

It's a "We said, Xi said" Kind of Situation:
Analyzing CCP Perceptions of US Freedom of Navigation Operations in
the South China Sea

BY

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APPROVAL

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DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.



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ABSTRACT

This study comprises an analysis of strategic messaging within the international environment, specifically between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States. The author assesses the strategic narrative conveyed through US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait, and what state-controlled, English-language Chinese media reactions reveal about how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) perceives these messages. The conclusion is that these media reveal important insights into CCP perceptions and show a trend toward limited internal acceptance of the US Freedom of Navigation (FON) narrative from 2015-2019. However, the CCP rejected ascribing broad international interests as the purpose of US FONOPs; the CCP instead perceived the operations' primary purpose as serving US-specific interests, either internally-focused or as part of US-PRC power competition.

The writer begins with theoretical foundation behind the use of military actions for strategic messaging within the international environment, specifically through the coercive mechanisms of deterrence, compellence, and assurance. The author also provides historical and legal context for US-PRC interactions around Taiwan and the South China Sea. The writer proposes a Narrative Matrix framework for assessing how Chinese reactions align with various possible perceptions of US FONOPs. The author uses this framework to code and analyze a data set of 167 unique English-language Chinese media articles that each refer to US FONOPs in the South China Sea under Presidents Obama and Trump, or refer to actions related to the Taiwan Strait. The writer cross-checks the media reactions to physical Chinese actions also taken in response to FONOPs. The final section summarizes the key findings, conclusions, assertions of the study, including recommendations for further study and strategic reflection.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Tension in the South China Sea

Foreign military aircraft, this is Chinese Navy! You are approaching our military alert zone! Leave immediately in order to avoid misjudgment!

I am a United States military aircraft conducting lawful military activities outside national airspace. I am operating with due regard as required under international law.

U.S. military aircraft. Attention, attention. This is the Chinese Navy. You are approaching our military zone. Please stay away from this area and leave immediately. Your actions are unfriendly and dangerous. Your actions are dangerous!

Station calling US military aircraft, please identify yourself..." [Long pause.] "...I am a United States military aircraft conducting lawful military activities outside national airspace. I am operating with due regard as required under international law.

Foreign military airplane. Foreign military airplane. You are approaching my military security area. Please go away quickly in order to avoid wrong judgment...

[Continued statement in US Navy, AUDIO: U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon flies over new islands in South China Sea, (Navy Office of Information, 21 May 2015), YouTube video, starting at 3:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLfTsuiGpG8>

The exchange above occurred on 20 May 2015 in the skies over Subi reef in the South China Sea. In less than nine minutes, multiple Chinese radio operators challenged the US Navy P-8A and told it to depart the area thirteen times. The US aircrew repeatedly responded with the same scripted response, reiterating in a calm voice that they were operating in international airspace. Frustration was building for some on the other side, however, as an irritated Chinese operator

eventually keyed his mike to simply shout, “you go!”¹ The tension was further increased because the transmissions occurred on a frequency shared with civilian air traffic, at least one of whom queried to confirm the Chinese were not speaking to him. After gathering updated video evidence of China’s herculean efforts to turn the submerged reef into a military island fortress, the aircraft flew on to also surveille Fiery Cross and Mischief reefs before returning to base.²

Although P-8s had flown these surveillance missions for months, this sortie was particularly special because a CNN camera crew was on board. In addition to CNN reports, the US Navy also posted a recording of the radio transmissions to YouTube.³ Even with additional international scrutiny brought about by media coverage, the Chinese continued to build up and militarize these man-made islands. Five months later the United States also began to regularly send warships to pass close to these reefs and others that China has claimed as their own sovereign territory in the South China Sea. Despite these US military activities within the international sea and airspace claimed by China, the Chinese Foreign Ministry simply protested US actions and continued construction on the artificial islands.⁴ Clearly, the US government could not have expected unarmed aircraft or even frequent appearances of one or two US naval vessels to stop the Chinese work, so what was the purpose of the missions?

The United States intended to communicate certain messages to the Chinese and others through these military maneuvers. The

¹ Jim Sciutto, “Exclusive: China warns U.S. surveillance plane,” *CNN*, updated 15 September 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/20/politics/south-china-sea-navy-flight/index.html>.

² Jim Sciutto, “Behind the scenes: A secret Navy flight over China's military buildup,” *CNN*, updated 26 May 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/26/politics/south-china-sea-navy-surveillance-plane-jim-sciutto/index.html>.

³ US Navy, *AUDIO: U.S. Navy P-8A*, 2015.

⁴ Xinhua, “China lodges protest with US on warship patrol in South China Sea,” *Global Times*, 27 October 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949232.shtml>.

advanced cameras of the P-8A could track Chinese progress on the reefs from a greater distance, but the aircrew intentionally flew within miles of the surface features where the Chinese were at work.⁵ The Navy deliberately invited a CNN camera crew on the sortie to not only publicize what China was doing to a global audience, but who would also report a week later that the Navy was considering sending warships to sail close by the reefs—a clear notice to the Chinese.⁶ The surface vessel sorties have become increasingly frequent in the South China Sea since 2015 and are commonly referred to as Freedom of Navigation (FON) operations or FONOPs by the United States. According to the US government, it regularly executes FONOPs throughout the world in places where other states have made “excessive” maritime claims. The maneuvers serve to demonstrate that the United States does not consider these claims legally valid under international law and to negate the claims of sovereignty by any other state.⁷

What is less clear, however, is the answer to the question of how do Chinese authorities perceive the messages of these missions? What Chinese audiences does the United States specifically intend to target with these messages and what messages do the Chinese actually receive?

Problem Statement

This paper explores issues surrounding US messaging strategies utilizing FONOPs, specifically regarding the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The government of the PRC has been under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since 1949 and the two are nearly indistinguishable today. However, it is important to differentiate between

⁵ “Global coverage: P-8A provides patrol capacity around the world,” *Jane’s Navy International*, 2017, https://www.janes.com/images/assets/471/70471/Global_coverage_P-8A_provides_patrol_capacity_around_the_world.pdf.

⁶ Sciutto, “Behind the scenes,” 2015.

⁷ Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R42784, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated 29 Jan 2020), 11-13, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf>.

the CCP, which ten years ago included about 1/12th of the total PRC population as membership, and non-Party Chinese citizens which number well over one billion.⁸ When considering how to influence what “China” does or does not do, the target is not necessarily China as a whole, but rather decision-makers in the PRC government, specifically the CCP. Unfortunately, internal CCP deliberations are notoriously opaque.⁹ How then can strategists discern CCP assessments of US actions such as FONOPs? This thesis argues that careful attention to Chinese media provides a useful window into CCP perceptions.

Unlike media in the United States and most of its allies, Chinese mass media is heavily guided, restrained, or managed directly by the state.¹⁰ Dissent in the media is rare and the reporting on current events is remarkably uniform for such an enormous state.¹¹ Given the level of CCP control, Chinese media provides the Party with a powerful tool for communicating directly to massive audiences in a different manner than an official government declaration of policy. A coordinated media narrative can influence the public in a way that still provides some deniability to the CCP and preserves the option to change course later without losing face because the mouthpiece is ostensibly an independent news organization.¹² This paper argues that recurring trends in how the Chinese media report about a subject can provide outsiders with a glimpse into what the CCP is thinking. Given this argument, the primary research question of this paper follows: What does state-controlled

⁸ Richard McGregor, *The Party: The secret world of China's Communist Rulers* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), xiv.

⁹ McGregor, *The Party*, 1-4.

¹⁰ McGregor, *The Party*, xiii.

¹¹ Subsequent chapters will present evidence from my research concerning uniformity in the Chinese media narrative.

¹² Consider CCP use of Chinese media to deflect public outrage over the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan province and to later shape the government narrative; “As China Clamps Down on Negative News, Quarantines on Land and Sea,” *New York Times*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/world/asia/coronavirus-china.html>.

Chinese media reporting reveal about CCP perceptions of US FONOPs in disputed or sensitive territory? Answers to this important question are useful to US strategists tasked with planning and assessing the effectiveness of US strategic messaging activities like FONOPs.



Chapter 1

Theory, The Party, and Chinese Media

Danger dominates the commander not merely by threatening him personally, but by threatening all those entrusted to him; not only at the moment where it is actually present, but also, through the imagination...”

-Carl Von Clausewitz

This chapter explores the theory behind the coercive mechanisms of deterrence, compellence, and assurance, all of which inherently relate to US Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPs). The chapter explores how these mechanisms rely on effective strategic communication between states to work effectively and why such communication is difficult in the environment of international relations. The chapter concludes with a concise review of CCP history and its relationship to current Chinese media organizations.

Theory and Strategic Communications

To better explore the process of messaging between the United States and the PRC, an understanding of the theory behind strategic communications and how it relates to deterrence and other forms of coercion in international relations is useful. Thomas Schelling observed in 1966 that war is a form of bargaining, focused on the other side's perception, where the power to hurt provides leverage.¹ States choose to surrender after military defeats because they perceive that the victor has the capability to inflict much greater pain otherwise.² On the other hand, victorious states choose to negotiate on terms of surrender because the defeated states still retain sufficient power to hurt the victor

¹ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 7.

² Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 142.

through continued resistance.³ A key insight of Schelling's work is that when it comes to coercive strategies, "violence is most purposive and most successful when it is threatened and not used."⁴

Threatened violence is at the heart of any strategy utilizing military assets for deterrence, assurance, or more active coercion, a fact that is particularly important for US strategists. These mechanisms have been a staple of US strategy since the end of the Second World War, given the dominance of US hard power during that time. It is better to gain political goals without risking the destruction of forces and other uncertainties that come with war. Sun Tzu's ancient dictum remains true: "to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."⁵ For example, the 2017 National Security Strategy and the public summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy together mention some form of deterrence 43 times.⁶ The following section argues that the coercive mechanisms of deterrence, "compellence," and assurance depend on successful communication to be effective, but the nature of international politics calls into question the ability for states to clearly communicate intent through military means.

Deterrence mechanisms rely on effective communication and involve military activities meant to convince an adversary to choose not to act in a certain way. Examples of undesired actions might include the invasion of a neighboring state or using weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in an ongoing conflict.⁷ To deter an adversary, the United States

³ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 142.

⁴ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 10.

⁵ Sun Tzu, *The Illustrated Art of War: The Definitive English Translation by Samuel B. Griffith* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115.

⁶ Mattis, James, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: The Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018); Donald J. Trump, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: The White House, 2017).

⁷ The United States attempted to deter Iraq against taking both actions during the first Persian Gulf War: Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *The Dynamics of Coercion: American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 39.

must successfully communicate both the capability and the will to engage in a threatened response. In short, the threat must be credible. Schelling suggests that deterrent threats are most credible when an actor maneuvers into a position where they have no choice but to respond as threatened if the target state takes the undesired action.⁸ Once that maneuvering is accomplished, the deterring state cedes the initiative to its adversary who must choose to either not act (deterrence works) or take a deliberate action that the state knows will bring it harm.⁹ The United States employs deterrence frequently.

The US nuclear deterrent represents an extreme example of deterrence whereby the United States threatens to employ its nuclear arsenal against any state that attacks it with weapons of mass destruction. The threat is credible so long as other states perceive both that US leaders could not accept an attack on the homeland without responding in kind (perhaps even automatically) and that US nuclear forces stand ready and able to do so. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) battalions deployed to the Baltic States under the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) mission are a conventional form of deterrence.¹⁰ Although these units do not have the power to physically stop a Russian invasion, such an invasion would probably cause US, German, Canadian, or British casualties and force a larger NATO response that risked growing into a general war. EFP is a better deterrent than the less credible threat of direct US intervention in a conflict involving only eastern European state forces against a nuclear adversary like Russia.

Unlike deterrence, “compellence” involves actions meant to convince a state to stop something it is already doing; however, communication remains just as essential. Schelling introduced the term

⁸ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 43-49

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Curtis Scaparrotti, “EUCOM Posture Statement 2018,” statement to United States Senate Armed Services Committee (Washington, DC: United States European Command, 8 March 2018), 8.

“compellence” to differentiate between actions meant to prevent behavior and those meant to change it.¹¹ Other authors have simply used the term coercion, but doing so can lead to confusion because coercive actions are also part of both deterrence and assurance; both use direct or implied threats to persuade another actor to act differently than they might otherwise.¹² Successful compellence is generally more difficult to accomplish because it is hard to draw a credible line in the sand when forces are already moving.¹³ Schelling suggests taking actions that create pain for the target state and are clearly tied to the target state’s behavior with certain assurance the pain will stop (or lessen) when the offending behavior ceases.¹⁴ Byman and Waxman emphasize the importance of analyzing coercive threats from the perspective of the adversary.¹⁵ While effective deterrence requires successfully communicating capability and will, effective compellence also requires successful communication of the purpose of coercive actions and a credible promise to stop those actions at the appropriate time.

Recent examples of compellence by the United States and its allies show just how difficult it can be to communicate the purpose and promise. During Operation Allied Force, NATO states applied pressure on Serbia to convince it to cease ethnic cleansing activities in Kosovo, but NATO struggled to find the proper level of pain to inflict and to communicate clearly what actions met a threshold for when that pain would stop.¹⁶ Decades of economic and political sanctions by US administrations have failed to compel North Korea to end its nuclear

¹¹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 70-72

¹² Byman and Waxman, *Dynamics of Coercion*, 3-9; Robert Anthony Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 12-15.

¹³ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 89.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Byman and Waxman, *Dynamics of Coercion*, 27-32.

¹⁶ Dag Henriksen, *NATO’s Gamble: Combining Diplomacy and Airpower in the Kosovo Crisis, 1998-1999*. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 148-151, 176-179, 194-196.

weapons program; North Korea completed at least six nuclear tests since 2006, is rapidly increasing its missile capabilities, and may soon have a truly robust and survivable nuclear force.¹⁷ In April 2017, the United States struck a Syrian airfield with cruise missiles to compel the Assad regime to stop using chemical weapons in its civil war, but the regime continued to use such weapons over the next year.¹⁸ In response, the United States with its allies struck more targets in Syria in April 2018.¹⁹ Although chemical use by the state of Syria seemed to then nearly stop, the United States later accused the regime of further attacks and it is not clear what level of chemical weapon use triggers or prevents future US airstrikes.²⁰ While states often draw clear lines for deterrence, compellence features increased uncertainty both in communicating the purpose of the forced pain and the conditions to stop it.

While compellence usually focuses on adversaries, assurance mechanisms often involve military actions meant to convince an ally not to take certain actions. The assuring state must communicate that the undesired actions are unnecessary or counter-productive. For example, the US nuclear umbrella serves to assure US allies that they do not need to develop their own nuclear weapons;²¹ allies that did so could start regional nuclear arms races. While threats of nuclear response to attacks on the US homeland might be inherently credible, it is much

¹⁷ Michael J. Mazarr et al., *The Korean Peninsula: Three Dangerous Scenarios*, RAND Report PE-262-A (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), 1-4, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE262.html>.

¹⁸ Tobias Schneider and Theresa Lutkefend "Nowhere to Hide: The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria," *Global Public Policy Institute*, February 2019, 8-11, https://www.gppi.net/media/GPPi_Schneider_Lutkefend_2019_Nowhere_to_Hide_Web.pdf; Daryl Kimball and Kelsey Davenport, "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2019," *Arms Control Association*, March 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Julia Masterson, "U.S. Alleges New Syrian Chlorine Attack," *Arms Control TODAY*, Vol 49: November 2019, 38, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-11/news-briefs/us-alleges-new-syrian-chlorine-attack>

²¹ William G. Eldridge, *The Credibility of America's Extended Nuclear Deterrent: The Case of the Republic of Turkey* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University, 2009), 9-12.

more difficult to convince allies that the United States would respond similarly to the same attack in Europe.²² In 1955, the United States ratified a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan to both deter PRC invasion and assure Taiwan that it would not face invasion alone.²³ However, by excluding islands close to the mainland coast then occupied by Nationalist forces, the treaty also communicated to both Chinese parties that the United States had no interest in supporting further Nationalist build-up on the islands or a counter-invasion from them.²⁴ The defense treaty was replaced in 1979 by the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA).²⁵ The TRA assures Taiwan of US commitment to preventing violent reunification by the PRC while also providing US administrations with tools to influence Taiwan against taking actions that could increase the likelihood of war, such as growing a large offensive military capability or making an official declaration of independence through the UN.²⁶ In these examples and others, the United States structures, positions, and sometimes maneuvers its military forces in order to assure its allies.

Logically, states deploy and maneuver their forces during peacetime either to seek future combat advantages or to communicate a narrative to their strategic audiences. If a state determines that armed conflict is likely in the short term, it is prudent to deploy military forces in a manner that makes them less vulnerable to attack and better prepared to strike. On the other hand, states also use the movement of military forces to communicate messages to others, especially for the purposes of coercion discussed above. While a state can be doing both things at the same time, this paper focuses on the messaging aspect. If there is a message, there is also an intended audience.

²² Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 35-36.

²³ "Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of China," signed 2 December 1954, TIAS 3178, 6 UST 433-438, accessed through *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/chin001.asp#1.

²⁴ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2011), 151-158.

²⁵ Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, Public Law 96-8, 96th Cong. (1 January 1979).

²⁶ Ibid.; Kissinger, *On China*, 355-356, 384-386, 492.

In his book, *War from the Ground Up*, Emile Simpson discusses the concepts of strategic narratives and strategic audiences. During any armed conflict there is both the “underlying physical reality” of various actions and “the interpretation” of what those actions mean; “strategic narrative is essentially an aspirational version of events which associates the two.”²⁷ In other words, a state’s strategic narrative explains both what it has done and what it hopes to accomplish through military actions. The “strategic audiences” are the “groups of people whom strategy seeks to convince of its narrative...their perceptions are the strategist’s objective.”²⁸ Simpson focuses on situations involving active violence and what he calls “armed politics,” which would include any use of military forces for compellence.²⁹ However, these concepts are also useful for discussing deterrence and assurance mechanisms. In each case, the state communicating a threat seeks to convince its target state (a strategic audience) that it has used or will use its military force for a certain reason (the strategic narrative). A threat becomes credible when the target audience believes it to be true, but that is not an easy task.

Communicating any strategic narrative in the international environment is difficult because states are not unitary rational actors. Both the realist and liberalist schools of thought on international relations assume on some level that states are rational actors that choose to take the actions that maximize their own self-interest. In their classic book, *Essence of Decision*, Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow explain how the reality is much more complex. States and their governments are composed of human beings and organizations that are neither homogenous nor purely rational.

Allison and Zelikow offer three models of decision-making that

²⁷ Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground up: Twenty-first Century Combat as Politics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 61.

²⁸ Ibid., 62.

²⁹ Ibid., 11.

interact simultaneously to produce government actions.³⁰ While a state, or rather its executive agent, may make decisions based on calculations of rational utility (Model I), that rationality is necessarily bounded by the fact that no decision-maker has access to perfect information.³¹ Furthermore, the organizations that comprise a government can produce a limited number of outputs (Model II).³² For example, a military can only take certain types of actions based on its training, culture, and equipment. Finally, the individuals within a government's decision-making body are not uniform in their assessments of what is most important and they serve additional constituencies in addition to the state as a whole (Model III).³³ The final state decisions represent not boundedly rational calculations of utility, but are the political resultants of a bargaining process.³⁴

The three models presented by Allison and Zelikow can be explained in terms of how a civic group might decide what color to paint a building it owns. Like the rational actor of Model I, the group could theoretically choose any color on the visible spectrum based on what would best serve the needs of the group, such as personal visual appeal, communication to outsiders, or physical environmental factors. However, like the organizational outputs of Model II, city laws and the production capabilities of the local paint store limit the civic group to a set of discrete color choices rather than a continuum. Finally, in accordance with Model III, the specific color chosen will be the result of some level of political compromise within the group, rather than a purely rational calculation of maximizing utility. In the end, a casual observer may puzzle as to why "someone" thought the final color was a good idea.

³⁰ Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed (New York, NY: Longman, 1999), 391.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16-26.

³² *Ibid.*, 163-185.

