



**SOUTH CHINA SEA STRATEGIC SITUATION
PROBING INITIATIVE**

**An Incomplete Report on US Military Activities
in the South China Sea in 2020**

SCSPI

March 12, 2021

About SCSPi

With a view to maintaining and promoting the peace, stability and prosperity of the South China Sea, we launched the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPi). The Initiative aims to integrate intellectual resources and open source information worldwide and keep track of important actions and major policy changes of key stakeholders and other parties involved. It provides professional data services and analysis reports to parties concerned, helping them keep competition under control, and with a view to seek partnerships.

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Content

About SCSPI.....	i
I. Strategic platforms frequently operated with a conspicuous intent of deterring China.....	1
II. Air reconnaissance forces intensified with and new features	12
III. Warships intensively operated near China’s stationed islands and reefs and the Taiwan Strait.....	21
IV. The scale and frequency of US military exercises decreased greatly ...	26
V . Conclusion and Prospect	29
Reference	34

An Incomplete Report on US Military Operations in the South China Sea in 2020

SCSPI

Even though COVID-19 wreaked havoc worldwide in 2020, the US military continued to carry out intensive military activities in the South China Sea, with their strategic weapon platforms, typically carrier strike groups, strategic bombers and nuclear attack submarines, operating in the region frequently, posing unprecedented deterrence against China. In the meantime, the US Navy and Air Force continued to conduct frequent reconnaissance operations in the region, deploying a mix of reconnaissance aircraft, including those of civilian contractors, to the South China Sea, all of which built up strong momentum for battlefield construction and warfighting readiness across the US military.

I. Strategic platforms frequently operated with a conspicuous intent of deterring China

Through 2020, the US military successively deployed three carrier strike groups, two amphibious ready groups, several nuclear attack

submarines and 17 batches of B-52H Stratofortress and B-1B Lancer bombers to the South China Sea for “Dynamic Force Employment”. The intensity, in terms of the scale, number and duration, of the US military activities in the region in 2020 was rarely seen in recent years.

1. Operations of large formations intensified and live combat drills became more targeted

To begin with, military forces deployed to the South China Sea were of large scale and long duration. The US Navy successively sent the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN-71) Carrier Strike Group (CSG), the USS *Nimitz* (CVN-68) CSG, the USS *Ronald Reagan* (CVN-76) CSG, the USS *America* (LHA-6) Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) and the USS *Makin Island* (LHD-8) ARG to the South China Sea throughout 2020. Specifically, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* CSG sailed through the South China Sea on the way to paying a port visit to Da Nang, Vietnam.¹ The USS *Nimitz* CSG and the USS *Makin Island* ARG transited the South China Sea en route to a deployment to the Middle East. The USS *Ronald Reagan* CSG and the USS *America* ARG from the 7th Fleet were deployed to the South China Sea to conduct deterrence patrols.

In view of the time of the operations, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*

CSG entered the South China Sea via the Bashi Channel on March 1 and departed around March 17. The *USS Nimitz* CSG entered the South China Sea via the Bashi Channel on July 3 and then left via the Strait of Malacca on July 18 for the deployment to the Middle East. The *USS Ronald Reagan* CSG entered the South China Sea four times throughout the year. It first entered the South China Sea on around July 3 via the San Bernardino Strait in the central Philippines and left around July 7; it returned to the waters in mid-July from the Java Sea and left on July 20; it reentered for the third time on August 14 via the Bashi Channel; it then went back to on October 12 via the Strait of Malacca for the last time of 2020. Overall, it maintained a presence in the South China Sea much longer than before. It is worth noting that, unlike routine patrols in previous years, the deployments of US carrier strike groups to the South China Sea and its neighboring areas in 2020 highly resembled live combat. For instance, the *USS Ronald Reagan* CSG was deployed to the neighboring areas of the South China Sea for more than four months, during which it swiftly entered and departed the waters several times and collaborated with other carrier strike groups, in the hope of maintaining necessary deterrence and keeping distance with the Area Denial forces of China.

Secondly, the operations covered highly sensitive areas with a great variety of exercise subjects. While underway in the South China Sea, the

US Navy's carrier strike groups and amphibious ready groups usually operated to the southwest of Taiwan, or near the Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands. The exercise subjects covered strategic combat exercises, including dual-carrier combat drills, the concept of operations (CONOPS) of light aircraft carriers and joint naval and air operations, as well as tactical drills like seaborne supply and carrier-based aerial refueling. On March 15, USS *Theodore Roosevelt* CSG and USS *America* ARG conducted Expeditionary Strike Force (ESF) operations near the Macclesfield Bank in the South China Sea,² marking the first such exercise undertaken by the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* CSG in the region.



Theodore Roosevelt, America strike groups conducted ESF training, March 15. Photo: US Navy

On April 20, the USS *America* ARG met up with the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) guided-missile frigate HMAS *Parramatta* (FFH 154) to flex

muscle in sensitive waters near China’s survey ship *Haiyang Dizhi 8* and Malaysian drillship *West Capella* in the South China Sea, as a move to show that they had Malaysia’s back and provoke China-Malaysia “standoff.” On July 3, the USS *Nimitz* CSG from the 3rd Fleet and the USS *Ronald Reagan* CSG from the 7th Fleet assembled in the South China Sea, respectively via the Bashi Channel and the San Bernardino Strait, the Philippines, for the first dual-carrier exercise in 2020 near the Scarborough Shoal,³ which was followed by a second dual-carrier exercise near the James Shoal on July 17, with the same two carrier strike groups.



The Nimitz and Ronald Reagan CSGs conducted dual-carrier operations, July 6. Photo: US Navy

The US military launched two consecutive dual-carrier formation exercises in sensitive waters of the South China Sea in a short span of half a month, whose timing coincided with the drills held by the PLA in the

