this point.”

46 McCain, “America Needs More Than Symbolic Gestures in the South China Sea.”
47 De Luce and Johnson, “Crunch Time for Washington and Beijing in the South China Sea.”
administration's rebalance policy, will counter parts of China's anti-access/area denial strategy, staying ahead in terms of weapons, tactics, and operational methods alone would not guarantee a credible deterrent. Chinese leaders are well aware which side has the strongest military, and hence what Beijing's assertive strategy is aiming to test is not the balance of military forces, but rather the “balance of resolve” and U.S. willingness, not ability, to fight and use those military capabilities, a savvy tactic that U.S. responses to date have failed to account for. Deterrence, according to one influential naval strategist, can thus be represented as the product of capability times resolve, whereby maximizing each factor's value in the equation would yield the highest end result and best fighting chance to deter an ambitious opponent. In that regard, Washington's well-known aversion to confronting China and its persistent emphasis on de-escalation and crisis management in every incident with Beijing are gradually chipping away at U.S. credibility in the region (and perhaps beyond) while also acting as a self-imposed strategic impediment, which continues to delay decisive American countermeasures that might confound the PLA's calculations. In essence, half-measures by the U.S. leadership, such as symbolic costs and confusing freedom of navigation patrols, have failed to stop the Chinese from building artificial islands and developing military capabilities in the SCS, and the longer America waits to challenge any new precedent, the more firmly it becomes precedent. To signal to China that it will not be able to use asymmetry of resolve to its advantage, therefore, Washington must show a willingness to escalate a situation to higher levels of conflict when Beijing is directly testing U.S. resolve, including reducing channels of communication during a contingency or involving other regional actors, among other measures.

However unlikely it may seem in the near term given Duterte's overtures to Beijing, a decision by China to begin large-scale island building and militarization activity at Scarborough Shoal could very well trigger a tougher response from Washington along these lines, and a more determined effort to deter Beijing’s behavior. It seems increasingly likely, according to Pentagon officials and experts, that China will seek to demonstrate in some way that it will not be constrained by the tribunal's decision, and to make clear to Manila that by pursuing a policy of diplomatic and economic engagement with the Philippines now that Duterte is in charge, Beijing still had no intention of relinquishing its claim to sovereignty over the shoal. Strategically, however, any Chinese

49 Ibid.
50 James Holmes, remarks delivered at Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis workshop, Washington, D.C., June 17, 2016.
51 Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Why Chinese Assertiveness Is Here to Stay."
efforts to establish a new military outpost on Scarborough Shoal, a triangular chain of coral reefs and rocks that lie just 185 nautical miles from the Philippine capital, would be a disastrous development and one that would allow the PLA to maintain a presence throughout the South China Sea, even extending its reach over parts of Manila’s home islands, with enormous strategic implications for both the Philippines and the United States, which just negotiated access for U.S. forces to five Philippine bases. In addition, new dredging work and deployment of military assets in the area would help establish a strategic triangle of Chinese-controlled islands, with the Paracels in the northwest, the Spratlys in the south, and Scarborough in the northeast, which Beijing could then use to project enormous power, monitor U.S. military activity in nearby waters, and declare an ADIZ over virtually the entire South China Sea. This, in turn, would put the burden of escalation on the United States and its Asian allies, complicating Washington’s task of determining a response, while strategically testing U.S. willingness to uphold the regional security order. A permanent Chinese occupation of Scarborough Shoal would also effectively detach part of the Philippine EEZ, as would China’s efforts to auction off sectors of the Vietnamese EEZ to foreign companies for oil and gas exploration.

Of course, the prospects for cooperation and constructive engagement with China should not be discounted. As former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy noted in 2014, “abandoning efforts to engage with China” could very well accelerate Beijing’s assertiveness and “run counter to a wide range of U.S. economic and security interests.”

Such efforts, for example, could include counter-piracy operations and other constabulary endeavors in the Gulf of Aden and elsewhere that could perhaps turn into an “outside-in strategy,” whereby allied powers can cooperate with Chinese forces outside Asia and hope to radiate these habits of cooperation into the waters of the East and South China Seas. Nevertheless, as experts point out, such collaborative arrangements, particularly within the first island chain, may be difficult to extend beyond purely straightforward humanitarian assistance and disaster response missions, given that any cooperative constabulary duty would be perceived in Beijing as ratifying U.S. maritime supremacy in Asia and sharing jurisdiction in seas and air space over which it insists vehemently that it holds indisputable sovereignty. Ultimately, however, the common purpose and

53 Holmes, “A Competitive Turn.”
Ultimately, the common purpose and priority of the United States and its regional allies should center on deterring China first, while also cooperating with Beijing when feasible, though yielding nothing on principle to the PRC for the sake of cooperation. This order of priority is significant, since China is unilaterally seeking to establish a precedent that it can amend or repeal parts of the law of the sea by fiat, which would be a very dangerous precedent for the U.S. alliance network in the region to accept.

In sum, policy makers in Washington must orient their approach to Beijing’s assertive new strategy while simultaneously clarifying their own goals and deciding how much they value those goals and the magnitude of effort they are willing to expend to maintain the U.S. position as a leading Pacific power and deny China an easy victory. Accordingly, this would involve summoning up resolve, resources, and regional allies to jointly uphold and defend the maritime principles and order in the Asia-Pacific. U.S. leaders, according to one expert, must therefore calculate their strategic response and diplomacy with regional audiences in mind, including friends, allies, and third-party stakeholders able to influence the competition’s outcome. Otherwise, if Washington appears unable or unwilling to compete over the long term, China’s neighbors may feel they have no recourse but to start accommodating themselves to Beijing’s wishes in Southeast Asia.  

