

**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, RI**

***CAPITALIZING ON US COAST GUARD AUTHORITIES AND CAPABILITIES ACROSS  
THE COMPETITION CONTINUUM WITH THE RETURN OF GREAT POWER***

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**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

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## **Abstract**

### *Capitalizing on US Coast Guard Authorities and Capabilities Across the Competition Continuum with the return of Great Power*

The 2018 United States (US) National Defense Strategy (NDS) explicitly emphasizes the importance of capitalizing on the US Interagency and the US Joint force to employ all dimensions of national power, thus gaining and maintaining competitive advantages over peer competition. The Department of Defense (DoD) can specifically benefit from capitalizing on its relationship with the United States Coast Guard (USCG). Notably, the USCG maintains unique authorities and capabilities and is at all times both a branch of the armed forces (Title 10) and a federal law enforcement agency (Title 14). By effectively employing the USCG across the competition continuum, the US will reduce the risk of maritime miscalculation with the People's Republic of China (PRC), mitigate "gray zone" challenges, and fill capability gaps in the Pacific.

### Strategic Setting

With the return of Great Power competition, the United States (US) must rediscover how to best counter peer competitors, especially the People's Republic of China (PRC). Peer competition requires leaders to actively employ all instruments of national power, including diplomacy, information, military, and economic (DIME) means. Moreover, US civilian and military leaders must fully bolster interoperability among the US Joint Force and across the full range of military operations. This interoperability will allow the maximum exploitation of the unique service and the Interagency capabilities. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis was clear in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) that the US Interagency, the US Joint Force, and Indo-Pacific allies and partners are the means for effectively expanding competitive space in the Pacific and deterring aggression with vying rivals.<sup>1</sup>

US military commanders at all levels of war must heed the guidance presented in the NDS and fully exploit the various authorities and capabilities offered by the US Interagency and Joint Force. During the last decade, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) has operated extensively in the Yellow, South, and East China Seas (SCS and ECS) conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), illegal unregulated and unreported fisheries enforcement (IUU), and theater security cooperation (TSC). Additional engagements also include foreign military sales (FMS) to Bangladesh and Vietnam. The Department of Defense (DoD) can benefit from leveraging its relationship with the USCG, as the USCG maintains unique authorities and capabilities and is at all times both a Title 10 branch of the armed forces and Title 14 federal law enforcement agency.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mattis, "2018 National Defense Strategy," 7-11.

<sup>2</sup> Title 14 United States Code (USC) § 1946 ed. – Establishment of the Coast Guard

By effectively employing the USCG across the full spectrum of competition, the US will reduce the risk of maritime miscalculation with the PRC, mitigate “gray zone” challenges, and fill capability gaps in the Pacific. First, USCG FONOPS and “white-hull diplomacy” in the ECS and SCS will effectively and safely facilitate US Info-Pacific Command’s (USINDOPACOM) objectives in a manner unlikely to trigger legal or institutional stimuli for armed conflict. Secondly, the USCG significantly augments the operational commander’s available force package as a force-multiplier for joint force lethality & deterrence in the Pacific. This is true for all phases of cooperation and conflict. Lastly, the USCG effectively enables a balance of operational factors, mitigates capability gaps in “gray zone” conflict and competition, and facilitates access to maritime infrastructure and basing in the USINDOPACOM AOR - tasks and challenges that are impossible for the DoD alone to address.

#### **De-Escalatory FONOPS and “White Hull Diplomacy”**

USCG FONOPS and “white hull diplomacy” in the ECS and SCS effectively and safely facilitate USINDOPACOM's objectives in a manner unlikely to trigger legal or institutional stimuli for armed conflict. Interaction between naval units are is and much more likely to result in miscalculation than those involving smaller and a less provocative Coast Guard, or law enforcement-centric force. Concurrently, the USCG presents additional confidence-building measures (CBM) that may reduce tension and the potential for maritime escalation.<sup>3</sup> CBMs are defined by joint doctrine and the social sciences as, “any set of unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral actions or procedures that act to reduce military tensions between a set or sets of states, before, during or after actual conflict.”<sup>4</sup> In practice, CBMs ensure the conduct of countries