³³ *Ibid.*, 293-313.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Beyond the internal limitations of governmental decision-making, the rational actions of states may unintentionally lead to war because they misperceive the intentions of an adversary. Robert Jervis described two competing models that rational decision-makers might adopt for deciding how to respond to an adversary that seems to act aggressively with its military. If the Deterrence model is misapplied, a state's attempts at compellence may lead to war when it misperceives an adversary to have malign intentions.³⁵ On the other hand, if the Spiral model is misapplied, a state may unintentionally emboldens an aggressive adversary that the state misperceives as benign; the resulting war could be much worse than if that state had tried compellence earlier.³⁶ In both cases disastrous mistakes occur because the state fails to understand the nature of its adversary's intentions.

Unfortunately, it is common for states to be uncertain of the intentions of other states, especially those they do not trust, due to the "fog of foreign policy-making."³⁷ Even when it would mutually beneficial, states may be unwilling to share more information than necessary with an adversary for fear of betrayal.³⁸ In fact, a state contemplating aggressive military action has incentive to deceive its enemy to give those actions the best chance for success. Furthermore, given the complexities of government decision-making described above, it is uncertain when or if a state can clearly know what its own intentions are or how it might react to actions by other states.³⁹ Even if a state knows what it intends, the state's actions may misalign with those intentions due to the effects of organizational dynamics and governmental politics. Even when states communicate intentions honestly and clearly, information must pass

³⁵ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 62-67, 72-74.

³⁶ Ibid., 58-62.

³⁷ Ibid., 113.

³⁸ Ibid., 67.

³⁹ Ibid., 54-57.

through human filters.

The human cognitive need for coherence and consistency acts as a filter that can powerfully resist the successful communication of strategic narratives. The agents making important decisions for a state are human. During every moment of consciousness, background processes in the human brain continually manage enormous quantities of sensory data, filter them through recalled experience, and automatically translate everything into a coherent perception of the self and the world around.⁴⁰ These processes make human life possible, but they are prone to logical errors when observed information does not match preexisting beliefs.⁴¹ Jervis describes “cognitive consistency” as the tendency for humans “to see what they expect to see and to assimilate incoming information to pre-existing images” of the world and other actors.⁴² A person will tend to interpret the actions of another actor as consistent with their personal belief about that actor being good or bad, especially when there is uncertainty.⁴³ Actors may ignore even clear indications that an adversary is acting friendly or merely defensively because the information is inconsistent with the belief that the adversary is a bad actor.⁴⁴

If a person observes and consciously considers evidence contradicting strongly held preexisting beliefs, the person experiences a significant mental discomfort or pain called “cognitive dissonance.”⁴⁵ If the cognitive dissonance is strong enough the person will either have to change his or her belief, or (more likely) dismiss the evidence somehow. Jervis argues that most people tend to simply avoid or filter out ideas and information that cause dissonance, with significant implications for

⁴⁰ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 10-13.

⁴¹ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 10; Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 409.

⁴² Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 117.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 382.

international relations.⁴⁶ To avoid cognitive dissonance, state leaders will tend to ignore evidence that makes their own intentions appear malign, aggressive, or irrational. Likewise, leaders are apt to view the actions of adversaries with greater suspicion than those of others. In short, the drive to avoid cognitive dissonance and maintain cognitive consistency further complicates the task of using military forces to communicate a clear threat or present a coherent, persuasive narrative.

With this theoretical background in mind, we are now prepared to examine their relationship to US military FONOPs. According to the US government, the FON Program is a joint Department of State (DoS) and Department of Defense (DOD) strategy to demonstrate US “resistance to excessive maritime claims” with the overall purpose of supporting the “global mobility of U.S. forces and the unimpeded traffic of lawful commerce.”⁴⁷ The DoD portion employs military aircraft and naval vessels through FONOPs to physically challenge the “excessive maritime claims” of both adversaries and allies.⁴⁸ The practice is based on historical USN precedent regarding US interests in ensuring “freedom of the seas” as well as the “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea” (UNCLOS) which codified traditional norms and practices into international law.⁴⁹ Specific implications of US interests and UNCLOS regarding freedom of navigation in the Straits of Taiwan and the South China Sea will be covered in the next chapter. However, the general US

⁴⁶ Ibid., 383.

⁴⁷ Department of Defense, *Annual Freedom of Navigation Report Fiscal Year 2018*, DoD report to Congress, 31 Dec 2019, 1; Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R42784, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated 29 Jan 2020), 13, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf>.

⁴⁸ DoD, *Report on FONOPs 2018*, 1, 2-6; Department of Defense, *INDO-PACIFIC Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, DoD report, 1 June 2019, 43.

⁴⁹ DoD, *Report on FONOPs 2018*, 1; “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” opened for signature on 10 December 1982, *United Nations Oceans and Law of the Sea*, https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm

concern is that unchallenged claims “could infringe the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea enjoyed by the United States and other nations” by threatening the “international rules-based order” or normalizing “might makes right” for settling disputes.⁵⁰ A state could use its unchallenged maritime claim as a pretext to unlawfully restrict other states from access to “vital natural resources” or to interfere with legitimate military activities.⁵¹

The overall US strategic narrative justifying FONOPs implies the use of similar coercive mechanisms to those described earlier in this section. FONOPs are not purely compellence, deterrence, or assurance actions, but FONOPs do include some mechanical aspects of all three mission types. Like compellence, an implied aim of FONOPs is to change the current behavior of another state by convincing the target to give up on or renounce its excessive maritime claims. The compellence-like mechanism of FONOPs is to cause the target pain until the behavior changes; in this case the pain is in the form of public humiliation and frustration the target suffers for being unable to enforce its sovereignty claim and keep the US military out.

By implication, the overt use of military assets during FONOPs acts as a deterrent against target state attempts to enforce its control of the maritime territory. In claiming FONOPs are routine demonstrations of sailing “wherever international law allows”⁵² every seafaring nation to sail, the United States puts the onus of acting to change the status quo on the target. Directly interfering with US warships carries enormous risks and if the target state does not or cannot, then local freedom of navigation becomes or remains the norm.

Like assurance missions, FONOPs also imply a mechanism to alter ally behaviors. On the one hand since FONOPs target both adversaries

⁵⁰ DoD, *Report on FONOPs 2018*, 1; CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 3.

⁵¹ CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 11-13.

⁵² DoD, *INDO-PACIFIC Strategy Report*, 43.

and allies, an implied message is for friends of the United States to not make maritime claims that are contrary to international law because the United States will not support them. On the other hand, in places like the South China Sea, US FONOPs also serve to convince allies not to give up their resistance to the excessive maritime claims by US adversaries. FONOPs demonstrate US resolve to resist domination of the sea by one nation and to enforce the international rule-based order that benefits both strong and weak seafaring states.⁵³

By incorporating inherent mechanisms of compellence, deterrence, and assurance, FONOPs are also therefore subject to the same concerns about strategic communications and misperceptions. Not only do FONOPs have an overt strategic narrative concerning benign and interest-based US intentions to preserve a fair rule-based international order, but they include implicit threats and assurances. To work as intended, all of these differing types of messages must pass through the uncertainties, filters, and misperceptions inherent in the “fog of foreign policy-making” and international relations to reach and be understood by the target audiences.⁵⁴

In summary, deterrence, compellence, and assurance mechanisms, which lay at the heart of modern US defense strategies, all rely on effective communication of both threats and strategic narratives. However, strategic communications between states are limited by the internal mechanisms of governmental decision-making processes, inherent uncertainty in the realm of international relations, and human cognitive filters. For these reasons it is imperative that US strategists employing FONOPs, which inherently include all three coercive mechanisms, carefully consider how target states perceive US efforts at

⁵³ DoD, *INDO-PACIFIC Strategy Report*, 43; US Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, (Washington, DC: Department of State, 4 Nov 2019), 4.

⁵⁴ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 113.

strategic communications; have the strategic audiences understood and accepted the intended strategic narrative? When the CCP is the targeted audience, a strategist must know things about the Party's history to answer these questions.

The CCP and Chinese Media

The CCP traces its origins back to 1921, but the Party gained the most power during the latter phases of the Chinese Civil War between CCP military forces and those of the Nationalists or Kuomintang (KMT).⁵⁵ Although ostensibly working together to subdue Chinese warlords and unify China under the First United Front agreement in 1923, "KMT-CCP collaboration was only a marriage of convenience."⁵⁶ The agreement fell apart as Soviet interference led to the expulsion of Communists from the KMT and open warfare between the two sides began in 1927.⁵⁷ At the end of the next 10 years of fighting, the CCP forces retreated to the North and seemed close to defeat until the full-scale Japanese attack on China forced the Second KMT-CCP United Front in 1937.⁵⁸ Both sides took the opportunity to maneuver for position against each other while using resistance against the Japanese to aid in acquiring recruits and external support and continued to do so after the truce ended in 1941.⁵⁹ Overall, the Sino-Japanese War was a great boon for the CCP whose Red Army grew from 8,000 in 1937 to 900,000 in 1945 with a militia 2.2 million strong.⁶⁰ Fighting between the sides intensified as World War II ended and both the United States and the Soviet Union intervened for their respective sides in the years that followed, but the CCP ultimately prevailed on the mainland.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Kissinger, *On China*, 86-90.

⁵⁶ Edwin Pak-wah Leung, *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), xxxv.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxvi-xxxvii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxix.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xl.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xl.

⁶¹ Kissinger, *On China*, 89-90; Leung, *Dictionary Chinese Civil War*, xl-xli.

In 1949, the CCP established the PRC with the Party as the sole ruling power, while the remaining KMT conventional forces retreated to Taiwan and other coastal islands.⁶² As the CCP prepared to complete its conquest of these remaining holdouts, the Korean War broke out on China's border and required the attention of the CCP. President Truman deployed the US 7th Fleet off the coast of China to prevent a CCP invasion of Taiwan while US attention was focused on Korea; the invasion was postponed indefinitely by CCP leadership.⁶³ When invasion seemed likely in 1954 during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, President Eisenhower again ordered the 7th Fleet into the waters off China's coast to prevent any CCP attempt at "liberation" of Taiwan.⁶⁴ Shortly afterward the United States signed a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan and it remained in force until replaced by the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979. Due to these US actions, a forcible reunification of Taiwan by the CCP was not tenable in the short term. In a significant way, the United States therefore brought about the political situation that continues between the PRC and Taiwan today.

Throughout the history of the CCP, one dominant leader or a small group of CCP insiders has held political power. From 1935 until his death in 1976, that man was Mao Zedong who ruled the PRC as a dictator beginning in 1949.⁶⁵ It is difficult to overstate the importance of Chairman Mao to the ideology and history of the CCP. The vestiges of the cult of personality built around him persist and no party leader has again approached his status.⁶⁶ After Mao, political power was concentrated in the hands of the CCP's 9-member Politburo Standing Committee headed by its General Secretary who also heads the Central

⁶² McGregor, *The Party*, xiii.

⁶³ Kissinger, *On China*, 98, 153.

⁶⁴ Kissinger, *On China*, 98, 152-158; Audrey Leble, "Historical Center Seeks Quemoy-Matsu Crisis Veterans," *Naval Historical Center Public Affairs*, 16 April 2004, https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=12805.

⁶⁵ Leung, *Dictionary Chinese Civil War*, 80.

⁶⁶ McGregor, *The Party*, 244-247.

Military Commission.⁶⁷ When Xi Jinping become the General Secretary, he consolidated power more quickly than previous leaders. He removed potential political rivals within the CCP and installed his supporters by judicious use of anti-corruption committees. There are indications that Xi is setting himself up to remain in power indefinitely in a return to some of the ways of Mao.⁶⁸

From the beginning, CCP leadership recognized the importance of controlling the narrative to gain and maintain the power necessary to create its vision for an ordered, internally peaceful Chinese society. In 1938, Mao wrote in *On Protracted War* of the need for propaganda mixed with action to mobilize China's vast population to win the war against Japan and then, though not explicitly stated, his true enemy the Kuomintang.⁶⁹ Mao used the call to arms as an opportunity sell to his strategic audience, the Chinese people, the narrative that Kuomintang leaders were corrupt or inept.⁷⁰ Since 1949, the CCP has maintained its power by tight hold of "three pillars," specifically "control of personnel, propaganda, and the People's Liberation Army" (PLA).⁷¹ The Chinese people remain the key strategic audience for the CCP, and the Party uses control of media to ensure its narrative is the loudest and most consistent, namely that it is the only group that can govern China effectively.⁷² While some western observers saw evidence the CCP was loosening its grip on media, the reverse has happened since Xi took power.⁷³

⁶⁷ Ibid., vi.

⁶⁸ "Xi Who must be Obeyed; the Rise and Rise of Xi Jinping." *Economist*, Sep 20, 2014, 11.

⁶⁹ Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol. 2 (Peking, PRC: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 118-121, 154-155.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 130-131, 190n5, 193n30.

⁷¹ McGregor, *The Party*, xiii.

⁷² McGregor, *The Party*, xiv; Susan L. Shirk, ed., *Changing Media Changing China*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5-8, 14, 55-59.

⁷³ Shirk, *Changing Media*, 7-17, 38-39; Edward Wong, "Chinese Leader's News Flash: Journalists must Serve Party," *New York Times*, February 23, 2016.

Several major Chinese media sources have direct connections to the CCP. The Party's powerful Propaganda Department is "responsible for guiding the content of print media and television" in China while the State Council Information Office (SCIO) formed in 1990 as "China's international public relations department" and oversees websites.⁷⁴ Both entities use state power to squash reporting as needed and shape public opinion, especially during crises or politically charged times of the year.⁷⁵ *People's Daily* is the "mouthpiece" of the CCP, has been in print since 1949, and its chief editor is a member of the Central Committee of the CCP.⁷⁶ *Global Times* focuses on more "sensational nationalistic reporting of international affairs," but it is subordinate to *People's Daily* and a CCP committee which are responsible for its content and pick its leadership.⁷⁷ Compared to other Chinese media *Global Times* is particularly profitable and its editors are reportedly closely aligned with the thinking of CCP leadership who themselves rely on *Global Times* to judge Chinese public opinion.⁷⁸ In contrast, the Chinese military's flagship publication, *PLA Daily* has remained focused on propaganda over profits and "presenting a 'sterilized image' of the PLA to its troops and to the public."⁷⁹

The *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) provides an interesting case because of some ambiguity about the amount of control the CCP exerts over it. Founded in 1903, SCMP is the newspaper of record for Hong Kong.⁸⁰ Due to its unique history as a British colony, the culture of Hong Kong developed with appreciation for individual rights and freedom of the press. These values are reflected in how SCMP has operated.⁸¹

⁷⁴ Shirk, *Changing Media*, 236, 238.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 232-248.

⁷⁶ McGregor, *The Party*, xi; Shirk, *Changing Media*, 7-9, 229.

⁷⁷ Shirk, *Changing Media*, 10, 12;

⁷⁸ Ibid., 227-230;

⁷⁹ Ibid., 31-32, 128-146.

⁸⁰ "About Us," *South China Morning Post*, accessed on 25 February 2020, <https://corp.scmp.com/about-us/>

⁸¹ Felix Wiebrecht, "Cultural co-orientation revisited: The case of the *South China*

Consequently, since Hong Kong returned to Chinese control in 1997, the CCP has chosen to treat SCMP differently than other Chinese media by exerting less clear or direct interference in its operations.⁸² Several scholars have noted concern about growing CCP influence over the paper, especially when it was fully acquired by Alibaba in 2016, but on the surface it appears the paper still maintains significant freedom in its reporting.⁸³ However, some have noted an editorial shift at SCMP toward aligning with the CCP since the Alibaba acquisition.⁸⁴

In February, 2020, the US State Department officially designated *People's Daily* and four other Chinese media organizations as "foreign missions," requiring all of them to "report all personnel to the State Department and register any property holdings."⁸⁵ The designation is under the Foreign Agents Registration Act which "requires anyone doing lobbying or public-relations work for a foreign entity to register and file periodic updates with the Justice Department."⁸⁶ At the time of this writing it is not clear if the designation also applies to *Global Times* and *PLA Daily* as subsidiary organizations.

Morning Post," *Global Media and China* Vol. 3 (2018), 32, DOI: 10.1177/2059436418778306.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 33-35.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 35, 46.

⁸⁵ Kate O'Keeffe and Jonathan Cheng, "U.S. News: U.S. Tightens Scrutiny of Chinese Media Outlets," *Wall Street Journal*, 19 Feb 2020.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Chapter 2

Conventions, States, and Methodology

The U.S. military is active on a daily basis to safeguard freedom of navigation and overflight in the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating our commitment to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows.

-Randall G. Schriver,
Assistant Secretary of Defense
for Indo-Pacific Security
Affairs

This chapter covers a short history of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The chapter describes some aspects of the relationships between the PRC, the United States, and UNCLOS and how those interactions relate to the US FON program. Two general dispute types are relevant to this study: challenges to claims of a territorial sea and challenges to PRC restrictions on the freedom of navigation. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the methodology to be employed in the remaining chapters to analyze CCP perceptions of US FONOPs.¹

Origin of UNCLOS

Given the difficulties presented in the last chapter concerning state communications in the international security environment, it should be no surprise that international law often reflects ambiguity and disagreement. Unlike domestic laws created and enforced by a broadly recognized and powerful government authority, international law consists of various treaties and “customary” laws developed in an

¹ For additional information on UNCLOS, its key definitions, and applicable issues, the author of this study recommends the entire Fletcher School *Policy Primer* referenced in Note 2 below and the official UNCLOS website, https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm.

environment with no overwhelming central authority.² While treaties include certain, agreed-upon language, customary law is more ambiguous because it is based on norms, as states perceive them, which can change over time.³ Two primary factors determine customary international law: (1) “State Practice,” what states capable of participating consistently do (including their reasoning); and (2) “*Opinio Juris*,” what states believe they are required or forbidden from doing under international law.⁴ Determining customary law therefore relies heavily on human perception of other states’ actions, intentions, and expectations. For the international law at sea, these perceptions matter at the level of servicemen, fishermen, and merchants interacting directly out on the ocean as much as they do at the highest levels of government. Given the potential friction and uncertainty, it was a worthwhile goal to codify the law of the sea into one universal treaty.

The UN Convention of the Law of the Sea developed from centuries of customary international law and decades of deliberate diplomatic negotiations. The debate about who should control the sea is ancient but by “the 19th century the concept of the free seas, open to all, was the prevalent view...fostering a body of law that favored free navigation and the conduct of both commerce and naval operations across the world’s oceans.”⁵ After WWII, the US and other states began to declare control of the water and resources off their coasts at varying distances.⁶ As technology allowed humans to reach resources farther off shore, the desire for state control of the ocean grew as well as the need to adapt historical “customary law of the sea to a changing world environment.”⁷ The first major UN conference on the subject first met in 1956 and

² John Burgess, et al., *Law of the Sea: A Policy Primer*, (Medford, MA: Tufts University, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 2017), 4-6, <https://sites.tufts.edu/lawofthesea>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 5-6.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid.

resulted in four treaties that successfully addressed some, but not all of the issues.⁸ Another conference in 1960 garnered no agreements, but the third Conference on the Law of the Sea met from 1973-1982 and produced the UNCLOS in force today.⁹ The US was a leader during these negotiations that spanned three presidential administrations and helped shape many of its territorial rules and definitions.¹⁰

US and PRC Interactions with UNCLOS

The PRC ratified UNCLOS in 1996, but the state also passed domestic laws concerning the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea that contradict the convention's rules.¹¹ The PRC enacted its "Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone" in 1992 before ratifying UNCLOS, but a decade after UNCLOS negotiations were complete.¹² The law claimed PRC sovereignty over the "territorial land" and established territorial seas around "Taiwan and the various affiliated islands including...Nansha (Spratly) Islands and other islands that belong to the [PRC]."¹³ In contradiction to UNCLOS, the law guarantees innocent passage only to "non-military foreign ships" and requires military vessels to "obtain permission" from the PRC before entering its territorial seas.¹⁴

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Zou Keyuan, "Redefining the Legal Status of the Taiwan Strait," *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 15, no. 2 (May 2000): 247, DOI 10.1163/157180800X00091; Robert Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York, NY: Random House, 2015), 173.

¹² Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R42784, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated 29 Jan 2020), 72, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf>.

