

THE 1974 PARACELS SEA BATTLE

A Campaign Appraisal

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On 19 January 1974, the Chinese and South Vietnamese navies clashed near the disputed Paracel Islands. The short but intense battle left China in control of seemingly unremarkable spits of land and surrounding waters in the South China Sea. The skirmish involved small, secondhand combatants armed with outdated weaponry. The fighting lasted for several hours, producing modest casualties in ships and men. The incident merited little public attention, especially when compared with past titanic struggles at sea, such as those of the two world wars. Unsurprisingly, the battle remains an understudied, if not forgotten, episode in naval history.¹

But its obscurity is undeserved. Newly available Chinese-language sources reveal a far more complex naval operation than is commonly depicted in Western scholarship.² Hitherto-unknown details of the battle illustrate how Chinese strategists tailored their tactics so as to coerce, deter, and defeat a rival claimant in the South China Sea. Notably, China employed a mix of conventional and irregular forces to meet its operational objectives. Such hybrid methods not only were common in Chinese naval history, but also foreshadowed the kinds of

combined maritime warfare China has employed recently against its neighbors in maritime Asia, including Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Indeed, Chinese operations in the Paracels represent an archetype that could be employed again in the future. It thus behooves policymakers to pay attention to China's naval past.

The battle was the first step in China's decades-long effort to establish and expand its presence

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in the South China Sea. In 1988, China seized six reefs and atolls of the Spratly Islands after another skirmish with the Vietnamese at Johnson South Reef. In late 1994, the Chinese built structures on Philippines-claimed Mischief Reef, leaving a weak Manila no choice but to accept the fait accompli. In 2012, China compelled the Philippines to yield control of Scarborough Shoal after a standoff at sea over fishing rights in the area. Beginning in late 2013, China embarked on a massive land reclamation project in the Spratlys, building up artificial islands that added up to thousands of acres of land. Some of the man-made islands feature military-grade runways, deep-draft piers to accommodate warships, facilities to host garrisons, and other support infrastructure. China's extension of its maritime power into the South China Sea, which has gathered momentum in recent years, began with the foothold gained in the Paracels.

The conflict and its aftermath also left an outsize and lasting legacy in Asian international relations. The territorial dispute that gave rise to fighting forty years ago remains unresolved and continues to stoke Sino-Vietnamese enmity. When Beijing placed an oil rig in waters close to the Paracels in May 2014, violent protests targeting Chinese businesses broke out across Vietnam. At sea, Vietnamese maritime law enforcement vessels sought to break the security cordon formed around the rig by Chinese civilian, paramilitary, and naval vessels. Amid the standoff, bilateral relations plunged to new lows. The contest, then, is far from over; and the passions the dispute still stirs up trace back to 1974.

The Paracels battle erupted at an inflection point in the history of China's turbulent politics. The nation was still reeling from the Cultural Revolution when the fighting broke out. The radical political movement had so ravaged military readiness that the Chinese navy nearly paid for it with defeat in the Paracels campaign. Mao Zedong devoted attention to the crisis, issuing his last military orders during the conflict before his death two years later. Deng Xiaoping, rehabilitated from the purges of the Cultural Revolution, oversaw the naval campaign. Liu Huaqing formulated fortification plans for the Paracels not long after the smoke had cleared from the battlefield. Deng, the architect of China's reform and opening, and Liu, the father of the modern Chinese navy, would later navigate their nation out of the dark era under Mao. Their roles in this clash likely served them well as they positioned themselves to lead China.

For the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy, or PLAN), the campaign is etched into the service's institutional memory, constituting an essential part of the navy's "glorious history."³ The "counterattack in self-defense" vanquished South Vietnam's navy and secured China's control over the Paracels.⁴ It is considered the PLA Navy's first sea battle against an external enemy. (The fighting against the Nationalists along the mainland coast in the 1950s and 1960s is regarded as an extension of the Chinese civil war.) The battle was also the first time that

the PLAN—then largely a coastal-defense force composed of obsolescent Soviet vessels—operated so far from China’s shores. The disparity in naval power that seemingly favored South Vietnam, (Republic of Vietnam, or RVN) has helped Chinese commentators mythologize the triumph.

The battle’s legacies, ranging from regional animosity to China’s strategic position in the South China Sea, call for a closer reexamination. The availability of relevant Chinese literature now makes it possible to extract insights from the clash. Reconstructing a clearer picture of the Sino-Vietnamese encounter at sea helps to discern the ingredients of the Chinese navy’s operational success. Moreover, a retrospective analysis draws out the continuities in China’s use of force and coercion at sea. In particular, Beijing’s combined employment of military and civilian vessels in 1974 suggests a durable operational preference for hybrid warfare that is evident today in territorial disputes involving China. Such predispositions carry implications for the various rival claimants in the South China Sea and for the United States as the arbiter of security and stability in maritime Asia.

To maximize the analytical value of the naval skirmish, this article first reviews the geographic setting and the historical context of the Paracels dispute. It recounts in greater detail the tit-for-tat maneuvers near the islands that brought China and South Vietnam to conflict. The article then elaborates on the naval battle and its aftermath, as the Chinese have retold them. It furnishes an assessment of the battle, critically analyzing China’s civil-military relations, the operational performance of the PLAN, the role of friction and chance, and the importance of paramilitary forces to Beijing. Finally, the article concludes with some thoughts about how the battle may inform China’s future strategy in the South China Sea and its implications for stakeholders in maritime Asia.

SOURCES AND METHODS

In recent years, Chinese historical accounts of the Paracels sea battle have proliferated across publicly available sources, including PLAN publications, academic journals, professional periodicals, and popular magazines. Participants in the campaign, from local commanders to tactical personnel, have agreed to interviews or produced their own eyewitness accounts, reflecting on their personal experiences. They have revealed fascinating details about the engagement and have forthrightly offered critical assessments of how the Chinese waged the campaign.

A general openness to debate on politically neutral topics, including naval affairs, partly explains this willingness to engage in frank discussions about the battle. For over a decade the Chinese leadership has permitted a relatively freewheeling discourse among officials, scholars, and commentators of various stripes, encouraging them to hold forth on China’s seaborne future. President Xi Jinping’s vow to transform China into a maritime power has further spurred

seapower advocates to retail narratives that justify the nation's turn to the seas. China's operational success in 1974 tells an uplifting story that dovetails with recent Chinese efforts to promote the navy as a prized national project and to enhance the society's "maritime consciousness." And, in light of Beijing's ambitions and growing capacity to influence events in the South China Sea, the history of the Paracels battle resonates with Chinese audiences.

The attention lavished on this incident opens a window onto China's interpretations of its own naval history.⁵ Indeed, the literature helps to discern lessons the Chinese have drawn from this battle as well as to identify lessons they may have neglected or chosen to ignore. If these lessons—and false lessons—hold value for China's policymakers and military commanders, the battle may offer insights into current Chinese strategy in offshore disputes. Equally important, Beijing's growing assertiveness in maritime Asia, including its construction of artificial islands in the Spratlys, is likely to increase policy demands in Washington and other Asian capitals to understand better how China views its seascape.

Some caveats about sources and methods merit mentioning. This article is based almost entirely on Chinese writings of the battle, including the PLAN's record of events, recollections of the participants involved in the clash, and secondary sources. China's sparse experiences at sea, especially in the first decades of communist rule, may have compelled Chinese analysts to dramatize overly, and thus potentially distort, their nation's naval successes. Not surprisingly, Chinese accounts frequently portray the enemy unflatteringly while playing up China's virtues. Xenophobic biases and cheap propaganda points abound. What follows, therefore, is not a neutral perspective.

While the Vietnamese side of the story is not represented here, this article draws on the few available English-language memoirs by RVN naval officers who were involved in the clash.⁶ It pays special attention to recollections that diverge sharply from the Chinese version of events. Moreover, discrepancies exist among the various Chinese descriptions of the battle. To the extent possible, this article identifies those differences, recognizing that a definitive story is not possible without access to official archives in both China and Vietnam. This is a first cut at an important but largely underappreciated episode in China's march to the seas.

THE GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT

The Paracel (西沙) Islands are roughly equidistant from China and Vietnam, located 300 kilometers south of Yulin, Hainan Island, and 370 kilometers east of Da Nang. The archipelago is composed of coral islands, reefs, and banks divided into two island groups. To the northeast is the Amphitrite (宣德) Group, in which Woody (永兴) Island is the largest feature. To the southwest is the Crescent (永乐) Group, consisting of Pattle (珊瑚), Money (金银), and Robert (甘泉) Islands

MAP 1
THE PARCEL ISLANDS



Source: Adapted from "Parcel and Spratly Islands: 1988," *Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection*, www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/.

on the western side and Drummond (晋卿), Duncan (琛航), and Palm (广金) Islands on the eastern side. About eighty kilometers of water separate the Amphitrite and Crescent Groups.

