

China and the South China Sea

Can the U.S. stop Chinese expansion?

China has been increasingly aggressive in the strategically vital South China Sea, establishing naval and air bases — and installing weapons — on islands it is constructing atop environmentally sensitive reefs. Tensions in the vast region, heavily patrolled by the U.S. Navy, have risen sharply in recent months. Surrounding nations, including the Philippines, a major U.S. ally, want access to the sea's wealth of natural resources — primarily oil, natural gas and fisheries — and its busy commercial shipping lanes. Responding to China, former President Barack Obama sought to shift more U.S. military resources to the region, but critics say his “pivot” was inadequate. President Trump's nominee for secretary of State, former Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson, told Congress the United States should forcefully confront China in the South China Sea and possibly deny it access to the islands it has built. Meanwhile, the Philippines' mercurial new president has voiced hostility toward the United States and a desire for closer relations with China, injecting further uncertainty into the region.



Chinese and Russian naval vessels hold a joint exercise in the South China Sea on Sept. 19, 2016. China's aggressive military activities in the region, including building military bases in the contested Spratly Islands and sending an aircraft carrier into the Taiwan Strait, worry many of China's neighbors. Rex Tillerson, President Trump's pick for secretary of State, also denounced China's actions.

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China and the South China Sea

BY PATRICK MARSHALL

THE ISSUES

The Spratly Islands have long been celebrated for their exotic marine life, including more than 1,000 species of birds, fish, turtles and sea grasses.

Lately, however, the remote collection of coral reefs and small islands in the South China Sea has become a source of ominous political and military tension.

Since 2013, China has been using sand dredged from the seafloor to turn coral reefs in the Spratlys into seven artificial islands covering more than 3,200 acres, complete with harbors, runways and hangars for military bases. ¹ China's intentions are benign, a government spokesman said in 2015: "The construction activities . . . fall within the scope of China's sovereignty, and are lawful, reasonable and justified. They are not targeted at any other country." ²

But last month the Chinese Defense Ministry conceded that China has placed weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles, on the man-made islands, saying "they are primarily for defense and self-protection, and this is proper and legitimate." ³

China's neighbors, along with many U.S. foreign policy experts and at least one likely key member of President Trump's administration, disagree.

Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson said at his Jan. 12 confirmation hearing that China's activities are "extremely worrisome." "Building islands and then putting military assets on those islands is akin to Russia's taking of Crimea. It's taking of territory that others lay claim to," Tillerson said. "We're going to have to send China a clear signal



Protesters from Vietnam and the Philippines demonstrate at China's consular office in Manila on Aug. 3, 2016, to demand that China respect their countries' rights to harvest fish and other resources in the South China Sea.

Several Asian nations have overlapping claims to islands, reefs and shoals in the vast sea, which also holds large untapped quantities of oil and natural gas.

that first, the island-building stops, and second, your access to those islands is also not going to be allowed." ⁴

International tensions over China's buildup are only the latest in a decade-long dispute with Beijing over the strategically important South China Sea, which stretches from Brunei in the south to Taiwan in the north and the Philippines in the east. (See map, p. 52.) M. Taylor Fravel, an associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says the South China Sea is at the heart of "the world's most complicated territorial dispute," one with military, economic and ecological dimensions.

Six countries — China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam — have overlapping claims to waters, islands, and reefs in the South China Sea. China claims four-fifths of the sea — a claim an international tribunal rejected in July. The most hotly contested areas are the Paracel Islands (occupied by China but also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan); the Spratly Islands (claimed by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam); and the Scarborough Shoal, a chain of reefs and rocks about 100 miles west of the Philippines claimed by China, Taiwan and the Philippines.

All but Taiwan have signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) under which a country's territory extends 12 nautical miles from its shoreline. In addition, the treaty gives nations the right to drill, fish or pursue other economic activities 200 miles from its shores in an area known as an Exclusive Economic Zone. In the South China Sea, the 200-nautical-mile zones result in multiple overlapping claims, especially because some countries have occupied — and in some cases created — small islands within the Exclusive Economic Zone of other nations.

For China, the South China Sea is of huge strategic importance. China's naval expansion and its construction of artificial islands, some analysts say, demonstrate that the Chinese want to control navigation throughout the sea and dominate the region militarily. In early January, for example, China sent its lone aircraft carrier into the Taiwan

Asian Nations Clash Over South China Sea

China, the Philippines, Vietnam and other Asian nations have overlapping claims to islands, reefs and shoals in the 1.4 million-square-mile South China Sea. The stakes include the rights to oil, natural gas, fisheries and other natural resources. China is also constructing controversial military outposts in the disputed Spratly Islands in an attempt to tighten its control over the region.

Claims to the South China Sea



Note: An Exclusive Economic Zone gives a nation the right to drill for oil and gas, fish or pursue other economic activities 200 miles from its shores. In the South China Sea, the zones have resulted in overlapping claims.

Source: Beina Xu, "South China Sea Tensions," Council on Foreign Relations, May 14, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/ckfsb9k>

Strait in what one analyst called a show of force "intended in part to intimidate" Trump and Taiwan.⁵

"They have nationalistic goals," says former Republican Sen. James Talent, a member of the U.S.-China Economic

and Security Review Commission, which Congress created to monitor trade between the two countries. The Chinese, he says, see themselves as "rightfully the dominant power in Asia." (See sidebar, p. 62.)

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, put it more harshly in December: "China is militarizing the South China Sea, its leaders continue to lie about that fact, and Beijing is paying little to no price for its behavior."⁶

China has been beefing up its navy in recent years. After launching more ships than any other country in 2013 and 2014, the Chinese navy had more than 300 vessels, including submarines, amphibious ships and missile-armed patrol craft as of 2015, and the trend is expected to continue, according to the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence.⁷

China's rapid naval expansion makes some policymakers nervous, especially in light of the amount of shipping that moves through the South China Sea.

"The importance of the South China Sea to global commerce and regional stability cannot be overstated, with estimates of more than half the world's merchant fleet tonnage passing through these waters," Colin Willett, deputy assistant secretary of State for multilateral affairs, told Congress last July. "The South China Sea also serves as an important transit route and operational theater for the U.S. and other regional militaries, including those of our allies and partners. It allows us to shift military assets between the Pacific to the Indian Ocean regions."⁸

In addition, control of the region's natural resources — oil and natural gas reserves and rich commercial fishing grounds — is at stake. By some estimates, the South China Sea may contain more oil than any other area of the planet except Saudi Arabia. And according to some estimates, the region has 60 percent of Asia's hydrocarbon resources.⁹ The most significant tensions over oil and gas fields have involved China's clashes with Vietnam and the Philippines over their searches for hydrocarbons in fields claimed by China.¹⁰

Conflicts over fishing rights are also heated. The South China Sea provides 12 percent of the global fish catch, and countries with territorial claims

in the region have strongly contested access to fisheries. Competition has led to serious overfishing. Fully half of the fisheries in the South China Sea are either over-exploited or have collapsed, according to experts.¹¹

As tensions rose in the past year, critics charged that former President Barack Obama made inadequate attempts to counter growing Chinese influence in the region. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's ascension to the presidency has generated anxiety among many U.S. and Asian experts and policymakers because of his threats to upend alliances and what many see as his unpredictability.

Trump repeatedly has criticized China over trade policy, saying the country unfairly closes its domestic market to imports while flooding the United States with cheap exports. And on Dec. 2, Trump broke decades of diplomatic tradition by taking a congratulatory call from Taiwan's president. Since 1972, despite its close ties to Taiwan, the United States has adhered to a "One China" policy, under which China asserts that Taiwan is a Chinese province and not an independent country.

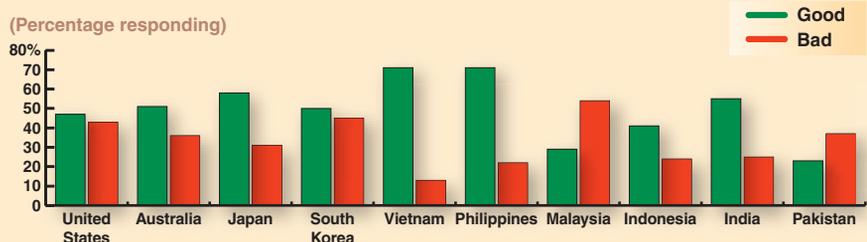
"I don't know why we have to be bound by a One China policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade," Trump told Fox News on Dec. 11. "We're being hurt very badly by China with [currency] devaluation, with taxing us heavy at the borders when we don't tax them, with building a massive fortress in the middle of the South China Sea, which they shouldn't be doing."¹²

Some argue that China's aggressiveness has actually strengthened the U.S. position in Asia. Citing China's military buildup, retired Adm. Dennis Blair, a former commander of the U.S. Pacific Command and former director of National Intelligence, told Congress last July that other countries were looking to the United States for help in countering an increasingly hard-line China. "China has paid a heavy price for its aggressive

Asians Back Greater U.S. Military Presence

Asians, with the exception of Malaysians and Pakistanis, generally say more U.S. military resources in the Asia-Pacific region would reduce the chances for conflict with China.

