## SOUTH CHINA SEA STRATEGIC SITUATION PROBING INITIATIVE

### An Incomplete Report on US Military Activities in the South China Sea in 2019

The South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative

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### An Incomplete Report on US Military Activities in the South China Sea in 2019

#### **SCSPI**

In 2019, the US armed forces continued to carry out intensive military activities in the South China Sea, with their strategic platforms coming in and out of the region frequently, sea and air reconnaissance forces conducting various operations vigorously, the freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) near China's stationed islands and reefs in the South China Sea increasing rapidly, and military diplomacy intensifying unprecedentedly. Though the US has become slightly more prudent in its words and deeds with regard to the military conflicts with China in the South China Sea, its operations in this region, in terms of both scale and intensity, have been significantly reinforced, compared to those in 2018. With the continual military exercises and various drills of the US armed forces and the rushing deployment of forces and platforms in the South China Sea, the region has become a front line of the maritime strategic competition between China and the US.

## I. The US strategic platforms conducted missions frequently, demonstrating increasing deterrence against China

In 2019, the US military's strategic deterrent forces, including aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, nuclear-powered attack submarines and strategic bombers continued to carry out intensive activities in the South China Sea, and conducted targeted deterrence patrols frequently in line with the regional situation and hotspot issues. Throughout the year, the US Navy deployed three aircraft carriers, including USS John C. Stennis (CVN-74), USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) and USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72), and three amphibious assault ships, including USS Essex (LHD-2), USS Wasp (LHD-1) and USS Boxer (LHD-4) for military operations in the South China Sea.

Two of the three aircraft carriers were sent to conduct targeted missions in the South China Sea, except for USS Abraham Lincoln which sailed through the waters on its way back to the US Naval Base San Diego, California after itsdeployment in the Middle East. The USS John C. Stennis, after a five-month deployment in Middle East, transited the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait eastbound to enter the South China Sea, and arrived in Laem Chebang,<sup>1</sup> Thailand, for a port call on February 10. On February 14, the carrier left Thailand to conduct military operations in the South

China Sea until March 5, thus making a nearly three-week stay in the region. Notably, while the USS John C. Stennis was operating in the South China Sea, the US President Donald Trump and the North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un met for a second summit in Hanoi, Vietnam on February 27 and 28. Therefore, the carrier was suspected of conducting pretended operations, with an aim to deter North Korea and build up momentum for the US in the summit. Shortly after the second Trump-Kim summit, the USS John C. Stennis (CVN-74) returned to the Indian Ocean and then headed to the Naval Base Norfolk in Virginia after its overseas deployment.

Throughout the year of 2019, the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) conducted two patrols, one in summer and the other in fall. During its summer patrol, it came in and out of the South China Sea twice, though staying for a relatively short period in the region; while during its fall patrol, the carrier spent most of the time on targeted drills in the region, especially in the waters between the Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal. Moreover, during the fall patrol, the USS Ronald Reagan, (CVN-76) formed a carrier strike group with the guided missile cruisers USS Antietam (CG-54) and USS Chancellorsville (CG-62), and the guided missile destroyers USS John S McCain (DDG-56), USS McCampbell (DDG-85) and USS Wayne E. Meyer (DDG-108), and conducted joint

exercises in the waters south of the Scarborough Shoal with the P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircrafts deployed in Clark Air Base, Philippines for days. There have been no public records yet on the subjects of exercises performed by the P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircrafts and the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) Strike Group. However, the waters in the South China Sea are wide with an average depth of over 2,000 meters, making itself a perfect zone for both submarine warfare and anti-submarine exercises.





On October 6, the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) Strike Group staged a joint exercise<sup>2</sup> with the USS Boxer (LHD-4) Amphibious Ready Group which transited the waters following its Middle East deployment. This exercise coincided with the "light carrier" concept which the US Navy has been testing out. Their joint exercise, to some extent, signaled a trend of the US armed forces' maritime warfare patterns; in particular, in regions where a dual-carrier formation is temporarily not achievable and disputes are very likely to occur, to deploy 1.5 carrier strike groups is another option.

Among the three amphibious assault ships in the South China Sea, the USS Wasp (LHD-1) stayed longer in the region, while the other two sailed through the waters heading to the Middle East for deployment. In late March, the USS Wasp (LHD-1) entered the South China Sea and participated in the US-Philippine Exercise Balikatan on Luzon Island, Philippines from April 1 to 12. During the exercise, the USS Wasp (LHD-1) carried 10 F-35B fighters of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 121 (VMFA-121). It was the first time that F-35B fighters of the US Marine Corps (USMC) were involved in a joint exercise<sup>3</sup> held in the Philippines after their deployment to the Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, which is of great relevance for the US military to test out the operational capabilities of F-35B fighters in the South China Sea and its neighboring areas and help them adapt to the operational scenarios.

In 2019, the US Navy's nuclear-powered attack submarines maintained intensive activities in the South China Sea and its neighboring areas. Incomplete data suggest that the nuclear-powered attack submarines which performed combat readiness patrols in the Western Pacific region throughout the year included USS Cheyenne (SSN-773), USS Scranton (SSN-756), USS Santa Fe (SSN-763), USS Illinois (SSN-786), USS Annapolis (SSN-760), USS Oklahoma City (SSN-723), USS Asheville (SSN-758), USS Hawaii (SSN-776), and USS Topeka (SSN-754). Some of the submarines were forward-deployed to the US Naval Base in Apra Harbor, Guam, and others left the Pearl Harbor in Hawaii or the West Coast of the US for deployment to the Indo-Pacific region. Given the covert

routes of the US Navy's nuclear-powered attack submarines, we cannot accurately identify the way they came in and out of the South China Sea. Nevertheless, as the South China Sea is a hotspot in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as a focus of the US military's attention, it is impossible that the country's submarine forces would be absent in the waters during their combat readiness patrols in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, as the two submarine tenders which are home-ported in Apra Harbor, Guam, namely USS Frank Cabal (AS-40) and USS Emory S Land (AS-39) have frequently operated in the Philippine Sea, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, we can infer that there are considerable operations of the US Navy's nuclear submarines in the South China Sea.