¹³ UNCLOS allows coastal states to declare a "territorial sea" up to 12 NM from its baseline where, similar to its land territory, the state exercises sovereign authority from the seabed through the airspace above the water (see UNCLOS Art. 2-3 and Note 15 below); People's Republic of China, *Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone of 25 February 1992* (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 24th mtg., 25 February 1992), Articles 2-3, https://www.un.org/depts/los/legislationandtreaties/pdf/CHN_1992_Law.pdf.

¹⁴ UNCLOS allows ships of any state to pass through the territorial sea of any other state by "Innocent Passage" provided the movement is "continuous and expeditious"

CCP officials may have thought passing the law first created a legitimate claim for the PRC's own interpretation of innocent passage.

The PRC's interactions with UNCLOS since 1996 often involve ambiguity. After ratifying UNCLOS, the PRC declared baselines around its mainland and the Paracel Islands (east of central Vietnam), but said the PRC would "announce the remaining baselines of the territorial sea...at another time."¹⁵ While the implication is that the PRC is entitled to additional baselines and territorial seas, the state left the matter vague as to specifically where. In 1998, the Chinese declared an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) "adjacent to the territorial sea of the [PRC]" out to 200 NM through a law that curiously included the statement that the law did "not affect the historical rights of the [PRC]."¹⁶ In 2009, the PRC asserted such a "historical" claim by submitting a map to the UN with the now infamous Nine-Dash Line that would extend Chinese sovereignty over most of the South China Sea.¹⁷ The accompanying statement claimed:

China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof (see attached map). The above position is consistently held by the Chinese Government, and is widely known by the international community...the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations requests that this Note Verable

and "is not prejudicial to the peace, good order or security of the coastal State" (see UNCLOS Art 17-25); PRC, *Law on Territorial Sea*, Article 6.

¹⁵ UNCLOS allows coastal states to declare territorial "baselines," generally at the low-tide waterline of their coasts (see UNCLOS Art. 5-10); People's Republic of China, "Declaration of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the baselines of the territorial sea, 15 May 1996,"

<https://www.un.org/Depts/los/legislationandtreaties/statefiles/CHN.htm>.

¹⁶ An EEZ can extend 200 NM from the baseline and provides the coastal state with "sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring and exploiting, conserving and managing the natural resources" in and under the ocean, including "marine scientific research" and environmental protection, but not control over airspace above (see UNCLOS Art. 55-58); People's Republic of China, *Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf Act* (Standing Committee of the 9th National People's Congress, 3rd session, 26 June 1998), https://www.un.org/Depts/los/legislationandtreaties/pdffiles/chn_1998_eez_act.pdf

¹⁷ CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 70-73.

be circulated to all members of the Commission, all State Parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as well as all members of the United Nations.¹⁸

Despite the supposed certainty expressed above, the wording leaves key issues ambiguous. While together Chinese laws and this statement express a clear PRC claim of sovereignty over all the island groups within the Nine-Dash Line, what that means for the surrounding ocean is less clear.¹⁹ Does China claim all of the waters within the line as its own special territorial sea that predates and somehow overrides UNCLOS rules?²⁰ Or rather, does the statement only claim the land features and whatever maritime zones UNCLOS authorizes for that land?²¹ The PRC did not declare any new baselines, which would clarify the issue; leaving the matter ambiguous provides some flexibility for how the PRC can negotiate with other states over competing claims.²² However, the PRC further declared in 2011 that under UNCLOS and domestic Chinese law, “China’s Nansha [Spratley] Islands is fully entitled to Territorial Sea [and]...EEZ,” a claim that would extend the PRC’s EEZ over most of the sea inside the Nine-Dash Line.²³

¹⁸ Message, CML/18/2009, Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations, to the Secretary-General, United Nations, 7 May 2009, English version, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/vnm37_09/chn_2009re_vnm.pdf

¹⁹ CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 72.

²⁰ Steven Stashwick, “80 percent of zero: China’s phantom South China Sea claims,” *Diplomat*, 9 February 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/80-percent-of-zero-chinas-phantom-south-china-sea-claims/>

²¹ UNCLOS defines an “island” as “a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide” and UNCLOS allows islands to establish a baseline, territorial sea and EEZ (see UNCLOS, Art. 121); Lynn Kuok, *The U.S. FON Program in the South China Sea: A lawful and necessary response to China’s strategic ambiguity*, East Asia Policy Paper 9 (Washington, DC: Center for East Asia Policy Studies at Brookings, Jun 2016), 19-22.

²² CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 72.

²³ Message, CML/8/2011, Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations, to the Secretary-General, United Nations, 14 Apr 2011, English version, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/vnm37_09/chn_2011_re_phl_e.pdf

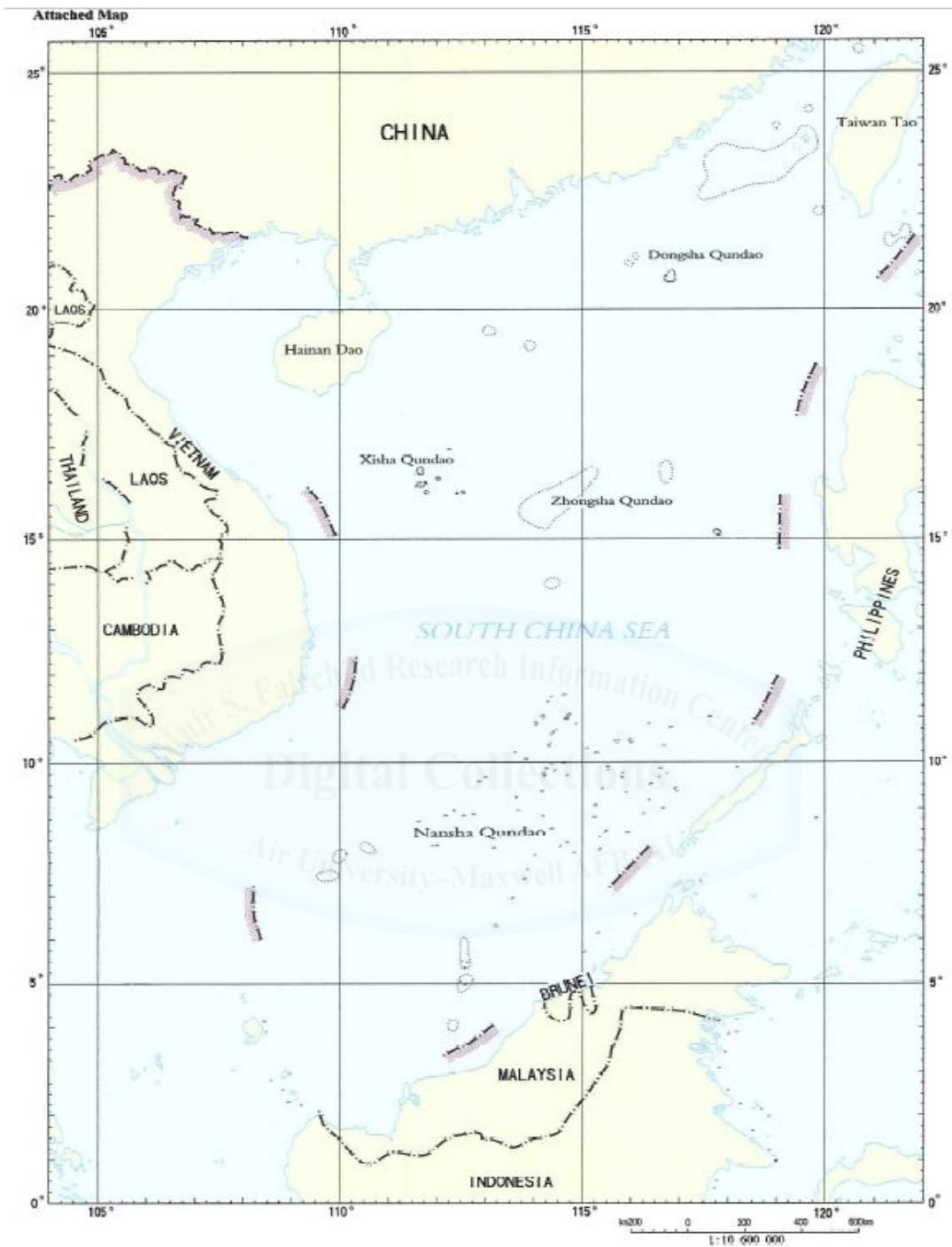


Figure 1. Nine-Dash Line Map.

Source: Message, CML/ 18/2009, Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN, to the UN Sec-Gen, 7 May 2009, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/vnm37_09/chn_2009re_vnm.pdf.

The quoted text from the PRC's 2009 message to the UN refers to this "attached map." The features labeled as Nansha, Xisha, and Dongsha Quando are referred to as the Spratly, Paracel, and Pratas Islands (respectively) by most non-Chinese sources. Scarborough Shoal, called Huangyan Dao by China, is the feature just north of the 15° N line and east of Zhonsha Quando label.

The 2011 letter was part of a dispute with the Philippines which eventually led to an international court decision that threatened most of the PRC's legal claims in the South China Sea. In 2013 the Philippines invoked UNCLOS to bring "15 claims against China before an UNCLOS arbitration tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration."²⁴ The PRC immediately denounced the action and refused to participate or recognize any decision by the tribunal.²⁵ The tribunal found that it did not have jurisdiction for deciding which state held sovereignty over any island territory, but the tribunal held that UNCLOS did allow it to hear and rule on other non-sovereignty issues in the Philippines' case, even with the PRC absent from proceedings.²⁶ The tribunal unanimously ruled in 2016 that UNCLOS provided no legal foundation for the Nine-Dash Line.²⁷ Further, while the tribunal did not say who owned them, it determined none of the features in question (in the Spratly Islands or Scarborough Shoals) met the UNCLOS definition for islands; some were rocks and the rest were low-tide elevations.²⁸ Although the rocks might allow a 12 NM territorial sea, nothing in the island groups supports an EEZ claim.

With the historic claim legally defeated, the PRC has proceeded to consolidate physical control over the disputed surface features and resources nearby.²⁹ By continuing to build-up artificial islands, the PRC can create many small pockets of control that weaker coastal states

²⁴ Paul Gewirtz, *Limits of Law in the South China Sea*, East Asia Policy Paper 8 (Washington, DC: Center for East Asia Policy Studies at Brookings, May 2016), 2.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gewirtz, *Limits of Law*, 2-3; Donald R. Rothwell, "Could Law Save the South China Sea From Disaster?" *National Interest*, 26 July 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/could-law-save-the-south-china-sea-disaster-17123>

²⁷ Rothwell, "Could Law Save"; CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 55.

²⁸ "Rocks" are features that would be islands except they "cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own." Alternately, "Low-Tide Elevations" are natural island-like land features that rise above the ocean at low tide and are submerged at high tide. Rocks can generate a territorial sea, but not an EEZ while LTEs can generate neither (see Note 21 above and UNCLOS Art. 13 and 121); Rothwell, "Could Law Save?"; CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 56.

²⁹ CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 57-61.

cannot physically contest. The PRC can then attempt to negotiate sovereignty disputes on a bilateral basis from a position of strength. It might be overlooked in this discussion that the EEZ created by China's mainland has relatively meager resources beyond fishing grounds; the richest petroleum resources are thought to be under the seabed at the southern end of the South China Sea.³⁰ The military character and expense of PRC island reclamation projects in the Spratlys make more sense when viewed through the lens of CCP leadership. The prospect of losing access to vast mineral resources as China's economy continues to industrialize must be alarming.

While the PRC ratified, but only selectively follows UNCLOS, its rival insists on enforcing UNCLOS without ratifying the treaty. Today, 168 of 193 UN member states have ratified UNCLOS, but the United States is not among them, despite being a central driver of UNCLOS negotiations.³¹ Early objections focused on mandatory dispute settlement procedures, but an additional 1994 agreement addressed that concern and then most states chose to ratify.³² The United States signed the agreement, but the Senate has not ratified UNCLOS despite many attempts, the latest of which failed in 2012 by one vote.³³ Opposition to US ratification concerns creating legal avenues to challenge existing US claims of sovereignty or placing legal burdens on the pursuit of US interests when US naval power and policy make US ratification unnecessary.³⁴ All US administrations since 1983 have held to the

³⁰ Kaplan, *Asia's Caldron*, 172-173.

³¹ Burgess, et al., *Law of the Sea Policy Primer*, 8-10, 80-81; "Status of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea," table, accessed 1 March 2020: https://www.un.org/depts/los/reference_files/UNCLOS%20Status%20table_ENG.pdf.

³² Burgess, et al., *Law of the Sea Policy Primer*, 9-10, 80-87.

³³ Ibid.; Austin Wright, "Law of the Sea Sunk in Senate," *Politico*, 16 July 2012, <https://www.politico.com/story/2012/07/law-of-the-sea-treaty-sinks-in-senate-078568>.

³⁴ Burgess, et al., *Law of the Sea Policy Primer*, 85-86; CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 46-48; Roncevert Ganan Almond, "U.S. Ratification of the Law of the Sea Convention," *Diplomat*, 24 May 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/u-s-ratification-of-the-law-of-the-sea-convention>.

policy that UNCLOS reflects binding customary law.³⁵

The US strategic narrative is that FONOPs establish and maintain the necessary “state practice” portion of the customary law embodied in UNCLOS, which benefits all nations. The US explanation has been consistent since the US FON program formally began in 1979 and the DoD publishes an annual FON Report summarizing operations for the previous year.³⁶ These reports show that US FONOPs challenge a broad range of excessive maritime claims of both US allies and adversaries, without providing specific of operational details (other than which claims drew multiple FONOP challenges).³⁷ Unchallenged claims could create new international norms when actions of other states seem to align with the claim and become, over time, new “state practice.” The consistency of the US position is demonstrated by US respect for and even positive statements upholding the PRC’s right to freedom of navigation when PLAN intelligence gathering ships have parked inside US EEZs around Hawaii and Guam to during US exercises.³⁸

This paper focuses on recent US FONOPs in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait that challenge two major types of excessive claims by the PRC: illegal restrictions on the freedom of navigation, and illegitimate claims of a territorial sea. The first type results from Chinese attempts to assert jurisdiction over military aircraft flying through airspace above PRC EEZs, or requiring “prior permission” for a military vessel to either travel through its EEZ or make innocent passage through its territorial sea.³⁹ During FONOPs, vessels executing innocent passage move

³⁵ Almond, “U.S. Ratification.”

³⁶ Burgess, et al., *Law of the Sea Policy Primer*, 19-28; Note: DoD FON Reports are available dating back to 1991 at: <https://policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/FON>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 85-90.

³⁹ Within their EEZs, UNCLOS requires coastal states to act with “due regard to the rights and duties of other states” specifically regarding their “freedoms of...navigation and overflight...and other internationally lawful uses of the sea related to these freedoms, such as those associated with the operation of ships, aircraft and submarine

deliberately and expeditiously through the territorial sea, while ships and aircraft in an EEZ are free to maneuver as desired. The second type of claim follows from improperly drawn PRC baselines or from PRC claims of a territorial sea where none exists around a low-tide elevation.⁴⁰ During FONOPs challenging this kind of claim, military vessels or aircraft may maneuver or take actions that UNCLOS defines as “prejudicial” in order to demonstrate that the movement is not innocent passage.⁴¹

These differences clarify the general US strategic narrative by supplementing it with more specific messages conveyed through US FONOPs in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea. How the PRC reacts, by word or action, reveals the level to which the PRC, or rather the CCP, understands, accepts, or rejects the US messages and overall strategic narrative behind those FONOPs.

Methodology of This Research

In discussing a “methodology for trying to understand the CCP,” Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver said that in his organization “we listen to what they say, read what they write, and watch what they do.”⁴² From the US perspective there seems to be frequent discontinuity between what the Chinese say through official statements, what they write in government policy documents or international agreements, and what they actually do with the PLA and other state assets. ASD Schriver noted the importance of considering all three areas together to identify the CCP’s vision, or what the Party intends for its region.⁴³ His framework is particularly useful for answering the central

cables” (see UNCLOS Art. 55-58, 86-96); Department of Defense, *Annual Freedom of Navigation Report Fiscal Year 2018*, DoD report to Congress, 31 Dec 2019, 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ UNCLOS, Article 19.

⁴² Randall G. Schriver, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs (address, Jamestown Foundation, Ninth Annual China Defense and Security Conference, Washington DC, 15 Oct 2019), 7:45, <https://jamestown.org/event/jamestown-ninth-annual-china-defense-and-security-conference/>.

⁴³ ASD Schriver, address to Jamestown Foundation.

question of this paper.

To assess how the CCP perceives US military operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, this research operationalizes Schriver's "say, write, do" framework to categorize and evaluate observed Chinese reactions as reported in international media. As discussed in Chapter 1, Chinese state-controlled media represent a combination of what the CCP "writes" and what it "says." It is reasonable to consider English-language state-controlled Chinese media as largely intended for messaging to the CCP's international audiences. The research presented here supposes that within this media there is a range of possible reactions to US FONOPs that correspond with certain CCP perceptions of the operations' purposes. In a similar way, what the PLA and other state assets publicly "do" in reaction to US FONOPS should also correspond to the same CCP perceptions. Together, the corresponding overt state actions, media reactions, and CCP perceptions fall on a spectrum from complete disagreement or rejection of the US narrative and messages to general acceptance or agreement. Figure 2 depicts that spectrum as proposed by this research.

The proposed spectrum provides a framework for analyzing CCP perceptions of US operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. The typology differentiates potential CCP perceptions of US FONOPs by the amount those perceptions agree or disagree with the public US narrative. The categorization focuses on what the CCP perceives as the operations' primary purpose and to what degree the Party perceives the operations as lawful. The categories are designed to leverage differences in perception that would logically drive divergent levels or types of reactions. Potential "say, write, and do" actions are classified by the perceptions with which they most align.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Note: The categories are ordinal, but not rational. There is a definite order for how much they relatively agree or disagree with the US narrative, but it would not be logical, for example, to say that reactions in Category A represent twice as much disagreement

US Strategic Narrative: US operations on and above the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait are legal under UNCLOS and demonstrate US commitment to a "free and open" sea.					
<----- DISAGREE with US Narrative ----->----- AGREE with US Narrative ----->					
	(A) - TOTAL REJECTION: FONOPs unlawful, meant as <u>direct threat</u> to PRC/CCP <u>sovereignty</u>	(B) STRONG REJECTION: FONOPs unlawful, meant as <u>major threat</u> to PRC/CCP's <u>vital interests</u>	(C) - BALANCED REJECTION: FONOPs dubiously lawful, meant to <u>weaken the position</u> of CCP in US-PRC <u>power competition</u>	(D) - CAUTIOUS ACCEPTANCE: FONOPs lawful, serve <u>legitimate</u> US concerns; <u>secondary purpose</u> is US-PRC <u>power competition</u>	(E) - GENERAL ACCEPTANCE: FONOPs lawful, support <u>legitimate interests of all states</u> ; effects on <u>power competition</u> are <u>incidental</u>
"Say" & "Write" Examples	Declare FONOPs an act of war; announce policy to use force to deny USN access to Taiwan Strait; tone portrays US as evil invader	Bold, bellicose tone threatening military escalation and/or economic retaliation; portray US as colonial aggressor; announce legal actions at UN	Protest language threatening legal action at UN; portray US as self-interested meddler bending rules; combative or defiant tone; frame PRC as victim of illegal US actions	Decreased media attention to FONOPs; references to malign US intent, threatened PRC interests, & "lawfare"; competitive tone; portray PRC as victim of the international system	Announce PRC FONOPs in "international" South China Sea; no media reference to US FONOPs or tone is even, factual, perhaps supportive; renounce PRC's excessive maritime claims
"Do" Examples	Shoot down US aircraft or fire on US surface vessel; block Taiwan Strait with PLAN and PLAAF	Aggressive/threatening maneuvers by PRC vessels forcing US ships or aircraft to alter course; deploy and posture military forces for imminent action near FONOP locations	Verbally harass US vessels by radio during FONOPs; build up defensive and offensive military forces near FONOP locations, postured for demonstration of strength rather than action	Shadow US vessels safely, but closely during FONOPs; cautious, but professional inter-vessel communications; build up defensive capacity in FONOP locations	Monitor US FONOPs as routine traffic; PRC makes innocent passage through US territorial waters; PRC FONOPs targeted to other states' excessive claims

Figure 2. Narrative Matrix.