Indeed, as many would argue, perhaps the only way to reach some form of security equilibrium with China within the near-seas zone is to ensure more robust U.S. presence and alliance cooperation there, which inevitably raises the risk of deepening confrontation and future tension in the region. To be sure, Beijing may never formally relinquish such goals as Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, or its excessive claims to sovereignty over sea and sky in the South China Sea, but by acting now, the United States may gain enough time to favorably influence the strategic competition and counteract China’s hubris. In the meantime, Washington’s rebalance policy and U.S. efforts to enhance the capacity of Southeast Asian states to police their own territory, sovereign seas, and EEZs are all eminently sound courses of action. In that regard, larger allies in the region such as Japan and South Korea can be particularly helpful by taking the initiative to manage events in Northeast Asia as much as possible and by helping the United States improve the self-defense capacity, maritime domain awareness, and naval and coast guard capabilities of smaller allies and stakeholders, including Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines. A strong U.S. focus on collaborative steps and cost-imposing strategies can engender further region-wide

maritime cooperation, strengthen information- and intelligence-sharing on potential Chinese actions, and improve the shared maritime domain awareness architecture in the region, all of which would be critical to addressing and deterring future Chinese coercion and adventurism in the South China Sea and beyond.
Given the evolving threat environment in the Asian-Pacific maritime domain, the United States is already focusing its strategic efforts on deepening naval collaboration with key U.S. allies and partners in the region while at the same time working to build up the maritime security capabilities of smaller countries in Southeast Asia that face increasing Chinese pressure in the contested waters of the South China Sea. Indeed, cooperation with Japan and the ROK, two of America’s most capable regional allies, on missions to improve overall maritime security in the area is specifically endorsed and encouraged in the U.S. Navy’s New Maritime Strategy, formally released in October 2007 as *A Cooperative Maritime Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power*, or CS21. The document, which articulated the first unified maritime strategy for the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, notably champions the idea of global maritime partnerships, especially with Washington’s primary allies in Asia, and identifies the Western Pacific, and specifically maritime Southeast Asia, together with the Indian Ocean and its approaches, as regions of exceptional strategic importance, home to some of the world’s most important sea lines of communication (SLOCs). This focus on broader multilateral cooperation as a way to build capacity and maintain security in the Southeast Asian maritime zone in an era of tighter defense budgets is also called for in the Pentagon’s 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG) and the *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* 2014. As noted in both the 2014 QDR and its predecessor, QDR 2010, U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific requires a customized, interagency, and whole-of-government approach to building local partnership capacity, and in that regard support in Washington for trilateral and multilateral cooperation with traditional allies such as Japan, the ROK, and Australia will remain a key component of the U.S. rebalance to Asia in the years ahead, especially as the incentives increase to reduce overall costs by relying more on
U.S. efforts are underway to develop and expand cooperative ties and partnerships with nations in Southeast Asia.

For its part, the rebalance strategy, however gradual and perhaps less far-reaching it may prove to be than when it was first announced in January 2012, has been a cornerstone of U.S. maritime engagement in the Asia-Pacific, at least in its military dimensions. This is certainly true with respect to America’s plans to shift by 2020 the U.S. Navy’s fifty-fifty split in its forces between the Pacific and the Atlantic to more of a sixty-forty split between these two oceans and to reconfigure and/or redeploy Marine units earmarked for Asia-Pacific duty. In addition, as called for in the rebalance, U.S. efforts are underway to develop and expand cooperative ties and partnerships with Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and other nations in Southeast Asia (in part by deploying up to four littoral combat ships, or LCSes, to Singapore), to promote a more integrated approach to military activities and operations in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and to encourage multilateral security cooperation in non-controversial but important mission areas like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Importantly, these ties are aimed to go well beyond, in the words of former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Greenert, “simple port visits,” as evidenced by recent Pentagon initiatives, including the deployment of U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft, several of America’s newest surface warships such as cutting-edge stealth destroyers, and F-22 Raptor stealth fighter jets and other advanced tactical strike aircraft to the region.1 Possible P-8A flights from a Malaysian air base in Sabah, located in northeast Malaysia, for example, would give the U.S. Navy a much improved capacity to patrol the waters of the South China Sea, a mission of ever-rising importance, given ongoing territorial disputes in the region and China’s growing submarine fleet operating out of Hainan Island. Reinforcing the pivot’s southward shift toward Southeast Asia, the Navy is also becoming more deeply involved in helping to build up the maritime security capabilities of select ASEAN countries, following a commitment of some $32.5 million to that objective by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry during his December 2013 visit to Hanoi.

More recently, cooperation in the maritime security realm has been highlighted in DoD’s latest Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy, released in August 2015, as well as in the Pentagon’s new Maritime Security

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1 Abraham Denmark, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, “South China Sea Maritime Disputes,” testimony before the House Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces, and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, July 7, 2016.
MSI is a promising new effort designed to modernize the maritime capabilities of ally and partner states near the South China Sea.

Initiative (MSI) for Southeast Asia, publicly unveiled by U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter at the Shangri-La Dialogue — Asia’s premier security summit — in Singapore in June 2015. The MSI, in particular, is a promising new effort designed to modernize the maritime capabilities of ally and partner states near the South China Sea and to build their capacity to respond rapidly to evolving security challenges in waters off their coasts and elsewhere in the region through such means as improving maritime domain awareness, expanding exercises, and leveraging senior-level engagements. Even before the advent of these initiatives, however, the U.S. government had begun accelerating and expanding its maritime security programs, funding, and related regional capacity-building efforts for Southeast Asia. The Philippines, for example, received a record $79 million in bilateral assistance in FY 2015 alone, more than 66 percent of the $119 million of total DoD funds allocated for developing Southeast Asian maritime capabilities that year. This assistance is largely focused on providing coastal radar systems, naval maintenance, interdiction vessels, naval fleet upgrades, communications equipment, and aircraft procurement, all necessary to expand the ability of the Philippine forces to conduct operations and patrols throughout the country’s exclusive economic zone, or EEZ. To maximize the impact of U.S. capacity-building efforts given resource and budget limitations, the Pentagon has also prioritized the transfer of Excess Defense Articles (EDA) for the maritime domain, and in July 2016, the U.S. Coast Guard formally turned over its high-endurance cutter, the USCG Boutwell, to the Philippine Navy, the third ship of its class provided to Manila in the past few years.2