In 2019, the US Air Force sent the 23rd Expeditionary Bomb Squadron (EBS) and the 69th EBS successively to the Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, in support of the Continuous Bomber Presence mission. Specifically, the 23rd EBS operated there from January to July, and replaced by the 69th EBS on July 12<sup>4</sup>. According to public records, the US Air Force B-52H Stratofortress did not frequently enter the South China Sea for military operations in the first half of 2019. One typical case occurred on March 5, when a B-52 of the 23rd EBS took off from the Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, flew over the Balintang Channel to conduct military operations in areas neighboring the Macclesfield Band,

and eventually returned to Guam; in most of the other cases, the B-52 take off from Guam and flew over the South China Sea to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, or to participate in the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition in Malaysia. In the second half of 2019, especially during the deployment of the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) Strike Group near the South China Sea, the B-52 frequently headed to the South China Sea for military operations. From August 12 to 14, two B-52s of the 69th EBS took off from the Andersen Air Force Base each day to conduct military operations in the north of the Scarborough Shoal, and interacted in some way with the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) Strike Group which was sailing through the waters northwest of Luzon Island, Philippines on their way back to Guam. This once again highlighted the extent to which the US Air Force B-52s were focused on cooperative combat exercises with carrier strike groups, especially such exercises held in areas around the South China Sea, which made the US targeting against China evident.

US	S Air Force	B-52H bomber	operations in the	South China S	Sea in 2019
Date	Number of flight	Call sign	Operation area	Squadron	Remarks
Mar 5	1	TOXIN02	Neighboring the Macclesfield Bank	The 23rd EBS	It was the first the 23rd EBS entered the South China Sea.
Mar 13	2	ROOST01、 02	South China Sea	The 23rd EBS	Two KC-135Rs were sent to provide mid-air refueling above the Philippine Sea.
Mar 26	2	STUN01、02	Langkawi, Malaysia	The 23rd EBS	To attend Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition
May 7	1	PINUP02	South China Sea	The 23rd EBS	On its way back to Guam from Diego Garcia.
Jun 7	2	COSBY01、02	South China Sea	The 23rd EBS	
Jul 29	1	Denally01	South China Sea	The 69th EBS	
Aug 12	1	COOKER01	North of the Scarborough Shoal	The 69th EBS	Conducted
Aug 13	1	COOKER01	North of the Scarborough Shoal	The 69th EBS	cooperative combat exercises with USS Ronald Reagan Strike
Aug 14	1	COOKER01	North of the Scarborough Shoal	The 69th EBS	Group
Aug 27	1	EVOLE01	South China Sea	The 69th EBS	
Aug 29	1	SURFR01	South China Sea	The 69th EBS	
Oct 2	1	SNAPY02	South China Sea	The 69th EBS	One KC-135R (number: 58- 0106)was sent to provide air refueling above the Philippine Sea
Oct 25	2		South China Sea	The 69th EBS	SCSPI

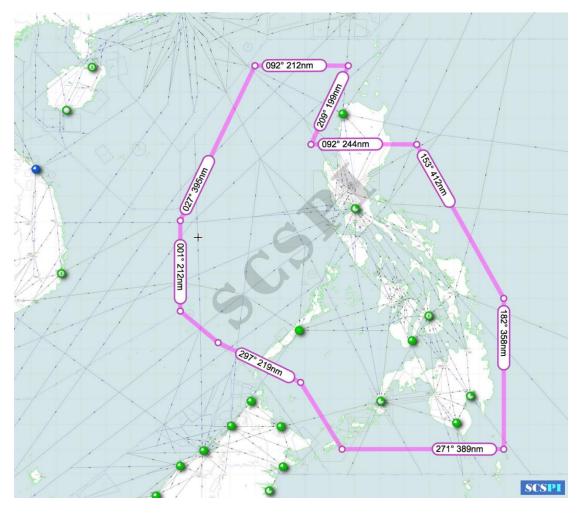
## II. The US Navy and Air forces intensively conducted reconnaissance and intelligence operations

Throughout the year of 2019, the US Navy's Military Sealift Command ships, including USNS Victorious (T-AGOS-19), USNS Able (T-AGOS-20), USNS Effective (T-AGOS-21), USNS Loyal (T-AGOS-22), USNS Impeccable (T-AGOS-23), USNS Bowditch (T-AGS-62), USNS Henson (T-AGS-63) and USNS Mary Sears (T-AGS-65) all conducted oceanographic and hydrographic surveys and collected data for preparing charts in the South China Sea for a long period of time. Specifically, in early June, the oceanographic reconnaissance ship USNS Henson (T-AGS-63) repeatedly conducted reconnaissance operations and surveys in the waters south of Sanya, which were less than 120 kilometers away from the Sanya Port. Additionally, in late August, the RV Sally Ride (AGOR-28), an oceanographic research vessel owned by the US Navy, sailed through the South China Sea northbound to moor at Kaohsiungn, Taiwan. It can be concluded that the US armed forces have normalized the deployment of at least two oceanographic reconnaissance ships to the South China Sea for reconnaissance operations, with their focus mostly on the waters south of Sanya, neighboring the Bashi Channel and in proximity to the Macclesfield Bank. The operations are primarily aimed at monitoring the important waterway of China's submarine forces and closely watching their moves.



In terms of air reconnaissance, the US armed forces intensively conducted various reconnaissance activities in the South China Sea by deploying air reconnaissance forces such as RQ-4 Global Hawks, P-8A and P-3C anti-submarine aircrafts, EP-3E Airborne Reconnaissance Integrated Electronic System (ARIES), RC-135 reconnaissance aircrafts and U-2S high-altitude reconnaissance aircrafts deployed at the Andersen Air Force Base in Guam, the Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa, the Clark Air Base in the Philippines and the Osan Air Base in South Korea.

The RQ-4 Global Hawks usually departed from the Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, flew over the Philippines and then conducted reconnaissance in the South China Sea. As the US military's major reconnaissance force in the region, they featured reconnaissance operations conducted at high altitude, long endurances and multiple approaches. They conducted reconnaissance three to four times each month, with their reach covering most swaths of the Philippines and the east of the South China Sea.