Would more U.S. military resources in the Asia-Pacific area be good or bad for peace in the region?



Source: "U.S. Defense Pivot to Asia Welcomed, for the Most Part — But Chinese See U.S. as Trying to Limit China's Power," Pew Research Center, June 22, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/huxa67y>

activities in the hostility of the other claimant states," he said.¹³

The Obama administration moved to strengthen the U.S. position by undertaking a "pivot" or "rebalance" of American political, economic and military resources toward Asia and away from the Middle East.

The two most important legs of Obama's strategy were a commitment to increase U.S. naval assets in Asia and the negotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade pact between the United States and 11 Pacific Rim countries finalized in February 2016 but awaiting congressional approval. TPP backers see it as an attempt to strengthen the economies of regional allies, but many think the Republican-controlled Congress is unlikely to ratify the pact after Trump heavily criticized it during the presidential campaign.

As for the other leg of Obama's "pivot" strategy, the United States pledged in 2012 to deploy 60 percent of its naval assets, including warships and submarines, in the Pacific by 2020, up from the current 50 percent.¹⁴

Despite those efforts, some experts argue the strategy is failing, "primarily for want of power," Talent says. The U.S. Pacific Fleet, which had 192 ves-

sels two decades ago, had 182 as of January 2016.¹⁵

Congress has failed to fund a larger Navy due to budget constraints, according to Robert D. Kaplan, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, a bipartisan think tank in Washington focused on security policy. "You can have all of the great concepts of an Asia pivot you want," Kaplan says. "It's not going to matter much" without ships.

Further complicating the situation has been last year's election of Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Philippines, historically America's strongest regional ally. Duterte has been a strident critic of U.S. policy and has reached out to China and Russia. (See sidebar, p. 60.)

As policymakers assess the future of international relations in the South China Sea, here are some of the questions they are asking:

Is China seeking to dominate the South China Sea?

It's not just China's growing navy that worries some analysts. China also has been expanding its footprint in the South China Sea by occupying contested islands and building artificial islands for use as military bases.

“China has continued to build harbors, communications and surveillance systems, logistical facilities and three military-grade airfields on many of the features it occupies,” Abraham M. Denmark, deputy assistant secretary of Defense for East Asia, told Congress in July. “In the past year, China also has deployed radar systems, anti-ship cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and has rotated fighter jets through features it claims in the South China Sea.”¹⁶

China’s construction of hangars and underground storage facilities for fuel and water would support extended deployments of aircraft and ships, he said, as would its installation of anti-aircraft weapons.

China’s leaders previously promised they would not militarize the South China Sea. During his state visit to the United States in September, in fact, Chinese President Xi Jinping said, “China does not intend to pursue militarization” on the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.¹⁷

While some skeptics scoff at those promises, other experts, noting that the weapons systems placed on the Spratly Islands are limited in range, say China is simply positioning itself to defend its territory and trade routes against the United States and others.¹⁸

“Since around 2010, China’s security policy has evolved from a focus on homeland defense to one . . . best characterized as ‘peaceful expansion,’ ” Timothy Heath, a senior international defense research analyst at RAND Corp., a research organization based in California, told the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission last January. Since China’s commercial and military interests have expanded geographically, Heath said, its ability to protect those interests also had to expand.¹⁹

As a result, he said, China has shown a greater willingness to involve itself in mediating disputes in regions far from its own shores.

MIT’s Fravel agrees China’s military posture is more defensive than aggres-

sive in nature. “I think they want to ensure that they are in a position not to be dominated,” he says. “I think they would like to weaken the influence of the United States, but that paradoxically may mean that they are more willing to cooperate with their neighbors on the things that their neighbors value, like investment projects.”

Other experts, however, argue that China’s intentions are not so benign. China is patiently building toward the day when it can militarily and economically dominate not just the South China Sea but all of Asia, they claim.

President Xi Jinping has “an empire-building intention,” says Ming Xia, a professor of political science at the College of Staten Island in New York. “In foreign affairs, China wants to be respected and feared by countries in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea and India. I think the appropriate comparison is to Japan in the 1930s,” when the Japanese invaded Manchuria, a region of China, in 1931.

China’s need to dominate the region, says former Sen. Talent, is particularly acute because the country’s leaders don’t have the legitimacy that comes with democratic elections. “They have to be able to show to their people that they have produced success as rulers,” he says. “Part of that is quality of life at home and part of that is prestige in Asia. That is what is driving them to assert sovereignty over the seas, including the South China Sea.”

Frank Gaffney, president of the Center for Security Policy, a conservative think tank in Washington, agrees that China wants to expand its control. “This is a moment when I think the China dream, as Xi Jinping calls it, is to be realized at the expense of everybody else in that part of the world, and it will return China to what it considers to be its rightful place as the world’s preeminent power,” says Gaffney, an adviser to Trump.

At the same time, some analysts say China’s aggressiveness may reflect tension between its civilian and military leaders.

During a recent fact-finding trip to China, James Clad, senior adviser for Asia at the Center for Naval Analyses, a federally funded research and development organization in Arlington, Va., serving the Navy and other defense agencies, and a former deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Asia, says he got the impression the political leadership “needs to continue to placate the military, with goodies, acquisitions and with rhetoric that approaches hyper-nationalistic sensitivities.”

Some analysts say China is only doing what most rising regional powers do. “An increasingly powerful China is likely to try to push the U.S. out of Asia, much the way the U.S. pushed the European powers out of the Western Hemisphere” in the 19th century, writes John J. Mearsheimer, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago. “Why should we expect China to act any differently than the United States did? Are they more principled than we are? Or ethical? Less nationalistic?”²⁰

Bonner R. Cohen, a senior fellow at the National Center for Public Policy Research, a conservative think tank in Washington, agrees. “These people are not reckless,” he says. “They make their geostrategic moves in a very calculating way.

“If they see opportunities, they will take advantage of those opportunities,” he continues. “They have always considered areas immediately adjacent to China — and that includes bodies of water — as being essentially a part of China.”

Should America’s regional allies pay more for U.S. protection?

In his first major foreign policy speech during the presidential campaign last April, Trump complained that the United States was paying far too much to protect other countries. “We have spent trillions of dollars over time on planes, missiles, ships, equipment — building up our military to provide a strong defense for Europe and Asia,” Trump said. “The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and

if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves. We have no choice.”²¹

Trump has also suggested that the United States should end its decades-long policy against nuclear proliferation and encourage South Korea and Japan to acquire nuclear weapons with which to defend themselves.²²

While most analysts and policymakers reject Trump’s position on nuclear proliferation, some observers welcomed his call for greater burden-sharing by Asian allies.

“In every case the allies should be shouldering more of their share of the common defense,” says Gaffney of the Center for Security Policy, adding that he found Trump’s call for allies to pony up “bracing.”

Cohen of the National Center for Public Policy Research agrees. “We don’t have the resources that we once did. So it is much better for us to encourage other people to look after their own interests,” he says. “There are things that they can do for themselves, and if we don’t show them how . . . and encourage them to do it themselves, they will simply rely on us to do it.”

Cohen says the United States has no territorial claims at stake in the South China Sea so “it is ultimately incumbent upon those countries . . . to do as much as they possibly can for themselves while at the same time leaning on the U.S. Navy as kind of an ultimate plan B.”

Others, however, argue that while wealthier allies, most notably Japan, should be prodded to contribute more, the United States shouldn’t be just a backup. Elbridge Colby, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, a liberal-leaning Washington think tank, told Congress in September that “because China is so powerful, we do need to take the lead, but actually that leadership role will be more likely to catalyze that burden sharing.”²³

In September, Japanese Defense Minister Tomomi Inada announced that his nation would increase its presence in

the South China Sea and would provide more aid to countries in the region, including the Philippines and Vietnam. The moves, he said, “underline my government’s resolve to protect our territorial integrity and sovereignty.” Inada, however, did not provide details.²⁴

Some policy analysts say Trump’s push to get allies to pay more will be counterproductive.

versity in South Korea, “Trump to date has cast the debate in a bean-counting light: How much do allies pay for this or that American capability?”²⁶

Rather than getting allies to pay more for protection, Kelly said, the United States should help allies build their own defensive capabilities and coordinate defense efforts with them. “Multilateral operations carry greater international credibility, re-



Getty Images/DigitalGlobe

Fiery Cross Reef, in the western Spratly Islands, is among the reefs that China has turned into man-made islands housing army and navy bases and airstrips. In an effort to stem China’s regional expansion, the United States deployed warships within 12 nautical miles of Fiery Cross Reef in 2015.