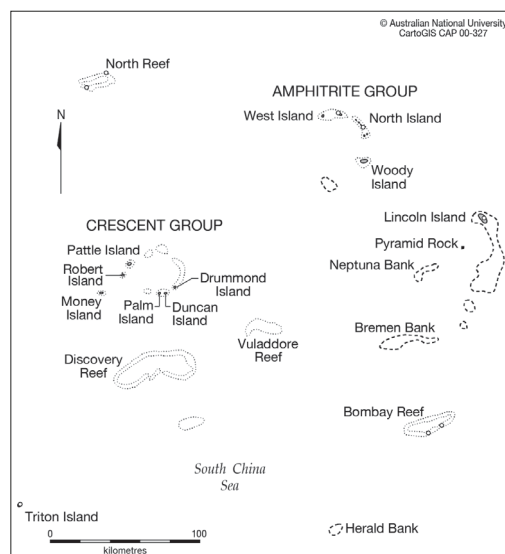
Chinese writings emphasize the geostrategic value of the Paracels, which sit astride critical lines of communications. According to the PLAN's official encyclopedia, "The Paracel Islands serve as China's natural protective screen and outpost. Sea and air routes heading to Singapore and Jakarta from China's coast must pass through this area, giving it an important status."⁷ Located about 660 kilometers southwest of the Pratas Islands, 550 kilometers west of Scarborough

MAP 2



Source: "Paracel Islands," in Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, www.cia.gov/.

MAP 3



Source: "Paracel Islands, South China Sea," [CartoGIS] Maps Online: ANU [Australian National University] College of Asia & the Pacific, asiapacific.anu.edu.au/mapsonline/.

Shoal, and 700 kilometers northwest of the Spratly Islands, the centrally positioned archipelago is viewed as an essential stepping-stone to other Chinese-claimed islands across the South China Sea.

After the Second World War, the islands changed hands repeatedly, with countries asserting a confusing array of claims and counterclaims to the Paracels. In 1947, the Nationalists on the Chinese mainland seized control of Woody Island, while the French, employing local Vietnamese troops, occupied Pattle Island at the other end of the Paracels. The communist conquest of Hainan Island, one of the last holdouts of the Chinese civil war, rendered untenable the Nationalist outpost on Woody Island. PLA troops seized the island after the Nationalist forces evacuated it in 1950. In the 1951 San Francisco peace treaty, Japan renounced all its rights and claims to the Paracels and Spratlys but left the transfer of title unresolved. South Vietnam and China subsequently issued official declarations that incorporated the Paracels as sovereign territory, in 1956 and 1958, respectively.⁸

In the meantime, China and South Vietnam occupied two halves of the Paracels. In 1955, a Chinese state-owned company began to mine guano on Woody Island for use as fertilizer back on the mainland. The following year, the French transferred Pattle Island to the Republic of Vietnam. In early 1959, Saigon's navy forcibly evicted Chinese fishermen from Duncan Island, thereby conferring on South Vietnam control over the Crescent Group. Throughout the 1960s, an uneasy stalemate prevailed as both sides built modest facilities and episodically patrolled the waters around the islands.⁹ It is likely that the substantial U.S. naval presence in the region and Washington's backing of Saigon deterred China from rolling back South Vietnam's control of the disputed islands.

In the 1970s, the promise of offshore oil intensified the dispute in the South China Sea. In mid-1973, Saigon granted energy exploration rights to Western companies and conducted geological surveys of the waters near the Crescent Group. That year, Beijing explicitly claimed the maritime resources present in waters adjacent to Chinese territory. China, too, began drilling an oil well on Woody Island in December 1973.¹⁰ The convergence of geopolitics, economics, and competing territorial claims soon drew China and South Vietnam into an escalating crisis.

PRELUDE TO BATTLE

In the summer of 1973, a series of provocations and reprisals set the two sides on a collision course. In August, South Vietnam seized six islands in the Spratlys, and a month later issued a formal declaration extending Saigon's administrative control over ten islands there. In October, two Chinese fishing trawlers, Nos. 402 and 407, appeared near the Crescent Group and began to work there.

The crewmen planted Chinese flags on islands over which the Vietnamese had established nominal control. They also set up a logistics team on Duncan Island, reestablishing a presence there, from which South Vietnam had evicted them more than a decade before.¹¹ In November, South Vietnamese warships began to harass the Chinese fishing boats, ramming them and arresting fishermen on board. Some of the captured Chinese were reportedly brought to Da Nang, where they were forced to confess their alleged crimes and acknowledge Saigon's sovereignty over the islands.

On 10 January 1974, the crews of the two Chinese fishing boats constructed a seafood processing plant on Robert Island.¹² The following day, the Chinese foreign ministry reiterated China's indisputable sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, the Spratly (南沙) Islands, and Macclesfield (中沙) Bank. Four days later, the RVN Navy dispatched the frigate HQ-16 to the Crescent Group. Upon encountering fishing boats Nos. 402 and 407 near Robert Island, HQ-16 ordered the two vessels to leave the area.¹³ The frigate then fired warning shots at them and shelled Robert Island, blasting the Chinese flag planted there. On 17 January, the destroyer HQ-4 arrived on the scene to support HQ-16. Commandos on board HQ-4 landed on Robert and Money Islands, pulling down Chinese flags there. The following day, HQ-4 and HQ-16 rammed fishing vessel No. 407, damaging it. That evening, frigate HQ-5 and fleet minesweeper HQ-10 joined in.¹⁴

After receiving reports from Nos. 402 and 407 about the RVN's naval activities, China began to sortie its forces. On 16 January, the South Sea Fleet ordered two *Kronshtadt*-class submarine chasers, Nos. 271 and 274, to reach Woody Island as soon as possible. The two warships hurried to their destination from Yulin naval base on Hainan Island. After picking up armed maritime militia, ammunition, and supplies at Woody Island the next day, Nos. 271 and 274 proceeded to the Crescent Group. The commanders were under strict instructions to follow three don'ts: (1) don't stir up trouble; (2) don't fire the first shot; and (3) don't get the worst of it.¹⁵ J-6 fighters (the Chinese version of the MiG-19) provided air cover during the flotilla's transit, but their limited range permitted only five minutes of loiter time over the Paracels.¹⁶ The warships would have to fend for themselves.

The two sub chasers reached the Crescent Group on the evening of 17 January and landed four armed militia platoons (each numbering ten members) on Duncan, Drummond, and Palm Islands in the wee hours of 18 January.¹⁷ At about the same time, two Guangzhou-based Type 010 oceangoing minesweepers, Nos. 389 and 396, rushed to the Paracels to reinforce Nos. 271 and 274.

In a sign of the PLAN's desperation, the No. 389 boat had just undergone major shipyard repairs and was not yet certified for sea duty. Worse still, the South Sea Fleet's most capable frigates, the Type 065s, were unavailable owing

PLAN ORDER OF BATTLE

No. 271 and No. 274	Class: <i>Kronshtadt</i> -class submarine chaser Displacement: 310 tons Armament: one 3.5-inch gun
No. 389 and No. 396	Class: Type 010 ocean minesweeper Displacement: 500 tons Armament: two 37 mm guns
No. 281 and No. 282	Class: Hainan-class submarine chaser Displacement: 500 tons Armament: two 3-inch guns

Source: John E. Moore, ed., *Jane's Fighting Ships, 1975–76* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1975).

RVN NAVY ORDER OF BATTLE

HQ-5 and HQ-16	Class: <i>Barnegat</i> -class seaplane tender Displacement: 1,766 tons Armament: one 5-inch gun
HQ-4	Class: <i>Edsall</i> -class destroyer escort Displacement: 1,590 tons Armament: two 3-inch guns
HQ-10	Class: <i>Admirable</i> -class minesweeper Displacement: 650 tons Armament: one 3-inch gun

Source: Moore, *Jane's Fighting Ships, 1975–76*.