Trajectories of one RQ-4 Global Hawks on November 11 to 12, 2019,

source: https://www.faa.gov/

At present, the US Navy has included two to three P-8A Poseidon antisubmarine aircrafts in its routine deployments to the Clark Air Base in the Philippines, and would boost the forces under special circumstances (like when the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) Strike Group is navigating through the South China Sea). Meanwhile, it has also deployed two P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircrafts (numbered 169010 and 168996, respectively) which carry APS-154 Advanced Airborne Sensors in the Western Pacific region, which primarily track and monitor surface targets. Specifically, the one numbered 168996 has never returned to the US mainland since its deployment to the Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa on April 7, 2019. Public records indicated that on September 27, the aircraft was briefly deployed to the Clark Air Base in the Philippines when the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) Strike Group was carrying out military operations in the South China Sea.

The US military has leveraged its air reconnaissance forces with a combination of routine reconnaissance and special reconnaissance operations. When performing routine reconnaissance operations, reconnaissance aircrafts usually follow a given route: they would first jet into the South China Sea via the Bashi Channel, then head northwest to the southeastern airspace of Guangdong Province, then fly west along the coastline of southeastern China to the southwestern airspace of Sanya,

Hainan Province, and finally return to Kadena Air Force Base performing reconnaissance operations. The selection of specific forces and airspace for special reconnaissance operations is often in line with the nature of a given mission. The special reconnaissance operations are primarily aimed at providing intelligence support for the US aircraft carriers, supporting surface warships for patrolling and monitoring the large-scale military actions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy. For example, on April 28 and 29, when the US Navy's guided missile destroyers USS Stethem (DDG-63) and USS William P. Lawrence (DDG-110) sailed through the Taiwan Strait from south to north, a P-8A Poseidon antisubmarine aircraft (number 169340) took off from the Clark Air Base in the Philippines to the airspace above areas neighboring Pratas Islands to conduct reconnaissance operations and provide intelligence support for the surface forces. With regard to the reconnaissance operations performed throughout the year of 2019, the US Air Force's U-2S high-altitude reconnaissance aircrafts and RQ-4 Global Hawks were mostly deployed for routine reconnaissance missions, while RC-135 reconnaissance aircrafts, P-8A and P-3C anti-submarine aircrafts and EP-3E ARIES were mostly assigned special reconnaissance missions. In particular, when the US Navy's surface forces were transiting the Taiwan Strait or the US Air Force's MC-130J Commando II was flying over the Strait, the US military deployed three types of aircrafts, namely RC-135V/W Rivet Joint, EP-3E

ARIES and P-8A for continuous reconnaissance over the south and north ends of the Taiwan Strait, in a bid to provide intelligence support for forces passing through the Strait. For instance, when the US Navy's guided missile cruiser USS Chancellorsville (CG-62) was crossing the Taiwan Strait on November 12, the US Air Force launched a RC-135V/W Rivet Joint from the Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa to reconnoiter in the airspace above the south end of the Trait. To extend the aircraft's stay in the air, the US Air Force sent a KC-135R Stratotanker from the same base to the airspace above the southwestern Taiwan to provide mid-air refueling. In the meantime, a P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircraft of the US Navy set off from the Clark Air Base in the Philippines to the south end of the Taiwan Strait for a reconnaissance mission, joining forces with the RC-135V/W Rivet Joint to provide intelligence support for the USS Chancellorsville (CG-62).

In addition to the aforementioned reconnaissance aircrafts, an E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) aircraft (number 97-0200), owned by the Georgia Air National Guard, took off from the Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa on October 8, in a bid to conduct reconnaissance operations in the airspace above the southwestern Taiwan. As an aircraft usually monitoring over the Korean Peninsula, it made a rare presence in the South China Sea, which was the only documented operation

of this aircraft in the region in 2019. Moreover, from August 16 to October 6, the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) briefly deployed a P-3B Orion Airborne Laboratory (number: N426NA) and a Learjet 25 (number: N426NA) to the Clark Air Base in the Philippines for experiments and surveys in the South China Sea and areas neighboring the Philippines.

#### III. The FONOPs were becoming more frequent and normalized.

According to public records, the US Navy carried out FONOPs near China's stationed islands and reefs in the South China Sea for five times in 2018. In 2019, the figure grew to eight, an increase of 60 percent, and the operations were conducted twice in May and November respectively. Specifically, three FONOPs took place near the Paracel Islands, four in the waters in proximity to the Spratly Islands and one in the waters near the Scarborough Shoal. All the ships and vessels sent for FONOPs, except for the guided missile destroyer USS McCampbell (DDG-85) which is affiliated to the US 7th Fleet based in Japan, were sent from the 3rd Fleet at the Naval Base San Diego. For instance, the USS Wayne E. Meyer (DDG-108) set off from the Pearl Harbor in Hawaii to the Western Pacific region on August 9, and returned to its home port on December 23. During

the nearly five-month deployment, the vessel conducted military activities in the waters of South China Sea, East China Sea and Sea of Japan, and carried out three FONOPs near China's stationed islands and reefs successively.

US FON	US FONOPs near China's stationed islands/reefs in the South China Sea in 2019								
Date	Ship	Feature	Home port						
Jan 7	USS McCampbell	Lincoln Island, Tree Island and Woody Island, Paracel Islands	US Fleet Activities, Yokosuka						
Feb 11	USS Spruance, USS Preble	Mischief Reef, Spratly Islands	US Naval Base San Diego, California						
May 6	USS ChungHoon, USS Preble	Gaven Reef and Johnson Reef, Spratly Islands	US Naval Base San Diego, California						
May 19	USS Preble	Scarborough Shoal, Macclesfield Bank	US Naval Base San Diego, California						
Aug 28	USS Wayne E. Meyer	Mischief Reef and Fiery Cross, Spratly Islands	Pearl Harbor, Hawaii						
Sep 13	USS Wayne E. Meyer	Paracel Islands	Pearl Harbor, Hawaii						
Nov 20	USS Gabrielle Giffords	Mischief Reef, Spratly Islands	US Naval Base San Diego, California , temporarily deployed at Changi Naval Base before the FONOP						
Nov 21	USS Wayne E. Meyer	Paracel Islands	Pearl Harbor, Hawaii						

During the operations, the US Navy conducted a sea-air operation with air reconnaissance forces like P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircrafts or EP-3E ARIES on well-chosen routes. The operations were more sophisticated and tended to become routine practices. Since 2019, their operations have no longer been undertaken at regular intervals. The intervals between two activities of the US Navy could be as long as three months or as short as one day, signaling their intention to show up whenever and wherever they want.