Similarly, the United States is increasing its maritime program assistance to Vietnam, which received more than $19.6 million in FY 2015 to bolster the naval intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and command and control capabilities within Vietnamese maritime agencies, with Washington’s recent lifting of the longstanding ban on sales of maritime-related lethal capabilities expected to encourage further interoperability with other regional fleets and forces.3 The United States is also working with Indonesia, having provided nearly $11 million in maritime assistance to the country in FY 2015 to increase its patrol and maintenance capacity, ISR integration, and training skills, and it has plans to augment U.S. funding for Malaysia in the coming years to build Kuala Lumpur’s maritime law enforcement training capacity and interagency coordination. In 2015 as well, the Department of Defense established new bilateral

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3 Ibid.
Select DoD Maritime Capacity-Building Efforts in Southeast Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reform of defense planning, defense strategy, and budget development and execution system and processes.</td>
<td>Defense Institution Reform Initiative (DIRI)</td>
<td>2013 to present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upgrade TNI Bell helicopters and Navy Special Forces Equipment, including 12 RHIBs ($27M).</td>
<td>Section 1206</td>
<td>2010 funding, RHIBs delivered 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Coast Watch Center ($19M).</td>
<td>Cooperative Threat Reduction Program</td>
<td>2013-2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coast Watch Radar System.</td>
<td>Section 1206</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform of defense planning system.</td>
<td>DIRI</td>
<td>2005-2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of WMD detection equipment; improved communications; construct coast guard training center; maritime security workshops ($21M).</td>
<td>Cooperative Threat Reduction Program</td>
<td>FY2014-2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law enforcement, advisory, and boat maintenance training ($405K).</td>
<td>Counternarcotics and Global Threats Authority</td>
<td>FY2014-2015</td>
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</table>

In seeking to augment the regional security network in the Asia-Pacific, in large part to help address China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, the United States has sought to pursue a variety of joint exercise and training opportunities with local allies and partner countries to promote the necessary interoperability and explore practical bilateral and multilateral maritime security cooperation. In that regard, U.S. forces conducted more than four hundred planned events with the Philippines in 2015 alone, including the premier annual exercise Balikatan, which is co-hosted by Manila and has been growing larger and more sophisticated each year. During the 2015 Balikatan, for example, more than fifteen thousand military personnel from the United States, Australia, and the Philippines exercised operations involving a territorial defense scenario in the Sulu Sea, with personnel from Japan observing. Similarly, the biannual Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise off of Hawaii, which includes twenty-seven nations and is currently the largest international maritime exercise in the world, aims to enhance the interoperability of the combined RIMPAC forces during lower-tier operations such as HA/DR and to integrate new participants into the use of multinational command and control at the tactical and operational levels. Other regular U.S.-led training initiatives in the region, such as the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) naval exercise with nine partner nations, the annual Philippine Amphibious Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX), and the Pacific Partnership medical ship exercise, have also centered in recent years on bolstering the maritime patrol and HA/DR capabilities of Southeast Asian states. In addition, as a way to build regional expertise and reduce crisis response times, the U.S. Army conducts rotational deployments of infantry brigade units for up to six months in East and Southeast Asia via exercise Pacific Pathways (which recently included training activities in Thailand, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia), and the 2015 iteration of the Sea Surveillance Exercises (SEASURVEX), aimed at improving airborne maritime reconnaissance interoperability, included for the first time a flight portion over the South China Sea.

Beyond these ties in the naval realm, Washington has made a fair amount of progress toward promoting multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region through its increasing participation in ASEAN’s Defense Minister’s Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and its Experts’ Working Group activities, which have proven to be a useful forum for building military-to-military cooperation and increasing local capabilities to respond to regional crises. In April 2014, for instance, then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel hosted a summit for ASEAN defense ministers in Hawaii that specifically focused on opportunities for broader information

sharing, joint and combined exercises, and, most importantly, maritime security awareness and closer coordination at sea. Following this dialogue, moreover, U.S. Pacific Command hosted a follow-on workshop in May 2015 to discuss possible models of information sharing and opportunities for greater maritime collaboration among the United States and ASEAN countries. Alongside these venues, the Obama administration also gained membership for the United States in the East Asia Summit (EAS), an annual ASEAN-initiated gathering of ministers and heads of state from the same eighteen countries that belong to the ADMM-Plus. Focused in particular on promoting regional cooperation in the areas of energy, finance, education, natural disaster management, and connectivity, the EAS has emerged as the region’s premier leadership forum, and active participation is considered a must for any non-ASEAN country that wishes to be seen as a serious player in the region.

MSI and Maritime Domain Awareness

Improved situational awareness in the South China Sea has been a key defense priority for the United States since at least 2013, and the issues of enhancing regional partners’ maritime domain awareness (MDA) and eventually moving toward establishing a common operational picture (COP) in the area are central components of the Pentagon’s 2015 Maritime Security Initiative. Often referred to by former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Gary Roughead as “the glue” that binds CS21 activities together, MDA is the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could affect the security, safety, economy, or environment of a nation.\(^5\) With most of its islets spread out hundreds of miles from shore, the South China Sea presents an opaque, low-information environment that makes it especially challenging for local governments to detect and monitor events at sea when they occur. What’s more, as many argue, this lack of situational awareness in the region, coupled with few avenues through which to share information and coordinate responses, has enabled Beijing to engage in its illegal construction projects in the Spratly Islands largely unchallenged, and to successfully and expertly exploit other claimants’ MDA limitations, leaving them with little more than to accept a Chinese fait accompli.\(^6\)

Washington’s MSI, therefore, represents a big step toward improving the ability of Southeast Asia’s littoral states to detect, understand, react to, and share information about air and maritime activity in the South


China Sea, with the ultimate goal of creating a common and regularly updated picture so that the nations concerned are on the same page. In essence, U.S. officials are looking outward at ways in which more advanced ISR capabilities might improve the ability of allies and partners to “sense” in the maritime domain, how technical supporting infrastructure would facilitate sharing maritime information across the region to build a COP, and how expanded exercises, training, and other involvement would lead to more contributing from regional states. This capacity-building approach, according to a senior U.S. defense official, is geared toward creating “strong, independent partners throughout the region,” who can better monitor events in the South China Sea and perhaps even dissuade various forms of gray-zone coercion by China in the future.

Adopting a more transparent maritime system for the region and applying a common operating picture of these contested waters can, according to another official, begin with the Philippines’ National Coast Watch Center and then branch out to the rest of the region, with willing countries as “initial connective nodes eventually leading to a network that actors can plug into.” Although the idea of enhancing regional MDA was explored at the 2014 ADMM-Plus summit mentioned earlier, MSI looms as the clearest and most concrete manifestation of this U.S. objective yet.