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<sup>3</sup> Glaser, Bonnie S. Report. Council on Foreign Relations, 2015. Accessed 23 March 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05645](http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05645)

<sup>4</sup> Higgens, Holly. 2015. *Applying Confidence-Building Measures in a Regional Context*. Institute for Science and International Security.

are expected and predictable so that states can have certain expectations with regard to the behavior of other states.<sup>5</sup> Lastly, the PRC has demonstrated a notable proclivity to adopt service uniformity regarding interactions in the ECS and SCS. For instance, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships traditionally shadow only foreign ships of similar size and hull color. USCG cutters tasked with FONOPS in the ECS and SCS are rarely approached by PLAN "grey hulls", only the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG). During the National Security Cutter (NSC) BERTHOLF's deployment to US Navy (USN) Seventh Fleet, the cutter was shadowed both within China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and within a highly contested area of the SCS known as the "nine-dash line". However, only the CCG approached BERTHOLF, never the PLAN. This proves that USCG cutters bring service parity as well as risk mitigation to gray zone operations, through competition and conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, USCG white hulls do not convey the same overtly militaristic, war-fighting demeanor as regular naval forces employed for this purpose.<sup>7</sup> The USS BARRY, a USN guided-missile destroyer, was expelled in April of 2020 from the SCS for contesting the PRC's claims of the Parcel Islands. The destroyer was tracked and ultimately expelled by PLAN aircraft and ships. Credible US military sources attribute the expulsion primarily to the ship's combatant profile and arguably escalatory reputation from the PRC's purview. Furthermore, following the 2017 collision involving USN ship and a commercial tanker, the PRC's state-run media accused the USN of increasing overall risk in the region both militarily and navigationally. On the contrary, USCG-led FONOPS and engagements in the region are both observed and not contested by the PLAN.

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<sup>5</sup> Higgs, Holly. 2015. *Applying Confidence-Building Measures in a Regional Context*. Institute for Science and International Security.

<sup>6</sup> Driscoll, J. (Captain, USCG). Phone Conversation with LCDR Paul. 28 April 2020

<sup>7</sup> Collin, Koh. 2016. "The South China Sea's "White Hull Warfare". *The National Interest*.



Due to the PRC's service uniformity, the USN is unable to challenge the CCG, a hybrid maritime service notorious for intimidation and abusing power to breach the territorial sovereignty of weaker ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) neighbors.<sup>8</sup> Albeit, the USCG can execute de-escalatory FONOPS in close proximity to the CCG and effectively challenge their actions. Similarly, Dr. Geoffrey Till reiterates the importance of implementing an integrated and collaborative approach to offsetting the PRC's influence in the SCS. This requires synchronous USN/USCG efforts to effectively transmit the intended message across the cooperative yet competitive diplomatic spectrum.<sup>9</sup> USCG patrols pointedly demonstrate US presence and diplomacy in the region and contest the PRC's excessive territorial claims.

Third, the USCG's use of white hull diplomacy is increasing in the region and transcends the use of solely USCG cutters. The service maintains four high-visibility staff positions in the security cooperation environment in US embassies in Vietnam and the Philippines. These nations are key partners in Southeast Asia for countering various misinformation claims by the PLAN and CCG. Additionally, USCG holds the Senior Defense Officer position in Fiji, providing diplomatic advice and counsel to the country on deterring PRC's interests in cultivating support and interests in the region. The above examples also demonstrate how USCG cutters and staff positions augment the USN for these particular missions, which are again key strategic and operational objectives for USINDOPACOM. In addition, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) fear of being embarrassed in front of the international community keeps the PLAN's actions holistically professional. The CCP's fear of international embarrassment, and apparent respect for the USCG, serve as CBMs for deterring nefarious maritime activity by the PLAN or CCG.

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<sup>8</sup> Sato, Koki. "China's Maritime Militia: A Legal Point of View". *Maritime Issues*. 12 March 2020

<sup>9</sup> Till, Geoffrey. 2013. *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge.