“President Trump will need to stop focusing on burden sharing and focus on security relationships,” wrote Anthony Cordesman, a national security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a nonpartisan Washington think tank. Trump shouldn’t ask allies to contribute more than they can afford and should refrain from giving allies and potential foes the impression that the United States is disengaging, Cordesman said.²⁵

Although a discussion of burden sharing can be useful, wrote Robert E. Kelly, an associate professor of international relations at Pusan National Uni-

lieve [the burden] on the U.S. military and signal to opponents that they face a full-bodied international coalition of serious, committed democracies — not just the Americans yet again,” he said.

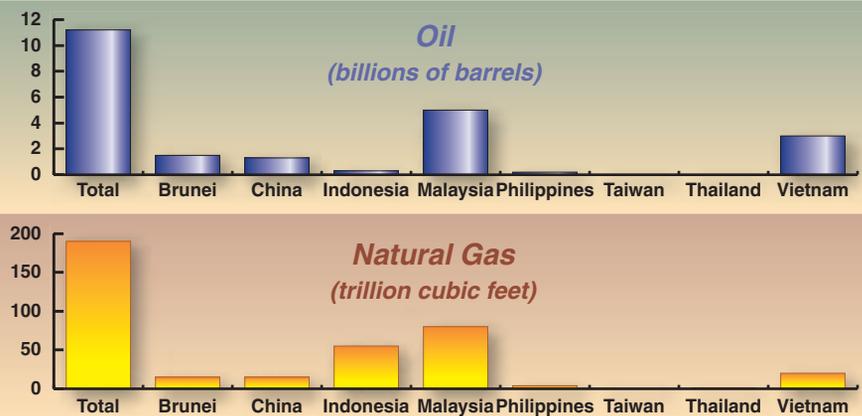
But others warn that calling on Asian allies to build up their own defense capabilities poses its own dangers. “The Chinese would interpret a buildup of allied military, and they say so, as a hostile act,” says former Sen. Talent. “So you don’t want to do that unless you’re certain that the Americans are going to be there backing them up.”

Talent also warns of complications

Malaysia Tops Oil, Gas Reserves

Malaysia has the most known oil and natural gas reserves in the South China Sea, according to the latest available estimates. The sea's vast reserves are largely unexplored and may contain more oil than any other region except Saudi Arabia.

Estimated Oil and Gas Reserves in the South China Sea, 2012



Source: "South China Sea," U.S. Energy Information Administration, Feb. 7, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/znusb9c>

in having Japan assume a higher military profile because of the notorious behavior of its soldiers before and during World War II. "For obvious reasons, historical reasons," Talent says, "this needs to be seen in the region as firmly under the umbrella of American leadership."

Oriana Skylar Mastro, an assistant professor of security studies at Georgetown University and a nuclear security fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, says U.S. alliances in Asia have delivered benefits that are impossible to measure in dollars.

"They allow us access and influence, and access and influence allow us to promote and protect our foreign policy interests," Mastro says. "Outsourcing our national security interests, even to those that we like and trust, is never a good idea."

Is the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement important to maintaining U.S. regional alliances?

One of Trump's most frequent targets on the campaign trail was the Trans-

Pacific Partnership (TPP). At a campaign rally last June, he characterized the trade pact as "a continuing rape of our country" because of its potential to harm the middle class.²⁷

Congress has yet to approve the TPP. To take effect, six countries that account for 85 percent of the group's economic output must ratify the pact by February 2018. That means both Japan and the United States must ratify the agreement. In December, Japan became the first, and so far only, signatory to do so.²⁸

When the TPP was finalized in 2015, it did not include China, which chose not to participate, according to Thomas J. Christensen, a professor of international relations at Princeton University and former deputy assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs. "The U.S. goal in relation to Beijing was not to exclude China from the TPP," he wrote, "but to . . . catalyze China to compete by further opening its own domestic markets and providing protection for intellectual property rights for the first time."²⁹

While China has not actively opposed the pact, its "One Belt, One Road" infrastructure project, which is aimed at strengthening China's economic links to countries in Eurasia by building roads and ports, would likely benefit from the TPP's collapse. That is because more countries in Southeast Asia would look to China rather than to Western countries for increased trade and aid.³⁰

Trump's adamant opposition to the pact is "clearly going to ruffle feathers" among the TPP's signatories, says Cohen of the National Center for Public Policy Research. Because China is not a party to the TPP, he says, other nations see the pact as having a "not-too-subtle anti-Chinese bent to it." It was, accordingly, viewed positively by American allies in Asia who hoped the creation of a free-trade zone would be a counterweight to an economically powerful China. Nevertheless, Cohen says the new president will likely reject the TPP. "I think the pact is effectively dead," he says.

While the domestic effects of the TPP were debated during the presidential campaign, the foreign policy implications received scant mention, even though the Obama administration pushed the deal as part of its Asian pivot.

"TPP would've anchored the Asian pivot for us," says Kaplan of the Center for a New American Security. "If you have a free-trade zone that you are the head of, you're in a very strong position in Asia." Kaplan says the Trump administration should push a version of TPP through Congress "by calling it something else."

Georgetown University's Mastro says the Asian pivot got lost during the presidential campaign as the candidates from both political parties focused on jobs and American competitiveness. "I'm not surprised that people in the Rust Belt weren't thinking about the primacy of the United States in the Asia-Pacific when they voted," she says. "You don't realize how much you need it until you lose it."

Asian countries, according to Mastro, saw the TPP as an indication that the United States was going to be more focused on its strategic interests in the South China Sea. With Trump's election, she says, "a lot of the optimism has been thrown out the window along with TPP. It was a big component of maintaining U.S. leadership in the region."

Publicly, Asian leaders say they hope Trump will reverse course. "I am a strong supporter of developing trade and open regionalism in Asia Pacific," said Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in November. "It is key to benefiting our peoples. I look forward to working with President-elect Trump on our shared goals of strengthening security and ensuring growth that is inclusive, sustainable and fair to all."³¹

Some experts say the Trump administration can accomplish many of the TPP's goals through bilateral trade agreements with friendly countries in the region. "If we're not going to go forward with the TPP, it's important to have a substitute . . . , which could be vigorously pursued through bilateral agreements," says former Sen. Talent.

But other analysts say even if the Trump administration successfully negotiates such agreements, the United States will have lost credibility by not ratifying the pact. TPP's failure "will raise very significant questions about our credibility and about our political will," says Gregory B. Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "It will tell Asian states that we are engaged militarily but not necessarily in any other way, whereas China is playing on all fronts. That's damage we're going to have a hard time undoing."

Even if Trump reverses course and the TPP is ratified, America's image has already been damaged, says Mira Rapp-Hooper, a senior fellow with the Asia-Pacific security program at the Center for a New American Security. "It has been deeply concerning to our partners



Getty Images/Asahi Shimbun

A Chinese coast guard ship patrols near the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea on Dec. 13 as a Philippine fisherman watches. The shoal, lying within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone, is claimed by not only the Philippines but also China and Taiwan. In July, the Permanent Court of Arbitration, in The Hague, ruled China was infringing on the Philippines' fishing rights.

in East Asia broadly to see how trade has been discussed in the U.S. election," she says. "They are keenly aware that this is not just a partisan issue, but that on both the left and the right there was a really strong anti-free trade sentiment in the United States." ■

BACKGROUND

Colonization and Resistance

Since the early 16th century, European colonization has shaped the countries bordering the South China Sea.

The first sustained Western colonization, driven by commercial and religious motives, began with the Portuguese capture of the city of Malacca on Malaysia's southwestern coast in 1511, a feat that required 1,200 men and more than a dozen warships.³²

Portugal's occupation of Malacca, where it built a fortress to protect its shipping, was followed by similar oc-

cupations elsewhere in Southeast Asia by the Netherlands, England, France and Spain. Eventually, those five powers controlled nearly all of Southeast Asia. Britain came to occupy "Burma, Malaya and Borneo; France controlled Indochina; the Dutch ruled Indonesia; and the United States had replaced Spain as the colonial master of the Philippines," wrote Asia expert Mark J. Valencia, an associate at the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, a think tank in Berkeley, Calif.³³

The experiences of the various Asian countries — and, in some cases, even their borders — depended to a large degree upon the colonizing country and on events in Europe.

"The frontiers were drawn so as to avoid disputes among the European powers," wrote Nicholas Tarling, an economist and historian at Australia's University of Auckland. "As a result, especially at the margins, they bore no firm relation to economic, social, cultural, ethnic or even geographical realities."³⁴

Changes in borders, governments and policies — from taxation to land ownership — "did not merely, nor even

primarily, result from the changes in tensions within Southeast Asia,” Tarling said. Instead, events in Europe drove many of the changes.³⁵

For example, as a result of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), the French gained dominance over the Dutch Republic and its colonies in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the British took possession of Dutch colonies in India, Ceylon and Java.