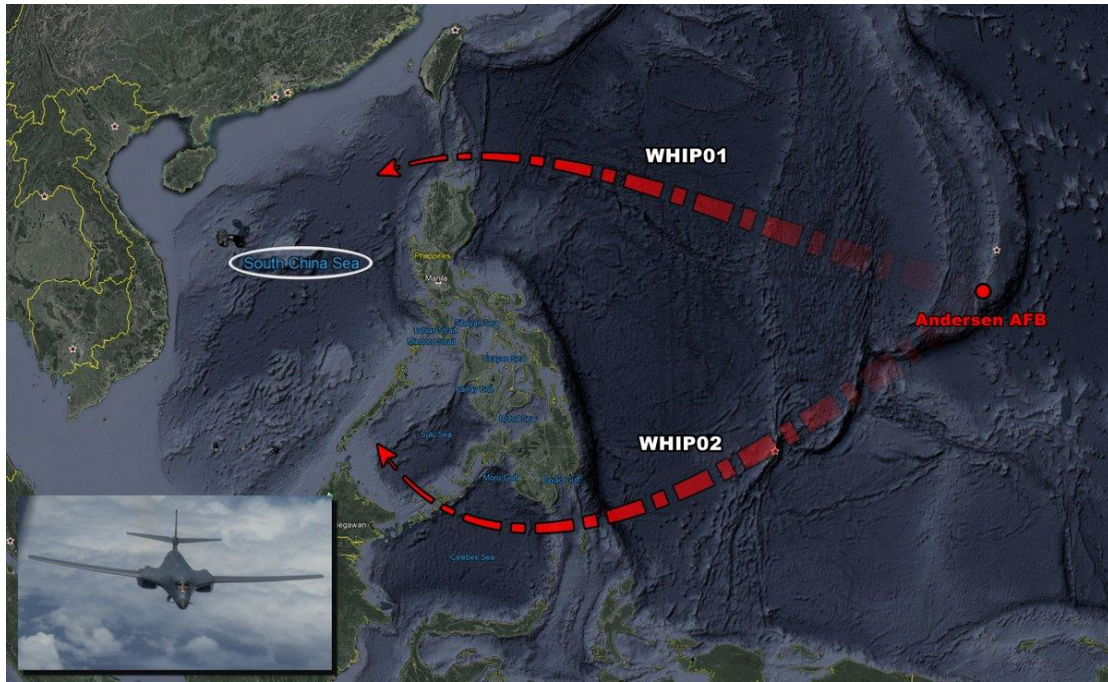
Paracel Islands and the annual Han Kuang Exercise in Taiwan. Taking the first dual carrier operation for example, on July 3 and 4, a US Air Force (USAF) B-52H Stratofortress bomber from the 96th Bomb Squadron departed Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana for the South China Sea for a joint exercise with USS *Ronald Reagan* and USS *Nimitz* Carrier Strike Groups. Joint strike against ground and seaborne targets between carrier strike groups and bombers has emerged as an important exercise activity performed by the US military in the Western Pacific. When these two carrier strike groups were underway in the South China Sea, several US Navy P-8As from Kadena AFB in Okinawa headed for the South China Sea. The P-8A could extend real-time intelligence support to aircraft carrier formations, and when armed with AGM-84 Harpoon anti-ship missiles, could conduct joint naval and air strike training with carrier strike groups. Apart from the P-8A, the USAF sent KC-135R aerial refueling aircraft from Kadena AFB near the Scarborough Shoal to carry out aerial refueling exercises with the embarked carrier air wing to boost fighters' capability for long-range operations in the South China Sea.

2. Bombers operated frequently with a focus on the CONOPS of “Dynamic Force Employment”

Throughout the year, the USAF sent B-52H and B-1B strategic

bombers to the South China Sea for highly intensive military operations, focusing on exercising the CONOPS of “Dynamic Force Employment”, a term coined by former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis,⁴ to make the tactical operations of US military’s bombers “unpredictable”. Statistics shows that USAF bombers operated over the South China Sea for 17 times in 2020, four of which took off directly from the mainland US, whereas the rest were from Andersen Air Force Base in Guam. Most of which were in dual-bomber formations when operating in the region, with a total of 11 B-52H and 21 B-1B sorties. Overall, the bomber operations took on the following characteristics:

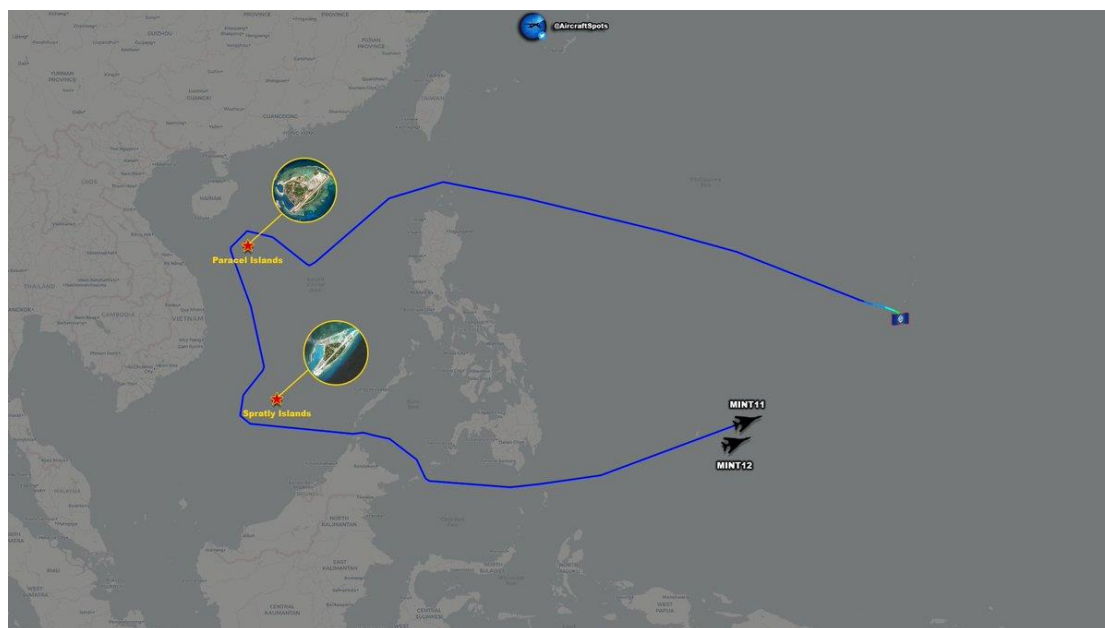
First of all, the routes were discreetly selected with a focus on south-north collaboration. The USAF bombers would normally enter the South China Sea via the Bashi Channel, to the north of the Philippines. However, apart from this route, the US military also charted out a new route via the airspace above the Sulu Sea off the southern part of the Philippines in 2020.



Trajectory of Two USAF B-1Bs, May 8. Credit: @AircraftSpots

In this way, the US military could send one bomber from the south and the other from the north respectively. Allowing the US to intervene in the region from two directions simultaneously, this operational model was very likely a diversion strategy. On the surface, it appeared that the US attempted to engage with the firepower of China with the bomber in the north. Yet, the real purpose is actually to simulate bombarding the Spratly Islands in the south. This model indicates that the US military is making continued efforts to rehearse airstrikes against the Spratly Islands, which are relatively poorly defended by the Chinese military. Besides, given the trajectories of B-1Bs on December 23 and 28, 2020 while operating over the South China Sea, the potential targets of US military exercises not only cover the Spratly Islands, but also the Paracel Islands and even some

important military ports and bases on Hainan Island.



Trajectory of Two USAF B-1Bs, December 28. Credit: @AircraftSpots

Second, the US armed forces emphasized the unpredictability of tactical operations. The US military began to apply “Dynamic Force Employment” of bombers to the Western Pacific Region, when five B-52H Stratofortress bombers from the 69th EBS of the USAF finished their six-month rotational deployment to Guam on April 16. The deployments lasted from two to four weeks and seemed to be random and contingent. The first dynamic force employment was made on April 29, when two USAF B-1B Lancers from the 28th Bomb Wing, Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota flew a 32-hour round-trip sortie to conduct military operations over the South China Sea and then flew back to the base.⁵ The US military maintained the model of sending bombers to the Western Pacific Region for patrol from the US mainland and Guam respectively to ensure a

persistent bomber presence in the South China Sea. As to the time of entering the waters, the US military often entered the airspace at night. For instance, from the night of May 18 to the early morning of May 19, two USAF B-1B Lancers covertly flew to the South China Sea from Andersen Air Force Base in Guam, exploiting the cover of darkness. The US military traditionally fires the first shot at night, in an attempt to launch a surprise attack against its adversary in order to rapidly seize command of the air and the sea.

