

BLUE SECURITY

A MARITIME AFFAIRS SERIES

Don't Shoot the Messenger
Perception and misperception in the South China Sea
Nell Bennett





BLUE SECURITY

The Blue Security Program engages with and facilitates high quality research on issues of critical maritime security across the Indo-Pacific. Bringing together leading regional experts in politics, international law and strategic studies, Blue Security focuses on three key pillars of maritime security: order, law and power.

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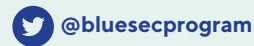
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INTRODUCTION

In May 2024, the United States (U.S.) conducted a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea to demonstrate its commitment to upholding international law. USS *Halsey* sailed past the Paracel Islands to challenge China's territorial claims, which the U.S. viewed as inconsistent with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This was a routine operation. The stated aims of these operations are always the same: to challenge excessive claims and promote adherence to international law.¹ In spite of the U.S.'s clear and consistent messaging, China called the operation an 'illegal intrusion' and 'a serious infringement of China's sovereignty and security'. China went as far as to call the U.S. 'the biggest destroyer of the peace' in the region.²

The U.S. has been running its FONOP program since 1979, and the program's objectives have remained the same – to preserve international law and to maintain peace and stability. However, after forty-five years of careful and consistent messaging, some target countries still view these operations as acts of aggression.³ This report examines the disconnect between the stated aim of the U.S. FONOP program and the ways that the program is perceived.

FONOPs are a form of strategic communication. That is, messages that are communicated to advance a strategic objective. Most of the literature on strategic communication focuses on the messages. Studies typically analyse the content of messages to assess whether they are likely to advance a strategic goal. However, this approach overlooks arguably the most important aspect of strategic communication – the way that the target audience receives and understands messages. By focusing on the messages, it is easy to overlook sender-receiver gaps that undermine the purpose of campaigns.

Strategic messaging is designed to advance objectives by causing other states to change their behaviour. Messages are targeted to specific states. The idea is that the state will receive the message and either reconsider or change its course of action. However, history has demonstrated that strategic communication does not always work. The most well-designed strategic messages may be ineffective if insufficient consideration is given to the factors that influence the way that messages will be received. This report examines the role of cognitive consistency in message interpretation. It argues that this psychological theory provides an explanation for why some strategic communication campaigns are destined to succeed, and others are doomed to fail. This is highly relevant to our understandings of FONOPs. Some observers have argued that U.S. FONOPs have been ineffective at curbing Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.⁴ This report presents an explanation for why this long-running program may be unsuccessful, and even counterproductive.

PERCEPTION AND COGNITIVE CONSISTENCY

Perception is a fundamental first step in the decision-making process. This is well recognised in the psychological and cognitive science literature.⁵ It has also been examined in political science and strategic studies.⁶ However, it has been largely overlooked in naval studies and maritime security. It is important to understand the role of perception because it influences the ways that strategic communication campaigns are interpreted. Specifically, states' perceptions of strategic messages are influenced by the way that they perceive the state that is sending the message.

This report uses cognitive consistency theory to explain why states accept or reject strategic messaging. According to consistency theory, people tend to behave in ways that minimise inconsistency in their beliefs, feelings and actions.⁷ If a state has a negative predisposition towards another state, they are likely to react negatively to that state's communications. As Robert Jervis observed, 'We tend to believe that countries we like do things we like... We tend to think that countries that are our enemies make proposals that would harm us...'⁸ Confirmation bias is a well-established psychological principle which holds that people tend to interpret new evidence in ways that confirm their current beliefs.⁹ Thus, states should be more ready to accept messages from states with which they have positive relationships and more prepared to reject messages from states with which they have negative relationships.

In this report, I argue that the efficacy of a strategic messaging campaign is largely predetermined by the relationship between the messenger and the audience. If there is a positive relationship, the campaign is likely to succeed. If there is a negative relationship, it is unlikely to have the desired effect. This relationship encompasses the narrower consideration of national interest. As Jervis observed, a state's perception of another state is 'usually determined by their beliefs about the degree of conflict between that country and their own.'¹⁰ This does not mean that states with positive or negative relationships will agree or disagree on all issues. Consistency theory only posits that the positive or negative relationship provides an initial predisposition to agree or disagree with the other state. This is significant in international politics because so often the most important messages are those that are sent to real or potential adversaries. These are the messages that are intended to avert crises, uphold order, maintain stability and preserve the status quo. However, according to consistency theory, these are the messages that are least likely to succeed.

THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In this report, I look at the messages that the U.S. sent through its FONOP program between the years 2016 to 2023.¹¹ I also examine the ways that these U.S. messages were interpreted by two regional powers: China and the Philippines. This choice is significant because during this period China was challenging U.S. hegemony in the Pacific. China was more likely to view the U.S. as presenting a threat than reassurance. Therefore, it should have been less likely to accept U.S. messaging. The Philippines, on the other hand, was a U.S. ally. According to consistency theory, it should have been inclined to respond positively to U.S. messages. The scope of this report only allows for an analysis of the perceptions of two states. However, future research should take a broader approach and look at the ways that other claimants and stakeholder states in the South China Sea view FONOPs. This would provide a more nuanced and robust understanding of the ways that states perceive FONOPs and the factors that influence their interpretations of these operations.

I examine the period 2016 to 2023 because the U.S. made the South China Sea a focus of its FONOP program from around 2016. There were FONOPs in this region in previous years, however, from 2016 they increased in regularity. The seven-year timeframe provides a sufficient period to chart any variations in message and interpretation. It is also sufficiently long so that the data is not skewed by short-term political matters that are not directly related to the FONOP program. Another advantage of this timeframe is that it encompasses three distinct U.S. presidential administrations: the Obama administration, the Trump administration and the Biden administration. This is significant because under both President Barack Obama and President Joe Biden, FONOPs were accompanied by nuanced explanatory press releases. These statements explained and justified the operations. Under President Trump, no explanatory press releases or diplomatic commentary accompanied the FONOPs. Therefore, by examining the period 2016 to 2023, I can assess any differences between the way that strategic communication is received when operations are accompanied by diplomatic explanations and when they are not.

METHOD

This report examines FONOPs executed by the U.S. and directed towards excessive maritime claims made by China. Although some of these FONOPs were directed at multiple parties, my focus is on the aspects of the operations that were directed towards Chinese maritime claims.¹² In order to analyse the messages that the U.S. sought to send with its FONOPs, I rely on the press releases that accompanied the operations and any official commentary from government representatives. There are obvious challenges with measuring the perceptions of an operation. These challenges are particularly apparent when seeking to analyse the subjective impressions of members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As Russell J Kirklin observed, ‘internal CCP deliberations are notoriously opaque.’¹³

Kirklin has conducted the only empirical analysis of Chinese interpretations of U.S. FONOPs in the South China Sea. In his analysis, Kirklin used Chinese media reporting as a proxy for the regime’s interpretation of the operations. In explaining this approach, Kirklin argued: ‘Chinese mass media is heavily guided, restrained, or managed directly by the state. Dissent in the media is rare and the reporting on current events is remarkably uniform for such an enormous state.’ Given the government control over reporting and uniformity of narrative, Kirklin argued that trends in Chinese media reporting provides valuable insights into what the CCP is thinking.¹⁴

Accordingly, to measure Chinese perceptions of U.S. FONOPs, I rely on statements from official Chinese spokespeople and media reporting of the operations. For media reporting, I rely on articles published in the *People’s Daily* and the *Global Times*. Both publications are official newspapers of the CCP. They therefore provide a substantially reliable proxy for official government opinion. I use the same approach for assessing the perceptions of the Philippines. The Filipino government did not exercise the same degree of control over the media. However, the consistency of positive reporting over the seven-year period, combined with the fact that the U.S. FONOPs served the Philippines’ strategic interests, makes it unlikely that the media reporting was inaccurate. I therefore rely on reporting from the *Manila Bulletin* and the *Philippine Star*. In terms of data collection, I collected articles by searching the online archive of the publications. I used the name of the ship involved in the exercise as the search term and narrowed the search to 12 months from the date of the exercise. This approach enabled me to identify articles that were written about exercises months after they occurred, and articles that reflected upon the impacts of the exercises.