The European powers were generally more interested in commerce and protection of their shipping lanes than they were about control of land and populations.

“The changing spirit of the times was most closely captured by Britain’s establishment of trading centers at Penang (1786), Malacca (1824) and especially Singapore (1819), occasioning the Dutch to establish similar ports within their sphere of influence,” said Robert E. Elson, an emeritus professor of history at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. “This was the beginning of the age of ‘free-trade imperialism,’ founded on the belief that ‘free trade,’ commerce unhindered by protection and undiverted by the demands of territorial administration, inevitably meant Britain’s economic success as well as greater prosperity for those peoples with which it traded.”³⁶

China also had significant influence over the region. Like the Europeans, the Chinese were not interested in controlling lands or peoples in Southeast Asia. China was “content with the confession of vassalage” that would ensure profits for the government and protection for Chinese traders, according to Tarling. When they were challenged, China intervened ruthlessly.³⁷

Meanwhile, the Chinese dynasties faced increasing domestic difficulties and became increasingly vulnerable to European encroachment. Two conflicts with Great Britain weakened China’s last dynasty, the Qing, which ruled from 1644 to 1911.

The first Opium War (1839-42) broke out when China attempted to prevent British traders from selling opium from India in China. “The resulting widespread addiction in China was causing serious social and economic disruption there,” wrote Asia historian Kenneth Pletcher. In March 1839, the Chinese government confiscated and destroyed more than 20,000 chests of opium warehoused at Canton by British merchants.

“The antagonism between the two sides increased a few days later when some drunken British sailors killed a Chinese villager,” Pletcher said. “The British government, which did not wish its subjects to be tried in the Chinese legal system, refused to turn the accused men over to the Chinese courts.”³⁸

Hostilities broke out several months later. British forces captured Nanjing in 1842, leading the Chinese government to capitulate. Besides forcing China to pay a large indemnity, the Treaty of Nanjing required China to increase from one to five the number of “treaty ports” where British merchants could trade and to cede the island of Hong Kong to the British.³⁹

The Second Opium War erupted in 1857 as China was attempting to put down the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64), a political and religious upheaval that cost an estimated 20 million lives. British forces, joined by French troops, prevailed, resulting in further Chinese concessions, including legalization of the opium trade.

“In the 19th century, as the Qing dynasty became the sick man of East Asia, China lost much of its territory — the southern tributaries of Nepal and Burma to Great Britain; Indochina to France; Taiwan and the tributaries of Korea and Sakhalin to Japan; and Mongolia, Amuria and Ussuria to Russia,” wrote the Center for a New American Security’s Kaplan.⁴⁰

The growing reach of European colonizers brought resistance from native populations.

Between the mid-19th century and the 1930s, “European governments found themselves engaged in ‘pacification’ campaigns against traditional states and popular rebellions,” said Carl A. Trocki, an Asia historian at Queensland University of Technology.⁴¹

At the end of the 19th century, a new global power entered the political maelstrom of the South China Sea: the United States. At war with Spain in the Spanish colony of Cuba in 1898, the United States joined forces with Philippine resistance forces to drive the Spanish out of the Philippines.

The rise of nationalist and communist movements in Southeast Asia was encouraged not only by local conditions but, once again, by events in Europe. The onset of World War I in 1914 pitted the colonial powers against each other. The resulting bloodbath demonstrated two things to resistance movements in Southeast Asia.

“The unprecedented scale and carnage of the hostilities served to undermine any pretensions that Western civilization possessed inherent moral superiority, while on a more concrete level, Britain and France, despite emerging as victors, both suffered a serious (and, it would prove, irreversible) erosion of economic and military power,” wrote historians Paul Kratoska and Ben Batson of the National University of Singapore.⁴²

By 1920, the confluence of domestic conditions and events in Europe enabled nationalist movements to challenge colonial regimes throughout the region.

World War II

These nationalist movements stalled in the 1930s because of a new Asian occupier, Japan, which began invading its neighbors in the lead-up to World War II.

The Japanese empire — in an attempt to secure resources, especially oil and

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Chronology

1500-1898

Outsiders colonize Asia.

1511

Portuguese warships capture Malacca in Malaysia, marking the beginning of 400 years of European colonization in Southeast Asia.

1839

First Opium War begins after China tries to prevent British traders from importing opium into China; with British victory in 1842, Treaty of Nanjing requires China to increase to five the number of ports open to British traders.

1895

Japan occupies Taiwan.

1898

After the Spanish-American War, the United States colonizes the Philippines.

1914-1945

Nationalist movements challenge colonial regimes throughout the South China Sea.

1914

World War I erodes ability of colonial powers to maintain control in Southeast Asia.

1940

With the onset of World War II, Japan — having already occupied Korea in 1910 and Manchuria in 1931 — captures nearly every country in South China Sea region.

1945

Japan surrenders; United States becomes dominant power in western Pacific.

1946-1988

U.S. Navy dominates the western Pacific.

1946

French forces battle Vietnamese nationalists backed by China and Russia; French withdraw in 1954 and Vietnam is partitioned.

1947

China publishes map of the South China Sea outlining its claims to nearly all of the sea.

1949

Communist Chinese forces defeat Nationalist Chinese, who flee to Taiwan.

1964

Gulf of Tonkin incident — a reported clash between a U.S. destroyer and North Vietnamese forces — sparks a major increase in U.S. involvement in Vietnam War.

1974

South Vietnam falls to North Vietnam; China seizes the Paracel Islands, which had been claimed by the South Vietnamese government.

1988

Chinese and Vietnamese forces battle at Johnson South Reef in Spratly Islands, claimed by both countries; 64 Vietnamese soldiers reportedly are killed.

2001-Present

Chinese influence in South China Sea grows.

2001

U.S. reconnaissance aircraft flying near China's Hainan Island collides with a Chinese fighter.

2009

Barack Obama, describing himself as “America’s first Pacific president,” promises Asian countries “a new era of engagement.”

2011

Obama announces a “pivot” to Asia, including a bigger naval presence in the region.

2012

China declares an “air defense identification zone” covering a large maritime area separating China from Japan.

2014

China moves oil exploration gear into the Paracel Islands, renewing tensions with Vietnam. . . . Satellite images show China building an island at Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratlys large enough for an airstrip.

2015

U.S. deploys warships within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-occupied Fiery Cross Reef.

2016

U.S. deploys more ships near Triton Island in the Paracels to reassert its “freedom of navigation” rights (January). . . . International tribunal rules in favor of the Philippines and against Chinese in dispute over ownership of the Spratly Islands (July). . . . Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte visits China and returns with billions of dollars in aid and trade deals after telling the Chinese that “America has lost now” (October). . . . China acknowledges that it has installed weapons on disputed islands in the Spratlys (December). . . . President-elect Donald Trump causes a diplomatic kerfuffle by taking a congratulatory phone call from Taiwanese president; a Chinese warship seizes a U.S. research drone in South China Sea (December).

U.S.-Philippine Relationship Grows Rockier

Mercurial leader “just does not want to work with the United States.”

With last year's election of Rodrigo Duterte as Philippine president, the United States' relationship with the Asian island nation — historically America's strongest ally in the South China Sea region — has grown a lot more complicated.

Since taking office in June, Duterte called President Obama a “son of a bitch,” threatened to expel U.S. Special Forces from training grounds on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, announced the end of joint U.S.-Philippine patrols in the South China Sea and suggested he was open to alliances with Russia and China.¹

The mercurial Duterte visited China in October and came home with billions of dollars in aid after telling the Chinese: “America has lost now. I've realigned myself in your ideological flow. And maybe I will also go to Russia to talk to [President Vladimir] Putin and tell him that there are three of us against the world: China, Philippines and Russia.”² A few days later, Duterte issued a clarification, saying he did not intend to split from the United States. He said he was calling for a “separation of foreign policy” rather than “a severance of ties.”³

Then in late October, the Philippine government announced that it had reached an agreement with China on the disputed Scarborough Shoal, an undersea ridge approximately 100 miles west of the Philippines. While details of the agreement were not revealed, a Philippines government spokesman said Chinese ships were no longer blocking Philippine vessels in the area.⁴

Most recently, Duterte, who is scheduled to visit Moscow in April, told Rear Adm. Eduard Mikhailov, head of Russia's Pacific fleet, that he was welcome in the Philippines “anytime you want to dock here for anything, for play, for replenish[ing] supplies or maybe [to be] our ally to protect us.”⁵

Some experts have attributed Duterte's antipathy toward the United States to the Obama administration's criticism of Duterte's anti-drug campaign, which the administration said has involved widespread extrajudicial killings and tactics that are “entirely

inconsistent with universal human rights.”⁶ Others see Duterte's outreach to China as evidence of his long-standing hostility to the United States. Duterte, who previously was mayor of Davao City, is “reflexively anti-American,” says Gregory B. Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a bipartisan policy research organization in Washington. “He just does not want to work with the United States.”