Third, the US military laid great emphasis on systematic joint operations. The history of the US military's repeated attempts to send and withdraw bombers to and from the South China Sea reveals that these operations are invariably reinforced by intelligence support provided by reconnaissance aircraft and aerial refueling. For example, when two USAF B-1B Lancers took off from Andersen Air Force Base in Guam for military operations over the South China Sea on May 26, the US also deployed an RC-135W Rivet Joint reconnaissance aircraft (numbered 62-4139), a P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircraft (HEX: AE6854), an EP-3E Aries II reconnaissance aircraft (numbered 159893) and a P-3C anti-submarine patrol aircraft (numbered 161586) from Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa. On December 28, two USAF B-1B Lancers departed Andersen Air Force Base in Guam to conduct military operations over the South China Sea, during which three USAF KC-135R Stratotanker aerial refueling aircraft

(call sign: PEARL24, 25 and 26; tail number: 59-1459, 63-8022 and 60-0328 respectively) flew from Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa to the airspace above the northwestern part of Luzon Island, the Philippines, to provide aerial refueling for these bombers.

3. Nuclear attack submarines were fairly active in the waters, as a way to supplement the void during the COVID-19 outbreak.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic severely handicapped US military deployments especially surface forces overseas. For instance, in March, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* pulled into Guam at short notice following a COVID-19 outbreak, leaving the US military with no aircraft carrier to use in the Western Pacific. Correspondingly, nuclear submarines with significant strategic deterrence power strengthened the patrol missions during the outbreak. According to the limited information publicly available, through 2020, the US Navy sent the USS *Chicago* (SSN-721), USS *Cheyenne* (SSN-773), USS *North Carolina* (SSN-777), USS *Asheville* (SSN-758), USS *Key West* (SSN-722), USS *Mississippi* (SSN-782) and the USS *Hampton* (SSN-767), to execute strategic patrol missions in the Western Pacific Region.

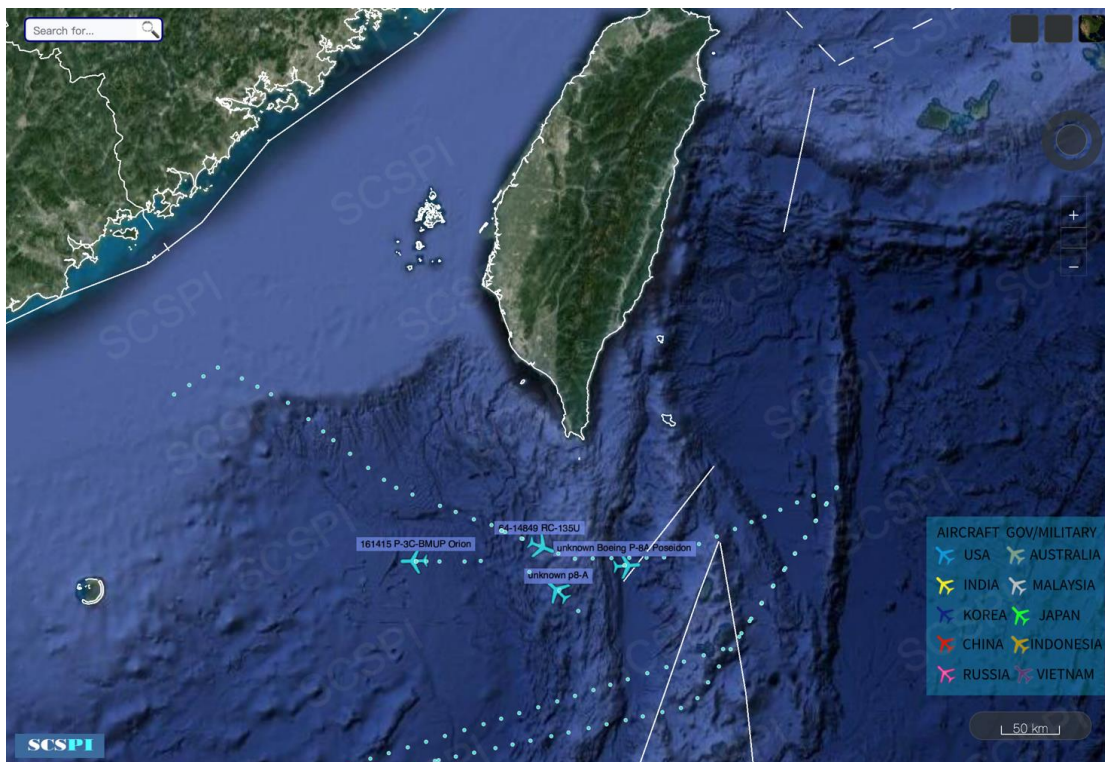
II. Air reconnaissance forces intensified with and new features

According to incomplete statistics, throughout the year, the US military conducted nearly 1,000 reconnaissance sorties from several bases such as Osan Air Base in South Korea, Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa, Andersen Air Force Base in Guam, Clark Air Base in the Philippines, and Brunei. These reconnaissance aircraft covered 13 types, including the U-2S, RC-135, E-3B airborne warning and control system (AWACS), E-8C joint surveillance target attack radar system (JSTARS), P-8A and P-3C anti-submarine aircraft, EP-3E Aries II reconnaissance aircraft, CL-650 reconnaissance aircraft, CL-604 maritime surveillance aircraft, RQ-4B Global Hawk and MQ-4C Triton high-altitude unmanned reconnaissance aircraft.

1. Provided intelligence support for US major military operations.

As the US carried out major military operations, for example, carrier strike groups and bombers operating in the South China Sea, warships transiting the Taiwan Strait or conducting so-called “freedom of navigation operations” (FONOPs) near the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands, the frequency and intensity of reconnaissance operations by various