In addition, the US Navy's FONOPs showed a clear sign of retaliation. For example, China denied the request for a US naval warship to visit Qingdao Port, a US defense official told Reuters on August 27. Right on the following day, the guided missile destroyer USS Wayne E. Meyer (DDG-108) carried out a FONOP near Spratly Islands. Amid the intensified strategic competition between China and the US in recent years, their maritime confrontation, especially in the South China Sea, has become particularly prominent. Moreover, the US has become too sensitive to China's military and political moves. It has become a major trend for the US Navy to retaliate against China by launching FONOPs near China's stationed islands and reefs in the South China Sea or sailing through the Taiwan Strait.

# IV. Various military exercises kept building up to greater capacity for joint combat and operation<sup>5</sup>

In 2019, the US military remarkably reinforced the subjects and

intensity of its military exercises in the South China Sea and its neighboring areas, and stepped up its joint military exercises with countries surrounding the South China Sea and troops beyond the region. Several hundred of military exercises have been undertaken, more than fifty of which were well-known. These exercises included anti-surface warfare (ASUW), underwater attack and defense, mine countermeasure (MCM) operations, air combat and defense, special operations, cyberspace operations, maritime domain awareness (MDA), maritime law enforcement, humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR).

The US joint military exercises in the South China Sea and its neighboring areas involved ASEAN member states and several other extraregional countries including Japan, Australia, New Zealand, France, India and Canada. Specifically, in the exercises with ASEAN member states, the US military continuously added new subjects while performing traditional ones at the same time to highlight maritime law enforcement, MDA and cyberspace operations. While in the joint exercises with countries outside the region, the US made ongoing efforts to strengthen military operation drills with its staunch allies in the South China Sea and the neighboring areas, with the focus placed on maritime cooperative combat, antisubmarine warfare (ASW) and MCM operations. Building up strong military capabilities and increasing battle readiness, Washington has been

quite outspoken about its intention to get its allies involved in the affairs of the South China Sea. In a comprehensive review of the US unilateral, bilateral and multilateral military exercises in the South China Sea and its neighboring areas in 2019, it was noticeable that the exercises, though remaining within a relatively stable framework, introduced new subjects, involved new participants, expanded ranges and incorporated new forces, aiming at specific targets and smacking of live combat.

The US allies beyond the region were increasingly involved with a bigger role to play in the exercises. The Exercise Balikatan held in early April, an annual military exercise between the Philippines and the US, saw the participation of Australia for the first time. The Australian Defense Force dispatched a 50-member team composed of special forces, medical personnel, engineers and priests, which indicated that the Australian military might participate in task force combat and battlefield support subjects during the exercise. Japan joined the US-Philippines Exercise Kamandag 3, where army forces from the three countries conducted a multilateral amphibious landing. During the ship-to-shore maneuver, after the reconnaissance of the beach and perimeter alert building by the Philippines and the US, the three countries' amphibious assault vehicles (AAVs) launched from the Philippine Amphibious Transport Ship BRP Davao (LD-602) and the US Whidbey Island-class dock landing ship USS Germantown (LSD-42) came ashore, Philippine and US Marines secured the objective, and Japan Ground Self-Defense Force led medical evacuation and disaster relief drills.

Cyberspace operations emerged as a new subject of the exercises. In 2019, the US conducted at least two joint military exercises concerning cybersecurity operations with countries in the Southeast Asia. In late July, the third Information System and Technology Exchange (ISTX) was held in Jakarta, Indonesia, by the Hawaii National Guard in cooperation with cybersecurity-related departments under the command of US Indo-Pacific Command, and Indonesian forces. This conference aimed to assist in cybersecurity doctrine development and enhance the cybersecurity capabilities to effectively defend and protect critical cyber information infrastructure from malicious virus and cyber intrusions. During the Cobra Gold 2019, the Royal Thai Armed Forces, the US Marine Corps and the Washington Air National Guard executed the first Cobra Gold Cyberspace Field Training Exercise (FTX) at the Royal Thai Air Force Headquarters in Bangkok, Thailand. The exercise focused on identifying and defending critical information and warfighting systems against a cyberspace attack.<sup>6</sup>

Military exercises would be more specialized and small-scale in the future. HADR, battlefield medical care, peacekeeping operations, flight

security, aircraft maintenance and other specialized exercises have weighed heavily in the military cooperation and exchanges between the US and ASEAN countries. In late September, the Idaho National Guard held a seminar on peacekeeping with members of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces.<sup>7</sup> Concurrently with this seminar, the US and Vietnam held the 9th Airman-to-Airman Talks on flight safety in Hanoi, Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> During the US-Indonesia Exercise Garuda Shield 2019 held in August, soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division of the US Army and the 16th Combat Aviation Brigade, and their Indonesia Armed Forces counterparts conducted platoon live-fire exercises. In the bilateral military training exchange in the same month, the US Marine Corps and the Indonesian Korps Marinir each sent a platoon of Marines to live and train together at the other's military base for three weeks.9 Such smallscale drills at the primary level have constituted an important part of the military exercises between the US and countries in the region.

	US military exercises in the South China Sea in 2019										
No.	Name	Date	Location	Participant	Troop	Subject					
1	US-UK Tactics Exercise	Jan 11-16	South China Sea	US, UK	USS McCampbell (DDG 85), Royal Navy Type 23 frigate HMS Argyll (F231)	Communicati on drills, division tactics, and a personnel exchange					