Despite Duterte's anti-American rhetoric, many experts say the United States remains popular in its former colony, which it controlled from 1898 to 1946, when the Philippines gained independence. “The United States is quite popular in the Philippines, and the alliance [between the two countries specifically] is quite popular in the Philippines,” says Mira Rapp-Hooper, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, a think tank in Washington. Noting that the United States is a top importer of Philippine goods, such as machinery, Rapp-Hooper says the U.S.-Philippines relationship is broader than just security.

“While Duterte may be deriving some personal satisfaction and perhaps some political points from seeming to push back on a longtime patron, I think his true alignment will ultimately be determined by his interests,” she says. “It is pretty clear that his interests are not as black-and-white as his rhetoric would suggest.”

The foundation of the nations' security relationship is a 1951 mutual-defense treaty that requires each nation to come to the aid of the other in the event of conflict or a threat to national security. In exchange for providing protection to the Philippines, the United States was allowed to maintain large military facilities in the Philippines, most notably a naval base in Subic Bay and Clark Air Base north of Manila.

In 1991, the Philippine Senate, citing the U.S. military presence as a vestige of colonialism, voted to expel U.S. forces from Subic Bay and Clark Air Base.⁷

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rubber, that were scarce within its territory — expanded into the Asia mainland with its occupations of Korea in 1910 and Manchuria in northeast China in 1931. It also occupied the island of Taiwan from 1895 until World War II ended in 1945.

With the onset of World War II, Japan quickly moved to take control of nearly all the countries in the South China Sea region. Between 1940 and 1942, Japan invaded Hong Kong, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Malaysia and

Burma and occupied all of them until the war's end. Its troops in China and elsewhere were accused of committing war crimes, including mass killings and rapes of civilians.

Although the Japanese occupations had stalled nationalist movements in the region, after Japan's defeat these movements “resurfaced and finally succeeded in throwing off the colonial political yoke,” wrote Valencia of the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability.⁴³

In China, the end of the war — and the end of fighting against the Japanese — meant a return to internal struggles,

primarily between communist forces led by Mao Zedong and nationalist forces led by Chiang Kai-shek. That struggle was settled, at least for mainland China, when Mao triumphed and Chiang and his followers fled in 1949 to Taiwan, which the People's Republic of China still considers its province.

Two years earlier, in the midst of its civil war, China issued a map detailing its South China Sea claims known as the “nine-dash line” — a territory extending hundreds of miles south and east from its southern province of Hainan. China argued that the Paracel

In the years just before Duterte's election, the Philippines had been cooperating more with the U.S. military because of rising South China Sea tensions. In 2014 the Philippines approved a 10-year agreement giving U.S. forces greater access to Philippine bases.⁸ And last March the two countries signed an agreement providing for a new permanent U.S. military presence at five Philippine air bases under the recently negotiated Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.⁹

After assuming office Duterte benefited from a July ruling by an international tribunal that sided with the Philippines over China in a dispute involving the Spratly Islands.¹⁰

The tribunal's ruling, rather than increasing tensions between the two nations, seems to have given Duterte an opportunity to move closer to China. Rapp-Hooper calls Duterte's decision not to press Philippine claims to the disputed islands and waters after the ruling a diplomatic turning point.

"Without the ruling, it would be very hard to see this bilateral diplomatic opening between China and the Philippines taking place," she says.

It is unclear how Donald Trump's election will affect U.S.-Philippines relations. Trump and Duterte spoke by phone in early December when, according to Duterte, Trump endorsed Duterte's controversial anti-drug campaign, calling it "the right way" to deal with the problem.¹¹ The Trump transition team has not confirmed Duterte's account.

"Duterte is wildly popular in the Philippines as someone who is standing up to the rest of the world, and that also means the United States," says Bonner R. Cohen, a senior fellow at the National Center for Public Policy Research. "I fully expect the Trump administration will try to reach out to him. Duterte clearly has no use for Obama, but Obama will be gone."

— Patrick Marshall

and Spratley islands had been integral parts of China for centuries.⁴⁴

The region also became "the cockpit of a contest between Western capitalism and Soviet and Chinese communist ideology," Valencia wrote. "The West, led by the United States, propped up dictators with force to prevent the spread of communism (resulting in the suppression of people's movements in Malaysia and the Philippines) as well as mass humanitarian tragedies in Vietnam and Indonesia."⁴⁵

When French forces withdrew from Vietnam in 1954, the Geneva Accords

partitioned the country, with South Vietnam (the Republic of Vietnam) backed by the United States and North Vietnam backed by the Soviet Union and China. Beginning in 1960, American military involvement in Vietnam grew rapidly, especially after the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which a U.S. destroyer reportedly clashed with a North Vietnamese fast-attack craft.

With Saigon's fall to North Vietnamese troops in 1974, remaining American forces left Vietnam. China seized the Paracel Islands, which had been occupied by South Vietnam. China and the government of the newly unified

Vietnam resolved territorial disputes in the Gulf of Tonkin but not elsewhere in the South China Sea; the two sides are still dueling over the Paracel and Spratley islands.⁴⁶ In 1988, Vietnamese and Chinese military forces clashed at Johnson South Reef in the Spratlys, with each country trading accusations of illegally occupying territory in the chain.

The retreat from Vietnam did not mean a U.S. withdrawal from the South China Sea. Since 1979 the United States has carried out a freedom of navigation program, with two goals: preserving freedom of the seas and demonstrating



Getty Images/Pool/Thomas Peter

Chinese President Xi Jinping greets Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in Beijing, on Oct. 20. Duterte was on a four-day state visit to China aimed at improving relations between the two South China Sea rivals.

¹ "President Duterte, the Wild Card in U.S.-Filipino Relations," *The New York Times*, Oct. 4, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/zpzhxoy>.

² Katie Hunt, Matt Rivers and Catherine E. Shoichet, "In China, Duterte announces split with US: 'America has lost,'" CNN, Oct. 20, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hrvlp8q>.

³ James Griffiths, Matt Rivers and Pamela Boykoff, "Philippines not really severing ties with US, Duterte says," CNN, Oct. 22, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hc6g8am>.

⁴ Richard C. Paddock, "Chinese Vessels Leave Disputed Fishing Grounds in South China Sea," *The New York Times*, Oct. 28, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/gm94m2>.

⁵ "Duterte hopes Russia will become Philippines' ally and protector," Reuters, Jan. 6, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/jjgum3>.

⁶ Jim Gomez, "Duterte tells Obama 'you can go to hell,' warns of breakup," *The Associated Press*, Oct. 4, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hs99v6n>.

⁷ David E. Sanger, "Philippines Orders U.S. to Leave Strategic Navy Base at Subic Bay," *The New York Times*, Dec. 28, 1991, <http://tinyurl.com/z7jpmce>.

⁸ Mark Landler, "U.S. and Philippines Agree to a 10-Year Pact on the Use of Military Bases," *The New York Times*, April 27, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/hur8vsq>.

⁹ Andrew Tilghman, "The U.S. military is moving into these 5 bases in the Philippines," *Military Times*, March 21, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hhmt2so>.

¹⁰ Siegfried Alegado and Cecilia Yap, "Philippines Posts Strongest Economic Growth in Asia at 7.1%," Bloomberg, Nov. 16, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/janttdc>.

¹¹ Felipe Villamordec, "Rodrigo Duterte Says Donald Trump Endorses His Violent Antidrug Campaign," *The New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/zpddqjl>.

China Reaching for Superpower Status

But analysts see huge obstacles to its bid for global supremacy.

From China's perspective, it's only a matter of time before it surpasses the United States as the world's premier economic and military power, analysts say. But many say the Asian nation of 1.4 billion people would have to surmount steep economic and military hurdles before it could rival the United States as a global superpower.

"China's leaders believe China represents the future, not just in hard power but also in economy, culture and values," said Mark Valencia, an associate at the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, a public policy think tank in Berkeley, Calif. "Indeed, China's leaders believe it is China's destiny to regain its prominence, if not preeminence, in the region and perhaps eventually the world."¹

But Gordon G. Chang, an American author and China specialist, says China's optimism is unwarranted. "The regime that was supposed to own the century may not survive the decade," he said. "The People's Republic of China is now trapped in slow-burning economic and financial crises that are shaking the country."²

According to Thomas J. Christensen, former deputy assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs, there is a growing sense among the Chinese that their country is on the rise while the United States is in decline.