Island and Antelope Reef from the south toward Palm and Duncan Islands, while HQ-10 and HQ-16 cut across the central lagoon of the Crescent Group from the northwest. Sub chasers Nos. 271 and 274 were directed to monitor HQ-4 and HQ-5 while Nos. 396 and 389 shadowed HQ-10 and HQ-16. In a bid to break the stalemate, HQ-16 forced its way past the two Chinese ships and launched two rubber boats carrying commandos to land on Duncan and Palm Islands.¹⁸ The Vietnamese assault forces ran right into the Chinese militia, which had dug in the day before. On Duncan Island, bayonet-wielding militiamen drove the commandos off the beach. On Palm Island, the defenders shot dead one Vietnamese and wounded three others, forcing the landing party to retreat to its mother ship. During the maneuver to land the commandos, HQ-16 rammed and damaged No. 389.¹⁹

Up to this point, the confrontation at sea had involved only maneuver, with no shots fired in anger. Chinese naval commanders, moreover, followed orders not to initiate the fight. Unable to dislodge their foes at sea and ashore, the RVN warships repositioned themselves into battle formation and charged the PLAN units. Bearing down on the Chinese vessels, they unleashed the initial salvo. The

to unspecified mechanical problems. Instead, the PLAN had to fall back on two Hainan-class sub chasers, Nos. 281 and 282, attached to a coastal garrison division in Shantou, nearly nine hundred kilometers from Hainan. The pair sped to Woody Island, refueling along the way in Zhanjiang and Yulin.

China's navy was clearly scrambling to assemble its forces. The Cultural Revolution was largely responsible for the fleet's state of disrepair. Nonetheless, the pieces were in place for confrontation. The hastily organized flotilla, four vessels in forward positions and two in the rear, were to protect the fishing boats and resupply the maritime militia on the islands.

THE BATTLE

On the morning of 19 January, the South Vietnamese warships approached the Chinese flotilla from two directions. HQ-4 and HQ-5 circled around Money

Vietnamese directed their fire at the ships' bridges, killing No. 247's political commissar, Feng Songbai, on the spot.²⁰ After taking direct hits, minesweeper No. 389 caught fire and began to take on water.

The PLAN units immediately returned fire and surged toward the opponent's warships. The commanders received orders to "speed forward, fight close, and hit hard."²¹ The smaller, faster, and nimbler Chinese vessels purposefully sought close combat (贴身战, literally, "stick-to-body combat") against the larger, lumbering, and slower-firing RVN units.²² The tactic was to draw so near that the enemy's main deck guns would overshoot their targets. By fighting while sheltering in these blind spots, the Chinese effectively nullified the superior range and lethality of the enemy's firepower. The PLAN commanders chose a knife fight against an adversary expecting a gunfight.

The RVN vessels sought to keep their distance, but the Chinese ships quickly homed in from several thousand meters to hundreds of meters.²³ Sub chasers Nos. 271 and 274 concentrated their fire on HQ-4 while Nos. 396 and 389 attacked HQ-16. The PLAN units took aim at communication gear, radars, and command posts to blind and deafen the enemy. In the intense exchange of fire, HQ-4 started to fill with smoke.²⁴ To the north, Nos. 396 and 389 drove off HQ-16 after fierce fighting and then turned on HQ-10.²⁵ In the melee, HQ-10's magazine exploded from a direct hit. By this time, the combatants were tangling only tens of meters from each other. At such close range, No. 389's crew raked HQ-10's deck with small-arms fire, killing the ship's captain.²⁶

HQ-16 retreated to the open sea after No. 396 turned back its attempts to reach HQ-10. Following some more exchanges of fire, HQ-4 and HQ-5 also left the scene, leaving behind the crippled HQ-10. In the meantime, No. 389 was in trouble. The badly mauled ship listed heavily and its crew could not extinguish the fire. Despite the risk of an explosion, trawlers Nos. 402 and 407 helped beach the heavily damaged minesweeper on Duncan Island. Sub chasers Nos. 281 and 282 arrived from Woody Island belatedly, at around noon, and attacked HQ-10 three times, sinking the ship just south of Antelope Reef.²⁷ HQ-16, HQ-4, and HQ-5 loitered to the west of the Crescent Group but did not attempt to reengage the PLAN units.²⁸

The Chinese moved quickly to retake Vietnamese-occupied islands. They wanted to cement their victory at sea; the naval command also feared that the opponent might counterattack with reinforcements. The South Sea Fleet mobilized one frigate, five torpedo boats, and eight patrol boats for the follow-on operation. The amphibious assault fleet, organized into three transport flotillas, was ordered to send ashore three infantry companies (each numbering about one hundred), one amphibious reconnaissance team, and the armed militia, totaling five hundred troops. The first flotilla consisted of four patrol craft accompanied by

fishing boats Nos. 402 and 407, hauling one infantry company. Four patrol craft and minesweeper No. 396 formed the second flotilla, with one infantry company and one reconnaissance team on board. The single frigate doubled as the third flotilla and the command ship, carrying one infantry company.²⁹

The first flotilla assembled before Robert Island on the morning of 20 January. The patrol boats shelled the island to suppress the defenders there. Three platoons embarked in rubber rafts and sampans conducted the amphibious assault, seizing the island in about ten minutes. Shortly thereafter, the patrol boats and the minesweeper of the second flotilla opened fire on Pattle Island. As PLA troops landed, some thirty Vietnamese retreated to the middle of the island, where they eventually surrendered. Among those captured were a major in the South Vietnamese army and an American liaison officer from the U.S. embassy in Saigon. By the time the PLAN turned to Money Island, the Chinese found that the RVN commandos had already abandoned their positions.³⁰

When the fighting was over, it was clear who had won. The PLAN had sunk one minesweeper, damaged three warships, killed or wounded over a hundred Vietnamese officers and sailors, captured forty-eight soldiers, and seized three islands, bringing the entire Paracel archipelago under China's control. The RVN Navy put one Chinese minesweeper out of action, shot up three other warships, killed eighteen, and wounded sixty-seven others.³¹

THE BATTLE'S AFTERMATH

Stung by the defeat, Saigon threatened to escalate. The South Vietnamese navy reportedly sent two destroyers to reinforce Da Nang and directed six warships to head toward the Paracels.³² The RVN high command also alerted all ground, naval, and air forces to heighten readiness for war. President Nguyen Van Thieu, who arrived in Da Nang to oversee his forces personally, allegedly ordered the South Vietnamese air force to bomb Chinese positions on the Paracels—before rescinding the decision. At the same time, Saigon requested assistance from the U.S. Seventh Fleet, but to no avail.

The Chinese girded for a Vietnamese counterattack. The Military Affairs Commission (MAC) instructed the Guangzhou Military Region to supply the defenders holding the Paracels. Yulin naval base soon became a logistical hub, organizing substantial quantities of ammunition, weaponry, fuel, medicine, food, water, and other supplies for delivery. The MAC placed all forces on high alert and detached three Type 01 Chengdu-class guided-missile frigates from the East Sea Fleet to reinforce their comrades. Equipped with SY-1 subsonic antiship cruise missiles, the frigates packed the kind of punch that the South Sea Fleet lacked. Mao Zedong personally ordered the three ships to transit the Taiwan

Strait—the most direct route to the Paracels—despite concerns that Nationalist forces on Taiwan and the offshore islands might ambush the flotilla on its way south.³³ Mao's gamble paid off when the three frigates arrived safely after an uneventful, though nerve-racking, voyage.³⁴

The South Sea Fleet also called into service Type 033 Romeo-class submarines, including 157, 158, and 159, based in Yulin.³⁵ On 20 January, submarine 157 undertook an unusual refueling mission after an oiler grounded on North Reef. After the sub topped off patrol craft near Woody Island, it returned to port.³⁶ Submarine 158 departed Yulin on 22 January to patrol the waters between Da Nang and Pattle Island. Attesting to Chinese anxieties about a Vietnamese riposte, its mission was to monitor enemy fleet movements and sink—without prior approval from high command—any RVN warships heading toward the Paracels.³⁷ Intriguingly, a PLAN sonarman later claimed that he had detected a U.S. nuclear-powered attack submarine that had been “tracking us for a long time.”³⁸ Submarine 159 subsequently took the place of submarine 158—under stricter rules of engagement, as fears of an RVN counterstrike receded.

This show of force, particularly the appearance of the missile-armed frigates, tipped the local naval balance of power around the Paracels in China's favor. Saigon soon realized that it was unable to reverse the new realities on the ground and eventually backed down.

After the dust had settled, the Chinese leadership began to consider steps for consolidating China's presence on the Paracels. In July 1974, the State Council and the MAC jointly issued a formal fortification plan. Beijing put Liu Huaqing, then the PLAN's deputy chief of staff, in charge of garrisoning the Paracels. Liu led a ten-member team to Woody Island for an on-site inspection in October 1974. The following month, Liu briefed the PLAN's leadership. Liu's findings would become the basis for constructing shore facilities, including an airfield and a port, and for administering the island garrison in subsequent years.³⁹

ASSESSMENT OF THE BATTLE

Recent Chinese publications have revealed, in vivid detail, a complex campaign that involved various implements of maritime power, ranging from trawlers to militia to submarines. Firsthand accounts make clear that it was not an easy win. Leaders had to be resourceful, improvising solutions along the way to make up for the decrepit material state of the PLAN. Chinese commanders committed their fair share of blunders even as they caught some big breaks. Friction bedeviled the Chinese navy. This more complete picture of the incident provides a sounder basis for evaluating the campaign and for assessing the lessons the Chinese may have learned from the battle.