There are limitations to this research design. It is important to consider the disadvantages in using media reports to infer government opinion. As Michael D Young and Mark Schafer noted, ‘the relationship between a leader’s statements and his or her underlying cognition is rarely straightforward.’ They observe that researchers seeking to understand how particular leaders view the world should approach media reports with caution, as they may reveal only public, not private, beliefs. When conducting such research, it is important to carefully analyse the texts and consider a larger variety of texts. More reliable sources are those that are spontaneous, and/or demonstrate a stability of beliefs over time.¹⁵ I mitigate the issue of reliability by charting variations in opinions and positions over a period of seven years. While this is not a perfect approach, it still provides valuable insights into the ways that the Chinese and the Philippines interpreted U.S. strategic communication.



RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This report shows that China did not accept the messages that the U.S. sought to send through its FONOP program. Notably, there was no difference in China's response to operations that were accompanied by carefully worded press releases and those that were not. In all instances, the Chinese reject U.S. justifications as hypocrisy. The Philippines, however, responded positively to the messages and even adopted U.S. rhetoric in its own communications. These responses are predictable. As the rising great power, China was negatively predisposed to the existing dominant power in Asia. The Philippines, on the other hand, had a positive relationship with the U.S. According to consistency theory, they would be expected to respond positively to U.S. messaging.

These findings have important implications for naval planning and strategy. Predisposition is a key factor that should be considered when assessing whether to implement a strategic communication campaign. These campaigns are costly, both in terms of actual monetary cost and opportunity cost. If it can be demonstrated that there is a high likelihood that the target audience will reject the messages, there may be more effective ways of utilising these resources.





THE US FONOP PROGRAM

The U.S. has a long history of conducting naval operations to assert its right to sail freely around the world. The official FONOP program was established by President Jimmy Carter in 1979 with the objective of challenging states' excessive maritime claims. According to the U.S. Department of Defence, excessive maritime claims are 'unlawful attempts by coastal States to restrict the rights and freedoms of navigation and overflight as well as other lawful uses of the sea.'¹⁶

Although the U.S. has not ratified UNCLOS, the current FONOP program seeks to uphold the U.S.' interpretation of the convention. In particular, Article 17 that states, 'ships of all States, whether coastal or land-locked, enjoy the right of innocent passage through the territorial sea.'¹⁷ The right of innocent passage means that states can transit through the territorial seas of other states without signalling their intentions in advance. Some states require that foreign ships give notice that they plan to pass through their territorial waters. The U.S. views the requirement for notice as being inconsistent with Article 17. Therefore, a key aspect of the U.S. FONOP program is that no advanced warning is given.

FONOPS AS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Strategic communication is often defined as 'the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission'¹⁸ or, the use of communication 'to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals.'¹⁹ Strategic communication is not limited to rhetoric. It can also encompass messages that are sent through the deployment of capabilities. The U.S. Government recognises that strategic communication can refer to actions as well as information. As expressed in a 2010 White House report entitled, 'National Framework for Strategic Communication': 'Every action that the United States Government takes sends a message.'²⁰ This report defined strategic communication as: 'The synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences [and] programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences.'²¹ Similarly, a 2012 report from the Joint Chiefs of Staff defined strategic communication as, 'the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all elements of national power' to advance U.S. Government interests.²²

According to this U.S. Government definition, deliberate government action is a form of strategic communication. Deploying forces sends a message. The content of the message can be understood from factors including the operation's design, the concentration of capabilities, timing, the relationship of the operation to relevant current events, any deviations from standard operating procedure and any official rhetoric that accompanies the operation.

FONOPs are an example of strategic action because they use a combination of words and actions to communicate with intended audiences. While the primary stated objective of FONOPs is to challenge excessive maritime claims, they also have broader foreign policy goals. These broader objectives have been expressed at different times as preserving the rules-based international order²³ and maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.²⁴

FONOPs can also be viewed as a form of maritime signalling. However, Hyun-Binn Cho and Brian C Chao observe that FONOPs are ambiguous signals. FONOPs are open to multiple interpretations due to the dynamic nature of the maritime environment. Additionally, their occurrence is irregular which can give rise to the perception that they are being used to single out particular states.²⁵ These factors can lead to misperceptions concerning the aims and objectives of the program. The U.S. has been explaining the purpose of the program since its official beginning in 1979. However, this does not mean that their message is getting through to the states that are the subjects of the operations. As Kim Heriot-Darragh observed:

