



Matching power with purpose in the South China Sea: a proposal by Donald K. Emmerson

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"We dominate the sky. We dominate the sea. We dominate the land and space." Thus did US President Donald Trump, standing in front of a huge American flag while addressing US troops at Yokota Air Base in Japan, begin his five-country Nov. 3-14 2017 tour of East Asia – by lavishing praise on American power.

America, he said, "dominates" the sky, sea, land, and outer space "because we have the best equipment," "the best people," and thus "the most fearsome fighting force in the history of the world." What mattered to him were American weapons and warriors, not American reasons and purposes – the how of domination, not the why. That made sense at a military base; his audience applauded and cheered. But his choice raised a question as to whether, on the rest of his trip, he would spend more time projecting America's power than explaining the strategy it is intended to serve.

To be fair, Trump did speak of seeking "peace and stability for the nations of the world," including "a free and open Indo-Pacific region," and he lauded America's ally Japan. Yet in his celebration of full-spectrum US military might, power upstaged purpose. That imbalance likely disappointed Asian policymakers and analysts who wanted more substantive reassurance. What outcomes did regional security with American characteristics imply? A region free of what and open to whom? Beyond the flexing of US muscle, what specific, shared, strategic Indo-Asian-Pacific-American interest did it enable? Not to mention the confusion of domination in ability with domination as hegemony.

In Southeast Asia, this shortfall – between prowess extolled and reassurance achieved – predates the Trump administration. At a joint press conference with Australia's minister of defense in 2015, for example, then-US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter reiterated a favored line: "Make no mistake, the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as we do around the world, and the South China Sea will not be an exception."

Again and again US officials have used such words and continue to use them to justify freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) conducted by the US Navy in the South China Sea. Trump did not repeat the promise to "fly, sail, and operate" lawfully "around the world." But the sheer scope of his "we

dominate" bravado in Yokota did bring that also sweeping "we operate" mantra to mind.

The vow to "fly, sail, and operate" wherever international law allows – FSOP for short – lacks the fierce ring of "domination." But from the standpoint of a Southeast Asian listener worried about China's behavior in the South China Sea, even the less bombastic vow does not necessarily reassure. Why not?

FSOP is global. The Southeast Asian leaders whom Trump will meet in the Philippines at the end of his trip are less concerned about maritime security worldwide than they are about conditions closer at hand: whether someday they may have to obtain China's permission to fish in, drill under, or even merely transit the South China Sea.

FSOP is law-first. The success of Beijing's maritime expansion has vindicated salami-slicing over rule-citing – *realpolitik* over *moralpolitik* including international law. The value of recourse to the UN Convention on the Law of Sea, or UNCLOS, has been debased. China continues with impunity to defy the 2016 judgment of a duly convened international court that China is violating the terms of UNCLOS in the South China Sea. Manila, the "plaintiff" who won the judgment against Beijing, chose not to press for its implementation. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte instead came close to snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, swayed as he was by the prospect of Chinese funding, the fear of Chinese anger, and the chanciness of US deterrence. Worsening that last worry was the lack of a vigorous or sustained effort by Washington to mobilize international support for the court's ruling.

FSOP is suspect. Despite not having ratified UNCLOS, the US appears to have upheld international maritime law more conscientiously than have many other states. Yet non-ratification continues to feed suspicion that US support for UNCLOS is conditional at best and hypocritical at worst. To the extent that Trump's nativist distaste for multilateral agreements survives what he is learning from professional advisers and foreign travel, such mistrust will not abate.

FSOP is self-referential. Not one of Southeast Asian's states can match, or even approach, the ability of the United States to "fly, sail, and operate" over, on, or in the South China Sea, let alone anywhere in the world that "international law allows." FSOP sounds less like a welcome promise to help Southeast Asians than a boast that says to them, in effect: Look at what I can do – and you cannot.

FSOP is ineffective. Neither FONOPs nor FSOP has prevented or even necessarily slowed the incipient Sinification – reconstruction, militarization, and preparatory control – of the South China Sea. Far from impeding this process, FONOPs and FSOP have proven to be, for Beijing, mere annoyances with

little or no thwarting effect on the extension of its authority over what is already virtually a Chinese lake.

Neither FONOPs nor FSOP should be dropped. But these gambits should be given a real-world goal: to accompany broader efforts by the United States, in cooperation with Southeast Asian and Asian-Pacific partners, to *keep the South China Sea free of exclusionary control by any single country, including the US itself*.

President Trump should consult with Philippine president Duterte with a view toward turning the above-italicized proposal into a formal request for consideration by the East Asia Summit, which both leaders will attend in Angeles City, Central Luzon, on Nov. 14, 2017.

That would fittingly give purpose to power. It would reverse the self-aggrandizing connotations of “domination” as a matter of just one country’s prowess. It would do so by opposing domination – in the sense of sole and coercive control – by any one country, including the United States. It would herald and underpin an actual US strategy for the South China Sea based on the coinciding interests of Americans and Southeast Asians alike.

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