"Many in China believe China is significantly stronger and the United States weaker after the [2008] financial crisis," wrote Christensen. That belief, he said, has led to calls within China to become more aggressive in geopolitics. But, he said, "domestic voices calling for a more muscular Chinese foreign policy have created a heated political environment."³

Others say China's military leaders already are responding to hawkish voices. "China's military is sending strong signals that it's gearing up to compete with the U.S. as a global superpower, engaging in a multifaceted reform effort to modernize

and professionalize its military," said Yvonne Chiu, an assistant professor of politics at the University of Hong Kong.⁴

The government is streamlining China's military, making the army smaller while expanding the navy and air force, analysts say. Chinese aviation technology, according to a recent Pentagon report, is "rapidly" closing the gap with Western air forces. "At the same time," wrote Paul McLeary, Pentagon reporter for *Foreign Policy* magazine, "China's nuclear and missile forces have been reorganized as an independent service and have been bolstered with a new array of weapons that push China's potential reach farther out into the Pacific."⁵

Yet, many experts are not convinced that China's rise as a global superpower is inevitable.

China's days of "heady" economic growth are over, according to Chang. Growth hasn't been in double digits since 2010, he said, and its gross domestic product (GDP) grew 6.9 percent last year, down slightly from 2015. While that's a rate the United States would welcome, Chang said those figures are possibly inflated. "In the middle of last year, a well-known China analyst was privately noting that [analysts] in Beijing were talking 2.2 percent [growth], and there are indications the economy grew at an even slower pace, perhaps 1 percent," Chang wrote.⁶

China's economy has two long-term vulnerabilities, according to Loren B. Thompson, chief operating officer of the Lexington Institute, a national policy think tank in Arlington, Va.: Its pool of low-cost labor is drying up because of China's growing middle class and urbanization, and China is overly dependent on manufacturing exports for growth.

Even if its labor problem could be solved, Thompson said, "the reliance of an export-driven economy on foreign markets makes China's prosperity — per capita [gross domestic product] is below \$10,000 — much more vulnerable than America's."⁷

a "non-acquiescence" to coastal states that make "excessive" maritime claims. The centerpiece is regular naval deployments in international waters throughout the region.⁴⁷

The U.S. Navy's primary base of operations in the Western Pacific after World War II was Subic Bay in the Philippines. In 1991, however, negotiations to remain at Subic and Clark Air Base broke down because, in the account of one reporter, the Philippines viewed the Americans' presence "as a vestige of colonialism and an affront to Philippine sovereignty."⁴⁸ The U.S. military left the two bases in 1992.

While China has generally avoided conflict with U.S. forces in the South China Sea, the Chinese government passed legislation in 1992 laying claim to four-fifths of the sea.⁴⁹ Perhaps emboldened by the expulsion of U.S. forces from the Philippines, China backed up this claim with a series of armed skirmishes with the Vietnamese and Philippine navies in the 1990s.

Only two years after the U.S. departure, wrote Kaplan, "China would move to occupy Philippine-controlled reefs in the Spratlys, and from the mid-1990s forward China would undergo a vast expansion of its air and sea forces, ac-

companied by a more aggressive posture in the South China Sea."⁵⁰

Part of China's increasingly aggressive posture was shadowing and challenging the presence of other forces, even in international waters and airspace. In early April 2001, a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft flying 70 miles from China's Hainan Island collided with a Chinese fighter that had scrambled to intercept it. The collision killed the Chinese pilot, and the American aircraft was forced to land on Hainan. The Chinese later released the American crew of 24 and returned the damaged aircraft to the United States.⁵¹

Per capita GDP in the United States — the country's total economic output divided by the population — was \$56,116 in 2015.⁸

Others point to fundamental problems in China's military, which lags the U.S. military in hardware. China has 1,230 fighter aircraft to the United States' 2,308. China's navy, with an estimated 714 vessels, is larger than the 415 vessels in the U.S. Navy, but China has only one aircraft carrier to the United States' 19.⁹

China has about 260 nuclear warheads, far fewer than the 7,100 in the U.S. arsenal.¹⁰

Adding missiles and other hardware isn't the only challenge for the Chinese, some experts say. "The Chinese defense industry management is so corrupt, [it's] like a black hole," says Ming Xia, a professor of political science at the College of Staten Island in New York. "And training is horrible."

Even within Asia, China's ability to project its military power is limited now and for the foreseeable future, says Stephen G. Brooks, an associate professor of government at Dartmouth College. China can project power against the Philippines and other rivals in the South China Sea, says Brooks, "but if the United States says, 'No, we don't want you to project power,' China doesn't have, and won't for a long time have, much ability to get around that."

Regardless of its limitations, China appears intent on asserting itself as a regional power.

And whether China is able to gain dominance in the western Pacific or beyond is not solely up to China, says Frank Gaffney, president of the Center for Security Policy, a conservative think tank in Washington.

"It is a question in part of what they do, obviously, but it's also a question of what we do," he says. "If we persist in the trajectory we have been on [with slowing defense budgets],



Getty Images/VCG

Chinese marines train with their Russian counterparts in a drill in the South China Sea on Sept. 19. China's military is sending strong signals that it is gearing up to compete with the U.S. as a global superpower, according to one analyst.

there is very little doubt in my mind that they will surpass us at some point. In some respects, I think they already have."

— Patrick Marshall

¹ Mark J. Valencia, "The South China Sea and the 'Thucydides Trap,'" in *The South China Sea: A Crucible of Regional Cooperation or Conflict-Making Sovereignty Claims?* (2016), p. 60.

² Gordan G. Chang, "A Turbulent China Shakes the World," in *Warning Order: China Prepares for Conflict and Why We Must Do the Same* (2016), p. 40.

³ Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (2015), p. 260.

⁴ Yvonne Chiu, "China's military is gearing up to compete with the U.S.," CNN, March 9, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/zhwq28w>.

⁵ Paul McLeary, "Pentagon: Chinese Military Modernization Enters 'New Phase,'" *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/z9fkdhb>.

⁶ Chang, *op. cit.*, p. 40; 2015 growth rate is from "China GDP Annual Growth Rate," *Trading Economics*, <http://tinyurl.com/pzthrrq>.

⁷ Loren Thompson, "Five Reasons China Won't Be A Big Threat To America's Global Power," *Forbes*, June 6, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/hgtrru>.

⁸ "GDP growth (annual%)," the World Bank, <http://tinyurl.com/y3vaz2u>.

⁹ "Global Firepower," GFP, Jan. 21, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/bgsc8df>.

¹⁰ "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," Arms Control Association, October 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/6ovpr2v>.

Post-9/11

The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States by the Qaeda terrorist organization marked a turning point in American foreign policy, with the George W. Bush administration launching invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

These wars diverted "the United States away from the rapidly changing strategic landscape of Asia precisely at a time when China [was] making enormous strides in military modernization, commercial conquests, diplomatic inroads, and application of soft power,"

wrote Kurt Campbell, the assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 2009 to 2013. The Americans' preoccupation with the Middle East greatly benefited China, Campbell said: "Rarely in history has a rising power made such prominent gains in the international system largely as a consequence of the actions and inattentiveness of the dominant power."⁵²

In 2009, however, newly elected Obama, describing himself as "America's first Pacific president," promised the countries of Asia "a new era of engagement with the world based on mutual interests and mutual respect."⁵³

Two years later, Obama defined his "pivot" to Asia as securing adoption of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and a bigger U.S. naval presence in the region.⁵⁴

China took notice of Obama's plans. It had been debating whether supposedly declining powers like the United States would fall away peacefully or launch preemptive wars against the rising powers, says Georgetown University's Mastro. "That debate came to an end with the rebalancing. The rebalancing was seen as a sign that, no, the United States will not go quietly into the night."

In 2012, in Xi's first year as president, China declared an air defense identification

zone that covered an expansive maritime area separating China from Japan. It included a contested group of tiny islands, known as the Senkakus (Japanese) or Diaoyu (Chinese), which have been under Japanese control since 1895.

“China followed up on this action almost immediately with a series of gestures that seemed designed to demonstrate its restored strength to its southern neighbors,” wrote Howard W. French, a Columbia University journalism professor who focuses on Asia and whose book on East Asian geopolitics, *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China’s Push for Global Power*, is scheduled for publication in March. “In Xi’s early days in office, the country’s first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, which was acquired several years ago from Ukraine and then extensively refurbished, was sent with a full battle group of other warships

described as “a deliberate challenge to Beijing’s self-declared sovereignty.”⁵⁷

Afterward, then-Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told Congress, “We will fly, sail and operate wherever international law permits and whenever our operational needs require.”⁵⁸ ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Rising Tensions

Secretary of State nominee Tillerson’s explosive testimony at his confirmation hearing on the South China Sea is setting off alarms throughout the region.

ministration, which did not comment on Tillerson’s remarks. “Is this a warning? Or will this be a policy option?” said Zhu Feng, executive director of the China Center for Collaborative Studies of the South China Sea at Nanjing University. “If this is a policy option, this will not be able to block China’s access to these constructed islands. There is no legal basis.”⁶⁰

China faces troubles on other fronts. The Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague, Netherlands, in July rejected China’s claims to all waters within its “nine-dash” line, saying they were incompatible with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The tribunal also said China cannot claim an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Spratlys. Instead, it said Chinese-built islands remain within the EEZ of the Philippines, which had brought the dispute to the arbitration court.⁶¹

Having sided with the Philippines, the tribunal then ruled that China had violated the Philippines’ sovereign rights by interfering with Philippine fishing and petroleum exploration. China refused to take part in the arbitration proceedings and said it would not “accept, recognize or execute” the verdict.⁶²

Some observers criticized the tribunal for provoking China. Rather than resolving tensions, *The Economist* warned that “the sweeping condemnation of [China’s] activities by the court could raise tensions in the South China Sea further, embolden other countries to launch copy-cat court actions and possibly lead China to react strongly.”