2	SMEE	Jan 17	Lopburi, Thailand	US and Thailand	The 1st Battalion, 112th Aviation Regiment, 96th Aviation Troop Command, Washington National Guard and the Royal Thai Army	Exchange on aviation safety
3	Bilateral Air Conting ent Exchang e- Philippin es (BACE- P)	Jan 20-Feb 1	Cesar Basa Air Base, the Philippines	US and the Philippines	The 121st Fighter Squadron (121 FS), a unit of the District of Columbia Air National Guard and the Philippine Air Force (PAF)	Exchanges on the drills of tactics, intelligence, flightline, and aircraft maintenance
4	Hanuma n Guardian 19	Jan 28-Feb 7	Thailand	US and Thailand	Approximately 800 US Army soldiers operating under the US Army 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team and approximately 900 Royal Thai Army soldiers under the Headquarters of 2nd Infantry Division and the 12 Infantry Regiment	Aviation assets, CIED tactics and SMEEs
5	Exercise Cobra Gold 2019	Feb 12-22	Thailand	29 countries, including US, Thailand, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore	Approximately 4,500 US personnel from the Amphibious Transport Dock Ship USS Green Bay (LPD 20), the 31st MEU and the 35th Fighter Squadron	Cyber FTX, FTX, HADR
6	US-UK Maritime Security Drill	Feb 18	South China Sea	US, UK	US Navy fleet replenishment oiler USNS Guadalupe (T-AO 200) , the Royal Navy frigate HMS Montrose (F236)	Eplenishment drill

7	Exercise Salaknib 2019	Mar 4- 24	The Philippines	US and the Philippines	More than 1,600 soldiers from the Seventh Infantry Division of the US Army and the 7th Infantry Division of the Philippine Army	Jungle field training exercise (FTX), bilateral Command Post Exercise (CPX), various SMEEs, as well as Cooperative Health Engagements (CHE) and Humanitarian Civic Action (HCA) projects
8	The ASEAN Defence Ministers , Meeting -Plus Maritime Security Field Training Exercise	Mar- May	South East Asia countries	US, Australia, Canada, Japan, Philippines	US Destroyer Squadron 1	Communicati on and maneuvering drills
9	Keris Strike Joint Exercise	Mar 11-15	Malaysia	US, Malaysia	The Washington National Guard, the 25th Combat Aviation Brigade of the US Army and the 11th Infantry Brigade of Malaysian Army	SMEEs on anti-terrorism, military police, unmanned systems, civil affairs, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, blasting, etc.

Tack   Cope   Mar   Thailand   Us   The 14th Fighter   Squadron of US Air   Squadron of US							
Tactics drill Mar 19 South China Sea Philippines Philippines, Australia  Bersama Warrior 14 Balikatan Apr 1- 12 Philippines Philippines Australia  Apr 1- 15 Guardian Sea 2019  Apr 7 Andaman Sea 2019  Apr 7 Andaman Sea 2019  The JS Amy Andaman Sea 2019  Apr 7 Andaman Sea 2019  The JS Amy Andaman Sea 2019  The Los Angeles-class attack submarine USS Louisville (SSN-724), an underway replenishment oiler, two frigates, a corvette and a Sea Hawk	10	Tiger		Thailand	Thailand,	Squadron of US Air Force, the Republic of Singapore Air Force, the	exercise and the suppression of enemy air defenses
Tactics drill  Mar 19 South China Sea  Philippines  The 7th Fleet flagship USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19) and the frigate BRP Ramon Alcaraz (FF 16)  Bersama Warrior Comma Mar 20 Malaysia nd Post Exercise  US, Malaysia  US, Malaysia  US, Malaysia  The Washington National Guard and the Malaysian Army  The Amphibious Assault Ship USS Wasp (LHD 1), the 31st MEU with the PAF and the PMC  The Amphibious Assault Ship USS Wasp (LHD 1), the 31st MEU with the PAF and the PMC  The Los Angeles-class attack submarine USS organized in two phases with a shore phase and a Corrette and a Sea Hawk	11	SMEE		Thailand		·	matter exchange on combat
Bersama Warrior  Comma Mar 20 Malaysia US, Malaysia Guard and the Malaysian Army  Balikatan Apr 1- The Philippines Australia  Apr 1- The Philippines, Australia  Apr 3 Andaman Sea 2019  Apr 7 Andaman Sea 2019  Apr 7 Andaman Sea 2019  The Washington National Guard and the Malaysian Army  The Amphibious Assault Ship USS Wasp (LHD 1), the 31st MEU with the PAF and the PMC operations, antiterrorism operation  The Los Angeles-class attack submarine USS organized in two phases with a shore phase and a corvette and a Sea Hawk	12		Mar 19			USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19) and the frigate BRP	communicati ons, maneuver and
14 Balikatan Apr 1- The Philippines Australia  Apr 1- The Philippines, Australia  Balikatan 12 Philippines Australia  Apr 1- The Philippines, Australia  Australia The Amphibious Assault Ship USS Wasp (LHD 1), the 31st MEU with the PAF and the PMC operations, antiterrorism operation  The Los Angeles-class attack submarine USS Louisville (SSN-724), an underway replenishment oiler, two frigates, a corvette and a Sea Hawk	13	Warrior Comma nd Post	Mar 20	Malaysia	US, Malaysia	Guard and the Malaysian	peacekeepin g operation in the command
The Los Angeles-class attack submarine USS  Guardian Apr 7 Sea 2019  Apr 7 Sea Thailand US and Louisville (SSN-724), an two phases with a shore oiler, two frigates, a corvette and a Sea Hawk  The Los Angeles-class was organized in two phases with a shore phase and a	14	Balikatan	·		Philippines,	Ship USS Wasp (LHD 1), the 31st MEU with the	including amphibious warfare, live fire exercise, urban operations, anti- terrorism
	15		Apr 7			attack submarine USS Louisville (SSN-724), an underway replenishment oiler, two frigates, a	was organized in two phases with a shore phase and a

					helicopter from the Royal Thai Navy (RTN)	sea phase that culminated with tracking a submarine. It marked the first time the RTN deployed a towed array sonar to execute anti- submarines missions.
16	US-India joint ASW exercise	Apr 15	Indian Ocean	US, India	The guided missile destroyer USS Spruance (DDG 111), P-8A Poseidon aircraft and the Indian Navy	Joint ASW training
17	Replenis hment- at-sea training	Apr 16	South China Sea	US, Japan	The fleet replenishment oiler USNS Pecos and the JMSDF ship JS Suzutsuki (DD 117)	Replenishme nt-at-sea training
18	Tactical training	May 2-8	South China Sea	US, India, Japan	The guided-missile destroyer USS William P. Lawrence (DDG 110), the Indian Navy destroyer INS Kolkata (D 63) and the tanker INS Shakti (A 57), the JMSDF helicopter-carrier JS Izumo (DDH 183), the JMSDF destroyer JS Murasame (DD 101), and the Republic of Philippine Navy patrol ship BRP Andres Bonifacio (PS 17)	Formation sailing and communicati on drills
19	ASEAN Defence Ministers , Meeting	Mar 13	South China sea	US, ASEAN member states	USS William P. Lawrence (DDG 110)	Information sharing, interoperabili ty and multinational

