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South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

Weekly Briefing:
March 7th

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Intelligence Briefings

Current Events Simplified



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At The Open Source Briefing, we remain committed to providing the public with ongoing developments around the globe.

United States

Author: Kevin O'Connell



Courtesy of USNI News

This week saw two bilateral naval exercises between the United States Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF). The first of these exercises involved took place on March 3rd and involved the USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71), USS Bunker Hill (CG-52), JS Yugiri (DD-153), JS Hatakaze (TV-3520) and JS Setoyuki (TV-3518) and involved maneuvering drills and a photo exercise. This exercise marked the second time that the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group (CSG) conducted bilateral exercises with the JMSDF during its current deployment.[1]

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Courtesy of Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet

The second bilateral exercise between the U.S. Navy and the JMSDF was the Bilateral Advanced Warfighting Training (BAWT). This exercise took place on February 28th and included the USS John S. McCain (DDG-56), USS Benfold (DDG-65), JS Ise (DDH-182), JS Shiranui (DDG-120) and the JS Harusame (DD-102).[2] BAWT is an annual bilateral training exercise with a “special focus on coordinating strategies and tactics in an all-domain environment.”[3]

In addition to the U.S.-Japan bilateral training exercises, this week also saw bilateral operations between the U.S. Navy and the Palau Bureau of Maritime Security. On March 2nd, reports indicated that the USS New Orleans (LPD-18) and USS Ashland (LSD-48) conducted maritime patrol operations in the Philippine Sea with Palau Bureau of Maritime Security patrol boat PPSS President H.I. Remeliik II.[4] While Palau lies outside of the South China Sea, its strategic position in the Philippine Sea makes the prospect of further U.S.-Palau military cooperation important to U.S. force posture in the Indo-Pacific. Further, this bilateral patrol operation follows a recent offer by Palau to host U.S. military bases in the future.[5]

China and Taiwan

Author: *Tad Unruh*

The Chinese and US militaries have continued their gray-zone warfare to protect their interests in the South China Sea(SCS) from February into March. On Friday, February 26, an announcement set the Cross-Strait and SCS conflict tone for the month to come. That day, the Chinese Ministry and National Defense announced it would hold military exercises from March 1-31, in an area of roughly 80 square kilometers in Chinese waters to the west of Guangzhou’s Leizhou Peninsula and north of Hainan Island.[1] Further in the article will go into specifics about these drills. Experts posit that these drills are to establish a consistent presence in the SCS over the month, deterring the US from conducting more freedom of navigation operations, continuing to modernize its navy and maintain its claims in the SCS.[2]

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South China Sea Intelligence Briefings



(Global Times)

China indeed began its exercises on March 1st. A CCTV report showed undated footage of joint landing drills, including the PLA Navy, Army, Marine, and Air Force troops as they conducted war games in the Paracel Islands. The footage included several “Type 726 “Wild Horse” air-cushioned landing craft sailing off a Type 071 amphibious transport dock and rushing onto a beach, each with a Type 96A main battle tank and fully armed marine corps soldiers on board,” as well as “A-Type 052D guided-missile destroyer, a Type 054A guided-missile frigate and a support ship kept guard off the coast, while a Su-30MKK fighter and an H-6K bomber provided air cover.”[3]

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SCMP

On the first, Taiwan, in response to China's activities, began drills of its own. The Taiwanese coast guard conducted a live-fire drill at the Pratas Islands on Monday, March 1st.[4] On Wednesday, March 3rd, the government-funded National Chung-Shan Institute of Science and Technology staged the first of 6 rounds of missile tests this month from the Jiupeng Military base in Taiwan's southernmost county of Pingtung.[5] The missiles to be tested are suspected to be Hsiung Feng-2E (Brave Wind-2E) cruise missiles and the extended-range version of the Thunderbolt-2000 tactical missiles and will be fired off the eastern and southern coasts.[6] In conjunction with the tests mentioned above, the Taiwanese Air Force will conduct at least 5 rounds of fire drills from the 3rd-25th of this month.[7] What those will entail has yet to be announced, but the location is along the southwestern coast, where much of the Chinese ADIZ intrusions have taken place in the last few months.

