



Sailor communicates with combat information center while standing watch on bridge as USS *Germantown* transits Luzon Strait, South China Sea, September 5, 2020 (U.S. Navy/Taylor DiMartino)

Harnessing the Power of Information

A Better Approach for Countering Chinese Coercion

By Kurt Stahl

China has implemented an incremental approach toward coercive activities in the Indo-Pacific region, including the South China Sea, placing the United States and its allies in a deteriorating position to counteract Beijing effectively.¹ This strategy has

enabled Beijing to avoid direct military conflict to date and has forced the United States to pursue new solutions for countering China in the region.² China has claimed the rights to all land features in the South China Sea, which has resulted in maritime territorial and

jurisdictional disputes with the surrounding countries—the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei.³ The coercive tactics China has used to navigate these disputes include building up military power in the South China Sea, threatening the use of force against foreign naval vessels, and exploiting natural resources within the exclusive economic zones of other countries. While these actions may appear insufficient to warrant a lethal military response, they are directly undermining vital U.S. interests, and some analysts suggest China’s ultimate goal is to force the United States out of the Indo-Pacific region.⁴

As described in the National Defense Strategy, the United States must maintain a presence in the region to achieve its aims by “detering aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains.”⁵ Specifically, vital U.S. interests in the region must include curtailing China’s continued infringements on the sovereignty of other countries, preserving freedom of

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navigation and commerce in the global commons, and strengthening international influence to advance American ideals, economic interests, and collective security solutions. China's pattern of conduct is at odds with U.S. interests, and the United States must respond with determination. While China's behaviors in the South China Sea should be considered acts of aggression, adventurism by the People's Liberation Army has not yet induced a lethal military response. Thus, the United States should adopt a strategy that will be effective without provoking a war.

An underutilized approach to addressing these problems is an information-centric strategy empowering partners and allies to apply collective pressure by bringing international attention to China's predatory ambitions and activities. The goal is to raise the reputational costs for China to a level that compels Beijing to moderate its behaviors—halting further militarization and territorial expansion in the South China Sea, curtailing coercive tactics to settle its maritime disputes, respecting the sovereignty of neighboring countries, and demonstrating a willingness to operate within established international norms. Successful implementation of an information-centric counter-China strategy requires an effectively designed information campaign that is aligned with the other instruments of U.S. national power and an understanding of this power's potential impacts. A successful information campaign will affect the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of both the international community and China's political leadership. Recent efforts in this arena have lacked the organization, cohesion, and energy needed to advance such a narrative internationally or within the United States.

This information-centric strategy presents a paradigm shift from current practice. Informational approaches are often applied in support of other instruments of national power, commonly dominated by diplomatic, military, or economic objectives. However, this new strategy asserts the informational approach as the supported instrument of

national power because it offers the best opportunity to counter Chinese influence and advance U.S. interests in the region without a greater risk of military conflict.

The South China Sea and Beyond

Exposing and highlighting Chinese actions and intent in the South China Sea through a persistent and cohesive narrative has the potential to bring countries together and unite the international community against China's aggressive and coercive expansionist policies. With a large economic and military footprint in the region, coupled with deep ties to partners and allies, the United States has a powerful voice capable of influencing attitudes and behaviors. Beyond informing the broader international and U.S. domestic public, the United States should focus communication efforts on protecting the sovereign rights of all countries currently having maritime disputes with China in both the South China and East China seas. Any infringement on that sovereignty by China, such as territorial expansion or resource exploitation into internationally recognized borders, should be collectively condemned on an international stage to impose reputational costs. Territorial expansion by China can take many forms: bullying its neighbors into accepting its position in dispute settlements, as it appeared to do following the 2016 South China Sea arbitration by the international court in favor of the Philippines; asserting physical presence to control areas within another country's exclusive economic zone or the international commons, such as by building artificial islands with military bases in the Spratly Islands; and acquiring foreign assets through debt traps, such as the case involving the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka.⁶