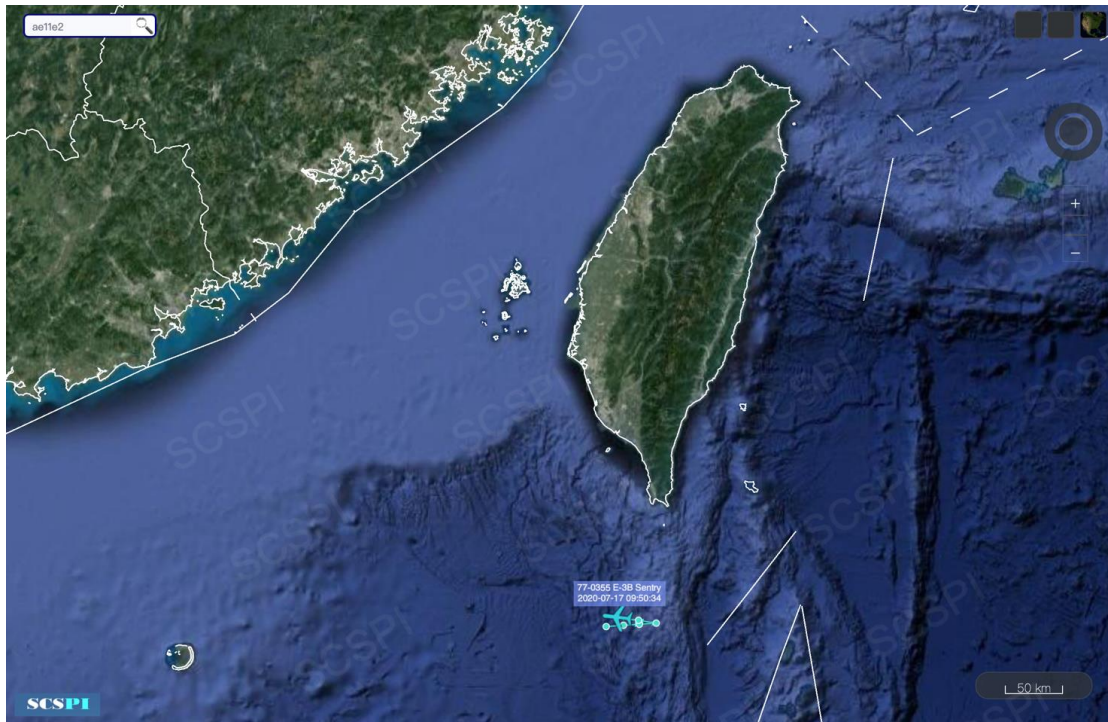
reconnaissance aircraft of the US military would markedly increase. For instance, when the guided-missile destroyer USS *Barry* (DDG-52), operated near China's Paracel Islands to conduct a so-called FONOP on April 28, the US military deployed a P-8A, a P-3C and an EP-3E from Kadena Air Force Base to the northern airspace of the South China Sea to extend intelligence support to the operation. As the ADS-B (Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast) data shows, when the *Nimitz* and *Ronald Reagan* CSGs conducted dual carrier operations in the South China Sea from July 3 to 7, the US military conducted 15 P-8A, three EP-3E, and two RC-135W sorties, plus one RC-135U and a single P-3C sortie, the intensity of which was quite exceptional since the US military deployed P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircraft to the Western Pacific in 2013.



4 US military reconnaissance aircraft operated over the South China Sea, July 6

2. Sharpened response to PLA movements

The US military sought to keep track of China's various military activities in the South China Sea and its neighboring areas through constant routine air reconnaissance against China. Whenever there were PLA military operations in and around the South China Sea, the intensity of the US reconnaissance activities would grow accordingly. For instance, when the PLAN aircraft carrier *Liaoning* conducted training in the South China Sea from April 12 to 22, the US military sent two to three sorties of various reconnaissance aircraft on a daily basis to perform reconnaissance. An E-8C (tail number: 96-0042), which was deployed to Kadena Air Force Base on July 11, conducted intensive reconnaissance operations over those waters. Then on July 17 and 18, the US Air Force made an unusual decision to deploy an E-3B AWACS (numbered 77-0355) and an E-8C JSTARS to the southwestern airspace of Taiwan for early warning and patrol operations targeting Southern China and Southeast Fujian Province. On August 26, a USAF RC-135S Cobra Ball ballistic missile-detection reconnaissance aircraft (tail number: 62-4128) from Kadena Air Force Base operated near the Paracel Islands to reconnoiter China's missile tests.



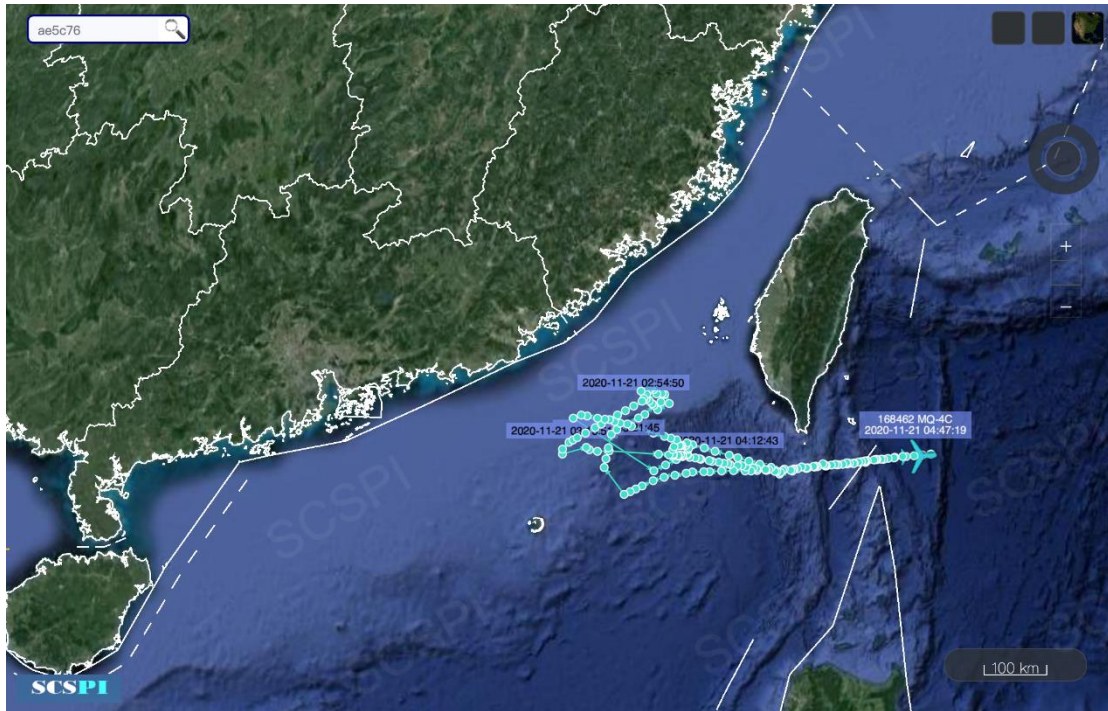
USAF E-3B operated over the South China Sea, July 17

3. Strengthened the deployment or exercise of new-type reconnaissance platforms and equipment

The US Navy deployed two P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircraft equipped with the APS-154 Advanced Airborne Sensors (AAS) to Kadena Air Force Base in the first half of 2020, which were then replaced by two other P-8As carrying the same sensors after July, whose operations mainly covered the sensitive areas in China's littoral areas, such as regions along the coastline of Southern China, Hainan Island, and the Spratly Islands.

On May 15, for instance, a P-8A Poseidon (numbered 169010) reconnoitered along the coastline of Hainan Island, China, in particular the

space off the coast of Sanya. Considering that Sanya Port is an important Chinese submarine base, it is self-evident why the US sent an aircraft fitted with special equipment for reconnaissance operations. In January 2020, the US Navy's Unmanned Patrol Squadron (VUP) 19 sent two MQ-4C Triton high-altitude unmanned reconnaissance aircraft from the US mainland to Andersen Air Force Base, Guam.⁶ Starting from April, the reconnaissance aircraft began conducting operations over the South China Sea. Such operations became increasingly frequent in November, with one deployed to the South China Sea every two to three days. Moreover, a P-8A Poseidon was spotted each time after an MQ-4C Triton high-altitude unmanned reconnaissance aircraft entered the South China Sea. This shows that the US Navy has begun to conduct reconnaissance exercises featuring the coordination of MQ-4C Triton and P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft in the South China Sea.