Primacy of Politics. China's political leadership retained a firm grip on all aspects of the campaign.⁴⁰ Operational imperatives repeatedly gave way to larger strategic considerations. On the day the Vietnamese landed on Robert and Money Islands, Mao Zedong personally approved the initial decision to respond more forcefully.⁴¹ He would maintain a watchful eye throughout the conflict. As the PLAN assembled its forces, the MAC stood up a six-member leading small group, headed by Marshal Ye Jianying and Deng Xiaoping to supervise the entire operation.⁴² Working out of the Xishan Command Center under the General Staff Department, the group assumed direct operational control and reported directly to Chairman Mao and the Politburo. Ye and Deng set the parameters of the campaign and asserted their will at key junctures during the battle and its aftermath.

Uncertainties surrounding possible U.S. reactions to escalation in the Paracels may in part explain the close political oversight of the operation. On the one hand, the 1973 Paris Peace Accords and the subsequent withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces in South Vietnam had dramatically reduced America's stake in the fate of its client. The burden had shifted to Saigon to look after its own security. War weariness afflicted decision makers in Washington as well. Simultaneously, Sino-American ties were still basking in the afterglow of rapprochement in 1972. Both sides were eager to court each other's friendship to counterbalance the Soviet threat. China's tepid response to the U.S. mining of Haiphong following Hanoi's Easter offensive signaled that great-power interests had eclipsed those of the regional players. The crisis over the Paracels thus represented a golden opportunity to seize the islands while China's strategic value to the United States remained very high.

On the other hand, Saigon was still Washington's ally. Equally worrying to the Chinese, the United States had appeared tacitly to support its client's position throughout the American phase of the Vietnam War; U.S. reconnaissance flights over the Paracels in the 1960s had drawn numerous protests from China. A violent clash of arms was certain to draw Washington's unwanted attention. Moreover, any U.S. diplomatic or military support to the RVN almost certainly would have transformed the strategic landscape and the local balance of power. The imperative to keep the United States out, even if direct American involvement was deemed unlikely, probably shaped the conduct of operations.

Recent Chinese accounts suggest that decision makers in Beijing carefully weighed the risk of U.S. intervention during the crisis as they contemplated each move. According to Admiral Kong Zhaonian, then the deputy commander of the Chinese navy, the tactical principle of not firing the first shot in part reflected worries about third-party intervention.⁴³ By conceding the first tactical move to the RVN Navy—so went the logic—China could cast South Vietnam as the aggressor, thus complicating America's diplomatic position. The Chinese therefore

framed (and still regard) the engagement as a “counterattack in self-defense.” Conversely, evidence that China had drawn first blood might have given Washington a more tangible reason to back Saigon.

Such caution extended to the battle’s immediate aftermath. Buoyed by operational success, the South Sea Fleet’s commander, Zhang Yuanpei, ordered his warships to give chase and sink the fleeing enemy vessels; but the commander of the Guangzhou Military Region, Xu Shiyu, speaking for the MAC, countermanded Zhang’s directive.⁴⁴ Fears of horizontal escalation again stayed the PLAN’s hand.

Concerns about a hostile U.S. response also stimulated debate about evicting Vietnamese forces from Robert, Pattle, and Money Islands. Intelligence reports that U.S. Navy warships were headed to the Paracels from the Philippines further alarmed the leading small group.⁴⁵ While the PLAN was likely tempted to ride the momentum of victory at sea, such a seizure would represent a major escalation. Chinese leaders feared that Washington might interpret such a climb up the ladder as a threat to the prebattle status quo. Admiral Kong recalled that even though plans and forces were in place to conduct the island landings, local commanders held back until their political masters made up their minds. Members of the leading small group apparently agonized over the decision to put troops ashore. In the end, Ye Jianying and Deng Xiaoping adjudicated the debate and ordered the Guangzhou Military Region to go forward with the amphibious assault.⁴⁶

The absence of outside intervention—due in no small part to tight political control of military operations—was crucial to the strategic success of the naval engagement.

David vs. Goliath. The battle exposed China’s military vulnerability to its south. Owing to Sino-Soviet and cross-strait tensions, Beijing’s strategic gaze was riveted to the north and east. Not surprisingly, the PLAN’s most capable ships belonged to the North Sea and East Sea Fleets. The South Sea Fleet’s feeble force structure reflected the South China Sea’s backwater status. As the crisis unfolded, the fleet had few seagoing forces suitable for operations in the Paracels, a predicament certainly made worse by the travails experienced during the Cultural Revolution. The frigate *Nanning*, a converted ex-Imperial Japanese Navy warship, was well past its service life. As noted, the three Type 065 frigates were not ready for sea duty. The PLAN’s fast-attack craft suffered from limited range and questionable seaworthiness. Only the submarine chasers and minesweepers possessed the range to sustain patrols that far south.

Chinese commentators frequently point to the unfavorable tactical situation confronting PLAN commanders on the eve of battle.⁴⁷ The RVN Navy clearly outsized and outgunned the PLAN: HQ-4 displaced nearly 1,600 tons at full load and was armed with two three-inch guns; HQ-5 and HQ-16 each displaced about

1,766 tons and were each equipped with a five-inch gun; HQ-10 displaced 650 tons and carried a three-inch gun. By contrast, the PLAN's *Kronshtadt*-class submarine chaser, Type 010 oceangoing minesweeper, and Hainan-class sub chaser displaced 310, 500, and 500 tons, respectively. All were armed with smaller-caliber guns than their Vietnamese counterparts. As one study notes, even the largest PLAN ship was smaller than the RVN's smallest vessel.⁴⁸

Yet China's navy won. Chinese analysts credit the officers and sailors alike for their tactical skill and *élan*.⁴⁹ Such intangible qualities, in their eyes, more than made up for the PLAN's lack of heft and firepower. Indeed, the fighting spirit of No. 398's crew, which engaged in the equivalent of hand-to-hand combat against HQ-10, remains part of the Chinese navy's lore. That the PLAN overcame such material asymmetries certainly dovetailed with the service's long-standing small-ship ethos. From the founding of the People's Republic, the Chinese navy found itself struggling from a position of inferiority against the U.S.-backed Nationalist forces. Yet in the 1950s and 1960s the PLAN repeatedly bested its archrival at sea, employing speed, daring, and stratagems. To Chinese observers, the battle for the Paracels thus represents yet another example of how an enterprising and determined weaker side can beat the strong.

However, such a feel-good story is overly simplistic, if not misleading. The PLAN's success resulted as much from Vietnamese incompetence and mistakes as it did from Chinese tactical virtuosity.⁵⁰ For example, some Chinese analysts criticize the RVN Navy for dividing the flotilla during the initial approach on the morning of 19 January. Had the Vietnamese concentrated their forces and their fire—so goes this line of reasoning—they might have picked off PLAN warships in sequence.⁵¹ At the same time, the decision to charge Chinese positions was imprudent. Proximity played to the opponent's strengths while negating the RVN's advantages in range and firepower. Had the Vietnamese struck the Chinese from a greater distance (assuming the crews possessed the necessary gunnery skills), they might have avoided the close-in combat that so favored China's tactical preferences. In other words, a more capable and less cooperative opponent might have changed the battle's outcome. A false lesson thus lurks for the Chinese.

Fog, Friction, and Chance. During this battle Carl von Clausewitz would have instantly recognized "the countless minor incidents" that "combine to lower the general level of performance."⁵² The terribly timed mechanical failures of the Type 065 frigates—the South Sea Fleet's most suitable combatants for the mission—set back the PLAN just as tensions rose in the Paracels. Had the frigates been available and rushed to the scene, the battle might have tipped even more favorably toward China. Alternatively, their presence might have deterred the Vietnamese from attacking in the first place.⁵³

However, the Chinese improvised, and managed—barely—to cobble together a flotilla in response to the RVN's naval presence. Even so, the PLAN was very fortunate that the weather cooperated. The operation took place during the northeast monsoon season, when surges—involving gusts of forty knots or more—can strike without much warning. Had nature turned against the PLA, the small combatants would have had trouble handling the rough seas, spelling trouble for the entire operation. The PLAN was as lucky as it was good.