	-Plus Exercise					response to maritime security issues.
20	Joint search-and-rescue exercises	May 14	South China Sea	US and the Philippines	The US Coast Guard (USCG) Cutter Bertholf (WMSL 750), the Philippine Coast Guard patrol vessels BRP Batangas (SARV 004) and the BRP Kalanggaman (FPB 2404)	Joint search- and-rescue exercises
21	Tactical training	May 18	Strait of Malacca	US, Japan	The guided-missile destroyer USS William P. Lawrence (DDG 110), the JMSDF helicopter-carrier JS Izumo (DDH 183), the JMSDF destroyer JS Murasame (DD 101)	Communicati on drill
22	US- Thailand CARAT	May 29- June 8	Thailand	US and Thailand	The guided missile cruiser USS Antietam (CG 54), the USS Patriot (MCM-7), the USS Pioneer (MCM-9), the USNS Millinocket (T-EPF-3), the Marine Rotational Force-Darwin Task Force, the US Navy Seventh Fleet Band, the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit (EODMU) 5 and the Naval Environmental Preventive Medicine Unit 6	Surface warfare maneuvering tactics, VBSS drills, mobile dive and salvage training, explosive ordinance disposal (EOD), minesweepin g and maritime patrol operations. MDA, submarine warfare, tactics tabletop exercises,

						integrated dive team training, EOD, jungle survival training and medical casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) field training exercises
23	Tactical training	June 10-12	South China Sea	US, Japan	The aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76), the JMSDF helicopter-carrier JS Izumo (DDH 183), the JMSDF destroyer JS Murasame (DD 101), and the JS Akebono (DD-108)	Communicati on check, tactical mobility, liaison officer exchange, etc.
24	Tactical training	June 13- July 15	Guam	US, Singapore	The 122nd Fighter Squadron from the 159th Fighter Wing of the New Orleans Air National Guard, Louisiana, 6 RSAF F-16 fighters from the RSAF 140 Squadron, an RSAF G550 Airborne Early Warning aircraft, and 150 RSAF aircrew.	Tactical training
25	Cope West 2019 Field Training Exercise	June 17-28	North Sulawesi, Indonesia	US and Indonesia	Six US Air Force F- 16CM/DM aircrafts from the 14th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron and six F-16 aircrafts from the Indonesian Air Force	Aircraft maintenance techniques, close air support (CAS), air-to- air operation training and a SMEE
26	Tactical training	Jun 19-20	South China Sea	US, Japan	The aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan (CVN- 76), the JMSDF	Communicati on check, tactical

					helicopter-carrier JS Izumo (DDH 183), the JMSDF destroyer JS Murasame (DD 101), and the JS Akebono (DD-108)	mobility, liaison officer exchange, etc.
27	Marine Aviation Support Activity (MASA) 19.2	July 15-25	The Philippines	US and the Philippines	The Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 262 (VMM-262) and the 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, USMC	Mutual defense, counterterrori sm and HADR
28	Informati on System and Technol ogy Exchang e (ISTX)	July 24-26	Indonesia	US and Indonesia	US and Indonesia service members specializing in cybersecurity	SSME on cybersecurity and protection
29	CARAT	Aug 1- 7	Surabaya, Indonesia	US and Indonesia	Staff from CTF 73 and DESRON 7, the littoral combat ship USS Montgomery (LCS 8), the Spearhead-class expeditionary fast transport USNS Fall River (T-EPF 4), the Legend-class cutter USCG Stratton (VMSL 752), the MV Carolyn Chouest, the Navy Environmental and Preventive Medicine Unit 6, the US 7th Fleet Band and a P-8 Poseidon aircraft.	Evolutions included both shore-based and at-sea training, such as VBSS drills, mobile dive and salvage training, gunnery exercises, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) drills, jungle warfare training and subject matter expert knowledge exchanges in MDA and

						other subjects
30	Bilateral Military Training Exchang e between Marine Corps	Aug 6- 29	Indonesia and Hawaii	US and Indonesia	The Alpha Company of the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Marine Regiment	Live-fire ranges, and integrated cultural events
31	Tactical training	Aug 12-14	South China Sea and Philippine Sea	US	The B-52H Stratofortress Bombers from the 69th Expeditionary Bomber Squadron and the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) Strike Group	Sea-air battles
32	Maritime Training Activity Malaysia 2019	Aug 14-19	Malaysia	US, Malaysia	The USS Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) Montgomery, the Legend-class cutter USCG Stratton (VMSL 752), Salvage Ship Grasp, T-EPF Millinocket, the 1st Tactical Diving & Salvage Forces, one MH-60S Seahawk helicopter and one MH-65 Dolphin helicopter	Exercises were divided into shore- based and at-sea phases, including such subjects as riverside inspection, tactical diving and salvage, firearms exercises, maritime patrol and operations, replenishmen t-at-sea training, etc. During shore-based exercises, SMEEs were carried out

						around such topics as aviation, women's leadership, damage control, military law, public affairs and healthcare
33	SEACAT	Aug 19	Singapore	US, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam	The Destroyer Squadron 7, the P-8A Poseidon aircraft and the USCG	Visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS)
34	Garuda Shield 2019	Aug 19	Indonesia	US and Indonesia	The 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment and the 16th Combat Aviation Brigade	SMEEs and platoon live-fire exercises
35	SMEE	Aug 30	The Philippines	US and the Philippines	The USMC, the PN and the PMC	SMEE on amphibious assault vehicle (AAV)
36	AUMX	Sept 2-6	South China Sea	US and ASEAN member states	The littoral combat ship USS Montgomery (LCS 8), the guided-missile destroyer USS Wayne E. Meyer (DDG 108), three MH-60 helicopters, and a P-8A Poseidon aircraft	VBSS, MDA, division tactics and maritime asset tracking
37	SMEE	Sept 9-11	The Philippines	US and the Philippines	The medical personnel from the US Pacific Air Forces and the PAF	SMEE on aeromedical evacuation