Together, these influences will reduce overall risk to the US mission and force. This profound demonstration proves how the USCG contributes at all levels of competition, particularly during Phase 0 Shaping. USINDOPACOM must utilize the USCG for FONOPS and white hull diplomacy in the ECS and SCS to holistically reduce the risk of maritime miscalculation among the US and the PRC's maritime services. **(Recommendation One)**

### **Force-Multiplier for Joint Force Lethality and Deterrence**

The USCG significantly augments the Operational Commander's available force package as a force-multiplier for joint force lethality & deterrence in the Pacific. This holds true during all phases of cooperation and conflict with the PRC. Regrettably, the USCG's value-added to joint force lethality and capability is both misunderstood and undervalued. As current USINDOPACOM Commander, Admiral Philip Davidson, emphasizes, "we must increase joint force lethality and continue to develop and field capabilities necessary to deter aggression and prevail in armed conflict should deterrence fail."<sup>10</sup> In support of this priority, USCG National Security Cutters (NSC) often deploy and integrate with Carrier Strike Groups (CSG) in support of both national level tasking and USINDOPACOM objectives.

Unbeknownst to many, the majority of NSCs are homeported in the USINDOPACOM AOR and are capable of both embarking and fully integrating with certain USN helicopters, providing a force multiplier for anti-submarine warfare (ASW). The NSCs have joint tactical datalinks, ensuring interoperability that augments joint force lethality both at the tactical and operational levels of war (OLW)<sup>11</sup>. Any addition to the operational commander's ASW force package is crucial, especially provided the strength and capability of the PLAN's modernized

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<sup>10</sup> Davidson, Philip S. 2019. Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command. "Posture Statement".

<sup>11</sup> Commander, US Navy Third Fleet. *Operational Needs Statement for Link 16 on USCG National Security Cutters*. 19 October 2017. Unclassified.

submarine fleet. The USCG patrols in the region also deter CCG and militia aggression toward the commercial fishing industry of the Philippines and Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> This demonstrates the USCG's added value to the lethality of the Joint Force beyond Phase 0 Shaping, particularly to the subsurface domain. USINDOPACOM must integrate USCG NSCs into the available force package in order to increase joint force lethality, bolster capabilities, and deter the PRC's aggression and influence. **(Recommendation Two)**

### **Balance Factors Against Objectives and Fill Capability Gaps**

The USCG's unique authorities and capabilities specifically enable an effective balance of operational factors and mitigate capability gaps, challenges nearly impossible for the DoD alone to accomplish. For example, the USCG is capable of remedying the many aids to navigation (e.g., buoys) discrepancies in the USINDOPACOM theater, a well-noted hindrance to accessing many pacific ports. The DoD lacks this capability in both ships and expertise that are required to service these navigation aids. This limits the DoD's ability to access port and critical maritime infrastructure to sustain deployments, key operations, and lines of supply (LOS). This example is an important demonstration of Interagency cooperation and support to fill a key capability gap, one in which the USN and USCG recently leveraged to produce great effects.

As a renowned author and professor of operations at the Naval War College, Dr. Milan Vego states, "operational commanders and planners must balance the factors of space, time, and force against the objective. The factor of space can be brought into balance operating from shorter lines of operation (LOO) and prepositioning equipment and logistics supplies".<sup>13</sup> This dilemma holds true provided the vast expanse of space and the "tyranny of distance" in the USINDOPACOM area of responsibility (AOR). The USCG's special attributes bridge many

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<sup>12</sup> Collin, Koh. 2016. "The South China Sea's "White Hull Warfare". *The National Interest*.

<sup>13</sup> Vego, M. "Operational Warfare at Sea", 132-133.

authority and capability gaps at the OLW that have plagued leaders and operational planners for some time, particularly when the distance problem is exacerbated by peer competition. There is a crucial need to compete with greater agility at levels of competition short of war, or in the “gray zone”, and against multi-functional and dimensional threats.

Notably, in 2018 operational planners from US Navy Pacific Fleet (PACFLT) and USCG Pacific Area (PACAREA) partnered to devise inaugural operational employment for several buoy-tending USCG cutters. The units were ultimately tasked to hydrographically survey and remedy said navigational discrepancies in several Compact of Free Association (COFA) States, namely Federated Micronesia and Royal Marshall Islands.<sup>14</sup> These island nations are under increasing pressure from the PRC’s coercive economic strategy and are also deemed crucial geostrategic locations for sustaining US operations should conflict ensue. Tactically, this USCG capability or service enables USN ships to safely enter ports for operational or logistical reasons; however, this capability provides significant advantages at the OLW as well. By addressing this operational gap or shortfall in navigable access to key ports, the USCG better facilitates USINDOPACOM’s ability to balance factors space and time with desired military objectives, specifically extending the operational reach and reducing the PRC’s undesirable influence in the region.