Command-and-control problems plagued the Chinese. On the night of 17 January, reinforcements consisting of torpedo boats were on their way to the Paracels but were recalled because of overlapping chains of command. The PLAN's deputy commander had arranged for the short-legged craft to refuel at Woody Island before heading into the combat zone. Unaware of the plan, the Guangzhou Military Region's commander ordered the ships back to port, citing lack of fuel.⁵⁴ Had the torpedo boats been present when hostilities broke out, the PLAN might have won an even more decisive battle. Alternatively, the Vietnamese might have backed down instead of picking a fight.

The late arrival of sub chasers Nos. 281 and 282 was yet another instance of poor communications. On the night of 18 January, Wei Mingsen, the flotilla commander, had received intelligence that the Vietnamese planned to attack the next day. He thus requested that fleet headquarters dispatch Nos. 281 and 282, which were awaiting instructions at Woody Island, only three to four hours away. Yet it took the two ships more than twelve hours to arrive, well after the heaviest fighting had ended. A postbattle investigation revealed that the South Sea Fleet headquarters in Zhanjiang failed to follow proper communications protocol, thus contributing to the significant delay in relaying the deployment orders.⁵⁵ Had the ships reached the Paracels earlier, the confrontation might have unfolded quite differently.

The inability of the PLAN's land-based airpower, centered on the J-6 fighter, to conduct sustained combat air patrols exposed the Chinese flotilla to enemy airpower. South Vietnam's F-5 fighters similarly lacked the range to loiter over the Paracels for more than five to fifteen minutes. Some Chinese analysts believe that the appearance of the J-6s over the Paracels, even for a short time, boosted morale and produced a certain deterrent effect on the adversary.⁵⁶ But this assertion is difficult to test and verify. The Chinese were simply fortunate that the air was uncontested.

Chance favored the Chinese navy again when Mao ordered the East Sea Fleet to send reinforcements to the Paracels. Interfleet cooperation was rare, if not unheard of, with regional fleet autonomy the norm. It is unclear whether the lack of interoperability added to the friction. Intriguingly, Taiwan did not object to the

transit through the strait and made no moves to obstruct passage, even though it was well positioned to harass the PLAN warships.⁵⁷ The Chinese leadership, bracing for a possible Nationalist ambush, was puzzled and pleasantly surprised by this conspicuous inactivity.⁵⁸ Taiwan was clearly a complicating factor that could have, at the very least, delayed the arrival of the three frigates. Beijing's ability to maneuver forces along the maritime periphery depended on Taipei's acquiescence, if not goodwill. Perhaps leaders on both sides of the strait tacitly agreed that South Vietnam's position in the South China Sea needed to be overturned.

In another example of Clausewitzian fog and friction, a Chinese oiler piloted by a crew unfamiliar with local waters ran aground on a reef. The tanker was en route to replenish the assortment of fast-attack craft that had assembled to seize the Vietnamese-held islands on 20 January. The combatants, capable only of one-way trips to the combat zone, were desperately short on fuel. Fuel-storage facilities did not exist on Woody Island, so only the grounded oiler could have supplied the fuel in offshore waters. Apparently out of options, the South Sea Fleet ordered submarine 157 to step in as a substitute. After filling its ballast tanks with fuel, the boat sprinted to the Paracels at full speed on the surface, a particularly risky move in a time of hostilities. This hastily improvised and highly unorthodox method of delivering fuel worked, to the relief of Chinese naval commanders. Even so, this logistical failure left the PLAN's flotilla dangerously exposed to a vigorous Vietnamese counterattack. Had the enemy contested the seas, this glitch could well have cascaded into disaster for the Chinese navy.

Paramilitary Instruments of Maritime Power. The civil-military integration of China's maritime power, involving the militia and the fishing trawlers, contributed directly to operational success. The militia, stationed forward on Woody Island, acted on short notice. Akin to a rapid-response force, the militia slipped onto the Crescent Group's southeastern islands under the cover of night, preempting the Vietnamese. Indeed, the militia threw back RVN commandos attempting to seize the islands the next day. The ability to act quickly and effectively denied operational objectives to the enemy while likely buying time for regular troops to mobilize on the mainland. Finally, the militia took part in the seizure of Robert and Pattle Islands that helped to secure China's control of the entire archipelago.

At sea, trawlers Nos. 402 and 407 acted as first responders. Months before the battle, the fishing boats maintained initial presence in the Paracels while asserting claims to the islands by planting flags on them. The trawlers then sent early warning to headquarters ashore when RVN warships first arrived in the Paracels. The leaders on board also furnished tactical intelligence to the PLAN's local commanders at sea. The ships helped transfer the militia onto Duncan, Drummond, and Palm Islands the night before the battle and provided the means to conduct

landings on Vietnamese-held islands after the RVN warships fled the area. The fishing boats were pivotal in the rescue of crippled minesweeper No. 389.

A closer look at the institutional affiliation of Nos. 402 and 407 helps explain their active participation throughout the confrontation. The trawlers belonged to the South China Sea Aquatic Produce Company, an entity that had been operating in the Paracels since 1955.⁵⁹ The company, in turn, fell under the control of the Paracels, Spratlys, and Zhongsha Islands Authority, a county-level administrative organ of Guangdong's provincial government. The authority was responsible for exercising sovereignty and jurisdiction over the islands and surrounding waters. Established in 1959, it was abolished in 2012 to yield to the establishment of Sansha, a prefecture-level city on Woody Island that claimed administrative powers over all islands and features in the South China Sea.

The fisheries company and the vessels it operated were also institutionally linked to the militia. The militia came under the dual leadership of Hainan's military district and the Chinese Communist Party's Work Committee of the Paracels, Spratlys, and Zhongsha Islands. The aforementioned authority—responsible for the fishing company—and the work committee formed a combined agency that administered the South China Sea islands under China's control. It is thus not surprising that Nos. 402 and 407 coordinated so closely with their militia and PLA counterparts. The PLAN drew strength from interagency cooperation.

Wei Mingsen revealed that the fishing company's deputy director, Zhang Binglin, was on board No. 407 to supervise the trawlers personally. In fact, Zhang boarded Wei's ship to share intelligence about the Vietnamese prior to battle and organized the 18 January militia landings on the islands. According to Wei, Zhang was a demobilized PLA soldier who boasted of "rich combat experience."⁶⁰ Yang Gui, the captain of No. 407 and leader of the militia on board, also conferred with Wei in person to confirm the presence of HQ-16.⁶¹ Yang has described the core of his fishermen as "first-rate militia."⁶² Both Wei and Yang recalled that militia had ready access to grenades, high-powered rifles, and machine guns below decks.

In contrast to a naval presence that could have conveyed belligerence, the trawlers gave China a low-profile means to back up its territorial claims. Even though the fishing boats engaged in provocative behavior, the ambiguities surrounding their identity and purpose furnished plausible deniability to Chinese leaders. The ostensibly civilian character of the trawlers added ammunition to Beijing's diplomatic narrative that Saigon was the aggressor. Indeed, a U.S. intelligence report cited "Saigon's military response to the move of Chinese fishermen into the Crescent group" as the "key step in the escalation."⁶³ This interpretation conformed to the story that Beijing likely wanted to tell.

HISTORY RHYMING?

Chinese behavior during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident exhibits operational preferences that echo the 1974 Sino-Vietnamese clash in the Paracels. The more recent crisis began when a Philippine reconnaissance aircraft detected five Chinese fishing trawlers working near the shoal, located some two hundred kilometers west of Luzon Island. To investigate the activities taking place inside what the Philippines considers its exclusive economic zone, Manila dispatched the navy's flagship, BRP *Gregorio del Pilar* (a former U.S. Coast Guard cutter). The discovery of coral, clams, and sharks on board the Chinese boats set in motion an action-reaction cycle. As the Philippine Navy sought to stop the poachers from hauling home the illegal catch, two China Marine Surveillance vessels intervened, precluding further Philippine attempts to enforce the law. To ease tensions, Manila recalled the frigate and deployed a coast guard vessel in its place. Rather than reciprocate the gesture, Beijing turned up the pressure by sending the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command's newest ship, adding heft to the Chinese show of resolve.

With at least eight Chinese vessels facing off against a lone Philippine cutter, the balance of forces clearly favored Beijing. Moreover, in the event of escalation, China's civilian boats and paramilitary forces could count on the long reach of the PLAN's striking power. While Chinese warships largely stayed out of sight during the crisis, their presence just beyond the horizon likely influenced Manila's strategic calculus. Even so, the Philippines refused to back down, leading to a months-long stalemate at sea. To bring an end to the standoff and arrest further deterioration in bilateral ties, the United States brokered a behind-the-scenes deal in which both sides agreed to remove their ships from the area. But shortly after the mutual withdrawals, China sent back its maritime law enforcement ships and closed off access to the shoal. Since then, Beijing has maintained a presence there, retaining de facto control of the feature and surrounding waters.