38	GEMA BHAKTI 19 (GB19) Staff Exercise (STAFFE X) (Echo of Good Deeds in Indonesi an)	Sept 16-23	Indonesia	US and Indonesia	The Hawaii National Guard (HING) and the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI, Indonesian Armed Forces)	Joint operational staff planning and processes
39	SMEE	Sept 16-20	Cambodia	US, Cambodia	The Idaho Army National Guard and the Royal Cambodian armed forces	SMEE on peacekeepin g
40	Lifesavin g First Aid Training	Sept 20-22	The Philippines	US and the Philippines	The US Army and the Philippine Army	Medical training known as Tactical Combat Casualty Care
41	Combine d Airborne Operatio n	Sep 22	The Philippines	US and the Philippines	The 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, the Philippine First Scout Ranger Regiment and the Special Forces Regiment (Airborne)	Combined airborne training and the simulation of large-scale rapid deployment forces
42	SMEE	Sept 25-27	Vietnam	US, Vietnam	The US Air Force and the Vietnamese Air Force	Professional training for pilots
43	Pacific Griffin 2019 Joint Exercise	Sept 27- Oct 10	Guam	US, Singapore	The littoral combat ship USS Gabrielle Giffords (LCS 10), destroyer USS Momsen (DDG 92), the Los Angeles-class submarine USS Key West (SSN 722), the dry cargo	Anti-surface warfare (ASUW), ASW

					and ammunition ship USNS Amelia Earhart (T- AKE 6), several P-8A Poseidon aircrafts	
44	Tiger Strike 19 joint exercise	Sept 30-Oct 5	Malaysia	US, Malaysia	The USS Boxer (LHD 4) Amphibious Ready Group and the Legend- class cutter USCG Stratton (VMSL 752)	Jungle warfare, CAS
45	Tactical training	Oct 6	South China Sea	US	The aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76), the guided missile cruiser USS Antietam (CG 54), the guided missile cruiser USS Chancellorsville (CG 62), the guided missile destroyer USS Wayne E. Meyer (DDG 108) and the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer (LHD 6)	Formation sailing
46	"Maritim e Warrior Coopera tion 3" joint exercise	Oct 9- 18	Luzon and Palawan in the Philippines	US, the Philippines, Japan	The Amphibious Transport Ship BRP Davao (LD 602), the Whidbey Island-class dock landing ship USS Germantown (LSD 42)	Amphibious warfare, live fire exercise, urban operations, air combat and anti- terrorism action, HADRexercis es
47	SMEE	Oct 11	The 7th Fleet flagship USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19)	US and Indonesia	The staff from the US Navy and the Indonesian Navy	Staff talks
48	Maritime Training Activity	Oct 14-21	Puerto Princesa, Philippines	US, Japan and the Philippines	The littoral combat ship USS Montgomery (LCS 8), the Whidbey Island-	The exercise consisted of both shore-

(MTA) class dock landing ship based and Sama USS Germantown (LSD at-sea Sama 42), the Spearhead-class activities. Shore-based expeditionary fast transport USNS events Millinocket (T-EPF 3), the included a Safeguard-class salvage series of ship USNS Salvor (ARS SMEEs on a 52), the Legend-class range of cutter USCG Stratton naval (VMSL 752) and a P-8A capabilities, Poseidon aircraft including MDA, force protection, medical care, HADR, explosive ordnance disposal, dive and salvage operations, engineering, aviation, and VBSS operations. The at-sea phase included VBSS drills, division tactics, a search and rescue exercise, helicopter deck landing qualifications, anti-air and surface warfare tracking, and vessel of interest tracking.

						The exercises
49	US- Brunei CARAT Exercise	Oct 22	Brunei	US, Brunei	USS Harper's Ferry(LSD- 49),one P-8A Poseidon aircraft	consisted of amphibious assault, jungle warfare and combat medical training.
50	Joint medical outreach project	Oct 23	The Philippines	US and the Philippines	The US Special Operations Command Pacific soldiers and soldiers from the Philippine National Police Special Action Forces 51st Special Action Company	Battlefield first-aid services
51	Replenis hment- at-sea training	Nov 1	South China Sea	US, India	The dry cargo/ammunition ship USNS Richard E. Byrd (T- AKE 4), the anti- submarine warfare corvette INS Kiltan (P 30)	Replenishme nt-at-sea training
52	Tactical training	Nov 6- 12	South China Sea	US, Australia	The littoral combat ship USS Montgomery (LCS 8) and the frigate HMAS Stuart (FFH 153), and the fleet replenishment vessel HMAS Sirius (O 266)	Formation sailing and replenishmen t-at-sea training
53	Ordnanc e handling training	Nov 11	The Philippines	US	The submarine tender USS Emory S. Land (AS 39) and the Los Angeles- class attack submarine USS Asheville (SSN 758)	Ordnance handling training

### V. The US Coast Guard became an emerging force<sup>10</sup>

In 2019, the USCG deployed two Coast Guard ships to the South China Sea, namely USCG Bertholf (WMSL-750) and USCG Stratton (WMSL- 752). The former left its homeport in Alameda, California on January 20 for the Western Pacific region and entered the South China Sea in early April, while the latter left Alameda for the Western Pacific region on June 12 and arrived in Indonesia on July 31. During their deployments to the South China Sea, the USCG ships carried out various exchanges and joint activities with countries in the region, and even participated in many exercises organized by the US military. Generally speaking, the USCG ships were playing a role in the country's operations in the South China Sea in the following two aspects.

Firstly, the USCG proactively participated in civilian activities including maritime law enforcement and search-and-rescue exercise. As a law enforcement unit, it is within the USCG's duty to participate in maritime law enforcement or search-and-rescue operations. On May 14, the USCG Bertholf (WMSL-750) was joined by the BRP Batangas (SARV-004) and the BRP Kalanggaman (FPB-2404), its Philippines counterparts, near the Scarborough Shoal for a joint search-and-rescue exercise. On August 23, the USCG Stratton (WMSL-752) completed joint law enforcement drills with the Indian Coast Guard, and similar drills with the Malaysia Coast Guard vessels during the Maritime Training Activity Malaysia 2019 as well as with the Indonesian Coast Guard during CARAT.