Source: Authors Original Work.

This framework categorizes a range of possible CCP perceptions regarding US FONOPs and how various "Say, Write, Do" reactions would align with those categories.

In the following chapters, the bulk of this research focuses on Chinese state-controlled media reporting on specific US operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait related to the US FON program (explicitly or implicitly). Each media report is categorized in accordance to where it falls on the spectrum in Figure 2. These data are analyzed for trends in Chinese reporting that reveal the CCP perceptions behind them. As a measure of control the media reporting on the specified FONOPS is cross referenced to overt actions taken by the PLA and other state-controlled assets as reported in international media. The research analyzes the convergence or divergence between what the CCP says,

as those in category B or to attempt to calculate some average categorical score for the media reactions surrounding a specific FONOP. This affects the types of mathematical algorithms researchers could apply to the data presented in this paper.

writes, and does to assess the value of the spectrum framework presented in this paper.



Chapter 3

Chinese Media Reactions

I conveyed to President Xi our significant concerns over land reclamation, construction and the militarization of disputed areas, which makes it harder for countries in the region to resolve disagreements peacefully.

-President Barack Obama

Relevant construction activity that China is undertaking in the Nansha Islands does not target or impact any country and there is no intention to militarize...islands in the South China Sea since ancient times are Chinese territory. We have the right to uphold our own territorial sovereignty and lawful legitimate maritime rights and interests.

-President Xi Jinping

This chapter describes the collection and analysis of Chinese media reactions to US FONOPs in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. The media reaction data is grouped according to FONOPS during the administrations of Presidents Obama and Trump with the latter group further split by location. The chapter describes notable trends, both for the overall data set as well as for each grouping.

Collection and Coding of Data

The research in this study includes Chinese state-controlled media responses to US FONOPs in the South China Sea from May 2015 to November 2018 and transits of the Taiwan Strait from July 2017 to May 2019. The chosen time periods kept the study to manageable levels while also allowing adequate coverage of FONOP events across the administrations of both President Obama and President Trump. The research included media reactions to twenty-one total US military actions in the South China Sea and nine in the Taiwan Strait. The bulk of the data covers actions in the South China Sea which were more

varied in form and location, had less historical precedent (for the Chinese), and elicited a broader range of reactions in state-controlled media. Overall, 167 unique media articles collected during this research could be coded according to the Narrative Matrix depicted in Figure 2.

US Strategic Narrative: <i>US operations on and above the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait are legal under UNCLOS and demonstrate US commitment to a "free and open" sea.</i>					
<----- DISAGREE with US Narrative -----> AGREE with US Narrative ----->					
	(A) - TOTAL REJECTION: FONOPs unlawful, meant as <u>direct threat</u> to PRC/CCP <u>sovereignty</u>	(B) STRONG REJECTION: FONOPs unlawful, meant as <u>major threat</u> to PRC/CCP's <u>vital interests</u>	(C) - BALANCED REJECTION: FONOPs dubiously lawful, meant to <u>weaken the position</u> of CCP in US-PRC <u>power competition</u>	(D) - CAUTIOUS ACCEPTANCE: FONOPs lawful, serve <u>legitimate</u> US concerns; <u>secondary purpose</u> is US-PRC <u>power competition</u>	(E) - GENERAL ACCEPTANCE: FONOPs lawful, support <u>legitimate interests of all states</u> ; effects on <u>power competition</u> are <u>incidental</u>
	"Say" & "Write" Examples	"Do" Examples	"Do" Examples	"Do" Examples	"Do" Examples
	Declare FONOPs an act of war; announce policy to use force to deny USN access to Taiwan Strait; tone portrays US as evil invader	Bold, bellicose tone threatening military escalation and/or economic retaliation; portray US as colonial aggressor; announce legal actions at UN	Protest language threatening legal action at UN; portray US as self-interested meddler bending rules; combative or defiant tone; frame PRC as victim of illegal US actions	Decreased media attention to FONOPs; references to malign US intent, threatened PRC interests, & "lawfare"; competitive tone; portray PRC as victim of the international system	Announce PRC FONOPs in "international" South China Sea; no media reference to US FONOPs or tone is even, factual, perhaps supportive; renounce PRC's excessive maritime claims
	Shoot down US aircraft or fire on US surface vessel; block Taiwan Strait with PLAN and PLAAF	Aggressive/threatening maneuvers by PRC vessels forcing US ships or aircraft to alter course; deploy and posture military forces for imminent action near FONOP locations	Verbally harass US vessels by radio during FONOPs; build up defensive and offensive military forces near FONOP locations, postured for demonstration of strength rather than action	Shadow US vessels safely, but closely during FONOPs; cautious, but professional inter-vessel communications; build up defensive capacity in FONOP locations	Monitor US FONOPs as routine traffic; PRC makes innocent passage through US territorial waters; PRC FONOPs targeted to other states' excessive claims

Figure 2. Narrative Matrix
Source: Author's Original Work

While all publicly reported US FONOPS utilizing surface naval vessels during the specified time periods are included in this research, the study covers media reactions to only a portion of FONOPs executed by US military aircraft. Publicly available media reports indicate that flights over the South China Sea by US surveillance aircraft were highly regular throughout the time period and US bomber missions supporting FON have also occurred frequently in the region since at least 2017. The specific aircraft actions covered in this study were selected because they drew international or Chinese media attention of interest to the research. Furthermore, only open sources were used to collect and analyze the

data presented here and the information was not cross-referenced to any internal DoD data or checked by DoD members that participated in the planning or execution of these missions. There were certainly additional sorties flown in support of FON during the time periods covered, but without any major media attention to them, it is not possible to use this research's framework to analyze CCP perceptions.

Some experts would object to using the term FONOP to cover all of the US actions covered in this research, however, there is not widespread agreement on the issue. Peter Dutton and Isaac Kardon argue that the term FONOP should only apply to missions that target specific legally-articulated and excessive territorial claims, which the PRC has not officially made for most of the South China Sea.¹ James Kraska argues that missions executed in line with “innocent passage” rules near features of the Spratly Islands undermine the purpose of FONOPs by implicitly acknowledging the claim of a territorial sea.² Other experts counter that “excessive maritime claims” also include unlawful burdens placed on air or sea vessels by nation-states, such as requiring prior-permission for innocent passage of military vessels or attempting to control the international airspace over an EEZ.³ Deliberate actions that simply drive a ship or aircraft through the areas in question without engaging in “prejudicial” behaviors are therefore still operations supporting the US FON program, even if not explicitly. While recognizing the potential sensitivity to the term in US circles, this paper refers to all such actions as FONOPs, to avoid confusion unnecessary for a research question dealing with CCP perceptions.

¹ Peter A. Dutton and Isaac B. Kardon quoted in Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R42784, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated 29 January 2020), 94-96.

² James Kraska quoted in CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 92-94.

³ Jonathan G. Odom, “Why US FON Operations in the South China Sea Make Sense,” *Diplomat*, 31 October 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/10/why-us-fon-operations-in-the-south-china-sea-make-sense/>; CRS, *US-China Strategic Competition*, 37N80, 92.

The distinction between naming conventions for US actions supporting FON does not seem particularly important for the CCP perceptions targeted in this research. Part of the CCP messaging strategy seems to rest on maintaining ambiguity as to specific PRC territorial claims. Throughout the articles gathered during this research, state-controlled Chinese media frequently used both the internationally common term for territorial seas, “territorial waters,” and also variations of more legally ambiguous terms like “waters adjacent to,” “waters near,” and “China’s waters.” Although the PRC claims all above water features in the South China Sea and demands some control of the surrounding sea and air, it has only officially declared baselines around the Paracel Islands.⁴ Given intentional Chinese ambiguity of PRC territorial claims, CCP perceptions of the details for specific US FONOPs are also likely ambiguous, however, the important question for this research is what the CCP perceives as the overall purpose and general legality of US FONOPs. For example, the CCP is unlikely to question whether a US destroyer should have performed a “man-overboard” drill inside of 12 NM of Fiery Cross Reef, but the Party certainly questions whether the ship should be in the area at all and what its presence means.

In seeking out CCP perceptions, the purpose of the selection criteria for which media articles to include was to reasonably cover all of the selected FONOPs. At least three media articles are included for all the identified US actions in the South China Sea, except for bomber sorties which in several cases drew only one or two mentions in the targeted media sources. No more than three unique media reports were found for some surface FONOPs, while some events had a much larger number of unique articles reported by state-controlled Chinese media. Of the total 167 unique articles coded according to the Narrative Matrix,

⁴ People’s Republic of China, “Declaration of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the baselines of the territorial sea, 15 May 1996,” <https://www.un.org/Depts/los/legislationandtreaties/statefiles/CHN.htm>.

27 deal with US actions in the Taiwan Strait and 144 with actions in the South China Sea (four articles apply to both areas). In the larger group, 69 were published during the Trump administration, with 75 during the Obama administration. The specific trends of these three important subgroupings are discussed in the following sections.

The bulk of the articles were located using search engines provided by the applicable Chinese media webpages.⁵ After much trial and error, the most reliable method for locating media articles on specific FONOPs proved to be searching for the name of a participating USN vessel or the English-language Chinese name for the reefs in question (Xisha, Nansha, Huangyan Dao, Dongsha) while filtering by date. The *People's Daily* and *Global Times* websites were most useful because they include an option for choosing specific date ranges (though *People's Daily* oddly limits the date range to before 2018). The *PLA Daily* website was less user-friendly, but still returned search results in order of article publishing date, thereby allowing isolation by date, albeit through a slower process. *Global Times* included an "advanced search" that explicitly allowed searching for key terms within the text of its articles, but there were some anomalies. Several sets of search results indicated that the media articles are not fully indexed across their provided search engines, however, it is not always clear if that is intentional or an inadvertent feature of how the articles were coded. For example, a search for a USN ship name may turn up no results, but articles produced by the given media outlet and discovered through different key word searches did include the ship's name in their body text.

With applicable media articles identified and accessed, relevant information about each was recorded by the author in a custom-built

⁵ The English language search pages are located at:
Peoples Daily - <http://search.people.com.cn/language/english/>;
Global Times - <http://search.globaltimes.cn/>;
PLA Daily - http://search.chinamil.com.cn/search/milsearch/stouch_eng.jsp;
South China Morning Post - <https://www.scmp.com/search>

Microsoft Access database. Each record included the article's title, full URL, date of publication (as displayed in the article), author (if listed), media source, date of the FONOP referenced, and posted language. To record additional information of potential interest to the overall research question, the database also included fields for personal observations, key or recurring phrases, and useful longer quotations. The final information documented was the article's coding.

After multiple readings each article was coded according to the framework discussed in Chapter 2 and the most appropriate column of the Narrative Matrix depicted in Figure 2. While many articles clearly fell into one of the categories, other articles often included elements of two of the levels of agreement. For example, the state-controlled Chinese media frequently included ambiguous threats of military escalation, most commonly to "take all necessary measures" to "safeguard the sovereignty and security" of China (Category B) while also framing the US as a self-interested meddler rather than a belligerent aggressor (Category C). Even when taking a competitive tone (Category D) rather than combative or defiant tone (Category C), the articles almost always called the US actions in the South China Sea illegal under domestic or international law. In borderline cases such as these, the greatest weight went to the overall tone of the language in each article. While claims of illegality and other stock phrases are easy to add to any article, they often come across as stale. On the other hand, emotional tone is harder to fake and is more closely tied to the perceptions of the author.

As noted above, some articles, such as PLA press briefings, referred to operations in both the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. Interestingly, there was sometimes a clear difference in tone separating the treatment of the two subjects, even from the same military spokesman at the same event. In these cases, one article could warrant different coding, depending on which location is considered. For this reason, records for articles about FONOPs in the South China Sea and

Taiwan Strait were separated into two tables (with identical field types) in the database to simplify separate analysis of each geographical area. As noted above, the vast majority of media articles included in this study focused on the South China Sea.

Overall Trends

Chinese state-controlled media reactions to FONOPs in specific areas and time periods are discussed in the next sections, however, some overall trends recurred throughout the articles analyzed in this research.

Those controlling the Chinese media push a consistent narrative framing the South China Sea issue in terms of China's "indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters"⁶ with China portrayed as a stable local actor and the United States as an inconsistent and destabilizing outsider. Nearly every article referring to US FONOPs mentions the "sovereignty" or "security" of China (usually both), most frequently quoting a spokesperson from the Chinese Foreign Ministry or Ministry of National Defense. The terms are generally used in the context of how US actions violated, damaged, or jeopardized China's sovereignty or security with ambiguous threats to take "all necessary measures" in the future to protect them. As noted above, the US actions are nearly always described as illegal under Chinese or international law (or both) and impeding local processes for settling disputes or disrupting an otherwise peaceful and calm South China Sea. When FON is mentioned, it is usually in terms of the US' "so-called 'Freedom of Navigation' operations" or in assertions that freedom of navigation has never been denied or even been a real issue in the South China Sea. This reflects the unusual position of the PRC that FON only applies to non-military vessels.

⁶ Message, CML/18/2009, Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, to the Secretary-General, United Nations, 7 May 2009, English version, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/vnm37_09/chn_2009re_vnm.pdf

The hyper-focus on sovereignty may give the impression that the CCP narrative is so strong that there is no room in Chinese perceptions for a competing US strategic narrative, however, the two are not mutually exclusive and the Narrative Matrix framework helps to cut through some of the noise. The CCP may truly believe the claim of historical Chinese sovereignty over islands of the South China Sea, or it may simply believe framing the issue in that manner provides the most Chinese advantage in regional disputes with the United States and others. Even if the perceptions of sovereignty are genuine, it is not likely that the CCP sees losing control over any island or territorial waters in the same way it would see losing control of Taiwan, Hong Kong, or an internal Chinese province. Either way, the Narrative Matrix framework focuses on how the CCP perceives FONOPs that challenge its claims. If the world accepted Chinese sovereignty of the reefs, rocks, and islands in the South China Sea, there would remain separate issues whether those features generated territorial seas and whether the PRC can legally bar foreign military vessels from access to the surrounding waters and airspace. So much as ensuring “free and open seas” is the purpose of the FON program, US policymakers must assess the level to which China and other states accept the US narrative.

To that end, this research indicates the CCP generally perceived US FONOPs as meant primarily to serve US interests rather than the good of the international community during both the Obama and early Trump administrations. Very few media reactions or PLA actions aligned with the (E) General Acceptance coding which would indicate a perception that United States is trying to look out for the good of the world. On the other hand, the CCP does not seem to perceive that the US interests in question include deliberately threatening the vital interests of China; outside of a few specific events, Chinese reactions rarely warranted coding as (B) Strong Rejection. The overall sense is that the CCP perceives US-PRC power competition to be the central or

secondary purpose of US FONOPs.

Despite consistent rhetoric to the opposite, this research also indicates the CCP does not generally perceive US FONOPs to be clear violations of international law. The CCP instead perceives that the US actions are either in a dubiously lawful gray area, or, though lawful under UNCLOS, deliberate “lawfare” to gain internal or relative advantage vis-à-vis China. Since the vast majority of Chinese reactions warrant coding as (C) Balanced Rejection or (D) Cautious Acceptance it is not clear exactly where the perceptions fall as far as what is legal. If the CCP was confident US actions were illegal, the Narrative Matrix framework predicts stronger, even aggressive reactions and legal leveraging of international institutions. Nowhere in this research, however, was there any indication that the CCP intended (or even threatened) to bring forth legal actions against the United States for its supposed violations of international law.

Coordination between the state-controlled media outlets and the CCP was evidenced by frequent re-posts of articles from other outlets and heavy use of editorials, either explicitly so or imbedded in what was presented as a factual news article. Each record in the database created for this research represents a unique and (usually) original article. *Global Times*, *People’s Daily*, and *PLA Daily* often re-post complete articles from each other and *Xinhua* network on their own platforms, but they note the source when doing so. Wherever possible the original article was used for articles from the state-controlled media targeted in this study, but there were some apparent re-posts that could not be found on the original source’s website.

As for content, there were general editorial trends, noted for the primary three state-controlled media. *PLA Daily* had relatively few original articles of interest to this study and did not report at all on most FONOPs. The *PLA Daily* did, however, publish transcripts of monthly press conferences with PLA spokespersons that were often highly useful.

Many of the questions appear planted, scripted, or edited, but the transcripts were translated and posted in English, supporting the idea that state-controlled English-language media sources are meant for communicating with the outside world. While *PLA Daily* articles tended to somewhat downplay tension, *Global Times* carried more editorials with an aggressively nationalistic tone, as did *People's Daily* to a lesser degree.

Before moving on to more specific analysis, it is important to consider some limitations of the data gathered in this study. It is not possible, by the methods utilized here, to make confident statements about the total response of Chinese state-controlled media. Without recording responses from all the applicable sources in real-time one cannot be certain that all of them are being captured. Since the research relied on careful searches of the sources' own website archives, it is possible that some articles may have been altered or removed after they were published. As noted above there were some indications that certain articles may have been taken down from one website, but remained posted or referenced by another. There were some abnormalities in key term searches, even when specifically requesting to search with the body text of *Global Times* articles. On the other hand, if the CCP does execute the option to alter what can be viewed on these sites, then the articles available to this study would reflect the public historical record the CCP allows or desires regarding US FONOPs, strengthening the value for determining CCP perceptions.

As noted in Chapter 2, the Narrative Matrix coding framework also limits what sorts of numerical operations make sense for this data. The categories in the framework are ordinal, but not rational so common descriptions like "average" or "median" coding do not apply. The choice of letters (A-E) to label the categories, rather than numbers, was intentional. While some forms of non-rational numerical analysis might be applied to this data, they are beyond the current skill of the author and the scope of this study. Instead, the following sections present the

media reaction data graphically, plotted along a timeline super-imposed with the applicable US operations timeline. The accompanying analysis provides additional context and several interesting observations emerge.

South China Sea FONOPs under President Obama

This section analyzes the collected state-sponsored Chinese media reactions to US FONOPs published during the administration of President Obama. It was during this time that United States first took various means to alert the international community of the PRC's efforts to build and fortify artificial islands throughout the region China claimed as its own historical territory. At some point, a decision was made to include challenges to China's associated (and ambiguous) maritime claims into the existing US FON program. The state-controlled Chinese media reactions to this decision and the four surface FONOPs it spawned are summarized in the figure below.

Figure 3 graphically presents the media reactions to FONOPS in the South China Sea. The data is presented in chronological order along the horizontal-axis according to the self-reported publish date for each article. Each triangle represents one unique article reacting directly to one or more of these specific FONOPs or to the FON program in general as it related to the South China Sea. The vertical axis depicts the five categories of US narrative agreement according to the Narrative Matrix framework presented in Chapter 2: (A) Total Rejection, (B) Strong Rejection, (C) Balanced Rejection, (D) Cautious Acceptance, and (E) General Acceptance. Note that higher on the vertical axis represents increased disagreement while lower indicates more agreement. The vertical displacement of triangles within each category has no meaning, but was added so that individual data points with the same coding could be observed when published on the same day.