Just as armed trawlers played an outsize role throughout the Paracels campaign, civilian and paramilitary vessels took part in the Scarborough Shoal incident. Chinese fishing boats triggered both crises by engaging in activities that, at least in the eyes of rival claimants, were illicit or provocative. Militia-crewed boats in 1974 and paramilitary ships in 2012 acted as China's first line of defense, helping to probe the intentions and capabilities of their opponents while asserting Beijing's claims. The noncombatant vessels enjoyed the protection of the PLAN even as they served as the eyes and ears of the Chinese navy. Such mutual support enabled China to evaluate the tactical circumstances; demonstrate resolve without militarizing the confrontation during the initial stages; calibrate the level of coercive pressure needed to compel the opponent's will; and, should deterrence fail, apply force.

The civilian character of the Chinese vessels constrained their rivals' navies. The South Vietnamese and Philippine navies were apparently loath to fire directly on lightly armed or unarmed civilian vessels, lest they risk major escalation or diplomatic fallout. The two services thus found themselves maneuvering and posturing in vain to expel the Chinese ships. Even as China's maritime presence imposed a stalemate, Beijing depicted its adversaries' naval actions as major provocations, opening the way for a more muscular show of force. Nonmilitary units also deprived outside powers, such as the United States, of adequate rationale to intervene, yet they were more than enough to signal resolve to the local actors.

In both cases, Beijing waited for the other side to cross a red line before taking action that decisively settled the dispute in its favor. China's maritime services sprang into action only after South Vietnam and the Philippines committed their navies to confront the Chinese. Whether Beijing consciously maneuvered its opponents into making the apparent first move or its rivals stumbled into that first move is unclear. This "second-mover advantage" presumably conferred on China the moral high ground to achieve more ambitious territorial objectives. As Thomas Christensen observes, "It often appears that Beijing is waiting for provocations by others to legitimize Chinese actions that will consolidate control over the islands that China has claimed for decades but not administered in the past."⁶⁴ Similarly, Christopher Yung and Patrick McNulty contend that "China may be engaging in a 'status quo plus' approach to maritime territorial dispute management, maintaining the status quo until a rival acts to advance its territorial claims, and then responding vigorously to leave its rival in a disadvantaged position."⁶⁵

In both confrontations, the Chinese penchant for conceding the first move, at least as China perceived it, extended to tactical rules of engagement. In 1974, Chinese combatants were under strict orders not to fire the first shot. Demonstrating impressive discipline under duress, the PLAN unleashed its firepower only after the RVN Navy obligingly launched the initial salvo. While the 2012 standoff avoided a firefight, the burden was on the Philippines to evict the nonmilitary Chinese vessels through greater staying power or force. Beijing in essence dared Manila to punch first, confident in the knowledge that it would overwhelm the outgunned Philippine navy in retaliation. Manila wisely refused to take the bait. A similar dynamic is discernible in the ongoing Sino-Japanese tussle over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands. China Coast Guard vessels regularly intrude into or near the islands' territorial waters, perhaps in hopes of setting off an overreaction.

After Beijing forcibly ousted Saigon and nudged out Manila by way of third-party intervention, it built up overbearing power in the disputed areas that shut out the rival claimants. The combined military-civilian flotilla that appeared in force near the Paracels not only cemented China's operational gains but also

conferred permanence on the new status quo. Zhang Zhaozhong, a retired admiral and well-known talking head in Chinese media, memorably dubbed Beijing's postcrisis consolidation of its position around Scarborough a "cabbage strategy." The metaphor refers to the concentric layers of security—from the navy standing watch at the outermost ring to the maritime law enforcement ships and fishing boats patrolling along the inner rings—that surround the shoal. By hardening a new reality with physical presence, China sought to telegraph irreversibility to outside audiences.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The United States and its regional partners confront an increasingly competitive maritime environment. From a strictly material perspective, the Chinese navy today is incomparably more powerful than it was in 1974. A replay of a weak and unprepared China facing off against a better-armed local opponent is virtually inconceivable.

At the tactical level, the roles have reversed rather dramatically: the PLAN outguns many of its Asian neighbors, including Vietnam, by significant margins. Indeed, the South Sea Fleet is no longer the neglected, rickety fleet from four decades ago. It now commands a large share of the service's newest surface combatants and, significantly, its base in Hainan is home to nuclear attack and nuclear ballistic missile submarines.

Woody Island has evolved from a primitive outpost four decades ago to a staging area from which fighters and warships can be launched. Farther south, a group of newly created artificial islands boasts runways and port facilities that can accommodate PLA air and naval forces. Should a network of mutually supporting, well-defended bases emerge across the South China Sea, a permanent forward presence would add teeth to China's coercive leverage in maritime disputes.

Overall, China now possesses the military power to impose costs on the United States about which Chinese leaders in 1974 could have only dreamed. Modern Chinese destroyers, frigates, fast-attack craft, and submarines bristle with long-range antiship cruise missiles that can strike from standoff distances. Shore-based aircraft and truck-mounted cruise and ballistic missiles can reach deep into the South China Sea, furnishing the kinds of protective cover that naval units in 1974 sorely lacked.

Somewhat counterintuitively, a more powerful PLA could render unnecessary violent clashes like the Paracels battle. Instead, China may rely even more on its maritime law enforcement ships—the signature feature of China's maritime coercion in recent years—to assert its territorial claims while the Chinese navy backstops such noncombatant units from just over the horizon. The Scarborough Shoal incident and the ongoing face-off over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands

amply demonstrate this civil-military integration of maritime power. Greater conventional military means will thus further empower irregular forces to impose China's will on rival claimants. And, if all else fails, Beijing can still call on its navy to settle a dispute. That China—unlike its weaker rivals—has the option of climbing the escalation ladder only amplifies the intimidation factor. Indeed, the navy's lurking presence may induce an opponent to back down in a crisis, as it apparently did during the Scarborough confrontation.

Even as the PLAN bulks up on more-capable platforms, China's maritime paramilitary forces are growing and modernizing at a breathtaking pace. According to a 2015 Pentagon report, China is pursuing "the largest MLE [maritime law enforcement] modernization effort in Asia" and "China's MLE fleet . . . is likely to increase in size by 25 percent and is larger than that of all of the other claimants combined."⁶⁶ The Paracels battle illustrates that China's employment of paramilitary units at sea is by no means a new phenomenon. Moreover, the clash reveals a well-pedigreed institutional nexus between the military and the maritime militia. Decades-long adherence to People's War under Mao helped hone the kinds of doctrine, personnel, command-and-control, and administrative structures well suited to combining conventional and irregular means. Such creative uses of civilian and militia personnel date back centuries; there may be more continuity to current Chinese strategy in offshore disputes than is commonly acknowledged.⁶⁷ Washington and other, Asian capitals should recognize that the complex interplay of Chinese naval and nonmilitary instruments of sea power will likely be a permanent fixture in regional maritime disputes.

Hybrid warfare, to use today's parlance, is neither novel nor unique to China. Russia, too, resorted to the use of paramilitary troops to dismember parts of Ukraine while avoiding a wider conflict with the West. There is thus an underlying logic of strategy that transcends the peculiarities of China's way of warfare. The apparent efficacy of mixing unorthodox methods with traditional tools of war suggests that China may turn to this playbook again in future confrontations in the South China Sea. With a more formidable conventional military backing up China's large and growing paramilitary forces, hybrid warfare could become an even more attractive and effective option for Beijing in the coming years. The United States and other stakeholders in the region must be alert to this prospect.

