



## NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

### STRATEGIC TRENDS

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#### **EMERGING CHALLENGES**

##### **Maritime security: the South Chinese Sea archipelagos**

The South Chinese Sea as part of the Pacific Ocean is an area in common with China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Philippines and Malaysia. For this reason the sea and its islands are subject to competing sovereignty claims by several countries.

According to the government, the People's Liberation Army Navy is routinely conducting training drills in the area aimed at increasing the fleets' combat effectiveness. China claims most of the South China Sea and Realpolitik understands that these drills, Beijing's ambitions and the ensuing disputes revolve around the more than \$5 trillion in global trade transiting yearly in these waters. In fact, China is carrying out a project to build artificial islands and military bases in those waters hundreds of miles off China's coast, that are technically international waters. But not for Xi Jinping and his territorial ambitions. According to HIS Jane's report, new Chinese islands are already built up and it is not clear if the project will stop soon or not. This explains the presence during March in these contested waters of a US Navy carrier group, a couple of destroyers and cruiser followed by a command and control ship. Analysts believe that the scope of the show of flag and force is to deter (and control) further Chinese enlargements in the area.

In the meantime maritime piracy incidents, such as kidnapping and killing, are constantly occurring in the area between Malaysia and Philippines. Incidents reported are one per week, lately, and perpetrated by Abu Sayyaf bandits who hold hostages and demand ransoms to ship owners according to local military. Abu Sayyaf is a South Philippines Salafi militant group, active since the beginning of '90s. It is considered considered an ISIS vanguard in Southeast Asia and it was listed as terrorist ground since the War on Terror programme during past Bush administration.

Indonesia has already called for joint maritime patrols with the Philippines and Malaysia after the attacks. Specifically Indonesian concerns about the frequency of maritime attacks are related to coal exports. In fact, it supplies around 70% of the Philippines' import needs. However the "securitization" of the area should follow a regional approach, because no single nation is able to guarantee by itself or in lieu of others an adequate response to maritime piracy.

At the moment, among ship owners there is not enough concern about the recent events of violence escalation in South Chinese Sea. Most importantly, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) does not recognize that area to be part of the High Risk Area (HRA).