Some of them will view FONOPs through an intuitive rather than legal lens. Warships can be imposing. Sailing close by uninvited can appear like attempted intimidation – especially if histories of colonialism and gunboat diplomacy are at play. FONOPs are easily perceived as the antithesis of the rules-based order that America seeks to uphold, muddying the distinction between its behaviour and China's.²⁶

As FONOPs are ambiguous signals, the question is how effective FONOPs are at communicating strategic messages and advancing objectives. This is addressed in the next chapter, which provides an analysis of U.S. FONOPs in the South China Sea between 2016 and 2023.

US FONOPS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

This chapter analyses the response of both China and the Philippines to U.S. FONOPs in the South China Sea in the period 2016 to 2023. As it is not possible to discuss each operation, the focus is on significant operations directed against Chinese maritime claims. This chapter will show that Chinese responses went from measured rejection of U.S. messages to the creation of Chinese counter-narratives, and ultimately to threats. Filipino responses, on the other hand, were supportive of the operations. Filipino reporting accepted U.S. messaging and even adopted the rhetoric and justifications that the U.S. provided in support of the operations.

The FONOPs examined in this chapter show that communication will not always be received in the way that was intended. The key factor that will determine whether a message will be accepted is the pre-existing relationship between the states. China was predisposed to reject U.S. messaging because China was a challenger state and it viewed the U.S. as competition and a potential threat. The Philippines and the U.S., however, were strategic partners. Therefore, the Philippines would be expected to accept U.S. messaging.

Another key finding is that repeating a message does not make an audience more likely to accept it. If the audience is predisposed to reject the message, repeating it may only make their rejection more entrenched. The U.S. repeated the same messages with its FONOPs in the period under analysis. However, the repetition only made Chinese responses more antagonistic. The Philippines, on the other hand, accepted the messages from the beginning. Repetition did not make a meaningful difference with the receptive audience.

U.S. FONOPS UNDER THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

In the early hours of Saturday 30 January 2016, guided-missile destroyer *USS Curtis Wilbur* came within 12 nautical miles of Triton Island in the Paracels. Triton Island was administered by China but also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan. The U.S. made the meaning behind the operation very clear: its purpose was to challenge attempts by China, Taiwan and Vietnam, 'to restrict navigation rights and freedoms around the features they claim by policies that require prior permission or notification of transit within territorial seas'.²⁷ That is, to uphold the right to free navigation, as established in UNCLOS.

The Chinese responded to the operation on the same day by posting the following statement on the foreign ministry website: 'The American warship has violated relevant Chinese laws by entering Chinese territorial waters without prior permission, and the Chinese side has taken relevant measures including monitoring and admonishments'.²⁸ Three days after the operation, this measured response was supplemented by a more forthright rejection of U.S. strategic communication. On 2 February, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Lu Kang, accused the U.S. of using freedom of navigation as an excuse to infringe upon China's 'sovereignty, security and maritime interests'. Lu stated that U.S. FONOPs did not accord with international law and that they disregarded the sovereignty, security and maritime interests of coastal states and put the peace and stability of the region at risk.²⁹ This response shows that the Chinese received the U.S. message that the operation was designed to uphold international law, but that they rejected this justification.

An interesting aspect of China's response to this operation is that the initial reported reaction was much milder than the statements issued three days after the event. The original statement only referred to infringement of Chinese domestic law. However, the later press release stated that the U.S. had breached international law. As the second statement was made several days after the event, it could reflect a political posture that had been adopted after deliberation and consultation. This shift in rhetoric could reflect the development of a Chinese counternarrative to position the Chinese as the victim of U.S. aggressions.

The Filipino press, on the other hand, expressed support for the U.S. conducting FONOPs in the vicinity of Trintion Island. The reporting in the *Manila Bulletin* was sympathetic to the operation. It stated that China had 'seized' the Triton Island off the former South Vietnam in 1974 and was 'embarking on massive construction of man-made islands and airstrips in contested areas.'³⁰ It is therefore likely that the Philippines accepted the U.S. message because of its positive relationship with the U.S., and because the message aligned with its perception of Chinese actions. The timing of the operation was also significant. The Philippines was awaiting the final ruling on its arbitration case concerning the legality of China's claim in the South China Sea.³¹ This would have made it sympathetic to the Vietnamese claim.