NOTES

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1. A fine exception is Taylor Fravel's account of the battle and an explanation for the outbreak of hostilities between China and South Vietnam. See M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders*,

- Secure Nation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 272–87. For a lively retelling of the battle, see Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2014), pp. 70–78.
2. For early standard accounts of the battle, see Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Seapower* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1982), pp. 268–69, and David G. Muller, *China as a Maritime Power* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1983), pp. 152–54.
 3. For discussion of the PLAN's operational history, see 杜景臣 [Du Jingchen], ed., 中国海军军人手册 [Handbook for Officers and Enlisted of the Chinese Navy] (Beijing: Haichao, 2012), pp. 7–16.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 609.
 5. For general accounts of the battle, see 王传友 胡延波 郭红彬 [Wang Chuanyou, Hu Yanbo, and Guo Hongbin], 海防安全论 [On Coastal Defense] (Beijing: Haiyang, 2007), pp. 86–88; 房功利 杨学军 相违 [Fang Gongli, Yang Xuejun, and Xiang Wei], 中国人民解放军海军60年 (1949–2009) [China People's Liberation Army Navy, 60 Years (1949–2009)] (Qingdao: Qingdao, 2009), pp. 204–206; and 李明春 吉国 [Li Mingchun and Ji Guo], 海洋强国梦 [Maritime Power Dream] (Beijing: Haiyang, 2014), pp. 114–18.
 6. The two South Vietnamese references used for this article are Kiem Do and Julie Kane, *Counterpart: A South Vietnamese Naval Officer's War* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998), and Ha Van Ngac, “The January 19, 1974, Naval Battle for the Paracels against the People's Republic of China Navy in the East Sea,” *HQHH Dallas*, 2015, vnnavydallas.com/. At the time of the battle, Captain Kiem was the deputy chief of staff for operations of the RVN Navy, the third-highest-ranking officer in the service, while Captain Ngac was commander of the task force involved in the Paracels battle.
 7. 石云生 [Shi Yunsheng], ed., 中国海军百科全书 [Encyclopedia of the Chinese Navy] (Beijing: Haichao, 1999), p. 1746.
 8. Bruce A. Elleman, “China's 1974 Naval Expedition to the Paracel Islands,” in *Naval Power and Expeditionary Warfare: Peripheral Campaigns and New Theatres of Naval Warfare*, ed. Bruce A. Elleman and S. C. M. Paine (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 143–44.
 9. South Vietnamese troops stationed in the Paracels may have been furnishing meteorological data to the United States.
 10. 李炳夫 [Li Bingfu], “西沙海战中的永兴岛钻探” [Drilling at Woody Island during the Paracels Battle], *China Petrochem*, no. 16 (August 2012), pp. 80–83. Li was a member of the oil-prospecting team on Woody Island. The team found no oil on the island.
 11. 郭富文 [Guo Fuwen], “那场英勇的海战” [That Heroic Sea Battle], *People's Navy*, 21 January 2014, p. 4.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. Vietnamese accounts describe the trawlers as steel-hulled, armed civilian ships disguised as fishing boats. Kiem and Kane, *Counterpart*, p. 176; Ngac, “Battle for the Paracels,” pp. 46 and 57.
 14. The Vietnamese warships were all hand-me-downs from the U.S. Navy. HQ-16 was the former USS *Chincoteague*, a seaplane tender of World War II vintage; the destroyer HQ-4 was the ex-USS *Forster* destroyer escort; the frigate HQ-5 was another former U.S. Navy tender; and the fleet minesweeper HQ-10 was the ex-USS *Serene* minesweeper.
 15. 魏鸣森 [Wei Mingsen], “我是怎么指挥西沙海战的” [How I Commanded the Paracels Sea Battle], *Modern Ships*, no. 8 (2007), p. 26. Wei Mingsen assumed command of the flotilla and deployed to the front lines on board No. 271, the flagship of the task force.
 16. “海军司令员谈西沙海战” [Navy Commander Discusses Paracels Battle], *Modern Ships*, no. 1A (2008), p. 16. This article is based on an interview with Adm. Kong Zhaonian, the deputy commander of the PLAN during the Paracels battle, who recounts key aspects of the clash.
 17. Du Jingchen, *Handbook for Officers and Enlisted*, p. 610.
 18. 杨贵华 [Yang Guihua], ed., 中国人民解放军战史教程 [Chinese People's Liberation Army War History Course] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science, 2013), p. 233. According to Captain Kiem and Captain Ngac, HQ-5 launched the amphibious assault team to land on Duncan Island. Kiem and Kane,

- Counterpart*, p. 176; Ngac, "Battle for the Paracels," p. 54.
19. The ramming is reported in Shi Yunsheng, *Encyclopedia of the Chinese Navy*, p. 1747. Another account reports that it was HQ-5 that rammed Nos. 396 and 389. See 梁芳 [Liang Fang], ed., 海战史与未来海战研究 [Sea Battle History and Research on Future Sea Battles] (Beijing: Haiyang, 2007), p. 199.
 20. Guo Fuwen, "That Heroic Sea Battle," p. 4.
 21. 杜作义 张云卿 [Du Zuoyi and Zhang Yunqing], "维护海洋权益 痛歼入侵之敌" [Defending Maritime Rights, Annihilating Invading Enemy], *Journal of Political Work*, no. 7 (1994), p. 17. *Journal of Political Work* is a monthly periodical published through the Dalian Naval Academy on behalf of the PLAN's Political Department. Du was No. 389's navigator, while Zhang was the political commissar on board No. 271.
 22. 李兆心 [Li Zhaoxin], "我所经历的西沙海战" [What I Experienced during the Paracels Sea Battle], *Party History Collection*, no. 7 (2009), p. 35. Li was a cryptographer working in the intelligence section of the South Sea Fleet headquarters.
 23. Wei Mingsen recounts that No. 271 was two thousand meters away from the Vietnamese when the shooting started. The Chinese then closed to a distance of tens of meters. See Wei Mingsen, "How I Commanded the Paracels Sea Battle," p. 30. The PLAN's handbook reports that the two sides closed from a range of one thousand meters to three hundred meters. See Du Jingchen, *Handbook for Officers and Enlisted*, p. 610.
 24. Captain Ngac corroborates the damage to HQ-4. See Ngac, "Battle for the Paracels," p. 60.
 25. Accounts about No. 389's actions vary substantially. Du Zuoyi and Zhang Yunqing recall that Nos. 396 and 389 turned their guns on HQ-10 after suppressing HQ-16's gunfire. See Du Zuoyi and Zhang Yunqing, "Defending Maritime Rights, Annihilating Invading Enemy," p. 17. Similarly, Wei Mingsen saw Nos. 396 and 389 fire into HQ-10 after driving off HQ-16. See Wei Mingsen, "How I Commanded the Paracels Sea Battle," p. 31. Others contend that HQ-10 charged minesweeper No. 389 to relieve HQ-16, then under heavy attack from Nos. 396 and 389. In this version of events, HQ-10 is hit while trying to save HQ-16. See Liang Fang, *Sea Battle History and Research on Future Sea Battles*, p. 199. According to the PLAN's official encyclopedia, it was No. 389 that charged HQ-10. The account in *People's Navy* corroborates the encyclopedia. See Shi Yunsheng, *Encyclopedia of the Chinese Navy*, p. 1747, and Guo Fuwen, "That Heroic Sea Battle," p. 4.
 26. Du Zuoyi and Zhang Yunqing, "Defending Maritime Rights, Annihilating Invading Enemy," p. 17; Guo Fuwen, *Encyclopedia of the Chinese Navy*, p. 4.
 27. Captain Kiem claims that an antiship cruise missile sank HQ-10, while Captain Ngac reports that he sighted a Komar-class guided-missile boat. Ngac likely mistook the arriving sub chaser reinforcement for the missile boat. Kiem and Kane, *Counterpart*, p. 178; Ngac, "Battle for the Paracels," pp. 63 and 72.
 28. Guo Fuwen, *Encyclopedia of the Chinese Navy*, p. 4.
 29. 刘礼峰 丁伟 [Liu Lifeng and Ding Wei], "西沙自卫反击作战 终极解密" [Paracels Self-defense Counterattack Operations Decoded], *Military History*, no. 6 (2005), p. 13.
 30. Ibid.
 31. Liang Fang, *Sea Battle History and Research on Future Sea Battles*, p. 200. Kiem contends that the RVN Navy sank a Chinese torpedo boat and a trawler, while Ngac claims that his forces sank No. 271. Kiem and Kane, *Counterpart*, p. 178; Ngac, "Battle for the Paracels," p. 70.
 32. Captain Ngac reports that he was put in charge of a new task force, composed of HQ-5, HQ-6, and HQ-17, to retake the Paracels. Owing to concerns that the warships were inadequate to fulfill the mission, the plan was subsequently canceled. Ngac, "Battle for the Paracels," p. 77.
 33. 张伟 [Zhang Wei], "毛泽东一生中决策的最后一仗—西沙群岛保卫战" [Mao Zedong's Strategic Decisions in the Last Battle: Defensive Battle for the Paracel Islands], *Party History Collection*, no. 10 (2008), p. 41. Chinese naval vessels typically avoided the Taiwan Strait, preferring to detour around Taiwan's east coast to reach the South China Sea.
 34. For an account of the tense passage through the Taiwan Strait, see 李兆新 [Li Zhaoxin],