China’s island building in the South China Sea is also drawing criticism for another reason: Environmentalists say it is badly damaging one of the world’s most important coral reef systems, which provide habitats and food for hundreds of marine species. China’s construction of bases atop delicate reefs, wrote John McManus, a University of Miami marine biologist, “constitutes the most rapid rate

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“We will fly, sail and operate wherever international law permits and whenever our operational needs require.”

— Ashton Carter,

then-Defense Secretary

on a maiden cruise straight into many of the most fiercely disputed areas of the South China Sea.”⁵⁵

China then blocked the Philippines from delivering supplies and fresh troops to a Philippine navy ship grounded on the disputed Second Thomas Shoal in March 2014. China also sent a large oil rig in May 2014 to disputed waters near the Paracel Islands.⁵⁶

In October 2015, the U.S. Navy sent ships inside the 12-nautical-mile limit that China claims as territory around its artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago in what author James Bamford

China’s *Global Times* newspaper said the United States could be forced to fight a war if it tried to block China from its islands. “China has enough determination and strength to make sure that [Tillerson’s] rabble-rousing will not succeed,” the paper said.

Carlyle A. Thayer, an emeritus professor of politics at the University of New South Wales in Australia, told *The New York Times*: “Tillerson’s proposal would provoke a serious confrontation that could quickly develop into armed conflict.”⁵⁹

Other experts expressed confusion about the intentions of the Trump ad-

Does China's military buildup in the South China Sea threaten U.S. security?



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China has made rapid changes to marine topography in the South China Sea in the past few years to create mini-islands or to augment existing islets occupied by Chinese personnel. In addition, China has installed airfields, portable air defense systems and military radars. Chinese President Xi Jinping's assurances that this type of activity wouldn't occur have proved worthless.

Unilaterally raising new land features in contested areas doesn't directly threaten American security. Nor does militarizing these features. But the buildup nonetheless threatens U.S. security because it comes accompanied by assertive, often reckless Chinese tactics.

Preoccupied by placating China's security establishment, Xi and his Communist Party allies underappreciate how unfettered freedom of navigation has totemic importance to the American security establishment. The United States insists on unimpeded access to all international waters lying 12 nautical miles beyond sovereign territory. Phrased rather brusquely as "we go anywhere we want," the ability to enter international waters at pleasure mirrors other navies' expectations of access, even China's.

But China claims sovereignty over myriad shoals and sandbars as well as over adjoining seas enclosed by a "nine-dash line," which first appeared in Chinese maps in the 1930s. During the 1970-80s, Beijing preemptively seized shoals and atolls from South and North Vietnamese garrisons alike. The new buildup affects the Philippines most directly: China occupied and then built structures on top of various shoals beginning in the 1990s.

Beyond that, China has refused to abide by an international tribunal's July ruling that said many of the country's actions in the South China Sea, including its construction of artificial islands and its expansive claims to sovereignty over the waters around them, violated the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea treaty (UNCLOS) to which China is a signatory.

Much of this resembles the push-and-parry tactics of past decades. But China's dramatically increased maritime and aerial power has changed the calculation. Its navy selectively informs non-Chinese ships that they're "trespassing." Those hailed — naval vessels, petroleum survey ships or fishing vessels — counter that they're in international waters. Ramming and other tactics have ensued.

Much of the undersea and aerial encounters between Chinese and other navies never makes the news. But harassment of foreign naval ships, including U.S. Navy vessels, has increased. The risk of a shooting incident has steadily risen.



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according to media coverage, China is speeding up the militarization of the South China Sea by deploying hundreds of missiles in the reclaimed maritime territories, and this supposedly poses a threat to U.S. security in the region. But few people would find such an idea convincing upon closer examination.

China's military buildup in the reclaimed islands in the Spratlys is quite limited but necessary. All the weapon systems are short-range and defensive in nature. Considering the billions of dollars spent on island reclamation and construction, Beijing is legally justified in building military defenses to protect its huge investment.

Second, it is unlikely these weapons would be used to attack nearby American ships and jet fighters. The reason is that any retaliation would put these islands at risk of being fully destroyed. I don't think that Beijing will risk a huge retaliation by using these island-based light weapons — rifle, guns and short-range missiles.

Third, China's limited weapon systems, along with airstrips in those constructed islands, do not forcefully change the military postures of China and the United States in the western Pacific. China's reclaimed islands, even with military facilities there, are more like "sitting ducks" than islands bases, as China's land-based firepower is too far away to defend them. Even a couple of U.S. destroyers could easily paralyze these islands.

China's activities in the Spratly Islands arise from political, not military, motivations. What's more, it's not China that initiated the reclamation and military buildup. Ironically, it's Vietnam and the Philippines, and they have never terminated their projects in their illegally occupied Spratly assets.

Beijing never disavows its promise of peaceful settlement of any maritime disputes in the South China Sea.

China's island construction and military buildup in the Spratlys might complicate U.S. security strategy in the South China Sea as China emerges as a new competitor in the western Pacific. But China's navy and air force remain far behind those of the United States, and it's unimaginable that China's newly claimed islands, even with a number of short-range missiles, could put the United States in jeopardy.

Beijing should be prudently and transparently handling its military buildup in the Spratlys while seeking to ensure the United States does not overreact. No one in the region seeks an escalation of military tension between the two powers.

CHINA AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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of permanent loss of coral reef area in human history.”⁶³

Troubled TPP

With Trump in the White House, most experts see little hope of Congress ratifying the Trans-Pacific Partnership. According to a transition-team memo obtained by *Politico* in mid-November, Trump plans to pull the United States out of the TPP within his first 100 days in office.⁶⁴

draw, renegotiate. Fix the problems that exist today.”⁶⁶

Judging from Trump’s appointment of free-trade foe Peter Navarro to lead a new White House office overseeing U.S. trade and industrial policy, Republican free-traders in Congress face an uphill battle.

Navarro, who favors higher tariffs on imports, is a staunch critic of China and other low-cost exporting nations. “Trump will never again sacrifice the U.S. economy on the altar of foreign policy by entering into bad trade deals like the North American Free Trade Agreement,

The Pentagon took an initial step in April, when it announced funding for the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), a five-year, \$425 million aid program that seeks to help South China Sea countries improve their ability to monitor activities in their territorial waters and air space.⁶⁸

The Philippines, which remains a U.S. ally despite Duterte’s ascension, is receiving the lion’s share of the first-year funding, taking in \$42 million of the first \$50 million. Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand are getting money to increase maritime security, and Brunei, Singapore and Taiwan for training and headquarter-level integration.

“Countries across the Asia-Pacific are voicing concern with China’s land reclamation, which stands out in size and scope, as well as its militarization in the South China Sea,” Defense Secretary Carter said last April. “We’re standing with these countries. We’re helping them build capacity. We’re affirming our commitment to their and the region’s security with increased posture.”⁶⁹

Critics, however, say the Maritime Security Initiative is inadequate. “The problem with MSI is that it’s ‘budget dust’ in Pentagon-speak,” Van Jackson, a former Pentagon official who served in the Obama administration, said. “You can’t do much with \$425 million.”⁷⁰

The Pentagon responded that the MSI is not the only increase directed at the South China Sea.