Individually, the countries most frequently affected by China's policies tend to shy away from direct confrontation. However, the United States can help provide cover for these countries while advocating their concerns through a clear narrative highlighting Chinese predatory behaviors to the international

community, raising China's reputational costs to a level that could compel a change in behavior. This goal could be achieved through an effort that starts at the national level, planned and synchronized by the National Security Council. Political, diplomatic, and military leaders must all play a role in supporting the strategic narrative. One method of implementation could be a Web site, run by the Department of State, publicizing every coercive or predatory action taken by China through weekly updates and quarterly reports. These reports would serve as a form of ammunition to reinforce the narrative advanced by U.S. leadership and echoed by the media and international community. Every time China intentionally violates established international rules and norms, the United States needs to lead and organize the effort to expose and rebuke these actions to provide top cover for the impacted countries. Raising the reputational costs through an information campaign could deter further Chinese territorial expansion and compel China to respect the sovereign rights of the neighboring countries.

Additional tactics in support of this information campaign should include simple actions such as public condemnation of specific incursions by China and more complex measures such as displaying disapproval through targeted economic actions or nonlethal military demonstrations. Public condemnation could involve the U.S. Secretary of State or, in egregious cases, the U.S. President making a statement to the media denouncing and drawing attention to instances of bullying behaviors by the Chinese government, such as harassment of Japanese naval vessels around the Senkaku Islands and human rights violations against internal minorities such as Uyghurs and Tibetans. China's history of persecuting its minority groups should be exposed to inflict additional reputational cost, particularly considering the widely reported use of state-run internment camps oppressing millions of Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region.⁷

Economic actions could take the form of precise sanctions to protest

objectionable behaviors or calculated foreign investments to offset predatory investments by China. Targeted, non-lethal military activities could also be utilized to demonstrate disapproval of Chinese behaviors by conducting exercises or maritime patrols in response. For example, if China initiates steps to construct a new artificial island in the South China Sea, the United States could organize a series of freedom of navigation operations in the vicinity. These tactics would be designed not to provoke an armed conflict but to send a resolute message of disapproval to Beijing while demonstrating solidarity with regional partners and allies. These actions might appear counterproductive and likely to increase the potential for military conflict, but placating an aggressively expanding China would only embolden its policymakers and ultimately lead to a more significant threat of war.

The informational approach must be the focal point of the U.S. strategy deterring Chinese adventurism within disputed territory in order to preserve freedom of navigation in the global commons of the Indo-Pacific region. A report by the Center for a New American Security calls for a “Truth Campaign” in the form of a white paper publicizing every unlawful action Beijing conducts in the South China Sea (including environmental damage).⁸ While this suggestion is a step in the right direction, an information campaign that helps achieve the desired endstate must be more robust than a white paper. This strategy requires deliberate planning and coordination at the national level. Further coordination, direction, and assessment should be conducted by the combatant commander in concert with interagency partners and allies. Military leaders and diplomats must understand the strategic narrative and be empowered to advance it through every key leader engagement and security cooperation activity.

This information-centric approach could yield positive results in the South China Sea and in other regions where China is applying similar subversive tactics. An understanding of malicious Chinese intent has the potential to

dissuade cooperation with and tolerance of Chinese aggression, even when masked through an incremental approach. By raising China’s reputational costs and challenging the narrative that its ambitions are peaceful, the international view of China could be altered and utilized to pressure Beijing into changing its tactics and adopting an approach that conforms with international rules and norms. Even if China does not change, however, the information campaign would still raise the situational awareness of the international community and cost the United States little to implement. Furthermore, with increased awareness, other countries would be in better positions to make decisions on how to handle the problem and potentially have increased leverage with unity under a common narrative.

One potential high payoff of this proposed information campaign could be that the international community recognizes China’s exploitative and predatory actions in the South China Sea, compelling countries in other regions to resist expanding Chinese influence. Oriana Skyler Mastro argues that the United States must recommit to advancing its values globally since it can provide an asymmetric advantage in Great Power competition, highlighting that China’s major vulnerability is that “its leaders have failed to articulate a vision of global dominance that is beneficial for any country but China.”⁹ Therefore, China’s aspirations of becoming the global leader may be susceptible to eroding international cooperation based on the values and image it is projecting, making the present a critical time for the United States to lead through the power of information. When direct military confrontation with China will likely result in mutually assured destruction, the ability to achieve National interests hinges largely on how effectively the United States can influence through communicating information, values, ideas, and vision.