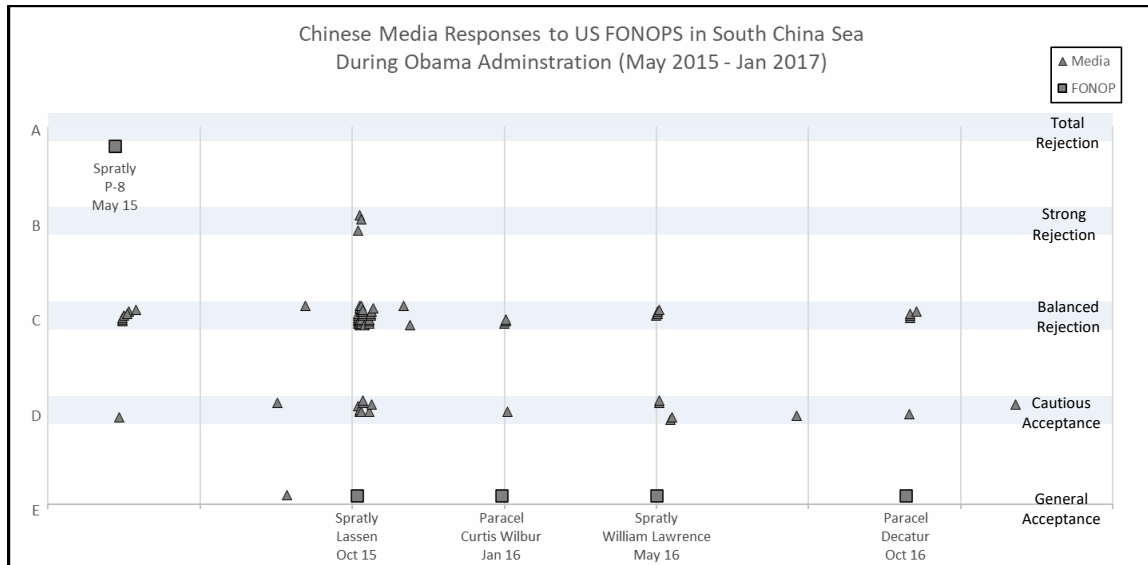


Figure 3. Media Responses to US FONOPs in the South China Sea During the Obama Administration.

Source: Authors Original Work. The time period covered includes May 2015 through January 2017.

The square-shaped data points represent US FONOPs conducted during this time period, subject to the selection restrictions noted in the first section of this chapter. Again, every publicly known surface FONOP and reactions to it were captured in the data for this research, but there were many more FONOPs conducted by US military aircraft than the sole P-8 mission present in this figure. The FONOP label indicates the type of US vessel involved, the date, and the area of the region targeted by the FONOP, either the Spratly Islands or Paracel Islands.

All of the conventions used for Figure 3 and described above also apply to Figure 5 and Figure 6 below, except where noted in the applicable sections.

As discussed in Chapter 1, to effectively leverage appropriate coercive mechanisms in support of the US strategic narrative, FONOPs must be publicly observed and understood by target audiences. The compellence aspect of FONOPs in regards to the CCP comes in the form of pain from public humiliation or frustration that the Party cannot

enforce its proclaimed version of sovereignty over the South China Sea. Such pain is absent if the Chinese and international public are unaware of the operation. Similarly, FONOPs can only deter China from attempting to act on its sovereignty claims if the CCP is aware that the US actions intentionally violate those claims, the Party understands why the United States is doing so, and the CCP understands the risks of overt acts to stop US FONOPs. Finally, the assurance mechanism of FONOPs requires third party states to be fully aware the operations occurred, their purpose, and the norms they seek to maintain or establish.

Under the Obama administration, the DoD's FONOPs strove to be publicly observed and understood, as typified in the widely reported P-8 mission described in the introduction to this paper. According to CCN, the Navy's justification for allowing its camera crew aboard a P-8 in 2015 was to bring increased international attention to the Chinese activities in the South China Sea that the United States perceived as a violation of international norms.⁷ According to aircrew statements, the missions had been flown for months as the service members observed almost daily progress on the construction projects, but there had been little broader media attention until the CNN reporting.⁸ As discussed in Chapter 2, international perception is a key part of customary international law. World attention rapidly increased with the video evidence recorded and posted online by CNN, as well as the Navy's posting of accompanying radio transmissions on Youtube. Chinese media responded as well.

After some delay, Chinese state-controlled media overwhelmingly indicated a Balanced Rejection of the US narrative for P-8 surveillance flights in the South China Sea. That finding implies some uncertainty about the lawfulness of the missions, but more certainty that the

⁷ Jim Sciutto, "Behind the scenes: A secret Navy flight over China's military buildup," *CNN*, updated 26 May 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/26/politics/south-china-sea-navy-surveillance-plane-jim-sciutto/index.html>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

primary purpose of the mission was power competition. Interestingly, according to the self-reported publishing dates, three days passed between this especially public FONOP and the first reaction on state-controlled public media. It seems the CCP preferred not to draw attention to the island building operations, but eventually felt forced to respond as the story gained international traction.

In any case, the first report was only a single, short article on *People's Daily* quoting a PLA spokesman with a relatively subdued tone that coded as Cautious Acceptance. There was no additional coverage of the P-8 mission for over 48 hours, but then it came in force. Over the following week seven unique articles and op-eds were posted and re-posted multiple times. These had a more decidedly defiant tone and more assertive statements by PRC officials and numerous “experts.” It may be that international attention failed to die down or that those directing the state-controlled media simply needed time to coordinate a response, but later media reactions tend to support the idea that the threat of future surface FONOPs mattered greatly to the CCP.

One part of the CNN reporting on the 20 May 2015 FONOP that drew particular attention in Chinese media was the potential for US escalation. Buried in the middle of the first article and repeated in subsequent reports was the statement “CNN learned” that the United States was considering “flying closer over the islands as well as sailing U.S. warships within miles of them, as part of the new, more robust U.S. military posture in the area.”⁹ This potential shift in US policy was mentioned in multiple Chinese media articles, even several months later in a *Global Times* piece that proved to be the only article in this study coded as General Acceptance. Published two weeks before President Xi Jinping and President Obama were set to meet in Washington D.C., the article downplayed “thorny issues” such as US-PRC disputes in the

⁹ Ibid.

South China Sea.¹⁰ The author described the “new type of major power relationship” that Xi would demonstrate, “characterized by no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation” with the United States.¹¹ Yet even in such an optimistic article, the *Global Times* mentioned how four months earlier Secretary of Defense Ash Carter “sparked bilateral tensions” by asking his staff to consider “flying navy surveillance aircraft over islands and sending US naval ships to within 12 nautical miles of reefs in the South China Sea.”¹² When the first ship came, the response was notable.

The volume of reactions by state-controlled Chinese media to the 26 Oct 2015 FONOP indicates that the CCP found the use of surface naval vessels to be a substantial escalation. The destroyer USS *Lassen* (DDG-82) was tapped to pass within 12 NM of Subi and Mischief Reefs in the Spratly Islands; these had been built into artificial islands with a large PLA presence. Although the action came only a month after President Xi’s first long visit with President Obama, the administration had been signaling the potential for the operation since at least May and state-controlled Chinese media was ready. The first reports began to pour out almost as the FONOP was happening and continued strong for several days. This research found 33 unique articles were published and frequently re-posted in response to the event within the first four days. In addition to being numerous, the state-controlled media reactions were consistent.

All the media reactions that this study examined that were published within a week of 26 Oct 2015 are magnified in Figure 4. A notable difference can be observed in this case between reporting by the *South China Morning Post* and the three targeted media that are under

¹⁰ Chen Heying, “Xi’s upcoming US visit to ‘stabilize ties,’” *Global Times*, 10 September 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/941608.shtml>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

CCP control.¹³ In Figure 4, the *Post*'s articles have a different marker to make them easier to distinguish. The consistency of state-controlled media is particularly evident when separated from *Post* articles; the overwhelming majority again indicate Balanced Rejection of the US strategic narrative. Two of the three more bellicose articles coded Strong Rejection were re-posts from *Xinhua* and one was a *Global Times* editorial. The two more subdued non-*Post* articles, coded as Cautious Acceptance, were published several days after the event and focused on high-level interactions between US admirals and their Chinese counterparts.

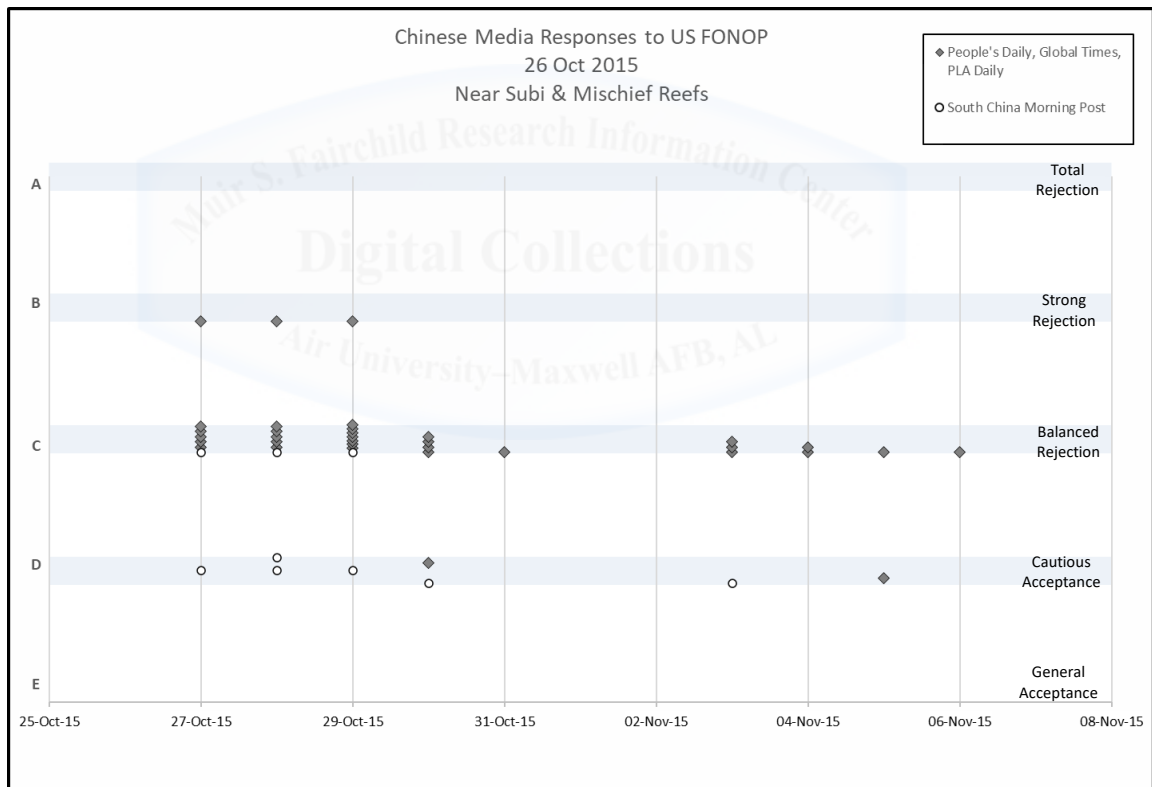


Figure 4. Chinese Media Responses to US FONOP on 26 Oct 2015
Source: Author's Original Work

¹³ Note that this event happened before the newspaper was fully acquired by Alibaba in 2016.

The mass of unique articles covering the FONOP on 26 Oct 2015 was not repeated during any other operation examined by this research. As media reactions to this action were the first to be targeted for collection during this study, the significance was not immediately obvious to the author. As media reactions to more FONOP events were researched, however, it became clear that this US action drew the most public media attention from the CCP of any FONOP in the South China Sea from 2015-2019. These reactions represent more than half of the total unique Chinese media reactions published during the Obama administration that were identified as significant for this study.

The overall media reaction may indicate anger, fear, or frustration on the CCP's part as the Party had no immediate means to counter the lawful change in US policy other than to protest loudly in the strongest way they could. Notably, while the US ambassador was angrily summoned in Beijing and PRC officials made public statements about the "illegal" US action, this study found no indication of a threat to take complaints to the UN or any other international body.¹⁴ While such threats were expected by the Narrative Framework for a Balanced Rejection of the US Narrative, their omission at least supports the definition of the category in that the CCP is not as certain of the illegality of FONOPs as its rhetoric indicates. Given that uncertainty, the CCP has little to lose by consistently calling the actions illegal because while it may persuade few outsiders, the practice provides cause for the CCP to later claim to domestic audiences that the world system is working against China when international organizations disagree with the Party's stance.

It is also possible the US action simply did not make sense to the

¹⁴ Minnie Chan, et al., "Warships sent, US ambassador called in as China bolsters Navy presence in disputed Spratly islands, after US sail-by rattles Beijing's sovereignty claims," *South China Morning Post*, 27 October 2015, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1872612/us-warship-heads-south-china-sea-islets-dramatic-rebuff>

CCP because it did not align with the Party's self-perception of what it was doing in the South China Sea. The CCP might have genuinely believed that China had a legitimate claim to the Spratly Islands and that other states would eventually come to understand that PRC control over the surrounding waters would be in the best interests of all parties. The Party might have dismissed the threat its installations could pose to future freedom of navigation or other economic interests of regional states. The CCP may not have seen its reclamation work as an overt escalation, but rather a clever move in a game of political posturing and positioning. If so, the US FONOP would have been particularly shocking after so many friendly Chinese overtures to the United States and coming only one month after President Xi stood next to President Obama in the Rose Garden and promised China had "no intention to militarize" the artificial islands it was creating.¹⁵ Regardless of any self-perceptions, the CCP certainly did not buy the US "free and open" narrative; the Party clearly perceived the main purpose of this FONOP to be US-PRC power competition.

As shown in Figure 3, subsequent FONOPs during the Obama presidency received a more stable and less concentrated media reaction that was a mix of Balanced Rejection and Cautious Acceptance. This trend may reflect a more sober and deliberate consideration on the part of the CCP during the 3 months before the next FONOP. By that time the CCP may have come to realize that FONOPs would be a new regular occurrence.

The coverage of the final surface FONOP of the Obama presidency on 21 Oct 2016 was somewhat unusual. The first article, and the only one coded as Cautious Acceptance for this US action, was a *People's Daily* op-ed. Multiple articles on the other platforms, all of which coded

¹⁵ David Brunnstrom and Michael Martina, "Xi denies China turning artificial islands into military bases," *Reuters*, 25 September 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-pacific-idUSKCN0RP1ZH20150925>.

as Balanced Rejection, appeared to make reference to and take similar quotations from this first op-ed, but the quotes do not match the original article. It is possible the inconsistency was due to separate authors translating the original article differently, if it was first published in Chinese, however, the *People's Daily* shows the op-ed to have been published in English the day before the other articles. It is also possible, that there was a different op-ed that either was not published in English or was subsequently taken down.

It is the opinion of the author of this study, however, that the discrepancy is evidence that the original op-ed was changed and reposted after the fact. The action on 21 Oct 2016 was the first surface FONOP after the South China Sea tribunal ruled against the legal foundations for China's Nine-Dash-Line. Consequently, the CCP may have anticipated and prepared for more aggressive US actions. However, the USS *Decatur* (DDG-73) reportedly did not pass within 12 NM of any of the Paracel Islands because the action was meant to challenge the excessive straight baseline claims made by China for the area.¹⁶ The 2016 operation was the first FONOP in this study that deliberately stayed that far out from the coastline. After later consideration of these factors, it seems plausible the CCP would want to mute any initially aggressive media reactions to the event.

If media reactions during the Obama administration largely aligned with a Balanced Rejection of the US narrative, how well did Chinese actions during the time period line up with that categorization? The answer is somewhat mixed. The radio transmissions during the P-8 mission detailed in Chapter 1 clearly indicate Balanced Rejection in the way they come across as verbal harassment. Statements by the aircrew

¹⁶ Sam LaGrone, "U.S. Warship Conducts South China Sea Freedom of Navigation Operation," *USNI News*, 21 October 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/10/21/u-s-warship-conducts-south-china-sea-freedom-navigation-operation>.

indicated this type of radio traffic to be common.¹⁷ On the other hand, the installation of military structures and radar systems identified by the P-8 crews are probably best interpreted as Cautious Acceptance in that they primarily increase defensive capability. The presence of PLAN surface warships, could be seen as either defensive or demonstrations of strength, however, the interactions between those vessels and USN destroyers would indicate they are best seen as Cautious Acceptance. It is difficult to be certain without access to ship-to-ship communications during these encounters, but public USN statements describing PLAN warships shadowing the US vessels who successfully conduct FONOPs “without incident” would seem to indicate that the PLAN acted safely and professionally.¹⁸ Further, aggressive or threatening PLA actions during these encounters would almost certainly draw public protest by the USN.

One additional CCP action during this time period deserves special attention. On 2 Sep 2015, the PLAN performed a textbook “innocent passage” with five vessels through US territorial waters off the Aleutian Islands.¹⁹ The ships had been exercising with Russia and experts noted the presence of a replenishment vessel among them indicated the extended return trip through US waters had been long planned.²⁰ The timing put the passage just weeks before President Xi’s visit to the United States and coincided with China’s celebration of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII.²¹ The Narrative Matrix codes this action as General Acceptance, but that does not seem appropriate since it was prior to the US surface FONOP on 26 Oct 2015. Many observers

¹⁷ Sciutto, “Behind the scenes,” 26 May 2015.

¹⁸ LaGrone, “U.S. Warship Conducts,” 21 October 2016.

¹⁹ Sam LaGrone, “Chinese Warships Made ‘Innocent Passage’ Through U.S. Territorial Waters off Alaska,” *USNI*, 3 September 2015, <https://news.usni.org/2015/09/03/chinese-warships-made-innocent-passage-through-u-s-territorial-waters-off-alaska>

²⁰ Andrea Chen, “Chinese navy sends Washington a message by patrolling near largest US state Alaska,” *South China Morning Post*, 4 September 2015, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1855448/chinese-navy-sends-america-message-patrolling-near>

²¹ LaGrone, “Chinese ‘Innocent Passage,’” 3 September 2015.

interpreted the Chinese passage as meant to send a warning message to the United States about the PLA's growing reach and that the United States could not hope to interfere in PRC territorial waters without suffering the same back.²² For its part, the US response was to affirm China's right to exercise freedom of navigation. The Chinese did not appear to repeat a similar action during the time period covered in this study. Altogether this action supports the conclusion that the CCP perceives FONOPS to be legal and that their primary purpose is power competition.

South China Sea FONOPS under President Trump

This section analyzes the collected state-sponsored Chinese media reactions to US FONOPS in the South China Sea that were published during the first two years of President Trump's administration. Figure 5 depicts the media reactions and associated FONOPS using the same conventions as Figure 3. Three trends are immediately apparent.

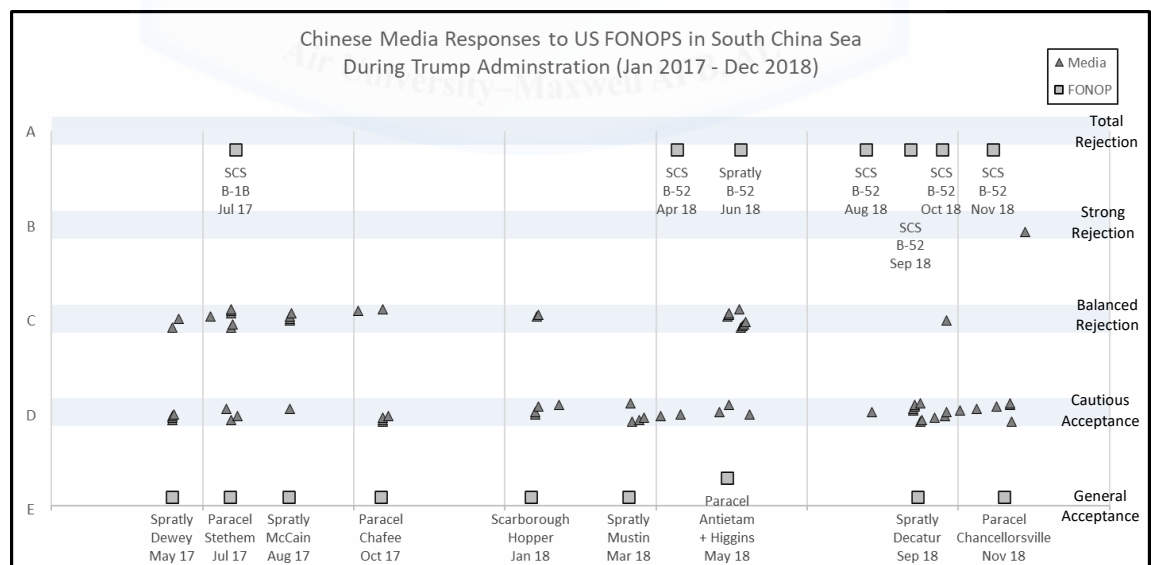


Figure 5. Media Responses to US FONOPS in the South China Sea During Trump Administration.