While the USN is capable of executing a myriad of “steady-state” roles and missions, the organization lacks key authorities that enable the US to hedge against the risk of increased miscalculation with the PRC and bolster lasting US partnerships in the Pacific. The USCG’s statutory Title 14 authorities (Federal Law Enforcement) encompass these potential shortfalls and are codified in various bilateral agreements (bilats) with Pacific Island Nations (PIN),

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<sup>14</sup> Davidson, Philip S. 2019. Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command. “Posture Statement

namely for the purposes of prosecuting transnational crime in the said nations' territorial seas (TTS). Under the auspices of the bilats, USCG law enforcement teams, in tandem with indigenous host-nation riders, embark onboard USN ships in order to conduct law enforcement activities to suppress illegal fishing<sup>15</sup>. These efforts to suppress illegal unregulated and unreported fishing (IUU) pay great dividends at the tactical level and save millions of dollars in lost revenue to illicit activity that deprives many fledgling pacific nation economies. The USCG's IUU efforts contribute significantly at the operational level of war as well, as the activities have an indirect yet decisive psychological "effect" that directly bolsters the US reputation in the Pacific above that of the PRC's vying influence. Lastly, these efforts take the form of both IUU operations and host-nation training and engagements and thus contribute significantly to USINDOPACOM's strategic focus of building resilient partnerships and alliances in the Pacific.<sup>16</sup>

The USCG provides key operational advantages of access to maritime infrastructure (ports) and basing. As a testament to this claim, USN ships have access to the port facilities of 10 nations scattered throughout the Pacific, as the ship rider agreements (or bilats) afford the DoD the legal nexus to access said facilities with little advanced notice. Figure 1 graphically depicts all of the current agreements between the USCG and the pacific nations. This specific USN and USCG joint operation is referred to as Oceania Maritime Security Initiative (OMSI) and is currently only conducted semi-annually by the USN due to limited resources and funding.<sup>17</sup> This USCG enabled access will prove invaluable should the US find itself in an escalated situation with the PRC beyond cooperation and competition and require impromptu port access in order to

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<sup>15</sup> Driscoll, J. (Captain, USCG). Phone Conversation with LCDR Paul. 28 April 2020

<sup>16</sup> Davidson, Philip S. 2019. Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command. "Posture Statement".