Aligning Instruments of National Power

An information campaign can be a powerful tool, but it must be part of a broader strategy, integrated with and

supported by the other instruments of national power.¹⁰ For this information campaign to help achieve strategic objectives and goals, it requires a top-down vision with coordinated and synchronized guidance across the entire government enterprise. The same themes and messages must be mutually supported by the military as well as diplomats and politicians. Such an effort requires the National Security Council to systematically and diligently plan, coordinate, direct, and assess strategic messaging efforts. The theater-level effort must be nested with the national strategy and involve key players in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), U.S. Department of State, interagency partners, and regional allies. This function could be accomplished with something as simple as a weekly working group led by USINDOPACOM, or it could be structured as a standing theater interagency information coordination center led by a senior State official. Recognizing that growth generally incurs additional monetary cost, the price tag of implementing an effective information-centric strategy would be far more economical than continuing an arms race or bearing the cost of war.

The military, diplomatic, and economic arms of the United States all communicate information and ideas to both international and domestic audiences. Therefore, they must work cohesively toward the same ends. Additionally, an information campaign would be ineffective if it is not backed by other tangible approaches and tools. A capable forward-deployed military that is engaged in the region is a requirement for physically communicating and lending credibility to strategic messages, while demonstrating the strong interconnectedness of military and informational approaches. The mere presence of a significant military force sends a message of commitment to the region’s allies, partners, and potential adversaries. More specific to the South China Sea, the U.S. military, and particularly its naval and aviation assets, continue to conduct freedom of navigation



Sailors conduct visit, board, search, and seizure exercise in rigid-hull inflatable boat from amphibious dock landing ship USS *Germantown*, operating in U.S. 7th Fleet area of responsibility to serve as ready response force to defend peace and stability in Indo-Pacific region, Philippine Sea, September 10, 2020 (U.S. Navy/Taylor DiMartino)

operations in the region to reinforce the U.S. interpretation of established international rules for navigation of the seas.¹¹ Military operations such as these, combined with multilateral exercises and patrols, should be integrated into the broader information campaign and strategy to dissuade China from continuing to violate international norms and infringe on the sovereignty of other states.

The importance of the economic instrument cannot be overstated, and its use must reinforce the information campaign. Economic policies could send strong strategic messages—rewarding desired behaviors, punishing objectionable actions, or building partnerships by generating opportunities. China has expanded its areas of influence through monetary investments and economic commitments such as the Belt and Road Initiative. The United States must thus offer an alternative promoting economic

advantages and dissuading countries from conceding to predatory economic relationships with China.¹² The United States should assume that countries in the Indo-Pacific region would continue to cultivate economic and diplomatic relations with China due to its power and proximity, but there are still opportunities to employ targeted economic initiatives to curb China's growing influence, including resurrecting the Trans-Pacific Partnership. One of Beijing's vulnerabilities is its tendency to employ predatory tactics to advance its economic and foreign policy agendas.¹³ These behaviors should be highlighted as part of the information campaign to inflict further damage to China's reputation. The United States should offer more appealing alternatives in the form of bilateral or multilateral trade deals and economic investments with the potential to yield long-term dividends for allied and partner countries.

While the United States might not have the money to match offers from China in every case, it could focus on quality over quantity with mutually beneficial economic initiatives.

Diplomacy is also central to the success of an information campaign. Diplomats are key agents for developing an understanding of the information environment and play a critical role in synthesizing, coordinating, and disseminating information and strategic messages. Officials within the State Department, particularly those operating at U.S. Embassies and consulates in the region, could work with foreign leaders to develop and promulgate consistent messaging that supports strategic objectives. Diplomats could leverage traditional and social media platforms in local languages and facilitate private exchanges with political and military leaders across the region.¹⁴ The State



Chinese People's Liberation Army Corporal Ke Mei Luo, right, receives route map with instructions before leading her team of fellow Chinese soldiers, U.S. Marines, and Australian soldiers to summit of Queensland's highest peak during Exercise Kowari 2017, Mount Bartle Frere, Australia, August 28, 2017 (U.S. Marine Corps/Emmanuel Ramos)

Department must be fully immersed in developing, implementing, and assessing this information campaign for the goals to be achieved.