Source: Author's Original Work.

The period covered includes January 2017 through December 2018.

²² Ibid.; Chen, "Chinese navy sends Washington," 4 September 2015

First of all, there was a large gap of time between the last surface vessel FONOP of the preceding administration on 21 Oct 2016 and the first of Trump's presidency on 17 May 2017. This study found no indication P-8 flights ceased during this gap, but the previous section of this chapter established a significant difference in CCP perceptions of airborne and surface ship FONOPs. Given the events surrounding the 2016 presidential election this gap might simply reflect the time it took for the new administration to settle in and consider options, rather than a deliberate change to policy.

Secondly, regardless of the purpose for the gap in time, once the FONOPs began again under the Trump administration they became noticeably more frequent. For context, once surface FONOPs began under President Obama, 4 total of the operations occurred over 13 months. In contrast, 7 surface FONOPS were completed in the first 13 months after they began under President Trump. Furthermore, US missions exercising FON in the vicinity of the South China Sea began to also include regular flights by B-52 or B-1B bombers. Comparing Figure 5 directly with Figure 3 is most striking in this regard. If starting from the May 2015 P-8 mission with CNN, the two figures cover about the same time period, but the years 2017-2018 show twice as many warship FONOPs and four times as many actions by vessels with overtly offensive capabilities.²³

Finally, with some exceptions, there is a definite trend during this time period towards state-controlled Chinese media becoming more aligned with Cautious Acceptance rather than the previously noted Balanced Rejection. Initial coverage of US FONOPs is split between C and D coding in a way not dissimilar to the Chinese media reactions in

²³ Note: although international media outlets claim the P-8A has some air-to-surface capabilities, its primary mission is sea surveillance and anti-submarine warfare. By contrast, the primary mission of bomber aircraft is unquestionably global strike.

the last year of the Obama presidency. With the exception of responses in May and June (discussed below), however, the majority of 2018 saw state-controlled Chinese media respond to US FONOPs in ways that correspond with Cautious Acceptance. This may have been due to the great increase in FONOPS frequency and may indicate that assertions of FON were becoming routine, even to the CCP. If so, that portion of the states US goals for the FON program showed success in this context.

One trend that is not well depicted in Figure 5 is that the later part of this period trended towards less and less overall media coverage of FONOPs. In several cases, it was difficult or impossible to find three unique mentions of a specific US FONOP without relying on articles of the *South China Morning Post*. Several articles collected only referred to US FONOPs in general, without specific dates or ship names. Unless the CCP has taken down previously posted articles, the data points in the last few months of 2018 likely represent the total of state-controlled media reporting on the applicable operations. This trend also supports the notion that US FONOPs were starting to become routine (and therefore less newsworthy).²⁴ Furthermore, the trend indicates CCP perception of FONOPs were shifting towards Cautious Acceptance of the US narrative because the Narrative Matrix framework predicts that decreased media attention as an indicator of the category.

Not all indications, however, were towards Cautious Acceptance. The largest outlier to the general trend in the media its response to the FONOP on 27 May 2018. The corresponding articles had a renewed defiant tone portraying the United States as an outsider meddling for its own ends in what would otherwise be a peaceful region. Some of this coverage merged with reporting on UK and French considerations of

²⁴ Note: It is also possible the CCP calculated that significant media coverage of US FONOPs was not in the Party's interests if it might be interpreted as CCP impotence to stop the operations. The author of this study would argue that such a calculation by the CCP would still best align with Cautious Acceptance in the Narrative Matrix.

conducting their own FONOPs as well as reports of the 5 June 2018 B-52 mission to the north part of the South China Sea. In Chinese media, the B-52s were associated with concerns about Taiwan and reports the United States was considering regular Taiwan Strait transits. Overall, the majority of Chinese media reporting on FONOPs at this time coded as Balanced Rejection. The change in media response may have been an emotional reaction to CCP insecurity due to anticipated changes in the policy of the Western states, or it may have been meant as a signal that the CCP was considering their own escalation to push back.

Whatever its purpose, the Summer 2018 outlier in media coverage was followed by the most significant outlier in PLA actions noted during this time period. The PLA action manifested as an incident on 30 Sep 2018 as the USS *Decatur* executed an otherwise routine FONOP. While passing within 12 NM of the Chinese-claimed Gavin Reef of the Spratly Islands, a Chinese destroyer came alongside the ship and forcefully demanded it leave the area. As the *Decatur* continued on its route, the PLAN vessel made an aggressive maneuver in front of the US ship and the latter took evasive action to avoid a collision. The USN reported that the “unsafe and unprofessional” actions off the PLAN cause the two ships to come within 45 yards of each other.²⁵ According to the Narrative Matrix framework, this type of action indicates Strong Rejection of the US narrative and a CCP perception that the FONOP is meant as an unlawful, major threat to vital PRC interests. If true, that should be of major concern to US policymakers. The state-controlled Chinese media coverage of the incident, however, indicated otherwise.

²⁵ Teddy Ng and Kristin Huang, “America accuses Chinese warship of ‘unsafe’ manoeuvres after near collision with USS *Decatur* in South China Sea,” *South China Morning Post*, 2 October 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2166565/chinese-destroyer-nearly-collided-uss-decatur-after-trying-drive>; Catherine Wong, “US, Chinese warships within metres of collision in South China Sea, leaked pictures show,” *South China Morning Post*, 3 October 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2166849/us-chinese-warships-within-metres-collision-south-china-sea>.

Whatever was meant by the PLAN's actions during the *Decatur* incident, the media coverage of the FONOP was particularly muted, especially considering the implications of the PLAN actions. While reporting in May and early June had shown mostly Balanced Rejection, from September through November, nearly all reports found by this study referring to South China Sea FONOPs were coded as Cautious Acceptance. There was extremely limited coverage of the *Decatur's* FONOP, with only three mentions of it (outside of the *South China Morning Post*) and only one within a week. The first reference in *Global Times* was released after the *Post's* report on the USN accusations, but it did not mention the close encounter. The third mention was a *Xinhua* re-post on *People's Daily* that was the only indexed occurrence of the USS *Decatur* on the platform's search engine since 2017 and casts the United States as the overall aggressor in the region. The middle article was by far the most interesting.

The second mention in the fully state-controlled media came in a fascinating *Global Times* op-ed published over a week after the event. Its author, a research fellow at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, refers to how the *Decatur* incident "triggered political noise," while pointing out what seem like contradictions in the US position from the Chinese point-of-view.²⁶ He frames the event, however, in terms of an inevitable friction between powerful states that need not lead to other incidents between warships, further military escalation, or the "Thucydides Trap" if the two sides better understand each other's perspectives.²⁷ While employing common CCP rhetoric, the author acknowledges with surprising empathy that the US and China have a fundamentally "different understanding of international rules, orders and global governance," including freedom of

²⁶ Li Kaisheng, "S.China Sea can be more risky than trade," *Global Times*, 11 October 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1122569.shtml>.

²⁷ Ibid.

navigation and sovereignty.²⁸ He calls on both to exercise restraint to avoid exaggerating their conflict while recognizing the conflict was real.²⁹

What do the limited state-controlled Chinese media reactions indicate about out CCP perceptions of the FONOP on 30 Sep 2018? It seems likely that the CCP recognized the implications of what the PLAN had done and decided to tightly control its media in order to avoid aggravating the situation. It is possible the commanding officer of the PLAN destroyer exceeded his authority in taking the actions. The CCP's reluctance to escalate physically or rhetorically indicates that it did not perceive the US actions as intended to directly threaten the PRC's vital interests. Otherwise, it would have been prudent to take more aggressive measures to strengthen its position if only to deter military conflict rather than adopt a more neutral response that could be interpreted as weakness. In any case PLAN actions during the next FONOP were again described by the USN as "safe and professional."³⁰

The trend towards more acceptance in media coverage continued through the last surface FONOP in the South China Sea covered by this study. In fact, this research found no mention of the 26 Nov 2018 FONOP in the archives of *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, or *PLA Daily*. No key word searches turned up any results, nor did combing through every mention of *Chancellorsville*, warship, destroyer, Xisha Islands, or "navigation" during the month after the operation. The only Chinese media data points for this event depicted on Figure 5 came from reports by the *South China Morning Post*. This is particularly interesting because the *Post* articles quote official statements about the FONOP from the PRC Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Defense. The evidence points to a

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Zhenhua Lu, "US sends guided-missile cruiser to South China Sea to challenge 'excessive' Chinese claims," *South China Morning Post*, 30 November 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2175729/us-sends-guided-missile-cruiser-south-china-sea-challenge>.

deliberate CCP decision to prevent any reporting which may again indicate increased acceptance of the US narrative. It is also possible the CCP decision was related to the fact that President Xi was set to meet the next week with President Trump at the G20 summit in Buenos Aires.³¹

Considering the number of bomber FONOPs reported on by the international news media during this time, the state-sponsored Chinese media reaction to them was rather limited and uneven. Part of the issue might be the increased uncertainty about when and where bombers flew, absent a specific statement provided by the DoD. The aircraft are not always as conspicuous as a destroyer sailing within 12 NM of an island. Several state-controlled Chinese media articles mentioned that PRC officials were not always sure if the bombers had actually flown over any Chinese claimed islands during their missions.

For the 7 bomber FONOPs depicted in Figure 5, this research found only 15 total direct mentions during the time period that related to the South China Sea. Of those, half covered the missions on 5 Jun 2018 and 25 Sep 2018. Chinese media reporting on the June mission was part of the summer outlier period noted above when articles tended toward Balanced Rejection. Reporting on the September mission showed a return to Cautious Acceptance. Chinese media from Summer 2018 and afterward often connected the B-52 flights to potential or actual US actions in or near Taiwan; during this time period, the United States both signaled and then began to execute transits through the Taiwan Strait with warships (which is the subject of the next section).

If media coverage tended toward Cautious Acceptance during this time period how did PRC actions align? As under President Obama, the answer is mixed, but there were some PLA actions of particular concern.

³¹ Kristin Huang and Minnie Chan, "South China Sea on the back-burner while United States and China talk trade," *South China Morning Post*, 4 December 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2176211/south-china-sea-back-burner-while-united-states-and-china-talk>.

As discussed above, the *Decatur* incident was the most worrying action due its association with Strong Rejection, but the lack of USN complaints during the many other FONOPs indicates that the majority of surface interactions should remain coded as Cautious Acceptance. There were other actions of note, however.

In April 2018, The PLAN executed a large force naval exercise in the South China Sea. The maneuvers included at least 47 vessels, including China's first aircraft carrier, *Liaoning*, and state-controlled Chinese media provided many videos and pictures of the event. On 12 Apr 2018 President Xi personally inspected and spoke during the exercise. Media praised the "transformation" of the PLAN under Xi's leadership into a force that could properly protect China's interests and sovereignty.³² According to the *PLA Daily*, the location and the size of the force was meant to send a message to the United States and others about China's capabilities. As such, the Narrative Matrix framework codes this action as Balanced Rejection.

During this time period, the PLA also deployed new capabilities to its holdings in the South China Sea such as bombers, Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) and anti-ship missiles. Several open sources noted the first known deployment of Chinese SAMs and anti-ship missiles to parts of the Spratly Islands on 4 May 2018.³³ While it could be argued that these systems are defensive in nature, their proximity to areas the USN and USAF were actively patrolling makes them just as much offensive. Weeks later, the PLAAF publicly announced that it had landed H-6 bombers on the PRC's new airfields in the South China Sea after the aircraft had completed a "simulated bombing" exercise.³⁴ Few would

³² Li Jiayao, "Subtle messages behind China's biggest naval parade," *PLA Daily*, 13 Apr 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-04/13/content_8003833.htm.

³³ Liang Jun, "China has right to peaceful activities in South China Sea: FM," 4 May 2018, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0504/c90000-9456230.html>.

³⁴ Liang Jun, "Air Force bombers land on island airport for first time," 19 May 2018, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0519/c90000-9461810.html>.

consider bombers a defensive platform, but the aircraft would also be vulnerable if staged long-term on the artificial islands rather than just refueling on it. For these reasons, the H-6 demonstration as well as the missile deployments are best seen as demonstrations of strength rather than posturing for imminent action; the Narrative Matrix codes all these actions as indicating Balanced Rejection.

In summary, as the number of US FONOPs increased during the first two years of the Trump presidency, the reactions of state-controlled Chinese media showed an overall trend towards Cautious Acceptance, while certain changes to PLA actions showed a trend towards Balanced Rejection or even Strong Rejection. What should be made of these conflicting trends? Is there perhaps some sort of schism between those directing the state-controlled media and the PLA? The best explanation is that CCP perceptions of US FONOPs in the South China Sea by the end of 2018 were trending towards a Cautious Acceptance of the US narrative. That means the CCP had come to realize that these FONOPs were legal under international law and the United States was having some success in making demonstrations of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea into a regular international norm. As that perception took hold, the CCP saw less value in drawing significant attention to FONOPs through the English-language Chinese media that it controlled and sought to limit damage that might result from the conflict escalating in a military direction.

If the Narrative Matrix framework is accurate, then the CCP also perceived that the United States believed its FONOPs supported legitimate US interests (even if the Chinese did not) in addition to also affecting US-PRC power competition. In that case, the CCP would not have viewed the US narrative about supporting a “free and open” sea as merely lip service, but rather something the United States genuinely believed was a key US interest. If these conclusions are accurate, they would predict a shift in CCP behavior towards looking for ways to

compete with the United States in the South China Sea rather than defend against attacks on Chinese interests.

On the other hand, much like several Chinese authors accused the US DoD of doing, it is most likely that some PLA actions that were contrary to this overall trend were tied to internal PLA interests. By emphasizing the US threat or provoking a US response, such as through the deployment of missiles to the South China Sea, the PLA could justify access to resources it perceived as needs. Many articles in the state-controlled media connected the US and other external threats to a need militarize the disputed islands while improving and better funding the PLA, especially the PLAN. For example, five months after the *Decatur* incident an article in *Global Times* specifically ties a proposed increased PLA budget to US and Japanese threats in the South China Sea, East China Sea and Taiwan Straits. Bureaucracy may not be all that different, even across the Pacific Ocean.

President Trump and the Taiwan Question

This section analyzes state-sponsored Chinese media reactions to US FONOPs in or related to the Taiwan Strait that were published from July 2017 to May 2019. For political and historical reasons, the CCP is particularly sensitive to issues related to the international waterway and that fact has implications for the US activities covered by this research.

The Taiwan Strait is a major international waterway connecting the South China Sea to the East China Sea. At its narrowest point the waterway is about 160 km or 86 NM,³⁵ so it is too wide for one state to claim all of it as a territorial sea under UNCLOS, even if that state held unquestioned sovereignty over both coasts. While foreign military vessels are not required to use “innocent passage” rules to pass through the international seas in the middle of the Strait, political sensitivity

³⁵ “Taiwan Strait,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*,
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Taiwan-Strait>

demands they take care when doing so.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Taiwan Strait and, particularly, US intervention in the waterway have played a critical role in the history of the CCP and the PRC it founded. Today, the PRC claims sovereignty of the island of Taiwan as part of single whole China it rules over and the state is extremely sensitive to any foreign actions or statements that might call into question this “one China principle.” Officially, the PRC views Taiwan as a renegade province that will be fully reincorporated at some point in the future, but the state has never renounced the use of force or invasion to do so. Much modern PRC sensitivity to any US activity in the Strait stems from the fact that the United States has deployed its navy to the waterway multiple times in the past in order to deter or deny the PLA from crossing over to Taiwan.

The CCP insists that the final determination of Taiwan’s political status is an internal Chinese issue in which no foreign powers may interfere. As stated in many state-controlled Chinese media articles read during the course of this research, this “Taiwan question” is the “most important and sensitive issue in China-US ties.”³⁶ The matter was at the heart of US-Chinese efforts to re-establish diplomatic relations during the Nixon administration and the “key passage” of the Shanghai Communique signed in 1972.³⁷ The terms “one China” and “Taiwan question” come from this paragraph. The joint declaration of US and PRC positions, as well as two more communiques in 1979 and 1982, enabled the normalization of diplomatic ties between the states over the last 5 decades. Consequently, Chinese officials and media frequently call on the United States to “abide by the One China principle and the provisions of the three Sino-US Joint Communiques” when dealing with

³⁶ Liang Jun, “PLA keeps eye on US ships in Taiwan Straits,” *Global Times*, 30 November 2018, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/1130/c90000-9523707.html>.

³⁷ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2011), 271.

US actions that may directly or indirectly relate to Taiwan.³⁸

Although the PRC has never officially recognized it, both sides of the Taiwan Strait have customarily kept military forces deconflicted by the median line of the waterway. The median is an imaginary line drawn down the middle of the Strait. In the 1950s, the United States declared that both the PRC and Republic of China (ROC) should keep their forces on the respective side of the median, but the line has no legal recognition or status under UNCLOS.³⁹ All three states do, however, see any of them crossing the median to the unfriendly side as politically significant.⁴⁰

The first significant USN presence in the Taiwan Strait during the time period covered by this study was not directly tied to FON. In July of 2017, the first PLAN aircraft carrier, *Liaoning*, made its third transit of the Taiwan Strait in order to execute a port call in Hong Kong during the 20th anniversary of the city's return to Chinese rule.⁴¹ The *Liaoning*, remained on the west side of the median line while Taiwan's naval vessels shadowed it on the eastern side.⁴² A week after the event, *China Times*, a newspaper in Taiwan, reported that the *Liaoning* was also monitored from the Taiwan side by a US destroyer. Although the author of this study found no contemporaneous or official US acknowledgement of the ship's presence, later media widely reported it as the USS *John S. McCain* (DDG-56).

This research found only one state-controlled Chinese media report on the transit of the *McCain*. The CNTV report, reposted on *People's Daily* was published shortly after the *China Times* story broke. It did not

³⁸ Li Jiayao, "Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on Nov.29," *PLA Daily*, 30 November 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-11/30/content_9360730.htm.

³⁹ Franz-Stefan Gady, "China Sends Aircraft Carrier Through Taiwan Strait," *Diplomat* 22 March 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/china-sends-aircraft-carrier-through-taiwan-strait/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "U.S. Navy destroyer monitored Chinese carrier in Taiwan Strait: report," *Japan Times*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/07/19/asia-pacific/u-s-navy-destroyer-monitored-chinese-carrier-taiwan-strait-report/>.

mention the ship's name and was only two sentences long, including a PLA statement that China was "monitoring the overall situation in the Taiwan Strait."⁴³ On the other hand, state-controlled media sources ran over 30 articles mentioning the *McCain* after it collided with a commercial shipping vessel the following month. The total media response indicates the PLA and CCP may have been previously unaware of the US ship's presence in the Strait. Even if they were aware, the CCP wanted to limit Chinese coverage of the event as much as possible. The lack of a public, official US statement indicates that while the *McCain* was exercising FON by being in the Strait, FON was probably not the focus of its mission. The political sensitivity of the issue and complexity of the mission make it impossible to code the Chinese media response under the Narrative Matrix framework, however the event overshadowed later US activities in 2018-2019. It was a year before the next Strait transit of a US warship.

Figure 6 depicts Chinese media responses to actions in or relating to the Taiwan Strait. This research uncovered no reports of US aircraft flying in the Strait, however, the two B-52 missions in the figure were tied to the "Taiwan question" by Chinese media are therefore relevant to this section. As mentioned above, the United States had signaled it was considering sending warships through the Taiwan Strait during the first half of 2018. During this time the *Liaoning* made several more transits of the Strait, the large naval exercise described in the previous section occurred in the South China Sea, PLAAF bombers circumnavigated Taiwan multiple times, and the PLA conducted a live-fire exercise in the Taiwan Strait as well.⁴⁴

⁴³ Wang Xuejing, "China says it is monitoring situation in Taiwan Strait," *People's Daily*, 20 July 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0720/c90785-9244114.html>.

⁴⁴ Bai Tiantian, "PLA sends planes round Taiwan for second time in a week," *Global Times*, 26 Apr 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1099897.shtml>.