Of course, the successful collection and interpretation of surveillance data is a hefty task for resource-constrained states with vast sea territories, even without the currently stark shortcomings associated with intra-ASEAN maritime cooperation. Moreover, the $425 million in dedicated MSI funding, to be dispensed to five ASEAN states plus three others over the next five years (through September 2020), is “budget dust”

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.
in Pentagon speak, according to a former U.S. official, with questionable sustainability beyond the Obama administration. It certainly would not be able to buy fighter upgrades, aircraft carriers, strategic airlift, or military bases and ports, nor could it immediately halt China’s land reclamation activities or challenge its next salami-slicing move.\textsuperscript{10} If invested wisely, however, according to experts, the MSI money could lay the foundations for greater collaboration and interoperability among reluctant Southeast Asian militaries as well as with other extra-regional partners with a stake in a stable South China Sea.\textsuperscript{11} This can be done, for example, by focusing more on the “software,” rather than the “hardware,” dimension of capacity building, including by supporting infrastructure and a joint center for maritime response operations, creating more opportunities for ASEAN forces to participate in personnel training initiatives with the United States, providing improvements in ISR and patrol vessel sustainment, integrating regional military services with U.S. and coalition defense networks via multilateral exercises, and identifying new systems requirements for critical maritime security capabilities. And although the \$140 million of total DoD and other U.S. funding allocated to the region in 2016 constitutes a modest increase over the \$119 million committed in 2015, MSI assistance (which comes from existing DoD money) is slated to increase starting in 2017, with \$100 million in MSI funds alone already allocated for each fiscal year thereafter through 2020.

This upward trend in MDA assistance is significant, especially if Washington is to realize its goal of building a layered COP in the South China Sea. U.S. forces have long relied on a common operating picture to effectively link command-and-control units located at headquarters with those in the field. According to the military definition, a COP amounts to “a single identical display of relevant information shared by more than one command that facilitates collaborative planning and assists all echelons to achieve situational awareness.”\textsuperscript{12} Maritime Southeast Asia needs a common real-time picture for military and commercial vessels and aircraft operating in the area, helping manage friction by allowing everyone to see who is doing what in the South China Sea, and enabling the calibration of appropriate responses based on what assets are positioned where. In addition, as many argue, greater shared awareness and a collective picture are logical first steps toward mobilizing collective action.\textsuperscript{13} Such a networked COP, more specifically, would aggregate information into a visual display, sourced from participating nations using interoperable software solutions

\textsuperscript{10} Van Jackson, “How the U.S. Can Spend \$425 Million in the South China Sea,” The Diplomat, June 10, 2015.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Jackson et al., \textit{Networked Transparency}.
\textsuperscript{13} Jackson, “How the U.S. Can Spend \$425 Million in the South China Sea.”
from government and the private sector, with the help of unique hardware and high-technology intelligence collection sensors available to trusted U.S. partners, along with organizational protocols developed through joint military exercises.\(^\text{14}\) Used the right way, therefore, $425 million could build a bridge, and a regional architecture for MDA, across the troubled waters of the South China Sea.

MSI, however, could face some regional challenges as it seeks to create this COP. Notwithstanding their limited maritime surveillance capacity, some Southeast Asian littoral states may be hesitant to share information with their neighbors, not least because of low political trust as well as rivalries among them. One example of this is the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (or ReCAAP), launched in 2006 to provide more timely and accurate reports of maritime crime against ships in the ASEAN region while facilitating best practices among its members. Although ReCAAP is considered a breakthrough regional government-to-government initiative that now consists of twenty Asian states, including regional powers such as China, Japan, and South Korea, to this day neither Malaysia nor Indonesia is an official member. Even though both countries have expressed support for ReCAAP, they have nonetheless refused to ratify the agreement and have refrained from formally participating in it because of the belief that to do so would undermine their claims of sovereignty in archipelagic waters and territorial seas and because of Malaysia’s view that ReCAAP’s Singapore-based Information Sharing Center constitutes an unnecessary competitor to Kuala Lumpur’s Piracy Reporting Center.\(^\text{15}\)

Hence, it would be important for Washington to strike a balance between raising the bar to build a COP while not getting too far ahead of existing regional MDA efforts and networks. Given the potential for political obstacles to a COP, the United States must work to craft a nuanced, unifying narrative about the political ends that MDA technology will serve and convince Southeast Asian countries that their dire need for maritime situational awareness outweighs their reservations about information sharing,\(^\text{16}\) a tricky task that, to the extent possible, America could tackle in partnership with its larger allies in the Asia-Pacific.

Japanese and South Korean Capacity-Building Efforts in the SCS
Both Japan and the ROK are critically dependent on open sea lanes from the Middle East through Southeast Asia and into the Western Pacific and, 

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
\(^{15}\) Bradford et al., *Maritime Security in Southeast Asia*.
\(^{16}\) Jackson et al., *Networked Transparency*. 

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14 Ibid.
16 Jackson et al., *Networked Transparency*. 

51 The Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis
by extension, on stable security conditions in the coastal and archipelagic areas through and around which these sea lanes flow. As an island nation with few natural resources, for example, Japan’s economic lifelines, and 99 percent of its trade by value, depend exclusively on the seas. In addition, the country imports some 99 percent of its crude oil, 80 percent of which travels through the South China Sea. Similarly, South Korea’s export-oriented, $1.38 trillion economy is critically reliant on seaborne trade along the key SLOCs that pass through Southeast Asia. In 2014, for instance, more than 1.1 billion tons of the ROK’s trade goods transited the contested waters of the South China Sea. Likewise, approximately 86 percent of South Korea’s oil consumption is supplied by imports from the Middle East, almost all of which must travel through the South China Sea as well.