Designing the Information Campaign

To achieve its intended goals, an information campaign must be deliberately planned, coordinated, and implemented with a whole-of-government approach and in concert with regional allies and partners. James Farwell notes that “information strategy is about framing issues, defining the stakes, and molding, shaping, and influencing target audiences to affect their behaviors.”¹⁵ This task can be effectively accomplished only with expertise and perspectives across the government, commonly reflected in the composition of the National Security Council. Furthermore, strategic communication would

become exponentially more powerful if the messages are coherent and mutually supporting information is communicated by other countries. A successful strategic information campaign requires deliberate planning and coordination among U.S. political, military, diplomatic, and economic leaders. At the outset of planning, these key players must determine and understand the goals and objectives.¹⁶ This step is critical because it shapes all future actions. Next, the planners must build a compelling narrative that supports the desired endstate, which requires an understanding of the information environment.¹⁷ Allies and partners would be invaluable in this effort by helping identify nuanced cultural and political sensitivities and building collective wisdom through the addition of unique experiences and perspectives. This collaborative effort is invaluable in crafting

and advancing a narrative that resonates with the intended audiences.

Any counter-China strategy would meet resistance from those who argue that the United States should pursue a strategy of cooperation with China, rather than competition, due to its global power and importance.¹⁸ Hal Brands and Zack Cooper categorize this approach as a strategy of “accommodation” and argue that it would produce “devastating effects for the U.S. position in the Asia-Pacific—with no guarantee that it will actually reduce the danger of an eventual conflict with China.”¹⁹ China has demonstrated a pattern of expansion and an intent to continue doing so in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and beyond. If the United States and likeminded nations fail to counter this aggression now, there might be no end in sight. A coherent strategy is urgently needed, and it must leverage an information-centric approach

to influence China, avoiding military conflict and leaving the door open for future cooperation when behaviors change.

To date, the United States has failed to enact a coherent strategy to address Chinese expansion and coercion in the South China Sea and other regions. The requirement for such a strategy is urgent, and the United States must lead the international community in developing and implementing one that is effective and sustainable. Specifically, the United States, in cooperation with partners and allies, must employ an approach waging a robust, coherent, and coordinated information campaign, aligned with all instruments of national power, to compel China to change its strategy of coercion. Until China demonstrates a willingness to adhere to international rules and norms, the United States should resist calls for strategies of accommodation. Similarly, the United States must avoid provoking a war with China, as the results would be devastating globally. An information-centric strategy is the most suitable, feasible, and acceptable approach to countering China and would provide the greatest strategic flexibility and sustainability. JFQ

Notes

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¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cronin et al., *Contested Spaces*, 20.

¹⁵ James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 143.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 143–147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁸ Lai, Troxell, and Gellert, eds., *Avoiding the Trap*, 171–179.

¹⁹ Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, “Getting Serious About Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (Winter 2018), 12–32, available at <www.jstor.org/stable/26398089>.

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Baltics Left of Bang: The Southern Shore

By Marcel Hadeed, Mariusz Kaminski, Monika Sus, Brett Swaney, and Amelie Theussen



Detering and defending against Russian aggression in the Baltic Sea region prior to open hostilities,

or “left of bang,” is a political problem that requires a coordinated regional approach by the Baltic southern shore states—Poland, Germany, and Denmark—in conjunction with their North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) allies. Despite common membership in NATO and the EU, the southern shore states hold differing strategic perspectives that reflect the challenges of a coordinated approach. These states should prioritize Baltic maritime security, regional mobility, and unconventional warfare capabilities in coordination with regional allies and partners. They should also leverage or enhance EU capabilities in cyber, information, and strategic communications to better deter and defend against Russian hostile measures.



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