It is also worth noting that the U.S. engaged in naval diplomacy with the Philippines both before and after the FONOP. *Curtis Wilbur* docked at Manila Harbour before the operation and returned to Subic Bay once it was concluded. This enabled the crew to conduct routine maintenance and provided an opportunity for rest. However, it also provided an opportunity for building rapport with Filipino counterparts. The *Manila Bulletin* reported that U.S. personnel would be meeting with the Philippine Coast Guard 'as a means of continuing to build the relationship between Philippine and US forces.'³² By using the FONOP as an opportunity to improve its relationship with the Philippines, the U.S. may also have made the Philippines more receptive to its strategic messaging. Indeed, in April 2016, Presidential Communications Operations Secretary Herminio Coloma, Jr. made an official statement over government radio that: 'The freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight in the West Philippine Sea are important basic principles being upheld by the Philippines and the United States. Any occurrence that violates or obstructs these principles create tension and concerns.'³³ This mirrors the strategic messaging of the U.S. and demonstrates that their messaging was received, accepted and even adopted by the Philippines.

On 10 May 2016, USS *William P. Lawrence* came within 12 nautical miles of a Chinese artificial island in the Spratly Island chain.³⁴ The Spratly Islands were claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam in their entirety. Malaysia and the Philippines also claimed certain parts of the island chain.³⁵ According to the U.S., Chinese ships challenged *William P. Lawrence* about a dozen times by radio, demanding that it leave the area. Spokesperson for China's Defense Ministry,

Senior Colonel Yang Yujun, said that China dispatched two J-11 fighter jets, a Y-8 maritime patrol aircraft, a guided missile destroyer, three warships, a guided missile frigate and a frigate to the area.³⁶

On this occasion, China issued a strong statement on the same day. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang responded that the operation, 'threatened China's sovereignty and security interests... and damaged regional peace and stability.'³⁷ Senior Colonel Yang Yujun said the operation justified China's construction of military facilities on the disputed islands:

The provocative actions of U.S. military ships and airplanes have exposed the U.S. motive of trying to destabilize the region and seek benefit from it. It also proves again the rationale and necessity of China's construction of defense facilities on relevant islands and reefs...

*Based on our needs, we will intensify our patrol in relevant waters and airspace, and improve our defense capabilities to firmly protect national sovereignty and security as well as to preserve peace and stability in the South China Sea.'*³⁸

China's reaction to the second U.S. FONOP of 2016 signalled a narrative shift. In this instance, China not only rejected U.S. messaging, but took the decision to use U.S. FONOPs as a justification for their militarisation of the South China Sea. In effect, they used the FONOPs as a rationale for the kind of activity that the U.S. was seeking to challenge. Thus, U.S. strategic communication was not only ineffective at dissuading China from enlarging its territorial claims and desisting from militarising the region, but it also provided China with a pretext for continuing to engage in these activities.

The Philippines was again sympathetic to the U.S. position. The *Manila Bulletin* reported that the U.S. had 'reaffirmed the concerns of the international community, particularly of the countries in the region, against Chinese movements and actions in the resource-rich sea.'³⁹ Discussing Chinese claims, the Filipino newspaper reported that 'China has added more than 1,200 hectares... of land to its South China Sea island holdings... The addition of airstrips and military infrastructure has Washington and others worried that China is attempting to assert total dominance over the region's waters.'⁴⁰

As with the earlier FONOP conducted by *Curtis Wilbur*, the U.S. concluded this operation with port visits to Manila and Subic Bay. During these visits, the U.S. crew engaged in cultural exchanges with Filipino personnel, including a wreath-laying ceremony in remembrance of those lost liberating the Philippines during World War II, led by a Manila-born U.S. naval officer.⁴¹ These kinds of rapport-building activities are often overlooked in analyses of strategic communication. However, they help to build a common understanding between states that facilitates effective communication. By incorporating these activities into the deployment schedule, the U.S. was able to more effectively communicate its strategic messages to the Philippines.