As a result, Tokyo and Seoul have increasingly identified efforts to improve sea-lane protection and overall maritime security in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian waterways as top national defense priorities, with both of them hoping to establish wider partnerships with ASEAN nations and institutions, as well as with India and Australia. Toward this objective, Japan, for example, completed in early 2014 a fundamental update and revision of its 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG). The revised guidelines emphasize the need to improve capabilities for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, sea control, sea-based missile defense, and the defense of remote islets within Japan’s territorial waters, as well as for sea-lane protection, maritime safety, HA/DR, and other joint missions in areas (such as Southeast Asia) quite distant from Japan’s traditional geographic zone of military operations. Although the greatest maritime challenge to Japan’s national security interests remains in the East China Sea, especially around the area of the Senkakus, Tokyo is worried that China’s artificial islands and military buildup in the South China Sea could eventually give it strategic control of the sea lines of communication, and, further, that a potential escalation of tensions between Beijing and Washington, Japan’s key ally, would pose a threat to regional stability. This has led to a sense of urgency among Japanese policy makers about the need to enhance the capacities of, and strengthen the links among, smaller Southeast Asian countries, with the hope that they can start to counterbalance China’s increasing regional influence and weight.

Both Japan and the ROK are critically dependent on open sea lanes from the Middle East through Southeast Asia and into the Western Pacific.

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18 Lee Jaehyon, “South Korea and South China Sea: A Domestic and International Balancing Act,” Asia Policy, no. 21, January 2016.
Indeed, Japan is already a leader in the realm of maritime capacity building in the area, having initiated and helped establish ReCAAP which, as noted earlier, serves to bring many regional coast guards together and enhance their anti-piracy capabilities. Tokyo’s new strategic engagement in Southeast Asia has focused on several emerging policy imperatives, or pillars. In the tactical sphere, for example, Japan has become actively involved in various bilateral and multilateral military-to-military training and exercise programs with regional coastal states and their militaries, including the Balikatan exercise series (since 2012); the Cobra Gold joint military exercises; the annual Pacific Partnership; various U.S.-Japan-Australia joint training initiatives (which in 2011 involved a special maritime exercise off the coast of Brunei in the South China Sea); ASEAN Regional Forum disaster relief training; ADMM-Plus HA/DR exercises; the U.S.-Australian military drill Talisman Sabre; and the U.S.-Philippine Amphibious Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX). On a more strategic level, as also emphasized in its new National Security Strategy and Defense Program Guidelines, Japan has focused on using its Official Development Assistance, or ODA, resources as part of capacity-building efforts in partner countries, geared especially toward ASEAN members. This approach is gradually altering the traditional commerce-driven or development-driven nature of Japanese ODA, turning it into a more robust strategic vehicle to provide financing for the development and improvement of critical ASEAN security-related infrastructure components, such as airports, roads, port facilities, power generation and electricity supply stations, communications, and software development. This policy, in particular, connects with Tokyo’s recent removal of certain restrictions on arms exports and the transfer of defense equipment and technology, announced in April 2014. Here, new and much more flexible interpretations regarding the appropriate conditions for such exports and transfers will allow Japan to pursue a wider range of options to extend aid to, and to share necessary defense equipment and technologies with, Southeast Asian countries and their militaries.

Recognizing that nearly all the littoral states of Southeast Asia are ill equipped to adequately patrol, much less defend, their territorial waters and exclusive economic zones, Japan is providing the Philippines, for example, with ten coast guard patrol vessels for its coast guard, and in the coming years it will also supply Manila with maritime communication systems through its new ODA policy. In addition, building upon the eased arms-export
restrictions and following an unprecedented agreement with Manila in 2015 on the transfer of defense equipment, Japan is gearing up to export additional patrol boats, aircraft, and multipurpose support ships that will further beef up the maritime security capabilities of both the Philippines and other ASEAN countries that need this help, such as Malaysia and Indonesia. The transfer of Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) TC-90 aircraft, in particular, could allow littoral states to visually monitor activities in the Spratly Islands. Strategic port calls also play an important capacity-building role in the Asia-Pacific, and, in that regard, the recent agreement between Japan and Vietnam on accepting JMSDF ships at Cam Ranh Bay, which has traditionally been a strategic spot to control the entire South China Sea, is a positive development, as is Tokyo’s pledge to supply Hanoi with at least six patrol vessels in the coming years. What’s more, if this hardware assistance is coupled with experienced technical support and training by the Japanese coast guard and the JMSDF, Japan could contribute even more effectively to its neighbors’ future maritime security capabilities. Taken together, all of these efforts seem to indicate a Japanese view that helping claimant (and non-claimant) states in the region reach a level of minimum credible deterrence is demonstrably in Japan’s interests, and could potentially lead to a more equitable balance of power in the South China Sea, with the hope of also drawing China’s attention away from tensions in the East China Sea.19

Similar to Tokyo’s greater willingness under its new defense program guidelines to support joint missions farther afield from Japan’s home islands, Seoul is increasingly seeking more off-peninsula capabilities as part of its latest Defense Reform Plan, with a particular emphasis on developing a blue-water navy capable of undertaking a wide array of maritime missions both within and well beyond ROK territorial waters. Increased interest in the deep waters is encouraging South Korea under President Park to rethink its current and future naval strategy, with a push toward a maritime policy that is less defined by (and less single-mindedly focused on) the North Korean threat, as important as that threat still is. After all, South Korea is geographically a peninsula but geopolitically an island, cut off from the Asian mainland by North Korea, surrounded by water, and deeply

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vulnerable, as noted earlier, to conflict along or close to any of the region’s major SLOCs.20 In this sense, the ROK’s new defense initiatives parallel, in many ways, Japan’s more expeditionary, out-of-area security focus.