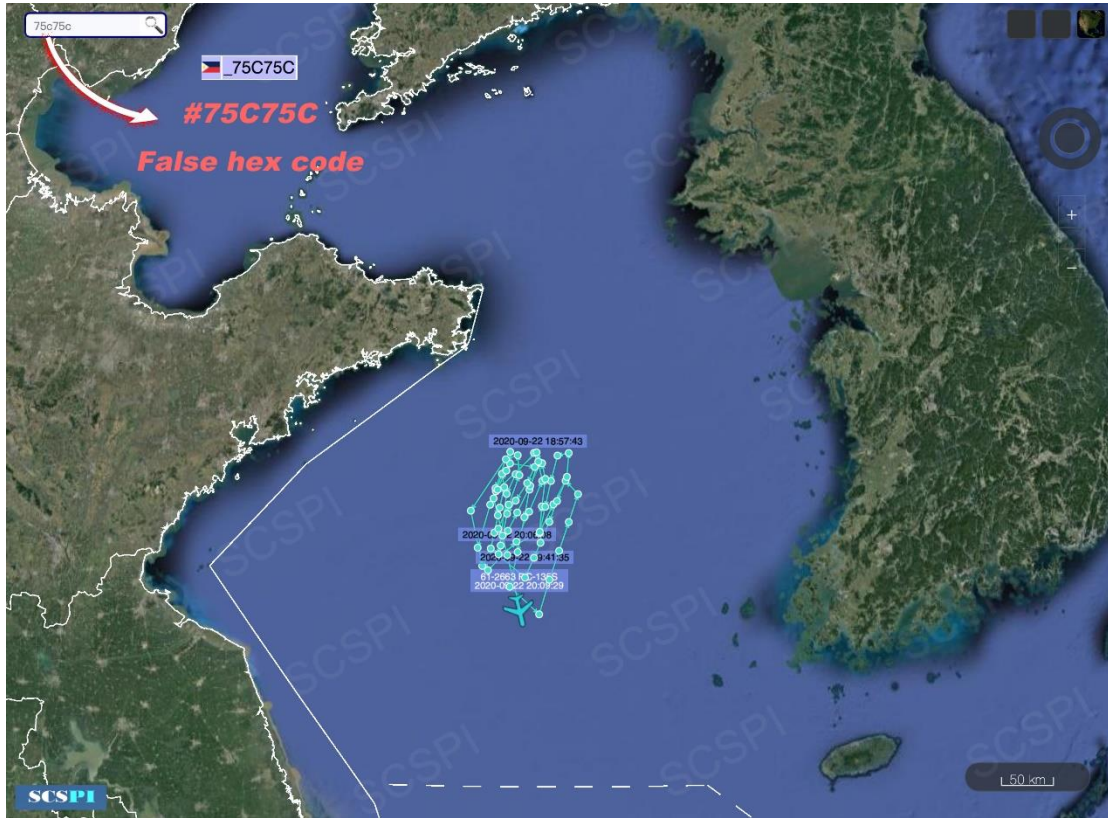
USN MQ-4C operated over the South China Sea, November 21

4. US reconnaissance aircraft unscrupulously posed as airliners by impersonating the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) hex codes of many other countries.

In 2020, SCSPI found through ADS-B signals that on multiple occasions US reconnaissance aircraft impersonated civilian aircraft of countries such as Malaysia and the Philippines to conduct close-in reconnaissance near China’s coast by broadcasting spoofed ICAO hex codes. For example, on the morning of September 8, a USAF RC-135W (tail number: 62-4134, HEX: AE01CE) departed Kadena Air Force Base for a reconnaissance mission over the South China Sea. After entering the

Bashi Channel, the aircraft changed its Mode-S code to 750548 and disguised itself as a Malaysian airliner. On September 22, a USAF RC-135S (HEX: AE01D6) stopped transmitting signals after taking off from Kadena Air Force Base, and impersonated a Philippine airliner (HEX: 75C75C) after it entered the Yellow Sea. The plane operated till around 8:00 p.m. that day to conduct intensive reconnaissance over the Yellow Sea, and then changed its hex code back to the real one after completing the mission, which was presumably sent to monitor the military exercise of the PLA in the Yellow Sea. Similar cases are too numerous to mention.

According to Wang Wenbin, spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as of mid-September in 2020, US reconnaissance aircraft had impersonated civilian aircraft of other countries more than a hundred times off the coast of China, representing a modus operandi of the US armed forces in conducting close-in reconnaissance globally. The US armed forces might believe that such practices are not expressly regulated by international law, but they are undoubtedly unethical. Moreover, these egregious conducts have severely disrupted the aviation order and air safety in relevant airspaces and threatened the security of China and countries in the region, and are likely to bring great danger to real airliners, especially to countries that the US impersonated.

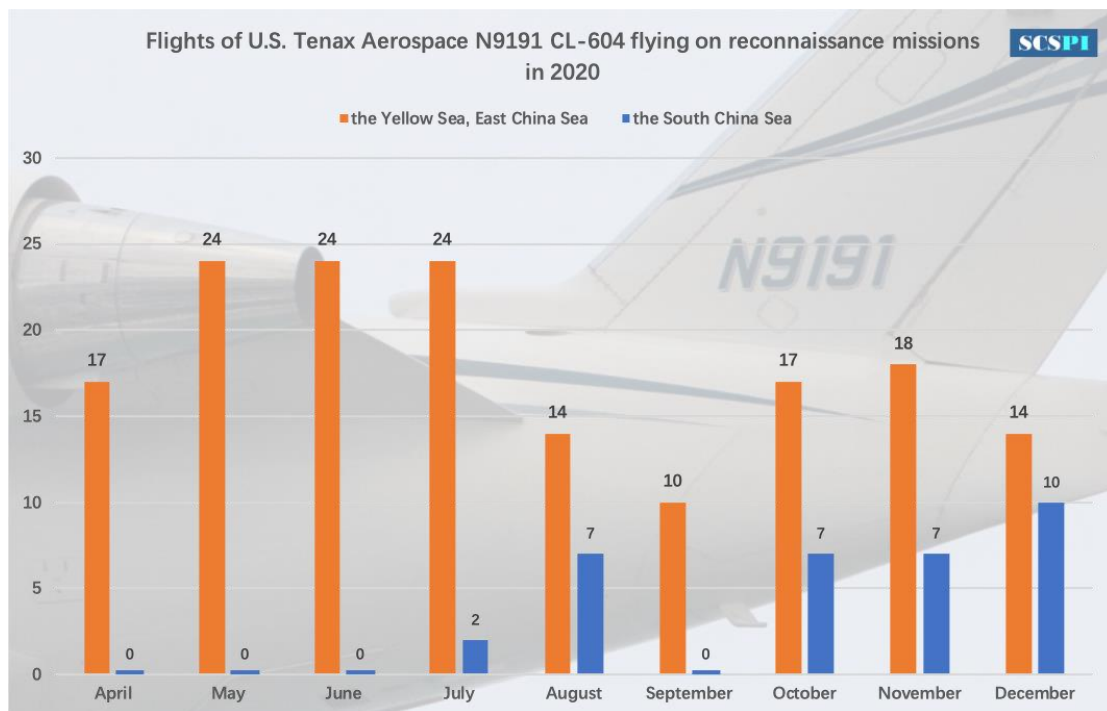


USAF RC-135S(AE01D6) electronically impersonated Philippine planes to conduct close-in reconnaissance over the Yellow Sea, September 22