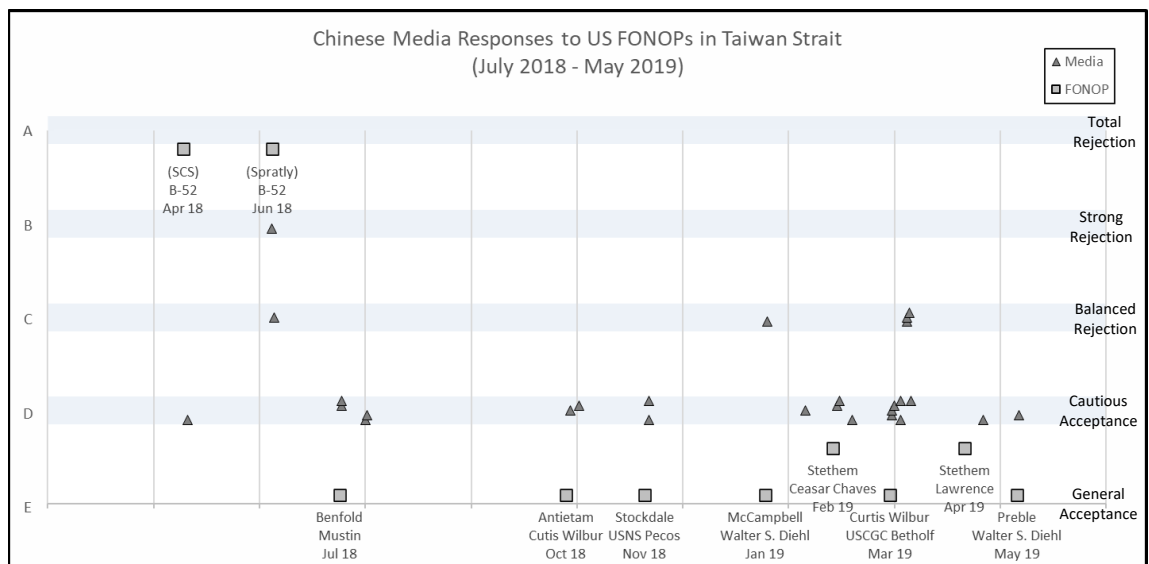


Figure 6. Media Responses to US FONOPs in the Taiwan Strait.

Source: Author's Original Work. The time period includes July 2017 through May 2019.

Figure 6 shows the most bellicose reference to a potential Taiwan Strait FONOP uncovered by this study was published in the midst of all this activity and a month before FON transits through the Strait began. The *Global Times* editorial in question was a direct response to reports the United States was considering the move. In a bold and bellicose tone, the author warned of potential “military confrontation,” forthcoming Chinese “actions,” and Chinese willingness to “safeguard its national sovereignty and dignity at any cost” if the US military got “too close to the Taiwan Straits.”⁴⁵ Despite this rhetoric, Figure 6 shows that, with one major exception, the Chinese state-controlled media response was milder than threatened when the FONOP began occurring the following July.

Overall, any mention of US actions in the Taiwan Straits was relatively limited in state-controlled Chinese media and very few of these articles coded anything other than Cautious Acceptance. The author of

⁴⁵ Editorial, “US warships unwelcome in Taiwan Straits,” *Global Times*, 5 Jun 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1105742.shtml>.

this study found there to be far fewer total mentions across the Chinese media of US activities in the Taiwan Strait, and these articles were more difficult to locate than for similar actions in the South China Sea. In several instances, while the names of US ships were printed in the body text of an article, the articles would not appear in searches for that name. Many of the articles in this section could only be found by searching for all mentions of Taiwan or Taiwan Straits during a certain time period and combing through them one by one. Furthermore, while there are a few references to these missions in *PLA Daily* and *People's Daily*, the most articles found were published in *Global Times*. Overall, these findings further support a conclusion of Cautious Acceptance in the Narrative Matrix framework.

The major exception to these overall trends was the media response to the transit of two US ships on 24 Mar 2019, however, the changes were not primarily due to the mission itself. Compared to the transits before and after, the nine articles discovered that mentioned this FONOP were a relative deluge and much easier to find. The tone of the articles was harsher and many spoke of the two ships' transit as a major escalation that broke the status quo. However, these Strait transits had been happening regularly for nine months and the most aggressive language in the articles was directed towards Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

What changed was that in the week before this operation, officials in the Trump administration had given tacit approval to sell new F-16s to Taiwan.⁴⁶ This was viewed by the CCP as a direct interference in the "one China principle" with unacceptable ramification for the overall "Taiwan question." To the CCP the sale of new military hardware might embolden the leaders of the DPP who otherwise might be feeling

⁴⁶ "US President Donald Trump's aides support the sale of 60 F-16 warplanes to Taiwan, sources say," 22 Mar 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3002831/us-president-donald-trumps-aides-support-sale-60-f-16-warplanes>

increasingly isolated against a PRC growing ever more powerful. While the CCP previously sought to limit media attention to US warship transits in the past, it now saw an opportunity aggressively rail against current physical US actions in an attempt to prevent the proposed actions from taking place. Alternately, while previously transits might have been seen as political irritants, the missions might now be a threat to CCP power if the actions were part of an integrated plan to strengthen Taiwan's independence faction. The overall push of the media blitz was for Taiwan and US to both return to previously acceptable policies.

The rhetorical escalation was matched by physical escalation by the PRC. On 31 Mar 2019, PLAAF fighters flew across the median of the Strait, but not over the coast of Taiwan, and state-controlled media reported relatively heavily on the event. Through its media mouthpieces, the CCP declared the median a farce and threatened to make flights over the line a regular occurrence, perhaps even flying over the island itself. Even noting the potential for accidents or a provoked shootdown of an aircraft, it seemed as though the CCP was engaging in its own game of brinksmanship.⁴⁷ By the time of the next Taiwan Strait FONOP in April, however, there had been no shots fired in anger. The state-controlled Chinese media returned to its previous tendencies of Cautious Acceptance tones and extremely limited coverage of US warship transits.

Although there seem to be obvious trends in the data, the Narrative Matrix framework may be less useful for FON actions in the Taiwan Strait. PRC officials and state-controlled media treatment of US activities in the Taiwan Strait is noticeably restrained and carefully controlled, much more so than in the South China Sea. The CCP genuinely considers the issue a core interest in a way that the South China Sea simply is not. The divide between Taiwan and the PRC is tied

⁴⁷ Editorial, "Taiwan can't gamble on cross-Straits crisis," *Global Times*, 1 Apr 2019, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1144298.shtml>.

to the very identity of the Chinese people, while the South China Sea has more to do with Chinese interests and resources. Furthermore, due their mutual history, it is unlikely that at any point in the near future, the CCP could come to perceive the presence of US warships in the Taiwan Strait as intended to uphold the good of the international community, rather than parochial US interests.

The framework also loses some usefulness because the Taiwan Strait is clearly an international waterway, with freedom of navigation supported by both UNCLOS and customary law. The CCP, through the editorial staff of *Global Times*, acknowledged it as such early on in the time period studied here.⁴⁸ Consequently, the Total Rejection and Strong Rejection categories would seem by definition to be inapplicable to CCP perceptions because there can be nothing illegal in US warships transiting the international waters of the Taiwan Strait. However, as is demonstrated by the media responses in March 2019, it is also certainly true that the CCP could conceivably perceive of these US actions as major threats to its vital interests. Alterations to the framework may be required to make it truly useful for analyzing state-controlled Chinese media reactions to US actions in the Taiwan Strait in the future.

Summary

This chapter summarized how data on state-controlled Chinese media reactions to US FONOPs in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait was collected, analyzed, and presented according to the Narrative Matrix framework (see Figure 2). Media responses to US actions in the South China Sea showed a trend of Balanced Rejection of the US FON narrative when FONOPs started during the Obama administration with a slight, then definite trend towards Cautious Acceptance during the heart of the early Trump administration. PRC actions taken in response to

⁴⁸ Editorial, “US warships play psychological game in Taiwan Straits,” *Global Times*, 8 July 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1109878.shtml>

FONOPs in the South China Sea were a mix of alignment with Cautious Acceptance and Balanced Rejection. Significant exceptions to general trends in both areas were noted.

The data for media reactions to US FON actions in the Taiwan Strait mostly pointed towards Cautious Acceptance. However, due to CCP sensitivity to actions relating to Taiwan, the author of this study is less confident in the value of the Narrative Matrix framework for analyzing CCP perceptions in that area.



Conclusions

Reflective thinking turns experience into insight.

-John C. Maxwell

This study began with the following research question: What does state-controlled Chinese media reporting reveal about CCP perceptions of US FONOPs in disputed or sensitive territory? The answer below is organized by the author into findings, conclusions, and assertions.

Findings

Chapter 1 explored theories that help to explain why strategic communication is so difficult in international relations. Thomas Schelling's ideas about compellence, deterrence, and assurance frame how the threat of pain or violence works to affect behavior, but the threat has to be effectively communicated. The essence of this communication is what Emile Simpson calls a strategic narrative, something meant to be accepted by targeted audiences which explains why actions were or will be taken and what those actions mean. The works of Graham Allison, Philip Zelikow, Robert Jervis, and Daniel Kahneman explain why many barriers to effective communication of strategic narratives exist due to inherent characteristics of human beings, groups of people, and the international environment itself.

As a means of strategic messaging, FONOPs incorporate coercive mechanisms of compellence, deterrence, and assurance to affect desired changes in the choices of various actors. In turn, each of these mechanisms requires effective communication of the strategic narrative to shape behaviors in the desired way. Evaluating the effectiveness of FONOPs then requires finding a way to measure CCP perceptions of the actions and how much those perceptions match the US strategic narrative. The relationship between the CCP and certain Chinese media

platforms makes the media an avenue for measuring CCP perceptions.

The messages sent and received through US FONOPs employ a set of grammar within a context discussed in Chapter 2. The grammar is largely encompassed by the international law of the sea, embodied and articulated in UNCLOS. The law defines many concepts, rules, and expectations for international actors on the ocean. The key context of FONOPs is laid out in the history of how the United States and China have interacted with UNCLOS, each other, and other regional actors.

After isolating the applicable grammar and context of US FONOPs, a framework can be created for categorizing CCP reactions in order to measure how the CCP received and understood the US strategic narrative. This study identified the US narrative for FONOPs as: US operations on and above the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait are legal under UNCLOS and demonstrate US commitment to a “free and open” sea. CCP reactions, by word and action, flow from how the US narrative was understood and interpreted.

The author of this study isolated two pertinent questions based on the US narrative: (1) Does the CCP perceive FONOPs as legal? and (2) What does the CCP perceive as the United States’ primary/secondary purpose for FONOPs? Potential purposes for FONOPs were identified as threatening PRC sovereignty or interests, affecting US-PRC power competition, and affecting US-specific interests or those of the international community. The possible CCP perceptions should, logically, drive the CCP towards different kinds of reactions that manifest in words and actions.

This research organized these various ideas into a single Narrative Matrix framework (depicted in Figure 2) for categorizing various possible CCP reactions into how they would be expected to align with five discrete levels of CCP acceptance of the US narrative: Total Rejection, Strong Rejection, Balanced Rejection, Cautious Acceptance, and General Acceptance. Armed with the Narrative Matrix framework, the author

sought out, collected, and coded English-language Chinese media reactions to US FONOPs over certain periods of time and region, with an emphasis on platforms clearly controlled by the state. The results of that research and analysis are presented in Chapter 3.

US FONOPs challenging excessive maritime claims of the PRC in the South China Sea (whether implied or explicit), began under the administration of President Obama. This study focused on air and surface FONOPs from May 2015 through January 2017. The study found that Chinese media reactions to these FONOPs generally aligned with a Balanced Rejection of the US narrative. Newsworthy PRC actions taken in response to US FONOPs aligned as a mix of Balanced Rejection and Cautious Acceptance.

After a significant break, US FONOPs publicly began again under President Trump with noticeably higher frequency. Between May 2017 and December 2018, Chinese media reactions to these FONOPs started as a solid mix of Balanced Rejection and Cautious Acceptance with a strong trend towards Cautious Acceptance by the end of the period. A notable exception to these trends included media responses in the summer of 2018 and PLAN actions during the *Decatur* incident on 30 Sep 2018. Broader contextual changes, especially related to Taiwan, may account for the temporary shift, but media responses quickly realigned with Cautious Acceptance after September. Most newsworthy PLA actions aligned with Balanced Rejection, but unreported actions during the frequent FONOPs were most likely aligned with Cautious Acceptance.

US operations emphasizing FON in the Taiwan Strait began under President Trump in July 2018 and this research studied Chinese responses to those operations from April 2018 to May 2019. While Chinese media reactions largely aligned with Cautious Acceptance, the unique context and history of Taiwan and the Strait cause some problems for the Narrative Matrix framework. The most significant and

sudden change to both Chinese words and actions occurred in March 2019, not in direct reaction to the FONOPs or US FON narrative, but in response to outside reports of potential arms sales to Taiwan. Meanwhile, unreported Chinese actions during this time period mostly likely continued to align with Cautious Acceptance expectations, however, more newsworthy PLA actions largely aligned with Balanced Rejection.

Conclusions

First of all, the findings summarized above demonstrate that careful attention to the reactions of English-language, state-controlled Chinese media does, in fact, reveal important information for evaluating CCP perceptions of US FONOPs. The relationship between the CCP and *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, and *PLA Daily*, means that what these platforms release in English is particularly relevant. This research uncovered ample evidence that the CCP intentionally filters or editorializes what information gets published and when. It is not that the words themselves are speaking the truth as the CCP perceives it, but rather what the Party chooses to release or to allow to stay posted (or indexed on platform search engines) reveals part of the message they are trying to send back. The CCP has a purpose in having certain articles written or translated into English for posting and these articles reveal an aspect of its perceptions

Second, this research indicates that the CCP perceives the primary US purpose for FONOPs in the South China Sea to be support for US-specific interests, and not those of the greater international community. The US interests in question might be specific to improving the competitive balance of power with China or more internally focused, such as genuine concern about losing economic access in the future (while power competition is a secondary purpose). Either way, the CCP does not give credence to the argument that the United States is motivated by a desire to create or maintain a “free and open” sea for everyone.

On one level, this rejection may seem obvious, but it is an

important distinction because this is a potential blind spot for US policy-makers. Americans probably do not perceive a difference in this area between what is good for the United States and what is good for the world. Americans genuinely believe that most people value freedom more than stability and that increases in US power should not be threatening to other “good” actors because Americans want what is best for everyone. Americans may be blind to the fact that free access is likely to help an open society proportionally more than a closed or authoritarian one.

Third, this research provides strong evidence that the CCP perceives FONOPs as legal, despite the consistent rhetoric to the contrary. Confidence of the illegality of actions by another party should drive one to take assertive measures to defend the legitimate rights being trampled on, but such Chinese actions were found to be the exception rather than the rule during this study. Furthermore, there was no language in any media articles covered by this research threatening legal action at the UN or other international law body. There are reasons for the CCP not to appeal to such bodies, such as a perception that the game is rigged or that an unfavorable ruling would further weaken the CCP’s position. However, such perceptions would not stop the CCP from threatening to appeal, especially if the legal position is somewhat ambiguous. If anything, Chinese media reactions actively avoided seeking legal redress for US FONOPs.

Fourth, the Narrative Matrix framework is helpful for sorting through the noise of state-controlled media, but additional information would help to draw more robust conclusions. This is especially true for non-newsworthy response actions taken by the CCP. Access to confidential or classified information, such as the details of interactions between the US military and PLA during FONOPs, could greatly increase confidence in coding CCP actions. The reactions that make the news tend to be the extraordinary ones. A noted weakness of the current framework is its difficulty in capturing when the other side is not saying

anything; is the silence an intentional reaction or was the US message simply missed?

Finally, even if some details of the framework might be incorrect, the disciplined thinking that went into it is vital in any effort to evaluate the effects of strategic messaging. The most important aspect of creating the framework was thinking through how another party could perceive a given action and react. This process involved separating potential perceptions into logically distinguishable categories, thinking through the logic of what message the receiver would then want to send back in each case, and finally considering what actions they would also want to take, perhaps unrelated to messaging (defensive preparations, for example). It is certainly not sufficient to simply judge the success of strategic messaging by binary results such as did the strategic messaging cause the Chinese to stop building artificial islands or not.

Implications

The evidence presented here indicates that the strategic messaging aspect of FONOPs in the South China Sea is working in some areas and not in others. On the one hand, there was a definite trend in state-controlled Chinese media reporting on FONOPs in the South China Sea moving from Balanced Rejection of the US FON narrative towards Cautious Acceptance. This indicates that the CCP has come to accept that FONOPs are certainly legal and that the US is genuinely concerned that its own interests are threatened by Chinese land reclamation and militarization in the region. On the other hand, the CCP does not appear to accept the narrative that US policy-makers are genuinely concerned about what is good for the rest of the international community. When another actor does something with the potential to hurt you, there is a natural difference in the way you perceive and react to that action depending on whether you think the actor is intentionally seeking to do you harm, is selfishly trying to protect his or her own interests, or genuinely (if perhaps mistakenly) simply doing what the actor thinks is

right. Therefore, the difference in perceptions represented by Cautious Acceptance and General Acceptance of the US FON narrative represents significantly different levels of resistance to US actions. There is a huge difference between “I will go wherever I want because I can” and “I will go where everyone is allowed to go to prove to those that are weaker than me that they can too.” It is worth some self-reflection of US policy to consider how to make that jump.

Ambiguity on the part of the US FONOPs is unhelpful because convincing strategic audiences that FONOPs are not only legal, but also beneficial to the greater community requires significant clarity and consistency. The author encountered multiple defense professionals during the course of thinking through this study who confidently claim the Chinese fully understand what the United States means to communicate through FONOPs. This research casts at least a little doubt on that assertion because it indicates that the CCP perceives a real difference between what the United States says it does and what it actually does. Furthermore, it is important to recognize this is not a two-player game and there are multiple other strategic audiences watching that the United States should consider, including other states in the region, the Chinese people, and the American people. To many in these audiences, the intricacies between high seas maneuvers and innocent passage or territorial seas and economic exclusive zones are not inherently clear. It is not even certain the difference greatly matters to the CCP. To that end, public statements linking specific FONOPs to specific legal challenges immediately after such operations complete could go a long way to clarifying what the United States is doing and better support the US FON narrative. Furthermore, deliberately including airborne FONOPs in such statements could greatly enhance their strategic messaging value. General statements about the “free and open” seas do not have the same effect.

Finally, the research here suggests several areas that might be

useful for further study. It was already noted that the addition of confidential or classified information about PRC actions or the interactions between the US military forces and the PLA could improve both the framework and the confidence of its findings. This benefit would have to be weighed against the limits such information's inclusion would pose on how widely the framework's findings could be shared.

Additionally, the framework and processes in this study could be greatly enhanced by individuals with skills in computer science. The process of finding, reading, and coding media articles was time-consuming and relied heavily on the judgement of the author, however, the use of programed searches of internet archives and recent advances in machine learning could make the process much more efficient. There already exist websites that periodically copy and archive public internet sites such as the Chinese media targeted by this study. Well-written computer programs might make use of these websites, not only to vastly speed up the process of finding relevant media articles, but also for identifying anomalies, such as if or when a state-controlled media website removes or alters an existing report. If the framework is further improved and enough media reactions are collected and coded, the resulting data should lend itself to machine learning algorithms that could greatly speed up the entire process. If both the collection and coding of media reports was significantly automated in this way, it may become possible to widen the search to consider the total national media response to US actions like FONOPs.

Parting Thoughts

China and the United States are the two most powerful states on the planet and the relationship between them will likely shape the future course of the international system. Policy-makers within the CCP and the US government might then be the most important agents on the world stage for determining answers to the big questions of war, conflict, competition, and peace across the entire human species. One cannot

emphasize enough just how imperative it is for US policy-makers to understand as fully as possible how the CCP perceives US military actions like FONOPs. The interactions between the PLA and a US P-8A described at the beginning of this paper hint at how much might depend on the frustrations, fears, or misjudgments of individual actors far down the chain-of-command. Whenever military forces operate in close proximity and under less than friendly conditions, there is potential for accidents and miscalculations. That potential is far higher when either side is blind to how its actions are perceived by the other. When it comes to CCP perceptions, US policy-makers need all the insights they can get.