Although dwarfed by its strong neighbors, for example, Seoul has built a robust navy, ranking eighth in the world. This navy opened a naval base in February 2016 at Jeju Island, located south of the Korean coastline, with facilities that are home to the recently commissioned ROK Navy (ROKN) 7th Task Flotilla, the first ROK flotilla designed to sail for expeditionary purposes, to protect the country’s vital sea lanes and trade routes.21

Nevertheless, despite the ROK’s growing naval capabilities, South Korea has been hesitant to use its resources to safeguard Asian waters and has remained mostly silent with regard to the South China Sea. This is largely because, as a middle power that has traditionally viewed itself as “a shrimp among whales,” South Korea seeks to avoid any major disturbances to its foreign relations, especially with Beijing and Washington. U.S. and other officials, however, have recently called on Seoul to play a role in the disputed South China Sea and specifically to step up to maritime security challenges posed by growing Chinese coercion in the area. South Korea certainly has resources it could commit, and it is well equipped to meet the needs of claimant countries around the South China Sea for more naval vessels, patrol craft, and the technical expertise to operate and maintain them. Indeed, the ROK is already engaged in high-profile defense co-production efforts such as a fighter program with Jakarta, and has signed more than a dozen bilateral security agreements with Southeast Asian militaries. In 2014 alone, South Korea’s defense exports reached $3.6 billion, with major deals including a $1.2 billion contract to build six corvettes for the Royal Malaysian Navy and a $420 million bid by the Philippines for twelve FA-50 fighter jets.22 The ROK also routinely holds joint naval exercises with ASEAN members, such as RIMPAC and ADMM-Plus, among others, and Seoul is well positioned to work with other interested stakeholders, such as Australia, Japan, and the United States, to coordinate the sale, transfer, or lease of military capabilities that serve to improve local MDA and could contribute to a maritime COP for dealing with a wide range of contingencies.23

Significantly, ASEAN members largely view South Korea through a lens of neutrality, given that Seoul is not a claimant in the South China Sea and lacks direct military interests in the area, with many Southeast Asian states much more willing to sympathize with the ROK as a country

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Jackson, “The South China Sea Needs South Korea.”
that shares their dilemma of having to balance between China’s rising economic influence and continued reliance on U.S. security guarantees. South Korea can thus promote stability in the region by adding its trusted voice to multilateral statements of condemnation when Chinese (or any other) aggression occurs in the South China Sea, and it can also ensure that maritime disputes in general remain high on the agendas of major ASEAN-centered and other international forums. The ROK already publicly supports implementation of the ASEAN Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea, and, in that regard, Seoul could make sure that it echoes the concerns of others with respect to well-known violations of the code. Clearly, although it may seem wise to distance itself from security issues in the South China Sea, by staying on the sidelines Seoul effectively risks letting the region move in a direction adverse to ROK interests in the future, and it would therefore make sense for the Korean government to shrink the gap between its power and current influence in maritime Southeast Asia.

Capacity-Building Opportunities and Challenges for the Future

Looking ahead, then, the opportunities for further maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia, particularly among Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul, are likely to expand, not least because the concept is encouraged by the increasingly outward-looking, internationally minded, defense postures of Japan and the ROK, both of which also view their alliances with the United States as ideal platforms for implementing defense policies with a broader geographical focus. Seoul’s promotion of a global Korea that is more active on both a regional and extra-regional level and Tokyo’s promotion of what it calls “ocean peacekeeping operations” (OPK) along key Pacific Ocean SLOCs simply reinforce a more proactive approach to security by both nations beyond Northeast Asia. So, too, the China dimension of maritime capacity building is likely to work in favor of U.S.-Japan-ROK maritime cooperation outside of Northeast Asia – albeit often within a looser, more multilateral format – in two different (and somewhat conflicting) ways. On the one hand, as evidenced by the maritime security assistance packages they have offered in recent months to certain ASEAN countries (particularly those, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, that have a maritime territorial dispute with China), Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul can use such assistance to

24 Cronin and Lee, “China’s Rise, the ROK-U.S. Alliance, and Asian-Pacific Security.”
25 Jackson, “The South China Sea Needs South Korea.”
26 Ibid.
27 Cronin and Lee, “China’s Rise, the ROK-U.S. Alliance, and Asian-Pacific Security.”
discourage overly assertive behavior by Beijing in contested sectors of the South China Sea, and to hedge against undue Chinese maritime pressure in these areas, something about which the United States, Japan, and the ROK all worry. Given that China is not likely to back off from a fairly assertive posture in the South China Sea in the near term, the incentives for the three allies to maintain a maritime presence in and around the South China Sea, to continue their efforts to build up local maritime security capabilities, and to do so whenever possible in a coordinated (and, if possible, trilateral) manner will likely remain strong for some time to come.

On the other hand, as counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden and along the Straits of Malacca have demonstrated, collective maritime deployments have proven to be a successful way as well to include China in cooperative security efforts, especially the farther away they are from contested portions of the South China Sea. Hence, in the years ahead, we can expect the United States, Japan, and the ROK to continue to pursue naval/maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean and in Southeast Asia in an effort both to counter Chinese brinkmanship at sea and to engage China in more cooperative behavior. Depending on the situation at hand, moreover, they are likely to implement this dual-track approach on a bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral basis, or perhaps a mix of one or two — whatever seems to fit the specific task or scenario best. The main point is that maritime cooperation, fueled in large part by the efforts of the United States, Japan, and South Korea, working alone and together and in concert with other capable players in the region — like Australia and India — can, in the longer term, help create the kind of security architecture that has long been needed in the Asia-Pacific region, and do that in a way that at least begins to share costs and defense burdens in a more equitable and acceptable way.

Of course, there are pressing questions that remain unanswered, such as what the new Trump administration would mean for regional capacity-building efforts and trilateralism, as well as how the continuing domestic political fallout from President Park’s scandal will affect South Korea’s 2017 presidential elections and, in the meantime, whether agreements such as the new intelligence-sharing pact with Japan will be jeopardized, given that Park’s political power has been diminished significantly. Furthermore, with the TPP’s future now in serious doubt, some Asia-Pacific leaders already appear to be drifting toward closer ties with China. Most recently, for example, in a blow to U.S. influence in the region, Malaysia signed a record number of agreements with Beijing, including a two-year defense contract to buy navy vessels from China. And earlier, in September 2016, new Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announced funding...
and investment deals with China worth $24 billion, fueling international concerns that Beijing can use its checkbook and trade relationships to essentially check U.S. strategic power in Southeast Asia almost at will. Duterte also declared a “separation” from the United States and a new alignment with China, as the two agreed to resolve their South China Sea dispute through talks, even though the Hague tribunal recently ruled in favor of the Philippines and condemned illegal Chinese actions in the area. Nevertheless, even if regional demand for, and reliance on, U.S. capabilities were to decrease in the future, there are still many imperatives, practical advantages, and opportunities for key U.S. allies with sizeable navies and overlapping strategic interests in the region, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, to take the lead in Southeast Asian security dynamics with the goal of improving operational transparency in the South China Sea, compensating for deficiencies in the existing regional architecture, and facilitating maritime security cooperation with ASEAN militaries, especially on common problems that are not specifically related to China, including illegal fisheries, piracy, avoiding accidents at sea, illicit trafficking, and proliferation.