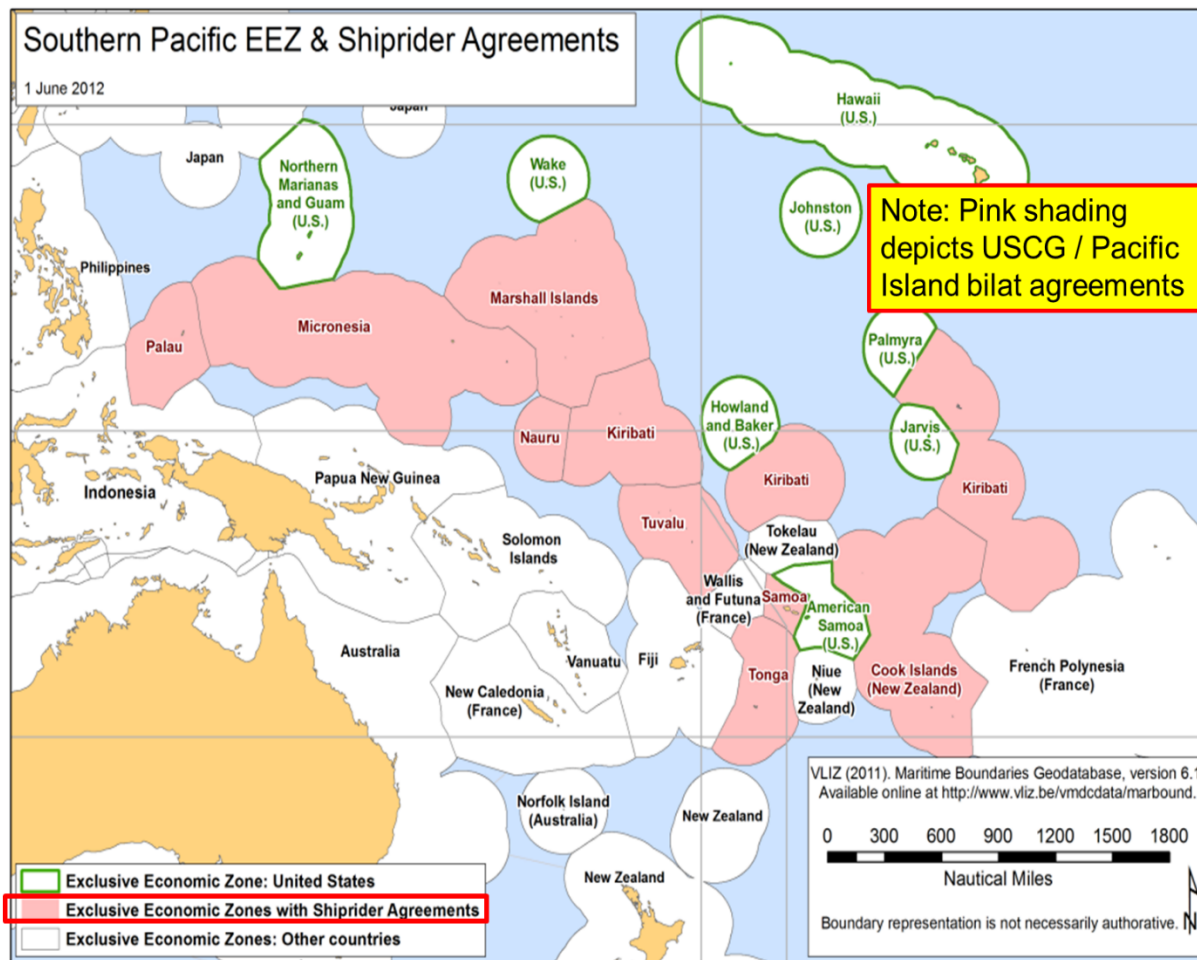
<sup>17</sup> US Indo-Pacific Command to US Pacific Command, message DTG 121221Z October 13

resupply and reconstitute units. Secondly, this significantly mitigates the disadvantages in Pacific theater geometry with the vast expanses of distance, or space.<sup>18</sup> USINDOPACOM must increase USN ship deployments in support of the joint USN and USCG OMSI mission in order to effectively capitalize on the USCG contributions to Phase 0 shaping mission. This may require USINDOPACOM to reallocate funds and reprioritize deployment schedules. **(Recommendation Three).**

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<sup>18</sup> Vego, Milan N. and Naval War College (U.S.). *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2007

Figure 1. Southern Pacific EEZ and USCG / Pacific Island Bilateral Agreements



### Keep the USCG “Coastal”

In contrast to utilizing the USCG for Defense Readiness missions in the Western Pacific (WESTPAC) and Oceania, some argue that the USCG should remain focused on statutory roles and responsibilities closer to the homeland. These roles include but are not limited to Search & Rescue (SAR), Drug/Migrant Interdiction, Maritime Homeland Defense (MHD), and Maritime Homeland Security (MHS), to name a few.<sup>19</sup> The USCG is the most capable service to execute these missions and is the most interoperable with various US Interagency partners akin to Customs and Border Protection and the Drug Enforcement Administration. Moreover, both US Northern and Southern Commands (USNORTHCOM/USSOUTHCOM) rely on the USCG as a primary force provider. Re-allocating USCG assets to USINDOPACOM would inevitably expose the US to vulnerabilities, including acts of terrorism, human, and narcotics smuggling.

The USCG is not sufficiently resourced to both defend the homeland from external threats and operate afar in support of USINDOPACOM. Although recent years have indicated a rising budget for the Coast Guard, the upward course is faint compared to the additions that the DoD received during the same timeframe.<sup>20</sup> Provided this era of peer competition and conflict with the PRC, the USCG’s contribution to the DoD’s role in the Pacific is noted; however, relevance to MHD and MHS offers a smarter utilization option for both the USCG and the DoD.