5. Civilian contractor reconnaissance aircraft becoming a “rising star”.

A Tenax Aerospace Bombardier CL-604 maritime surveillance aircraft (tail number: N9191) arrived at Kadena Air Force Base on March 31, 2020, and was sent on a South China Sea reconnaissance mission for the first time on July 16. As of the end of 2020, the aircraft had made 33 flights to the South China Sea. On July 29, a Lasai Aviation Bombardier CL-650 reconnaissance aircraft (tail number: N488CR) was deployed to Kadena Air Force Base. It was sent to the South China Sea for the first time

on August 20 to conduct reconnaissance operations, and made four flights before transferring to Europe. On August 18, a Meta Special Aerospace “King Air” Beechcraft 350 low-altitude reconnaissance aircraft (tail number: N334CA) arrived at Manila Airport in the Philippines, primarily to facilitate anti-terrorism efforts in the Mindanao region of the Philippines.



Flights of US Tenax Aerospace N9191 CL-604 flying on reconnaissance missions in 2020

US private defense contractors’ reconnaissance aircraft, by joining in reconnoitering in the South China Sea, could complement US military reconnaissance aircraft, so as to boost the military-civilian joint combat capability. Meanwhile, their deployment was also aimed at addressing “gray zone” challenges, a concept stressed by the US recently.⁷ Usually, the Tenax CL-604 would after departing Kadena Air Force Base, make a

stopover at the Clark Air Base in the Philippines for refueling, and then fly to the South China Sea for reconnaissance missions. It mainly reconnoitered regions including the south end of the Taiwan Strait, China's southern coastal areas, Hainan Island and the Paracel Islands. As US civilian contractors' reconnaissance aircraft were on their South China Sea missions, US military reconnaissance aircraft, such as P-8A, P-3C and EP-3E, would also be active in the region. Therefore, there would be possible fusion of information between the civilian and military planes that they could interact and coordinate with each other.

III. Warships intensively operated near China's stationed islands and reefs and the Taiwan Strait

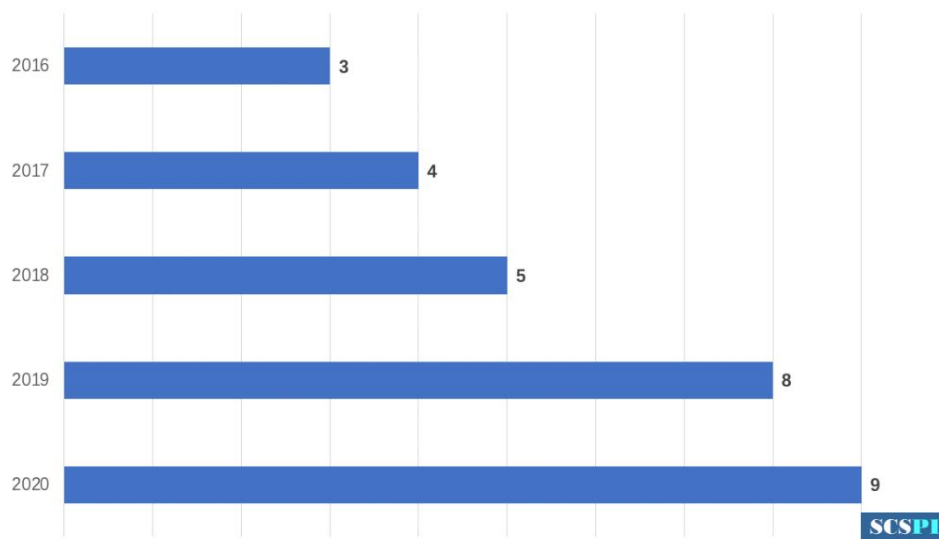
Throughout 2020, the US military continued to operate intensively near China's stationed islands and reefs in the South China Sea, in the name of "freedom of navigation and overflight", and dispatched vessels and aircraft to transit the Taiwan Strait, in the name of "defending Taiwan", whose frequency and intensity were unprecedented in recent years. Specifically, the US military operated near China's stationed islands and reefs in the South China Sea nine times, five near the Paracel Islands and

four near the Spratly Islands. An MC-130J special mission aircraft flew across the Taiwan Strait twice; a C-40A transport aircraft flew over the island of Taiwan once; and surface warfare ships sailed through the Taiwan Strait 13 times.

1. Intrusions into China's stationed islands and reefs became much more intensive and increasingly normalized

According to public records, the US Navy operated near China's stationed islands and reefs in the South China Sea five times in 2018, which increased to eight in 2019 and nine in 2020. The nine operations in 2020 were all in the waters off the Paracel Islands or the Spratly Islands, which were performed mainly by the 7th Fleet and supported by warships temporarily deployed from the 3rd Fleet. Meanwhile, most of them were carried out at month ends and designed to support relevant political moves of the US. On July 14, the US Department of State released a statement on the South China Sea, in which it denied China's major maritime claims in the south-central South China Sea.⁸ On the same day, the US Navy's missile destroyer USS *Ralph Johnson* (DDG-114) intruded into the waters in proximity to the Spratly Islands. Notably, the US showed a growing interest in the Paracel Islands that five out of nine operations were targeted at the Paracel Islands, even outnumbering those near the Spratly Islands.

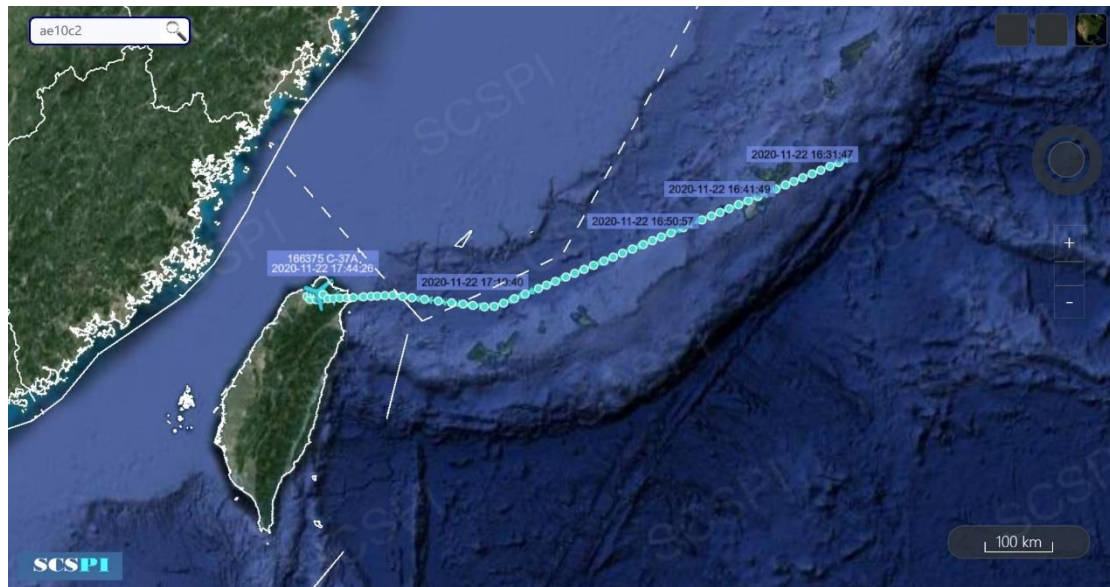
Reported Yearly US Navy Intrusions into South China Sea Islands/Reefs Stationed by China



2. The Taiwan Strait, especially the southwestern airspace of Taiwan, has become a region of primary US focus in China-US military rivalry, with mounting potential military risks.