March 4

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South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

- In a national security document released by the White House, President Biden outlined Taiwan as a critical economic and security partner worthy of long-term commitment to the country.[8]
- OSINT researcher HI Sutton posted a piece noting pictures of 7 individual submarines in pens at the base in Yulin.[9]

March 5th

- Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said that China remains committed “to promoting the peaceful growth of relations across the Taiwan Strait and China’s reunification” and won’t tolerate independence or “separatist activity.”[10]
- The Chinese military announced a 6.8 percent rise in defense spending, reaching reach 1.355 trillion yuan (US\$209 billion) in 2021, keeping it second behind the US and doubling Vietnam’s budget, which is next closest on the list.[11]

Philippines

Author: Bang Tongco

During the week, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) revealed that the COVID-19 adversely affected its patrols to the Manila-claimed West Philippine Sea (WPS). In military developments, India and Hong Kong-based news outlets reported that the Philippines will continue to purchase the Russo-Indian BrahMos supersonic anti-ship missiles.

PCG Commandant Adm. George Ursabia on 3 March disclosed that the Service’s activities in the WPS were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, adding that only one vessel was deployed to the island of Palawan for patrols ^[1]. Ursabia revealed that the PCG was patrolling the WPS using its Japan-built 44-meter Parola-class Multi-Role Response Vessels (MRRVs) and Islander patrol planes. However, Ursabia stated that the PCG had to withdraw an MRRV from Palawan to assist in COVID-19 operations, leaving only one such patrol ship for the WPS. Ursabia added that PCG patrols to the WPS were also disrupted by inclement weather as well as other tasking relative to pandemic and disaster response ^[1]. To recall, the PCG undertook at least two

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search and rescue (SAR) missions to look for missing fishermen in the WPS, with one such operation over the Chinese-occupied Scarborough Shoal in August 2020 ^{[2][3]}.



One of 10 Japan-built MRRVs, the BRP Malabrigo in South Harbor, Manila. The Malabrigo took part in SAR efforts to find a missing fisherman in Scarborough Shoal in 2020 and is similar to the sole MRRV deployed in Palawan for WPS patrols. Image courtesy of Wikipedia.

The Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post on 2 March reported that Philippine Defense Undersecretary Raymund Elefante signed an agreement with Indian Ambassador to the Philippines Shambu Kumaran for Manila's possible purchase of the BrahMos anti-ship missiles ^[4]. The report said that the Department of National Defense gave no indication on Manila's payment schedule. The report cited Stratbase ADR Institute defense analyst Jose Antonio Custodio assessed that Manila's purchase of the BrahMos will be aimed at deterring Chinese aggression in the WPS. Custodio said that the BrahMos will be mounted on land-based platforms and possibly on the two South Korean-built Jose Rizal-class guided-missile frigates. Custodio warned that the agreement between Elefante and Kumaran does not mean that funding is already available. India's WION News on 5 March said that New Delhi offered Manila US\$100M in loans to purchase an unknown number of BrahMos missiles ^[5]. WION said that the deal will help India promote itself as a credible arms exporter and could help pave the way for other BrahMos deals with South American states, Indonesia, and South Africa.

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South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

The WION report also forecast that Manila will use the BrahMos missile to counter China's increasing assertiveness in the SCS ^[5].