As detailed in the previous chapters, closer and sustained cooperation between and among Japan, South Korea, and the United States is critical to maintaining security not only in Northeast Asia but in the Indo-Pacific region more broadly. Given, moreover, the largely maritime nature of the Indo-Pacific region, it stands to reason as well that maritime security has emerged as a policy and operational sector where allied cooperation could be particularly productive. However, if they are to cooperate successfully in this realm, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul must develop their policies and programs with the following key points and recommendations squarely in mind.

- With the late 2015 Japanese-South Korean agreement on the “comfort women” issue, the rise in North Korean provocations in the 2015-2016 timeframe, and growing concerns over Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas, the geopolitical climate is now especially conducive to a rise in U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation. It is critical, therefore, that the three allies do all they can to take advantage of this new opening to lock in forward progress recently achieved on the trilateral front and to improve the prospects for further success. Otherwise, a unique opportunity to strengthen and expand trilateral security collaboration – and to shore up, in this way, regional stability overall – could be lost.
- Such cooperation appears to be particularly promising in the maritime security realm, in part because it is by definition offshore and out of the sight of potential domestic critics (especially in South Korea), but also because it accords so well with the more maritime-oriented security policies of Japan and South Korea and key aspects of the U.S. rebalance to Asia. Assuring the security
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of – and uninterrupted access to – the vital sea lanes running between Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf/Indian Ocean remains an especially important common mission of all three allies. Partly for this reason, they also share a strong interest in building maritime partnerships and a greater capacity to cooperate with key nations situated along these critical waterways, especially along the maritime chokepoints of Southeast Asia.

- Operationally, greater trilateral cooperation in the areas of sea-based missile defense, anti-submarine warfare (ASW), counter-piracy, maritime domain awareness (MDA), and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) has become a priority, as has expanded collaboration in the “softer” security realms of search and rescue (SAR) and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) from the sea. Going forward, establishing trilateral connectivity and common operational procedures in these mission areas looms as an equally important task, especially in cases – such as sea-based missile defense and maritime air patrol – where U.S., Japanese, and South Korean weapons platforms and supporting technologies are compatible, if not the same.

- Building on such initiatives, closer trilateral cooperation on specific weapons acquisition projects and the pooling of defense technology assets may also be possible over time. Candidate programs in the future could include shared depot maintenance and logistical support for U.S., Japanese, South Korean, and even Australian F-35 combat aircraft, as well as for SM-3 Block IIA missile defense interceptors deployed on AEGIS-equipped ships (assuming, that is, that South Korea and Australia go forward with plans to procure the Block IIA.) Yet another promising area for cooperation in the hardware realm would be with respect to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), including both the Global Hawk (capable of performing at an altitude of 50,000 feet) and the Guardian (capable of performing at 30,000 feet), both of which the allies should be able to lease to each other, rotate among each other’s forces, and share the data so acquired. Of these three examples, cooperation on UAVs is likely to be the easiest to achieve, F-35 cooperation the hardest, and the SM-3 Block IIA cooperation the most politically challenging, given ongoing sensitivities in the region over missile defense (especially in China).

- In support of the operational and more hardware-oriented efforts noted above, improved mechanisms for information- and intelligence sharing among the three allies are essential. Ever since the
failed attempt by Japan and South Korea to sign a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2012, effective information- and intelligence sharing between the two has been stymied. However, with the decision by Tokyo and Seoul to finally sign a GSOMIA in late November 2016, the largest roadblock to such cooperation has effectively been removed. With a GSOMIA in place, it should also be much easier to expand the purview of the 2014 Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement (TISA) to cover more than just North Korean weapons of mass destruction (WMD) data and to allow such data to be shared directly between Tokyo and Seoul rather than through a Washington “go-between” channel. A signed GSOMIA and an expanded TISA should also make it considerably easier for the United States, Japan, and the ROK to work together to build a common operational picture (COP) of evolving conditions throughout maritime Asia, and to share that COP with each other and other interested parties in the region. By improving transparency at sea, a shared COP along these lines could prove as well to be a vital tension-reduction and confidence-building measure, especially in contested portions of the East and South China Seas.

- With regard to security concerns in the South China Sea more specifically, the allies need to develop tailored responses and a division of labor that plays to their individual strengths. For Japan and South Korea, instead of joining the United States in conducting freedom of navigation (FON) patrols, it is probably wiser to concentrate on building up the maritime security capabilities of key Southeast Asian countries (especially the Philippines and Vietnam), and on coordinating these efforts with those of the United States. This should include a greater emphasis on training and education with regard to maritime operations, in addition to the provision of appropriate naval vessels and related hardware. Capacity building efforts by Japan and South Korea could become increasingly important if relations between Manila and Washington continue to sour under Philippine President Duterte. It will be important as well to include in such efforts additional infrastructure development support similar to the investments Japan has already been making to construct modern airfields and ports in Vietnam and the Philippines. Built largely for commercial purposes, such facilities could also help to support future joint military operations and training missions.

- While South Korea is often reluctant to operate in the East and South China Sea sectors in ways that might anger Beijing (and
make it less willing, as a result, to help on North Korean issues), Seoul needs to develop a more comprehensive regional security posture that complements its well-established Korean Peninsula/Northeast Asia focus and its growing global security orientation (centering on out-of-area peacekeeping, reconstruction, and counter-piracy missions). Beyond additional partner capacity-building as described above, more vocal South Korean support for the rule of law and regional norm-building for contested maritime zones – including a binding code of conduct within the South China Sea – could be important additional steps. With respect to these and related issues, South Korea could have a greater influence on the smaller Southeast Asia nations than either Japan or the United States could, precisely because it is seen by these nations as having to cope with the same pressures they face in trying to avoid displeasing Beijing while at the same time maintaining (and cultivating) close ties to Washington. In this sense, South Korea could emerge as a more credible source of advice for Southeast Asian leaders on which policies to adopt and how to do that in ways that minimize risk.