Throughout 2020, the US military operated abnormally frequently around Taiwan, as evidenced by an unprecedented 13 Taiwan Strait transits by US warships, the first dual-aircraft formation flying over the Strait, and even an exceptional overflight over Taiwan. Not to mention, Director for Intelligence of the US Indo-Pacific Command Michael Studeman’s visit to Taiwan on November 22, a move showing that the US-Taiwan intelligence cooperation has been brought out in the open. By deploying vessels and aircraft to the Taiwan Strait to instigate separatists and providing

intelligence support, the US has been sending quite a dangerous signal to the “Taiwan independence” forces and posing a grave threat to peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait region.

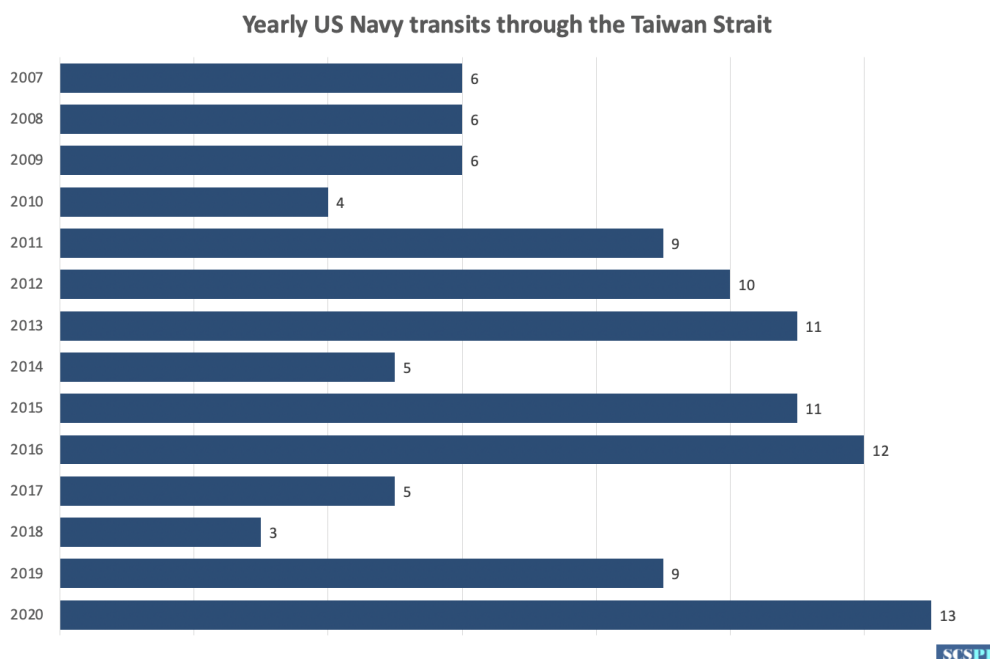


USAF C-37A, boarded by Michael Studeman, Director of Intelligence of INDOPACOM, arrived at Taiwan, November 22

In addition, the southwestern airspace of Taiwan has become a priority for various types of US reconnaissance aircraft to conduct intensive surveillance. Apart from providing intelligence support for vessels and aircraft transiting the Taiwan Strait, their primary object was to monitor the PLA’s latest actions in eastern Guangdong and southern Fujian.

In 2020, E-8C JSTARS made nearly 20 flights to the South China Sea on reconnaissance missions, which mainly operated over the south of Taiwan Strait and the Bashi Channel. As a potent tool for the US military

to advance battlefield construction, the E-8C mainly monitors ground targets. Capable of detecting targets at around 250 kilometers, they can search and track the deep targets of rivals from high altitude. As the capability of the PLA has been constantly upgraded, the US military have grown an increasingly stronger interest in the PLA's deployments and activities in regions like Guangdong Province and Hainan Island.



As the US military aircraft were increasingly active in the southwestern airspace of Taiwan, the China-US military encounters in the area became more and more frequent. Ham radio operators could often hear Chinese military aircraft sternly warning away the US military aircraft over the radio, including “You are approaching Chinese airspace. Change your course immediately or you will be intercepted!”⁹ and “You will be

responsible for all the consequences!” This provides a glimpse into how intensive and oppressive the US military operations are, which will inevitably lead to escalating potential military risks.

IV. The scale and frequency of US military exercises decreased greatly

The US conducted military exercises and drills much less frequently in the South China Sea and on a considerably smaller scale than before. One of the largest annual joint exercise, known as Balikatan, which is held between the US and the Philippines and also involves participation from Australia, was cancelled because of the pandemic. Throughout the year, the largest multilateral exercise of the US armed forces in the South China Sea was Cobra Gold 2020 co-hosted with Thailand,¹⁰ which included traditional subjects like landings operation and jungle warfare, as well as new subjects such as cybersecurity. In addition, eight A-10C attack aircraft from the 25th Fighter Squadron of the US Air Force were transferred from Osan Air Base in South Korea to U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand. The USS *America*'s embarked F-35B fighters also participated in various exercise subjects, which marked the first time that US Marine Corps F-35B fighters took part in a military exercise in Thailand.¹¹



F-35B aircraft embarked on USS America, Exercise Cobra Gold 2020, March 1. Photo: US Navy

During the pandemic, the US military continued to woo their regional allies, such as Japan and Australia, to pursue gunboat diplomacy, by holding a series of bilateral and multilateral exercises, and hyping them up on social media, in order to continuously strengthen their regional presence, boost the military partnerships and stepping up military deterrence against China.