“From a multitude of exercises across the region, to freedom of navigation operations and presence operations, the Department of Defense continues to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows so that others can do the same,” Assistant Secretary of Defense Denmark told Congress in July, citing carrier operations in the Philippine Sea, exercises conducted with Japan and India and other “enhanced tempo” activities.⁷¹

But former Sen. Talent says U.S. naval power in the region is inadequate, especially given the logistical advantage



Getty Images/Bloomberg/Andrew Hurrell

An oil production platform lies off the coast of Brunei in the South China Sea, which by some estimates may contain more oil than any other area of the planet except Saudi Arabia. China’s claim to four-fifths of the South China Sea was rejected by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in July.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., told reporters after the election that the pact will likely not receive congressional approval.⁶⁵

Still, a high-profile Republican in Congress and others have suggested TPP could be salvaged. Rep. Kevin Brady, R-Texas, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, said on Nov. 15 that Republicans should defend free trade, including the TPP, in the new Congress. “Republicans are going to continue to support the freedom to trade,” Brady told a panel of *The Wall Street Journal* CEO Council. “Don’t with-

allowing China into the World Trade Organization and passing the proposed TPP,” wrote Navarro and a co-author in an article in *Foreign Policy* in November. “These deals only weaken our manufacturing base and ability to defend ourselves and our allies.”⁶⁷

Military Rebalance

The other critical component of Obama’s pivot to Asia is increasing the U.S. naval presence in the region and the amount of military assistance to allies.

the Chinese have in being so close to the theater of operations. “Because it is in their near seas, the Chinese can focus their power very quickly,” says Talent. “It takes several weeks for us to steam ships from the West Coast to the region.”

Others say U.S. forces are up to the challenge. “Certainly, U.S. assets in the Pacific are sufficient to the task now, and if we follow through on pledges to ship further [naval] assets to the Pacific . . . , they should be up to the challenge of the future,” says Poling of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Some in Congress urged the Obama White House to increase naval patrols near disputed islands in the South China Sea. The proposed Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative Act of 2016, which did not survive last year’s Congress, would have required the administration to report to Congress on its China activities and on U.S. plans for freedom of navigation operations in the region. Additionally, the bill called for delivering more sophisticated military hardware to the Philippines.⁷² It is unclear whether similar legislation will be introduced in the current Congress.

A few analysts say the United States may already have too big of a military presence in the region and should work toward sharing power with China rather than trying to contain it.

“As the United States military doubles down in Asia, the chances increase that one side will cross a red line,” wrote strategic-intelligence consultant Nicholas Borroz and Southeast Asia analyst Hunter Marston in October. “That does not mean Washington should abandon its allies. But it should avoid creating extensive, untenable defense agreements. Washington should maintain a manageable number of security commitments and take steps toward balancing power with China in the Western Pacific — and it should do so while it has the power to shape that balance in its favor.”⁷³ ■

OUTLOOK

Trump’s Impact

One of the biggest uncertainties regarding the South China Sea, especially in light of secretary of State nominee Tillerson’s confirmation hearing testimony, is what Trump will do as president. Trump’s transition team had no immediate reaction to Tillerson’s comments, but earlier it said the new administration “will take a hawkish view of China, focus on bolstering regional alliances, have a renewed interest in Taiwan, be skeptical of engagement with North Korea and bolster the U.S. Navy’s fleet presence in the Pacific.”⁷⁴

Some observers hope Trump will take a measured and balanced approach to China and the South China Sea.

“Trump made it abundantly clear during the campaign that he is no friend of open-ended military interventions [and] nation-building exercises such as what we have experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan,” says the Public Policy Research Center’s Cohen. “At the same time, he has called for restoring U.S. military might and has deplored what he sees as the deteriorated state of the U.S. Navy. In other words, he appears to see a strengthened United States as deterring potential adversaries from engaging in reckless geopolitical behavior.”

Cohen adds that Trump’s appointments also indicate that he will follow a policy of deterrence grounded on a stronger military. “Having retired General James Mattis as Defense secretary, a man known to friend and foe alike as ‘Mad Dog,’ only underscores what I see as a 21st-century version of the older, Cold War-era doctrine of deterrence,” says Cohen. In the South China Sea, where the United States wants free navigation and secure shipping routes but where it has no

direct territorial interests, “what we could see is renewed respect for the United States.”

Others point to inconsistencies in Trump’s appointments. The selection of Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad, a longtime acquaintance of Chinese President Xi, as U.S. ambassador to China may indicate that Trump’s approach to China will be more constructive than his comments on the One China policy indicated.

Of course, the future of the South China Sea depends at least as much on China as it does on the Trump administration. According to many experts, China will continue to expand its influence in the region.

“The fundamental problem is that China is not stable [due to potential challenges to its leadership from the military], so its leaders, for various reasons, are in no position, in no mood, to deal with their counterparts in other capitals on a good-faith basis,” wrote Gordon G. Chang, a China specialist and *Forbes* magazine contributor.⁷⁵

The Center for Security Policy’s Gaffney agrees, pointing to the growing importance of China’s military. “The military there is becoming sort of the key powerbroker, and everybody is trying to accommodate them,” he says. “It’s a worrying thing that the Chinese military is clearly feeling its oats.”

According to the Center for a New American Security’s Kaplan, the situation in the South China Sea is, indeed, at a “contradictory, unstable inflection point,” although he says China’s growing influence is not unexpected.

“Nothing we can do will deter China from gradually, inexorably trying to [extend its influence] in the South China Sea, because it is in their demonstrable self-interest to do so,” says Kaplan.

His advice for Trump is to resist the temptation for surprises. “Surprises may work from time to time, but, generally, diplomacy requires predictability,” he says. “We should establish a predictable relationship with China.” ■

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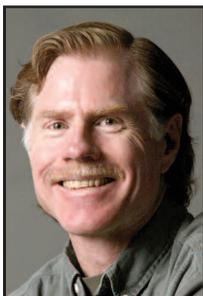
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A senior fellow at the centrist Brookings Institution assesses the Obama administration's evolving policies in Asia and concludes that both the United States and China "must keep in mind that they are best served by adopting positions that engender a healthy respect in the other capital concerning capabilities and goals so that neither acts rashly."

Thompson, Loren, "Five Reasons China Won't Be A Big Threat To America's Global Power," *Forbes*, June 6, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/hgtlrru>.

The head of the Lexington Institute, a conservative think tank focused on national security, spells out the reasons he believes China is incapable of challenging the United States; the two primary ones, he says, are China's overreliance on exports and its aging population.

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"Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015," Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/j8fkvbv>.

In its annual assessment of China's military power, the Department of Defense concludes that the country is rapidly modernizing its forces, although it still lacks the ability to project significant power far from its own shores.

"Asian Views on America's Role in Asia: The Future of the Rebalance," Asia Foundation, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/ztqmjx5>.

Specialists from Asian countries offer strategic recommendations to the incoming U.S. president regarding foreign policy toward Asia; the report stemmed from a series of meetings held by this nonpartisan international development organization.

"Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/gpqqktj>.

This report by a bipartisan think tank, commissioned by the Department of Defense, finds that the Obama administration's efforts to rebalance U.S. strategic resources in Asia may be insufficient to protect American interests in the region.

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This report by the U.S. Navy's intelligence service details China's recent efforts to modernize its navy, and finds that while East Asia remains China's primary focus, it is seeking to build a navy capable of deploying beyond that region.

Rinehart, Ian E., "The Chinese Military: Overview and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, March 24, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/ju29zdc>.

A report by the research arm of Congress examines in detail China's efforts to modernize its military and finds that it is building "a modern and regionally powerful military with a limited but growing capability for conducting operations away from China's immediate periphery."

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Additional Articles from Current Periodicals

Environmental Issues

“China sets up South China Sea environment protection fund,” Reuters, July 25, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hgdbghd>.

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Beech, Hannah, “The Environment Is the Silent Casualty of Beijing’s Ambitions in the South China Sea,” *Time*, June 1, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/jmqxhwf>.

Some biologists say that China’s construction of islands atop coral reefs in the South China Sea could lead to ecocide.

Makinen, Julie, “China has been killing turtles, coral and giant clams in the South China Sea, tribunal finds,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hhyfggy>.

Chinese activity in the South China Sea “caused devastating and long-lasting damage to the environment,” a tribunal found, and added that China failed to prevent its fishing boats from harvesting endangered species, including sea turtles.

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Former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating accused Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson of threatening to involve Australia in war following his inflammatory statements about the South China Sea.

Campbell, Charlie, “Chinese Media Has Told Rex Tillerson to ‘Prepare for a Military Clash,’” *Time*, Jan. 12, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/hpdg69h>.

Chinese state media warned that any American attempts to bar the building of artificial islands in the South China Sea would force a “devastating confrontation” with the United States.

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China exacerbated tensions with Japan when it stated that its sole aircraft carrier would carry out its training drills far into the eastern Pacific.

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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said the Philippines would stand firm if China attempted to mine mineral resources where his country has economic rights.

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South China Sea disputes have reignited Chinese nationalism, and that may have contributed to McDonald’s decision to sell its mainland China and Hong Kong businesses.

Phillips, Tom, “China says Trump’s pick of hostile trade adviser is ‘no laughing matter,’” *The Guardian*, Dec. 22, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/jgmfweh>.

A Chinese newspaper blasted Donald Trump’s choice for trade adviser as “another sign of the confrontational approach the incoming Trump administration seems intent on taking.”

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