Contributor's Analysis

The PCG's lower number of patrols in the WPS affects Manila's ability to counter China's increasing use of "gray zone" warfare to advance its maritime claims in the SCS ^[6]. In the past, Manila's use of Philippine Navy (PN) vessels to confront China Coast Guard (CCG) ships in the WPS has largely ended in Beijing's favor as seen in the 2012 Scarborough Standoff ^[6]. Chinese state media excoriated Manila's use of PN ships to confront CCG vessels, forcing the Philippines to withdraw its ships and replace them with PCG cutters in an attempt to avoid prevent China from claiming that its law enforcement "white hulls" were being targeted by the PN's "gray hulls". The Philippine government would do well to increase the funding, capability, and vessel availability of the PCG to address China's "gray zone" activities in the WPS. Despite the PN's greater military capabilities and ship readiness, it is ill-equipped to combat China's use of CCG and suspected maritime militia ships in the WPS and may even cause military escalation during incidents. Relatedly, Adm. Ursabia's statement that only one MRRV was available for the WPS patrols indicates that the other nine are either on maintenance or deployed on other missions. Regardless, Manila would need to also look toward deploying the PCG's other ocean-going assets such as its four Australian-built 56-meter San Juan-class and French-made 84-meter Gabriela Silang-class patrol vessels ^[7]. Furthermore, Manila may have to fast track the PCG's acquisition of two Japan-built 94-meter MRRVs to ensure that the Service has enough ships for SAR, maritime law enforcement, and sovereignty patrol missions in the WPS ^[8].

On the Philippines' possible purchase of BrahMos missiles, it is not yet known if the system will be deployed under the Army's 1st Land-Based Missile System Battery or the Philippine Marine Corps' Coastal Defense Regiment ^{[9][10]}. In this manner, the CDR might be the better choice, given the PN's acquisition of Boeing ScanEagle drones as well as its anti-ship missile-armed Jose Rizal-class frigates ^[11]. Relatedly, the glacial pace of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' modernization programs could indicate that the BrahMos purchase will be delayed and the development of associated "kill-chain" capabilities also deferred until the next administration in 2022.

The Open Source Briefing

South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

Vietnam

Author: Giulia Croce Butler

While the Biden administration has yet to release its National Security Strategy to Congress, it seems that the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy could be carried on from the previous administration.^[1] This would give Vietnam the opportunity to improve its position by engaging with Washington in a full strategic partnership while at the same time maintaining a stable relation with China. The FOIP is founded on principles that involve freedom of navigation, assuring open trade and investment, building open infrastructure, and enforcing maritime laws. Hanoi's commitment in having a rules-based regional security system aligns with both Washington's and ASEAN's strategic interests.

Active involvement at the negotiating table alongside Japan, Australia, India and the United States (also referred to as Quads) would grant Vietnam more credibility when dealing with China directly. Vietnam has already received two Hamilton-class cutters and minor equipment and technology from the US military. Nonetheless, finding itself between the two big powers could also present its challenges for Hanoi, especially if Washington is leading it to choose a side. What's more, an increased presence of US assets in the South China Sea might push Beijing to militarize its shores even more.



Photo: EPA/STR

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South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

Despite these risks, taking advantage of the FOIP could be an opportunity for Vietnam to assert its stance and focus on capacity-building, while remaining strongly involved in the commercial and investment-side of the strategy as well. By doing so, Vietnam would continue to be a promoter of a rules-based international order and leading its neighbors to pursue common strategic interests.

Besides this, Vietnam's leadership is essential during this crucial time of Code of Conduct negotiations with China.^[2] The slogan "We Care, We Prepare, We Prosper" encloses in itself multiple opportunities, yet it requires joint efforts to agree on a plan of action. ASEAN especially benefited from Vietnam's diligence in keeping in mind the interests of the parties involved and carrying on the dialogue of peace and cooperation.

One of the ASEAN members that Vietnam is closely partnering with is Thailand.^[3] Last week, the two foreign ministers met online to discuss bilateral relations together with the latest developments in the East Sea. The countries announced that they will celebrate the 45th anniversary of bilateral relations by signing a new agreement between the foreign ministers that spans until 2025 and aims at bringing the turnover of trade to \$20 billion a year. Seeing the demand for increased collaboration, about 13 Thai and Vietnamese provinces and cities have also twined. The most prominent agreement is between Hồ Chí Minh City and Bangkok, which chose to cooperate in matters of trade, culture and education. The foreign ministers also mentioned the desire to affirm their presence in the region and more broadly to promote solidarity and teamwork within ASEAN.