- However, broader support for commonly agreed rules of the road at sea and further efforts to improve the maritime self-defense capabilities of smaller nations facing pressure from Beijing are not by themselves going to be sufficient to counter Chinese assertiveness in and around the South China Sea, or to deter additional provocative actions by China in the future. What is needed in addition is a willingness on the part of the United States to sustain a credible maritime posture in the region, based in part on regular FON operations and aerial surveillance/overflights over contested waters. Such a posture should take advantage of the most advanced technologies available and innovative operational concepts to maintain a flexible and responsive forward U.S. presence, to leverage where possible allied/partner country capabilities, and, in this way, to fashion an effective response to China’s increasingly potent A2/AD policies. Perhaps most important of all, in managing strategic relations with China, the United States must be willing to accept a greater degree of risk than it has at times in recent years, with the aim of avoiding the possibility of being “self-deterred” because of a fear of escalation. Properly executed, this can be done without being reckless, and it could tip the “balance of resolve” in the South China Sea and elsewhere back in Washington’s favor.

In managing its relations with China, Washington must be prepared to accept a greater degree of risk to avoid being ‘self-deterred.’
• At the same time, the United States, Japan, and South Korea all do need to pursue and expand cooperation with China where it is possible to do so, and cooperation in the maritime realm, once again, is a logical arena within which to do that. Apart from encouraging Beijing’s adherence to a South China Sea code of conduct as mentioned above, this might include working with China to expand the application of the 2014 Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (or CUES) to cover non-military as well as military vessels and platforms, taking steps to consolidate the Chinese navy’s participation in joint counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and regular efforts to include the Chinese navy in bilateral and multilateral disaster relief drills. At the very least, cooperative efforts along these lines can help to improve each navy’s understanding of how the others operate and foster useful personal connections among senior commanders, all of which can reduce the potential for mis-cues and miscalculations at sea, especially between China, on the one hand, and the United States and its principal Asian allies on the other.

• Trilateral collaboration can also be usefully broadened to draw in other participants and to cover additional mission areas by including like-minded regional partners with sizeable navies (namely Australia, India, and perhaps Singapore) in future exercises and training missions, and by leveraging trilateral successes to promote greater multilateral collaboration via such forums as the ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting (ADMM) Plus. In this way, trilateralism truly becomes a building block in support of a more effective and inclusive regional security structure.

• All that said, while trilateral cooperation has clearly been on an upward trajectory over the past two years (especially on the maritime security front), domestic political factors in all three countries could still slow (if not derail) a full flowering of trilateralism over the next few years. Donald Trump’s victory in the U.S. presidential contest, for example, could cast a pall on trilateral cooperation given his critical comments about Japan and South Korea on the defense burden-sharing front. Similarly, an opposition victory in South Korea’s 2017 presidential election – or even before then, President Park’s impeachment or resignation – could lead to a downgrading of trilateral cooperation as a policy priority given that the opposition is generally more interested in engaging North Korea than in cultivating ever closer ties to Japan and strengthening, in this way, trilateralism. And while Prime
Minister Abe looks quite strong at the moment, there is still considerable resistance in Japan to the more active defense posture he is promoting, which includes plans for greater trilateral and multilateral operations and significant investments in capacity building in Southeast Asia, all heavily maritime in nature.

- To guard against significant slippage in trilateral forward progress, senior leaders from Japan, South Korea, and the United States, therefore, must make every effort to meet in a trilateral format and to champion trilateralism whenever possible (as President Obama, President Park, and Prime Minister Abe did during the March 2016 Nuclear Security Summit in Washington and as their defense ministers did on the margins of the May 2016 Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore). So, too, more concerted efforts need to be made to build support for trilateral cooperation within each country’s legislative branch and across party lines, and to get the message out about the benefits of trilateralism to key national media (especially in Japan and South Korea).

At root, the fundamental challenge that trilateralism must overcome has been described by one Asia-Pacific expert as more a matter of cognitive dissonance among the allies than one of removing material impediments to cooperation. Put in simplest terms, both Japan and South Korea need each other to ensure their national security, but neither really seems to want the other to achieve that objective. For its part, the United States says quite regularly that it wants the help of both Japan and South Korea to bolster regional security, but it often acts as if it doesn’t really need them. Going forward, resolving these apparent disconnects between wants and needs will likely be as important to trilateral cooperation as any future efforts to settle (or head off) policy disputes or to fix technical and operational problems that can stymie such cooperation. The good news is that recent and ongoing progress in the area of trilateral maritime cooperation has shown that it is possible to do just that. What is needed now is more of the same.
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About the Authors

Charles M. Perry is Vice President and Director of Studies of the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis (IFPA). He has written extensively on a variety of national and international security issues, especially with respect to U.S. defense and foreign policy, regional security dynamics, alliance relations, civil-military coordination, and nonproliferation. In addition to the U.S.-Japanese-South Korean security cooperation project on which this study is based, Dr. Perry is currently directing an eighteen-month project on the strategic consequences of China's push for dominance in the South China Sea region. Recent publications of note include Managing the Global Impact of America’s Rebalance to Asia (2014); New Strategic Dynamics in the Arctic Region: Implications for National Security and International Collaboration (2012); A Comprehensive Approach to Combating Illicit Trafficking (2010); Finding the Right Mix: Disaster Diplomacy, National Security, and International Cooperation (2009); and Nuclear Matters in North Korea: Building a Multilateral Response for Future Stability in Northeast Asia (2008). He holds an M.A. in international affairs, an M.A. in law and diplomacy, and a Ph.D. in international politics from The Fletcher School, Tufts University.

Bobby Andersen is a Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis. Her areas of expertise include Nordic affairs, regional security developments in the Asia-Pacific, NATO and European security issues, U.S. defense policy, and the changing security dynamics in the Arctic region. Her research also focuses on the future use of unmanned combat air systems by the U.S. Navy. Recent publications of note include New Dynamics in Japanese Security Policy: Summary Report (2015), Managing the Global Impact of America’s Rebalance to Asia (2014), New Strategic Dynamics in the Arctic Region: Implications for National Security