However, what strategic level effects are accomplished by restricting the USCG to the US and Latin American shores? While the USCG saves lives and interdicts illicit contraband daily, the results of these efforts are limited to the tactical and perhaps operational level. On the

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<sup>19</sup> Crea, Vivien. "THE US COAST GUARD: A Flexible Force for National Security." *Naval War College Review* 60, no. 1 (2007): 14-23. Accessed 23 March 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/26396794](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26396794).

<sup>20</sup> Smicklas, Brian. "Guard the Coast from High End Threats." *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 145, no. 2 (February 2009).



contrary, the strategic effect of just one high-visibility USCG cutter visit to allies akin to the Philippines or Taiwan is profound. Like demonstrations of US presence directly contribute to Phase 0 Shaping and demonstrate the US commitment to allies in the Pacific. Undoubtedly, leveraging the USCG in like ways reaps strategic dividends that refute the PRC's undue influence in the region. Most notably, white-hull diplomacy and FONOPS thwart undue maritime risk for miscalculation between the US and the PRC. This is a crucial CBM the US cannot afford to overlook.

### **Conclusion**

The US must capitalize on the USCG's unique authorities, experiences, and capabilities in the USINDOPACOM AOR. Likewise, the USCG must be effectively employed across the full spectrum of competition in order to reduce the risk of maritime miscalculation with the PRC, mitigate "gray zone" challenges, and fill capability gaps in the Pacific. In direct correlation to this posture, the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) specifically emphasizes the importance of capitalizing on the US Interagency and the US Joint force in order to employ all dimensions of national power, and thus gain and maintain competitive advantages over peer competition.<sup>21</sup>

As the US experienced during World War II in the Pacific, the "tyranny of distance" beset US military strategic and operational objectives. Today, however, the nature of war and the domain(s) in which we fight have changed substantially, making the situation even more challenging for military leaders and operational planners. Additionally, USINDOPACOM theater geometry presents a myriad of challenges akin to lacking access to reliable critical maritime port infrastructure and unreliable aids to navigation required for safe operations. Of equal importance, the revisionist PRC seeks to undermine both US efforts and international

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<sup>21</sup> Mattis, "2018 National Defense Strategy,"

order, with contentious maritime interactions in the ECS and SCS becoming both routine and excessively risky. The risky interactions between the USN and PLAN are compounded by the “fog” and “friction” inherent in gray zone competition and conflict between peer rivals. The US must exhaust all efforts to mitigate and deter these circumstances from coming to fruition.

For these reasons, US military leaders must capitalize on the US Joint Force strengths and leverage the many authorities and capabilities of the Interagency, particularly the USCG. The use of the USCG for FONOPS and white hull diplomacy will reduce the risk of maritime miscalculation in ESC and SCS whilst still achieving USINDOPACOM’s objectives of freedom of navigation, partnership and presence, and regional influence. Secondly, the USCG offers an absolutely essential addition to the commander’s force package to ASW and a force for deterrence in both gray zone cooperation and competition with the PRC. Third, should maritime conflict ensue, the US will require both an efficient and legal means to expeditiously enter the TTS and ports of pacific island countries. The USCG bilateral agreements afford the US this critical access without violating international law and breaching the expectations of diplomacy. Whereas the Chinese are using coercive diplomacy to acquire basing rights to critical ports and logistics nodes, the USCG balances the factors of space and force by legally extending the operational reach and endurance of US forces across the Pacific.

### **Recommendations**

1. USINDOPACOM must utilize the USCG for FONOPS and white hull diplomacy in the ECS and SCS in order to holistically reduce the risk of maritime miscalculation among the US and the PRC's maritime services.
2. USINDOPACOM must integrate USCG National Security Cutters into the available force package in order to increase joint force lethality, bolster capabilities, and deter the PRC's aggression and influence.
3. USINDOPACOM must increase USN ship deployments in support of OMSI in order to effectively capitalize on the USCG contributions to Phase 0 shaping mission.

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