Japan

A rather interesting development occurred as a Chinese fishing boat overturned roughly 330 kilometers north of Ishigaki city. [1] The Japanese Coast Guard rescued the individuals who were drifting in the water and reported that 5 more were missing.[2] With this recent incident, it should be noted that this will not be the last time the Japanese Coast Guard is required to assist Chinese fisherman. With Chinese fishermen sailing far from the mainland, any potential incident will require the help of the Japanese Coast Guard, whose assets are just a stone's throw away.

On 3 March, the Japanese Coast Guard's joint-training exercise helped to confirm a point that was made in the Japan section of the briefing in the past two weeks. That point was that Japan and her allies will continue to conduct specialized training towards countering Chinese assets in particular. This March 3rd training included both the JMSDF and Japan's Coast Guard and was reported to include one escort ship, one missile boat, two helicopters, and

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South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

two patrol boats from both the JMSDF and the Japanese Coast Guard.[3] It was reported that the exercise included “Assuming that a suspicious ship is heading for an important facility such as a nuclear power plant, we confirmed how to operate escort vessels and patrol vessels when dealing with them in cooperation.” [4]

On 4 March, the Japanese Coast Guard reported that four Chinese Coast Guard vessels entered the area around the Senkaku Islands for the 20th consecutive day. [5] On the same day, a statement by President Biden himself re-asserted his commitment to America’s Allies in the Pacific and laid out a 24 page document that covers this strategy in detail. In the report, Japan has been listed as one of the U.S’s core allies and it can be assumed that the technologically advanced nation will play a key role in areas of R&D and strategic positioning of naval assets.

In addition to diplomatic mentions, the 4th also saw the JMSDF hold a commission ceremony for their new Auxiliary ocean surveillance ship. This ship will be used for monitoring hostile submarine activity.[6] Next week’s briefing will have an analysis of Japan’s military budget and asset development.



Image Courtesy of the Japan Ministry of Defense Official Twitter Account

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South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

Aircraft Monitoring

PLAAF Y-8



Shaanxi Y-8 Surveillance Aircraft: Has many variants that include anti- submarine warfare, ISR, cargo, troop transport.

03/01 - Southwest Taiwan [3]
03/02 - Southwest Taiwan [4]
03/03 - Southwest Taiwan [8]

P-8



Anti-submarine and anti-surface maritime/wartime patrol aircraft. Its sensitive instruments can pick up enemy ground and ship movement in addition to also carrying armaments.

03/01 - South China Sea [2]
03/02 - East China Sea (Australian) [5]

P3-C Orion



P3-C Orion: Provides advanced threat detection for both surface surveillance on both land and sea.

03/04 - South Taiwan [11]
03/06 - South China Sea [15]

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South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

KC-135 Stratotanker



Provides aerial refueling support to Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps and allied nation aircraft.

03/01 - South China Sea [1]
03/02 - South China Sea [6]

KJ-500



Chinese KJ-500: is an AEW aircraft that has the capability of short takeoff and landings.

03/07 - West Taiwan [16]

Ep-3E Aries II



EP-3E Aries II: multi- intelligence aircraft that contributes to “information dominance, battle space situational awareness, suppression of enemy air defenses, destruction of enemy air-defense, anti-air warfare and anti-submarine warfare applications.”

03/04 - South China Sea [12]
03/05 - South China [13]

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South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

RC-135



RC-135W Rivet Joint: Provides real-time detection capabilities for military personnel. Range is 1,500 miles.

03/02 - South China Sea [7]
03/04 - Northwest Taiwan [10]

MQ-4C Triton



MQ-4C Triton: Supports ISR and signals intelligence operations. Northrop Gruman capabilities: “The aircraft can fly over 24 hours at a time, at altitudes higher than 10 miles, with an operational range of 8,200 nautical miles.”

03/04 - South China Sea [9]
03/06 - South Taiwan [14]

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The Open Source Briefing

South China Sea Intelligence Briefings

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