- “西沙海战中我支援军舰顺利通过台湾海峡的真实过程” [The Real Story behind Our Warships Successfully Passing through the Taiwan Strait during the Paracels Battle], *Party History Collection*, no. 10 (2010), pp. 46–48. Li was on duty during the passage of the three frigates, witnessing the entire course of events.
35. The submarines were part of the 32nd Submarine Flotilla.
 36. See an oral account by 杨宝林 [Yang Baolin] recorded in 林儒生 [Lin Rusheng], “西沙海战中的潜艇兵” [A Submariner during the Paracels Battle], *Ordnance Knowledge*, no. 11 (2014), pp. 76–79. Yang was an electrician on board 159. Yang later became the political commissar of submarine 296.
 37. Captain Ngac recounts his fears that Romeo- and Whiskey-class submarines might be lurking along the route between Da Nang and the Paracels. In hindsight, his concerns appear justified. Ngac, “Battle for the Paracels,” p. 64.
 38. See oral accounts by crew members on board submarine 158 in 林儒生 [Lin Rusheng], “西沙海战中的潜艇预伏战” [Submarine Patrols during the Paracels Battle], *Ordnance Knowledge*, no. 4 (2015), p. 81.
 39. 刘华清 [Liu Huaqing], 刘华清回忆录 [Memoirs of Liu Huaqing] (Beijing: Liberation Army Press, 2007), pp. 338–43.
 40. For accounts of the Military Affairs Commission's directives to naval forces in the Paracels, see 高新生 [Gao Xinsheng], 中国共产党领导集体—海防思想研究 (1949–2009) [Study of Coastal Defense Thought of the Chinese Communist Party's Leading Group (1949–2009)] (Beijing: Shishi, 2010), pp. 171–74, and 吴寒月 [Wu Hanyue], 中国共产党海防思想研究 [Study of Coastal Defense Thought of the Chinese Communist Party] (Beijing: National Defense Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 126–28.
 41. Zhang Wei, “Mao Zedong's Strategic Decisions in the Last Battle,” p. 39.
 42. Ye Jianying, then vice chairman of the Party Central Committee and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, managed the day-to-day affairs of the Military Affairs Commission. Zhou Enlai put Ye in charge of the leading small group. See 范硕 [Fan Shuo], ed., 叶剑英传 [Biography of Ye Jianying] (Beijing: Contemporary China Press, 2015), p. 378. See also 宋毅军 [Song Yijun], “邓小平和叶剑英在1974年西沙自卫反击战前后” [Deng Xiaoping and Ye Jianying during the 1974 Paracels Self-defense Counterattack], *Party History Collection*, no. 7 (2014), p. 11.
 43. “Navy Commander Discusses Paracels Battle,” p. 15.
 44. Li Zhaoxin, “Real Story behind Our Warships Successfully Passing through the Taiwan Strait,” p. 33.
 45. Ye Jianying's biography corroborates this piece of intelligence. See Fan Shuo, *Biography of Ye Jianying*, p. 378. See also 赵小平 [Zhao Xiaoping], “叶剑英指挥西沙海战” [Ye Jianying Commands the Paracels Battle], *Modern Navy*, no. 6 (2000), p. 16.
 46. Zhao Xiaoping, “Ye Jianying Commands the Paracels Battle,” p. 16.
 47. For an assessment of the orders of battle on both sides, see 远林 唐毓璠 [Yuan Lin and Tang Yujin], “图说西沙海战” [Paracels Sea Battle Explained], *Modern Ships*, no. 10 (2001), pp. 35–37.
 48. Liang Fang, *Sea Battle History and Research on Future Sea Battles*, p. 199.
 49. The PLAN's tactical performance is especially noteworthy given the ravages of the Cultural Revolution. Two factors may have accounted for China's success. By 1974, the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution were over. Nationalism may have also sustained morale and the physical courage to fight.
 50. Vietnamese sources indicate that the RVN task force suffered major tactical and technical problems. HQ-10 was running on only one engine when the fighting started. See Kiem and Kane, *Counterpart*, p. 177, and Ngac, “Battle for the Paracels,” p. 40. HQ-4's main guns malfunctioned during the first critical minutes of the battle. See Kiem and Kane, *Counterpart*, p. 177, and Ngac, “Battle for the Paracels,” pp. 59 and 76. In the confusion of the skirmish, HQ-16 was struck by friendly fire. See Kiem and Kane, *Counterpart*, p. 178, and Ngac, “Battle for the Paracels,” p. 76. Finally, the RVN Air Force's F-5 fighters did not possess sufficient range to provide adequate cover to the naval units. See Kiem and Kane, *Counterpart*, p. 176, and Ngac, “Battle for the Paracels,” p. 61.

51. 刘振华 [Liu Zhenhua], “西沙海战胜利原因分析及对当前南海争端的启示” [Analysis of the Reasons behind the Victory in the Paracels Battle and Lessons for the Current South China Sea Disputes], *Legal System and Society*, no. 9 (2009), p. 367.
52. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), p. 119.
53. For this counterfactual analysis, see 镭射 [Lei She], “如果65型护卫舰参加西沙海战” [If the Type 65 Frigate Had Joined the Paracels Sea Battle], *Modern Ships*, no. 11 (2012), p. 3.
54. Interview with Adm. Kong Zhaonian, “Navy Commander Discusses Paracels Battle,” p. 15.
55. 张毓清 [Zhang Yuqing], “亲历西沙之战” [Witness to the Paracels Battle], *History*, no. 7 (2011), p. 69. Zhang was the navigator of No. 281. According to Zhang, when No. 281 arrived at Woody Island, its crew shut off its radio and transferred communication links to facilities ashore, in line with protocol. But, for some reason, the South Sea Fleet headquarters kept radioing No. 281. According to standard practice, the fleet headquarters should have contacted shore command instead. Rear Admiral Zhang later served as commander of the training department of PLAN headquarters and as a department chair at China's National Defense University.
56. 尹恩忠 李楠 [Yin Enzhong and Li Nan], “西沙海战中思想政治工作的经验及启示” [The Experience and Lessons of Political Work during the Paracels Sea Battle], *Journal of Political Work*, no. 7 (2014), p. 34.
57. Theories abound about Taiwan's apparent passivity. Some believe Chiang Kai-shek, who shared the People's Republic's claims over the South China Sea, tacitly allowed the Chinese frigates to pass unmolested. Others speculate that back-channel communications won Chiang's approval of the transit. See 张春英 [Zhang Chunying], “海峡两岸对南沙和西沙群岛主权的共同维护” [Cross-strait Joint Protection of Spratly and Paracel Islands Sovereignty], *Military History*, no. 5 (2003), p. 27.
58. Li Zhaoxin, “Real Story behind Our Warships Successfully Passing through the Taiwan Strait,” p. 47.
59. The company was first established in Guangzhou in 1954 and moved to the town of Baimajing in Hainan in 1958. Formerly known as the State-Owned South China Sea Guano Company, the company mined guano on Woody Island from 1955 to 1962. After the company exhausted the guano supplies on the island in 1962, it was renamed the State-Owned South China Sea Aquatic Produce Company. Today, the South China Sea Fishing Industry Group is a major conglomerate. The web page summarizing its corporate history extols the contributions of No. 407 in the Paracels battle. The PLA conferred awards on nearly a hundred militia members employed by the company for their meritorious service. Images of No. 407, No. 402, and Yang Gui, the captain of No. 407, are available on the website. See www.nanhaifishery.com.
60. Wei Mingsen, “How I Commanded the Paracels Sea Battle,” p. 27.
61. 黄传友 舟欲行 [Huang Chuanyou and Zhou Yuhang], 海军—征战纪实 [Navy: Campaign Documentary] (Beijing: Liberation Army Literary Press, 2007), p. 328; 舒云 [Shu Yun], “西沙群岛自卫反击战内幕” [The Inside Story of the Paracel Islands Self-defense Counterattack], *Party History*, no. 10 (2000), p. 11.
62. 郑小红 杨少松 [Zheng Xiaohong and Yang Shaosong], “八旬老船长忆中越西沙海战: 冒险援救受伤战” [Eighty-Year-Old Captain Remembers the Sino-Vietnamese Paracels Sea Battle: Taking Risks to Save Wounded Warriors], *China News Online*, 18 January 2010, china.com/.
63. Central Intelligence Agency, “The Paracel Islands Incident,” memorandum, 21 January 1974, p. 3. Available from the *Digital National Security Archive*, www.search.proquest.com/dnsa.
64. Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), p. 261.
65. Christopher D. Yung and Patrick McNulty, “An Empirical Analysis of Claimant Tactics in the South China Sea,” *Strategic Forum*, no. 249 (August 2015), p. 10.
66. U.S. Department of Defense, *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, July 2015), p. 11.
67. See Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*, pp. 216–23.