USS America ARG sailed with Royal Australian Navy HMAS Parramatta in the South China Sea near Chinese survey ship and Malaysian drillship, April 18. Photo: US Navy

In addition to large-scale multilateral military exercises, the US military also conducted multiple small-scale tactical exercises in the South China Sea throughout 2020. With a focus on live combat, these exercises were mainly to practice various new CONOPS developed by the US military in recent years. In the first quarter of 2020, for example, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* CSG and USS *America* ESG, while operating in the South China Sea, joined forces twice to conduct Expeditionary Strike Force operations, with the aim of enhancing the cooperative engagement capability (CEC) of carrier and expeditionary strike groups in the region.¹²

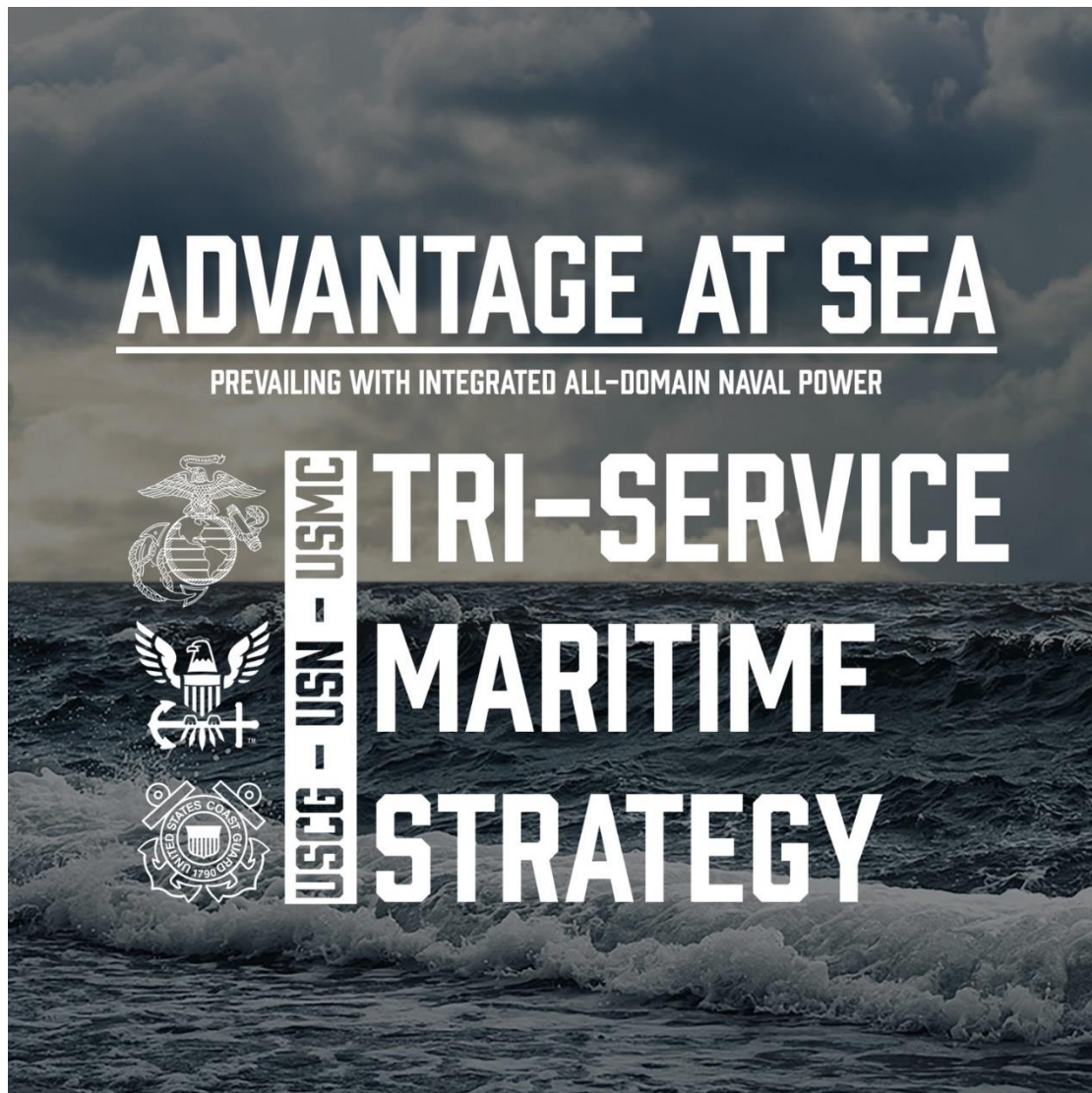
V. Conclusion and Prospect

In 2020, the US military exerted maximum pressure in the South China Sea through a raft of intensive moves, such as deploying various strategic weapons platforms to the region, frequently operating near China's stationed islands and reefs and transiting the Taiwan Strait, in an attempt to display its military power and deter China. However, the US is gradually losing such military dominance in the Western Pacific despite its evident military superiority globally, as China has been delivering much more targeted and effective countermeasures. Overreactions and excessive deterrence of the US military will not contribute to peace or stability of the region.

1. Strategically, the Biden administration will uphold military containment against China as fundamental

At present, the US Democrats and Republicans have basically reached a consensus on the strategic judgment of China, agreeing that "China represents the most pressing strategic threat to the US." In December 2020, the US Congress passed a USD 2.2 billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative, which is modeled after the European Deterrence Initiative¹³ and primarily aiming to advance the overall development of critical infrastructure of the

US military in the Indo-Pacific region, so as to address “the threats and challenges posed by China.” Kenneth Braithwaite, Secretary of the US Navy, has called for the Navy to establish a new numbered fleet¹⁴ dedicated to the South China Sea and the eastern Indian Ocean. Therefore, under the new US administration, neither the course of confronting China, politically or militarily, nor the trend of China-US military confrontation in China’s surrounding areas like the South China Sea, will change. The *Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power*,¹⁵ a pace-setting new strategy jointly released by the US Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, also makes clear that “the Naval Service will develop an integrated all-domain naval force” and “emphasizes expanded cooperation with allies and partners,” so as to cope with the long-term strategic competition.¹⁶



A new tri-Service maritime strategy entitled *Advantage at Sea* released by the US Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard on December 17.

2. Tactically, the intense US military struggle with China will persist in the future

In recent years, the US has continued to expand its military presence in the South China Sea, with scaled up various military drills and activities in the region. In an era of rising Sino-US competition, it could be expected that various types of warships and warplanes of the US military will

continue to frequently perform different kinds of military activities in the region. Considering that allies and partners are the cornerstone of all foreign policies of the new administration, the US will place more reliance on its allies and partners to counterbalance China, especially against the backdrop of a relative decline in its own power. Measures could, for example, include getting regional allies and partners to step up involvement in the South China Sea issues, seeking to expand cooperation in sharing military bases and conducting joint military operations, and interfering in the maritime disputes through various means, including military intervention.

3. Guided by the principle of controllable competition, the US military operations in the South China Sea may tend to a relative low profile

Owing to the growing development of open source data and mass media, and US military's actively disclosing relevant information, US military operations in the South China Sea were excessively politicized and popularized during the Trump presidency. In an effort to emphasize competition with China, the US flaunted military power on their official websites and social media and even publicly intimidated China, which significantly aggravated tensions in the South China Sea region. The Biden administration is well aware that the Sino-US competition is a long-term

process, and that “maximum pressure” will not crush China but may instead result in an uncontrollable situation. Military competition is only normal, but it must be kept under control. With this principle in mind, the US military may shift from “doing much and talking much” to “doing much but talking little”, and lower the posture and intensity of publicity. For instance, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* CSG was given less media coverage while operating in the South China Sea in late January 2021. Of course, it remains to be seen whether this trend can be sustained. In any case, it would be positive for the two militaries and two countries if the competition could be kept as limited as possible to the professionals.

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