Secondly, the USCG is actively involved in the US military's operations and deeply integrated into the US combat system. During its deployment to the Western Pacific region, the USCG Stratton (WMSL-752) visited Australia as its first stop, where it participated in the US-Japan-Australia Exercise Talisman Sabre 2019 and joined the Wasp Amphibious Ready Group for surface warfare exercise. In the US-Malaysia Exercise Tiger Strike 2019 and the US-Philippine MTA Sama Sama in the South China Sea, the USCG Stratton (WMSL-752) joined the US Navy vessels in visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) drills, division tactics, search-and-rescue exercise, helicopter deck landing qualifications, anti-air and surface warfare tracking. All these suggest that the USCG has become an important member in the US military's combat system in the Asia Pacific region.

In 2019, the US military actively engaged in military diplomacy in the South China Sea, continuously strengthened military cooperation with countries in the region, and made them more dependent on the US by selling arms and presenting weapons as gifts. Following the long-standing philosophy in military diplomacy, the US military continued pushing for military exchanges at all levels with countries in the South China Sea by means of military leaders' visits and port calls, thus enhancing mutual trust. The US military's visits in 2019 showed that Vietnam has become a target

for the US military leadership to pull on their side. In terms of arms sales, the US proactively sold advanced weapons to several countries in the region to deepen their military dependence on Washington.

8	US military visits in the South China Sea in 2	2019
Date	Ship/Official	Destination
Jan 17	USS McCampbell	Port of Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia
Jan 24	USS Essex	Phuket, Thailand
Feb 10	USS John C. Stennis	Port of Laem Chabang, Thailand
Feb 22	USS Decatur	Phuket, Thailand
Mar 18	USS Preble	Phuket, Thailand
Mar 30	USS Wasp	US Naval Base Subic Bay
Apr 11	USS Blue Ridge	Port of Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia
Apr 16	Admiral Philip Davidson, Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command	Hanoi, Vietnam
Apr 26	USCGC Bertholf	Singapore
May 6	USS Blue Ridge	Singapore
Jun 8	USS Boxer	Phuket, Thailand
Jul 31	USCGC Stratton	Port Of Surabaya, Indonesia
Aug 7	USS Ronald Reagan, USS Antietam	Port of Manila, Philippines
Aug 7	USS McCampbell	US Naval Base Subic Bay
Aug 14	USCGC Stratton	Lumut Naval Base, Malaysia
Aug 20	General David L. Goldfein, Chief of Staff of the US Air Force & General Charles Q. Brown Jr., Commander of US Pacific Air Forces	Hanoi, Vietnam
Sep 4	USS Lake Erie	Port of Manila, Philippines
Oct 6	USS John P. Murtha	US Naval Base Subic Bay
Oct 17	USS Ronald Reagan, USS McCampbell	Singapore
Oct 21	Admiral Karl Leo, Commandant of the US Coast Guard	Port of Puerto Princesa, Philippines
Nov 19	Mark T. Esper, US Secretary of Defense	Hanoi, Vietnam
Dec 19	USS Gabrielle Giffords	Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam

#### VI. Conclusion and Prospect

In 2019, the US military continued improving its presence and operation intensity in the South China Sea, with its moves more targeted towards China. To implement its Indo-Pacific Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy, the US will continue to increase its presence and conduct more military operations against China, which may be reflected in the following aspects.

#### 1. The forces deployed to the region will be more diversified.

Operations in the South China Sea will be still dominated by the Navy and Air Force, but the roles of the Marine Corps, Army, Coast Guard and other armed forces will become more prominent. After the deployment of two USCG ships to the South China Sea in 2019, in particular, the USCG's presence in this region will be further enhanced. By 2021, three USCG ships will be deployed to Guam, making the South China Sea a major area for activities of USCG ships. Meanwhile, the deployment of army forces will be further strengthened. In December of 2019, the amphibious assault ship USS Wasp's replacement by the USS America and the amphibious transport dock USS New Orleans (LPD-18)'s deployment to Commander Fleet Activities Sasebo has boosted amphibious attack ability of the 7th Fleet. As the US Army Pacific said in 2019 that it would strengthen the army forces in the Southeast Asia and demand division-level forces be

deployed to the South China Sea and its neighboring areas. <sup>14</sup> The large-scale deployment of US Army forces in the South China Sea is bound to come. Though it remains unrealistic for a large scale of the US Army to deploy in the South China Sea, intensifying deployment, whether in the name of military visits or exercises, is inevitable. Having targeted China as the largest strategic maritime rival, different branches of the US military will undoubtedly conduct more active operations and innovate their moves in the South China Sea.

2. The military confrontation between China and the US in the South China Sea will become increasingly evident and fierce. The US military will continue to contend with China in the South China Sea with both overt and covert means. On the surface, the US military will still make provocations and exert pressures by moves such as FONOPs near Paracel Islands, Scarborough Shoal and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, vessels' and aircrafts' navigation and patrol missions in the South China Sea and transits in the Taiwan Strait. At the same time, the US military will secretly advance its deployment of reconnaissance forces and battlefield construction. With China's continuous military modernization and Navy and Air Forces' reinforcement, the US is bound to be more anxious and thus all-round reconnaissance operations against China will be strengthened correspondingly. Consequently, the chances of close

confrontation between the two countries' maritime and air forces will be wider. In line with the so-called "total competition" <sup>15</sup> concept, the US military will also leverage its publicity capacity to play up China's deployment of weapons, construction projects on islands and reefs and rights protection actions in the South China Sea, exaggerate China's militarization in the South China Sea, intimidate China's neighbors or undermine the rules-based international order.

3. Military cooperation between the US and several countries in the region will be further deepened. Given the perceptibly fiercer contradictions between Beijing and Washington in the South China Sea, the US will enhance military exchanges, expand the scale of military exercises, improve the quantity and quality of weapons to be sold, and present outmoded weapons as gifts to countries in the region, in a bid to induce them to take their sides between the US and China. At present, except the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, most ASEAN countries have not had in-depth military cooperation with the US. The increasingly warmer US-Vietnam military relations will probably usher in further military cooperation between the two sides. When partnering with Southeast Asian countries, most of which have limited defense budgets, the US will still give priority to MDA, intelligence sharing and so on within the framework of the *Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative*.

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