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STRATEGIC TRENDS

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CHINA

China adopts a “Mare Nostrum” line on the Southern China Sea

China released its first White Paper on military strategy at the end of May outlining four critical security concerns: the sea, outer space, cyberspace and nuclear powers. For the nations of Southeast Asia, the strategy has serious implications particularly in regard to their maritime interests because the white paper hints that China wants to take possession of almost all of the Southern China Sea.

The strategy evokes the “Mare Nostrum” declaration of ancient Rome with a fundamental difference. Rome had subdued all the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, while China, whatever its economic and military strength, does not rule the other countries - like the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei - overlooking the South Chinese Sea and unwilling to renounce their rights over it.

According to the white paper, *“some external countries are busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China”*. While the US is not named explicitly, there is little doubt as to which country China is referring to. Faced with these territorial threats, the paper argues that *“in line with the evolving form of war and national security situation, the basic point for PMS [preparation for military struggle] will be placed on winning informationized [sic] local wars, highlighting maritime military struggle and maritime PMS”*.

To counter new threats, “*the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned*”. China will therefore develop “*a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests [and] safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests*”. The Chinese Navy will enhance its capabilities for “open seas protection”. including deterrence and counterattack. In accordance with its policy of “active defence” (a concept first used by Mao Zedong), the paper states that China “will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked”.

The Southeast Asian nations are expected to spend \$58 billion on military equipment over the next five years, much of which will be used to reinforce their navies. However it is unlikely that their enhanced naval capabilities will do much to deter China. They are small countries compared to China and their response to the Chinese threat will carry little weight unless they will get external support. Their only way is to seek cooperation from the United States.

The Philippines and the US signed an “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement” in April 2014. Nevertheless, China’s ever increasing naval operations in the South China Sea have caused the Philippines Defence Minister to ask the US a stronger commitment to ensure the Philippine maritime security. Vietnam does not currently have any defence agreements with the U.S., which may be something Hanoi might want to pursue in the near future. In the meantime, Vietnam has sought closer security ties with regional powers. A deal to consult on defence affairs was concluded with Australia in March 2015. Similarly, Japan signed a defence pact with Indonesia in March 2015, following enhanced military partnerships with the Philippines and Vietnam.

These initiatives will do little to contain China's muscular policy in the South China Sea without a direct involvement by the US which looks like inevitable and whose consequences are impossible to predict.