The research presented here offers exactly these kinds of insights into US-PRC interactions, especially concerning how the CCP perceives US military actions. Measurable, distinguishable, and empathetic trend data on what the CCP “says, writes, and does” in reaction to US actions are critical for policy-makers to gain insight into how the strategic messages behind the US actions were received by the CCP. The insights provided by the Narrative Matrix framework can help strategists to not only better assess the value of FONOPs, but also to mitigate the perception challenges inherent to international relations.

APPENDIX

Chinese Media Database

The tables below show the English-language Chinese media reports and articles as analyzed, coded, and recorded in the overall database during the research presented in this paper. As described in chapter 3, the database was split into two tables based on reference to either the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait. Due to space, the tables only include the article date, title, source, URL, and the research author's assigned coding.

Table 1 - English-language Chinese media referring to US FONOPs in South China Sea.

Publish Date	Title	News Source	URL	Coding
23-May-15	Chinese troops ask U.S.military jet to leave Nansha Islands: FM	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0523/c90883-8896601.html	D
25-May-15	U.S. in South China Sea: troubleshooter or troublemaker?	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0525/c90883-8897240.html	C
25-May-15	US close reconnaissance in South China Sea may cause miscalculation: FM	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/923542.shtml	C
25-May-15	B-1 bombers herald tough choice for Canberra	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/923493.shtml	C
26-May-15	Commentary: Manila will not benefit from playing with fire over South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0526/c90883-8897946.html	C
28-May-15	U.S. meddling in South China Sea unjustified, unprofitable	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0528/c90883-8899143.html	C
29-May-15	No one tells us what to do, Beijing says	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0529/c90786-8899432.html	C
03-Jun-15	Obama is sowing discontent in S.China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/925069.shtml	C

04-Sep-15	Chinese navy sends Washington a message by patrolling near largest US state Alaska	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1855448/chinese-navy-sends-america-message-patrolling-near	D
10-Sep-15	Xi's upcoming US visit to 'stabilize ties'	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/941608.shtml	E
22-Sep-15	President Xi's US visit should be an opportunity	Global Times	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0922/c90000-8953400.html	C
27-Oct-15	China warns US of "eventualities" in South China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949352.shtml	B
27-Oct-15	After the show, it's time for US destroyer to leave	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949261.shtml	C
27-Oct-15	US provocative act in South China Sea breaks peaceful commitment	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949234.shtml	C
27-Oct-15	China lodges protest with US on warship patrol in South China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949232.shtml	C
27-Oct-15	U.S. Navy to Send Warship to South China Sea in 24 hours	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1027/c90000-8967162.html	C
27-Oct-15	Two Chinese Destroyers Sent to Warn Patrolling U.S. Warship in South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1027/c90000-8967676.html	C
27-Oct-15	Warships sent, US ambassador called in as China bolsters Navy presence in disputed ...	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1872612/us-warship-heads-south-china-sea-islets-dramatic-rebuff	C
27-Oct-15	Beijing has options if US escalates challenge to its claims in South China Sea	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1873006/beijing-has-options-if-us-escalates-challenge-its	D
28-Oct-15	Beijing summons U.S. ambassador over U.S. navy patrol	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1028/c90000-8967680.html	B
28-Oct-15	US warned over patrol by warship	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1028/c90000-8967787.html	C
28-Oct-15	DM Spokesman: China firmly opposes U.S. warship's patrol in Nansha	PLA Daily	http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-10/28/content_6742369.htm	C
28-Oct-15	Chinese ambassador slams US provocation in South China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949471.shtml	C
28-Oct-15	China chastises US for "show of military force"	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949394.shtml	C
28-Oct-15	U.S. Pacific Commander to Visit China to Discuss South China Sea Dispute	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1028/c90000-8968263.html	C

28-Oct-15	China, US won't cut off contact over USS Lassen's sail-by in the South China Sea, say experts	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1873562/china-us-wont-cut-contact-over-uss-lassens-sail-south	C
28-Oct-15	South China Sea dispute: the three Chinese and US ships involved in the escalating row	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1873116/south-china-sea-dispute-three-chinese-and-us-ships	D
28-Oct-15	War of words: Beijing fumes as US threatens to send more warships near disputed South China Sea islets	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1873072/us-warships-sail-again-near-south-china-sea-islets	D
29-Oct-15	US no hope to win S.China Sea showdown	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949647.shtml	B
29-Oct-15	Defense Ministry's regular press conference on Oct.29	PLA Daily	http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-10/29/content_6746090.htm	C
29-Oct-15	Public opinion shouldn't dominate sea spat	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949829.shtml	C
29-Oct-15	Experts say US naval patrol in South China Sea detrimental to regional peace	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949705.shtml	C
29-Oct-15	US to send admiral to China for talks	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949631.shtml	C
29-Oct-15	US Navy official to visit amid tension next week	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1029/c90000-8968269.html	C
29-Oct-15	Commentary: The U.S. should never play with fire in South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1029/c98649-8968310.html	C
29-Oct-15	U.S., Chinese naval officials to discuss South China Sea situation: U.S. official	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1029/c90000-8968799.html	C
29-Oct-15	US, China to hold talks on American warship's patrol in disputed area of South China Sea	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1873578/us-china-hold-talks-american-warships-patrol-disputed	C
29-Oct-15	Why did the US choose the Subi and Mischief reefs for its South China Sea patrol?	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1873761/why-did-us-choose-subi-and-mischief-reefs-its-south	D
30-Oct-15	Navy chief "deeply concerned" over US patrol ship in S.China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949943.shtml	C
30-Oct-15	China's navy commander warns US provocative acts in South China Sea could spark accidental conflicts	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1030/c98649-8969306.html	C
30-Oct-15	Navy chief "deeply concerned" over U.S. patrol ship in S.China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1030/c90000-8969328.html	C
30-Oct-15	US sea patrols won't challenge China's long-term vision	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949861.shtml	C

30-Oct-15	US, Chinese navies discuss S.China Sea dispute	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949872.shtml	D
30-Oct-15	Diplomacy, not sending in warships, is the way to resolve sea disputes between China and the US	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1873973/diplomacy-not-sending-warships-way-resolve-sea-disputes	D
31-Oct-15	PLA Navy chief calls US move 'dangerous'	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/950034.shtml	C
03-Nov-15	United States Pacific Commander Visits China	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1103/c90000-8970464.html	C
03-Nov-15	PLA official tells US not to spoil relations with China	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1103/c90000-8970468.html	C
03-Nov-15	China urges U.S. against further provocation in S. China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1103/c90883-8971061.html	C
03-Nov-15	US warships to visit Spratlys 'twice a quarter' in South China Sea but 'pose no threat'	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1875156/regular-not-poke-eye-us-navy-plans-two-or-more-patrols	D
04-Nov-15	China tells US to stop naval threat	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1104/c90000-8971078.html	C
04-Nov-15	FM slams US as Pentagon vows regular sea incursions	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/950679.shtml	C
05-Nov-15	U.S. Defense Secretary to Cruise on U.S. Warship through South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1105/c90000-8971721.html	C
05-Nov-15	China responds to Pentagon chief's visit to aircraft carrier in South China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/951083.shtml	D
06-Nov-15	FM slams Carter carrier visit in South China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/951154.shtml	C
26-Nov-15	China urges U.S., Japan not to flex muscles on South China Sea	PLA Daily	http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-11/26/content_6787705.htm	C
30-Nov-15	Demystifying the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet	PLA Daily	http://www.81.cn/rd/2015-11/30/content_6791801.htm	C
31-Jan-16	China drives off US destroyer intruding into Xisha Islands waters	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0131/c90000-9011795.html	C
01-Feb-16	US warship's incursion 'aims to renew tension'	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0201/c90000-9011827.html	C
01-Feb-16	Op-ed: China will never compromise to "paper tigers"	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0201/c98649-9012362.html	C

02-Feb-16	China urges U.S. to stop flexing muscle on excuse of "navigation freedom"	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0202/c90883-9012670.html	D
10-May-16	China warns U.S. against shows of strength in South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0510/c90000-9055747.html	C
11-May-16	China condemns naval patrol by US warship in South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0511/c90883-9055909.html	C
11-May-16	Defense Ministry responds to U.S. warship patrol	PLA Daily	http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-05/11/content_7049413.htm	C
12-May-16	China opposes U.S. distortion of navigation freedom: spokesman	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0512/c90883-9056558.html	C
12-May-16	US destroyer's South China Sea show an insipid affair	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/982600.shtml	D
12-May-16	U.S. warships abusing FON operations in South China Sea: PLA newspaper	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0512/c90883-9056941.html	D
19-May-16	Commentary: U.S. should stop provocations in South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0519/c90883-9060340.html	D
20-May-16	South China Sea patrol should be a regular move, military expert says	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0520/c90000-9060998.html	D
10-Aug-16	US warship visit 'eases tensions'	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/999474.shtml	D
23-Oct-16	Commentary: China will not sit idle and let the US act wantonly	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/1023/c90000-9131391.html	D
24-Oct-16	China will never allow US to run amok in South China Sea: People's Daily	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/1024/c90000-9131652.html	C
24-Oct-16	People's Daily says China will never allow U.S. to run amok in South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/1024/c90000-9131899.html	C
24-Oct-16	China opposes US provocations in Xisha	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-10/24/content_7321338.htm	C
28-Oct-16	Defense Ministry's regular press conference on Oct.27	PLA Daily	http://eng.mod.gov.cn/HomePicture/2016-10/28/content_4754434.htm	C
01-Jan-17	Carrier to firmly safeguard nation's maritime rights	Global Times	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-01/01/content_7432863.htm	D
25-May-17	Latest US provocation in S.China Sea is a serious strategic mistake: expert	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1048621.shtml	C

25-May-17	China's defense ministry: US navy patrol not conducive to peace in S.China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0525/c90000-9220617.html	D
25-May-17	Defense Ministry warns against US warship in South China Sea	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-05/25/content_7618603.htm	D
25-May-17	China protests U.S. warship entering South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0525/c90000-9220613.html	D
26-May-17	Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference On May 25	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-05/26/content_7618652.htm	D
29-May-17	Beijing dismisses G7's remarks	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0529/c90000-9221719.html	C
19-Jun-17	China, US to hold first diplomatic, security dialogue	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1052482.shtml	C
30-Jun-17	Defense Ministry's regular press conference on June 29	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-06/30/content_7657841.htm	D
03-Jul-17	China pledges more maritime patrols after US warship's 'provocation'	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0703/c90883-9236440.html	C
03-Jul-17	MOFA: US warship sailing territorial waters a 'serious provocation'	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0703/c90000-9236113.html	C
03-Jul-17	China strongly opposes US destroyer's trespass in South China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1054673.shtml	C
03-Jul-17	Foreign ministry slams US destroyer for sailing close to South China Sea island	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1054604.shtml	C
03-Jul-17	U.S. warship entering China's territorial waters "a grave offence": spokesperson	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-07/03/content_7661752.htm	D
04-Jul-17	Maritime provocation in Trump era will make no difference	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1054765.shtml	C
07-Jul-17	China opposes show of force after US bombers' S. China Sea flyover	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0707/c90883-9238715.html	D
11-Aug-17	China resolutely opposes U.S. provocation in South China Sea: spokesperson	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0811/c90786-9254419.html	C
11-Aug-17	Chinese Defense Ministry: ill intention of sending US warships to South China Sea obvious to everyone	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0811/c90883-9254167.html	C
11-Aug-17	China protests U.S. warship approaching reef of Nansha Islands	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0811/c90883-9253842.html	C

11-Aug-17	China protests about US's third 'freedom of navigation'	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0811/c90883-9254147.html	D
12-Aug-17	Beijing slams US intrusion near Nanshas	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0812/c90000-9254423.html	C
25-Sep-17	China-Vietnam ties greatly improved with expanded border meeting	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1068191.shtml	C
11-Oct-17	China lodges representations with U.S. over destroyer's trespass on territorial waters	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/1011/c90000-9278706.html	C
11-Oct-17	China warns US warship to leave after it sails near Xisha islands	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/1011/c90000-9278700.html	D
11-Oct-17	US destroyer sails near disputed Parcel Islands in the South China Sea	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/diplomacy/article/2114810/us-destroyer-sails-near-islands-claimed-china-south-china-sea	D
11-Oct-17	China protests over US Navy patrol in contested South China Sea waters	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2114941/china-protests-over-us-navy-patrol-contested-south	D
15-Oct-17	US needs wiser South China Sea strategy	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1070391.shtml	D
20-Jan-18	China 'warns off' US destroyer near South China Sea's strategic Scarborough Shoal	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2129805/china-warns-us-destroyer-near-south-china-seas	D
20-Jan-18	Defense ministry warns US against 'causing trouble out of nothing'	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1085786.shtml	D
21-Jan-18	China vows 'necessary measures' in S.China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1085880.shtml	C
22-Jan-18	US Navy's reckless operations in South China Sea will only hit a brick wall	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0122/c90000-9418218.html	C
22-Jan-18	US no longer predominates in South China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1086049.shtml	D
05-Feb-18	Land reclamation to expand in South China Sea islands: expert	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1088347.shtml	D
24-Mar-18	China opposes US provocation in South China Sea: spokesperson	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1095000.shtml	D
25-Mar-18	PLA conducts spring drills in West Pacific, S.China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1095121.shtml	D
30-Mar-18	South China Sea exercise 'normal and routine': Defense Ministry	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0330/c90000-9443465.html	D

02-Apr-18	Military drills should not be misinterpreted	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1096321.shtml	D
13-Apr-18	Subtle messages behind China's biggest naval parade	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-04/13/content_8003833.htm	D
26-Apr-18	PLA sends planes round Taiwan for second time in a week	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1099897.shtml	D
22-May-18	US urged to not overreact on S. China Sea training	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0522/c90000-9462638.html	D
27-May-18	US warships enter Chinese territorial waters without authorization	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1104372.shtml	C
28-May-18	Washington provokes Beijing in the South China Sea at its own peril	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0528/c90000-9464833.html	C
28-May-18	China opposes U.S. provocation in its territorial waters: spokesperson	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0528/c90000-9464552.html	C
28-May-18	China warns US warships to leave South China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1104374.shtml	D
04-Jun-18	China warns West of S.China Sea provocations	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1105508.shtml	C
05-Jun-18	US warships unwelcome in Taiwan Straits	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1105742.shtml	C
06-Jun-18	China justifies beefing up defenses after US sends B-52s near Nansha Islands	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1105876.shtml	C
07-Jun-18	Op-Ed: US show of force shows who is really militarizing the South China Sea	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0607/c90000-9468437.html	C
08-Jun-18	Expert: America's constant provocations in Taiwan Strait aim for subtle balance in competition	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/08/content_8056557.htm	C
11-Jun-18	China puts missiles back on contested South China Sea island as United States pushes allies for bigger military presence in waters	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2150226/china-puts-missiles-back-contested-south-china-sea	D
31-Aug-18	Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on Aug.30	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-08/31/content_9267939.htm	D
27-Sep-18	China opposes B-52 flyover	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/112121.shtml	D
27-Sep-18	US should cease South China Sea antics	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1121214.shtml	D

28-Sep-18	Chinese military demands rational, mature action from US	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-09/28/content_9300274.htm	D
28-Sep-18	US actions urged to fix military relations	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0928/c90000-9504330.html	D
02-Oct-18	China wards off US Navy destroyer to leave S.China Sea	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1121633.shtml	D
02-Oct-18	America accuses Chinese warship of 'unsafe' manoeuvres after near collision with USS Decatur in South China Sea	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2166565/chinese-destroyer-nearly-collided-uss-decatur-after-trying-drive	D
03-Oct-18	US, Chinese warships within metres of collision in South China Sea, leaked pictures show	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2166849/us-chinese-warships-within-metres-collision-south-china-sea	D
11-Oct-18	S.China Sea can be more risky than trade	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1122569.shtml	D
18-Oct-18	China, US ministers meet to ease tension	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1123596.shtml	D
19-Oct-18	Commentary: Who is making waves in South China Sea?	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/1019/c90000-9510067.html	C
19-Oct-18	The US B-52 bomber was criticized again in the South China Sea	PLA Daily	http://www.81.cn/jkhc/2018-10/19/content_9317846.htm	D
28-Oct-18	US warships cannot be protectors of Taiwan	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1124831.shtml	D
08-Nov-18	China, US must try to stop new 'iron curtain'	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1126618.shtml	D
21-Nov-18	US carrier port call sends positive signal	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1128432.shtml	D
30-Nov-18	Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on Nov.29	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-11/30/content_9360730.htm	D
30-Nov-18	US sends guided-missile cruiser to South China Sea to challenge 'excessive' Chinese claims	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2175729/us-sends-guided-missile-cruiser-south-china-sea-challenge	D
01-Dec-18	Chinese navy sent to confront USS Chancellorsville in latest South China Sea stand-off	SCMP	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2175916/chinese-navy-sent-confront-uss-chancellorsville-latest-south	D
10-Dec-18	Expert: If US warship illegally violates Chinese territorial waters again, bump against it	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-12/10/content_9374205.htm	B
28-Feb-19	Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on Feb. 28	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-02/28/content_9436626.htm	C

Table 2 English-language Chinese media references to (potential) US FONOPs in the Taiwan Strait.

Publish Date	Title	News Source	Webpage	Coding
26-Apr-18	PLA sends planes round Taiwan for second time in a week	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1099897.shtml	D
05-Jun-18	US warships unwelcome in Taiwan Straits	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1105742.shtml	B
06-Jun-18	US sending warship through Taiwan Straits may provoke Chinese mainland response	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0606/c90000-9467778.html	C
08-Jul-18	Chinese military 'closely monitored' US warships sailing through Taiwan Straits: expert	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1109861.shtml	D
08-Jul-18	US warships play psychological game in Taiwan Straits	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1109878.shtml	D
19-Jul-18	US official's call for closer military ties with Taiwan heightens tensions: analyst	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1111550.shtml	D
20-Jul-18	China can learn from Trump's respect for Russia	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1111711.shtml	D
24-Oct-18	Concerns voiced on warships' Straits passage	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/1024/c90000-9511157.html	D
28-Oct-18	US warships cannot be protectors of Taiwan	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1124831.shtml	D
30-Nov-18	Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on Nov.29	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-11/30/content_9360730.htm	D
30-Nov-18	PLA keeps eye on US ships in Taiwan Straits	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/1130/c90000-9523707.html	D
25-Jan-19	US warships' futile geopolitical provocation in Taiwan Straits	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1137038.shtml	C
12-Feb-19	China 'likely' to see steady increase in 2019 defense budget	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1138581.shtml	D
27-Feb-19	How China-US row can affect East Asia	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1140373.shtml	D
28-Feb-19	Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on Feb. 28	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-02/28/content_9436626.htm	D

06-Mar-19	US will only hurt itself playing radical Taiwan card	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1141198.shtml	D
25-Mar-19	China urges US to properly handle Taiwan-related issues	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1143374.shtml	D
25-Mar-19	China protests US warships passing through Taiwan Straits	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1143385.shtml	D
26-Mar-19	PLA on high alert to safeguard national sovereignty: spokesperson	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-03/26/content_9459831.htm	D
29-Mar-19	Event planned to fete PLA Navy's 70th anniversary	People's Daily	http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0329/c90000-9561952.html	D
29-Mar-19	Taiwan issue brooks no foreign interference: defense ministry	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1143899.shtml	D
01-Apr-19	Taiwan can't gamble on cross-Straits crisis	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1144298.shtml	C
01-Apr-19	US playing Taiwan card risky	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1144246.shtml	C
02-Apr-19	US has less cards to play in Taiwan Straits	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1144481.shtml	C
03-Apr-19	US containment strategy full of fallacy	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1144595.shtml	D
07-May-19	PLA conducts live-fire exercise north of Taiwan Straits	Global Times	http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1148890.shtml	D
24-May-19	China urges U.S. to abide by one-China policy after American warships sail through Taiwan Strait	PLA Daily	http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/24/content_9512357.htm	D

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