U.S FONOP UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

During the Trump Administration, FONOPs in the South China Sea became bolder and more frequent. However, the first FONOP of 2017 did not occur until four months after Trump's inauguration. There had even been speculation in the American and Chinese media that President Trump was delaying FONOPs to avoid antagonising the Chinese.⁴² However, in May 2017, USS *Dewey* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef, in the Spratly Island chain, where it conducted a man overboard operation.⁴³ According to China's defence ministry spokesperson, Ren Guoqiang, a Chinese missile frigate drove *Dewey* from the area.

The Philippines reported this operation as a show of support for their position. The *Philippine Star* stated, 'The move of the US Navy to sail near Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands shows Washington's support for the Philippines' claims over the South China Sea.'⁴⁴ In July of 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague found Mischief Reef to be part of the Philippines' continental shelf.⁴⁵ The Chinese ignored the ruling and continued to occupy the area.⁴⁶ The Chinese press reported the U.S. operation as the 'first provocation by the US since President Donald Trump took office, coming after Sino-US ties showed signs of stabilizing', and speculated that it may have been an unauthorised operation, initiated by the 'the far right in the US military, deliberately acting contrary to Trump's will to embarrass him'.⁴⁷ Ren Guoqiang said that 'the US' mistaken behavior will worsen the situation. We demand the US correct its mistakes'.⁴⁸

China's response to the first FONOP under Trump was more measured than its responses to the FONOPs under Obama. The use of the word 'mistake' and the suggestion that this operation may have been unauthorised and therefore not part of official U.S. strategy seemed to be offering an invitation to the U.S. to reconsider its approach to the South China Sea issue. However, when the Trump administration sent USS *Stethem* to the Paracel Islands six weeks later, China adopted the same rhetoric it had employed with the Obama administration, urging the U.S. to 'immediately halt such provocative actions that seriously violate China's sovereignty and threaten China's security'.⁴⁹

By 2018, the Chinese FONOP counternarrative positioned China as a collaborative partner in the South China Sea and the U.S. as a destabilising spoiler. This was demonstrated by China's response to USS *Hopper*'s transit within 12 miles of Scarborough Shoal. *Hopper* was shadowed by the Chinese missile destroyer *Huangshan*, which sent instructions to the *Hopper* to leave the area.⁵⁰ China responded to the incident by accusing the U.S. of undermining stability in the region. It noted the collaboration between China and ASEAN on the South China Sea code of conduct. An editorial in the *Global Times* opined that, 'The times are gone when the US played a predominant role in the South China Sea. If Washington insists on stirring up troubles in the region, it will become a lonely pirate left with only a few companions from outside the region'.⁵¹ These responses show China's reactions becoming more and more negative as the U.S. repeated the same operations with the same messages. This demonstrates that repetition of a message will not make it more acceptable if it does not align with the target audience's pre-existing beliefs.



In contrast with China's admonitions, the Philippines reported favourably on U.S. FONOPs in the region. U.S. naval diplomacy may have played a role in this. A few weeks after *Hopper's* FONOP, Lieutenant Commander Tim Hawkins made a statement from the flight deck of the USS *Carl Vinson* that was anchored at Manila Bay. Lieutenant Commander Hawkins explained that the U.S. Navy was operating the Western Pacific, 'to work with our partners and allies... but also promote regional security, stability and kinda re-assert our belief that all should operate in accordance with international law'.⁵² It is significant that Lieutenant Commander Hawkins chose to address the press on the importance of international law while docked in Manila. This emphasised to the Philippines that U.S. FONOPs were designed to support regional partners and were not destabilising the region.

China's opposition to U.S. FONOPs only became more entrenched as the year progressed. In September 2018, USS *Decatur* sailed through the Spratly Islands. As it passed the Gaven and Johnson Reefs, *Decatur* was approached by the Chinese destroyer, PRC *Luyang*.⁵³ According to the U.S. Navy, 'the PRC destroyer conducted a series of increasingly aggressive maneuvers accompanied by warnings for *Decatur* to depart the area.' The PRC destroyer approached within 45 yards of *Decatur's* bow, forcing the U.S. ship to undertake a tight manoeuvre to avoid a collision.⁵⁴

This belligerent response to a routine operation generated confusion among U.S. observers. Particularly as the PRC destroyer's actions would have to have been authorised by the CCP.⁵⁵ However, from the Chinese perspective, the reason for *Luyang's* aggressive actions was clear. In a statement addressing the incident, a spokesperson from China's Ministry of Defence, Wu Qian, said, 'the US side has sent warships into waters near China's islands and reefs in South China Sea time and again, which has posed a grave threat to China's sovereignty and security'.⁵⁶ The Philippines, however, took an opposing view. Rather than seeing the operation as a threat to Chinese security, they perceived it as a means of upholding international law – exactly the message that the U.S. was seeking to convey. The FONOPs, combined with U.S. naval diplomacy, made the U.S. the security partner of choice for the Philippines.⁵⁷

The rate of FONOPs in the South China Sea increased during the Trump Administration with operations peaking in 2019.⁵⁸ In November 2019, US littoral combat ship USS *Gabrielle Giffords* traversed the Spratly Islands, while destroyer USS *Wayne E. Meyer* transited through the Paracel Islands. The Chinese navy and air force monitored both two vessels and demanded that they leave the area.⁵⁹ The Chinese portrayed these operations as the U.S. attempting to undermine regional stability. On the day after the operations, an editorial in the *Global Times* accused Washington of being a 'spoiler' in the South China Sea:

*ASEAN members have expressed many times that they do not want to choose sides between China and the US, and they hope the US can respect China and ASEAN members' joint effort to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea. ASEAN members are certainly aware of Washington's real intention of interfering in the region.*⁶⁰

This clearly demonstrates that increasing the frequency of FONOPs served to consolidate China's response. Not only did Beijing reject Washington's stated goal of upholding international law, but it also used the operations as a means of positioning the U.S. as a malign outsider in the region. However, the claim that ASEAN members were aware that the U.S. was seeking to interfere in the region was not apparent in Filipino press coverage.

In March 2020, USS *Bunker Hill* conducted a FONOP in the Spratly Island chain to challenge the excessive claims of China, Vietnam and Taiwan. This operation was closely followed by a FONOP conducted by USS *Barry* in the Paracel Islands. The Chinese People's Liberation Army Southern Theatre Command spokesman, Li Huamin, responded, 'These provocative acts by the U.S. side... have seriously violated China's sovereignty and security interests, deliberately increased regional security risks and could easily trigger an unexpected incident'.⁶¹ This reference to the potential for escalation shows that the regularity and frequency of U.S. FONOPs was antagonising the Chinese, and shows the Chinese response shift from admonishments to direct threats.

U.S FONOP UNDER THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

The Chinese continued to use strident rhetoric in their responses to FONOPs conducted under the Biden administration. In 2021, USS *Benfold* conducted a FONOP in the South China Sea, which, according to a press release issued by the US Seventh Fleet, was intended to uphold the 'rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea recognized in international law by challenging the unlawful restrictions on innocent passage imposed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam'.⁶² The *Philippine Star* reported that the operation, 'reflects US commitment to uphold freedom of navigation and lawful uses of the sea as a principle'.⁶³ However, China interpreted this as providing, 'more irrefutable evidence of the US' militarization in the region with navigational hegemony'.⁶⁴ Thus, despite the carefully crafted diplomatic rhetoric, China rejected U.S. messaging and advanced its own interpretation of the operations.

In 2022, *Benfold* undertook another FONOP, which was accompanied by a press release emphasizing the U.S.' 'commitment to uphold freedom of navigation and lawful uses of the sea as a principle. The United States is defending every nation's right to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows'.⁶⁵ However, Senior Colonel Tian Lijun, spokesperson at the PLA Southern Theater Command, said that the operation violated China's sovereignty and security, harmed regional peace and stability and violated international law.⁶⁶

By late 2023, Chinese responses became more hostile. In December 2023, USS *Gabrielle Giffords* sailed past Second Thomas Shoal Spratly Island chain. U.S. Seventh Fleet said the operation was consistent with international law. 'Every day the U.S. 7th Fleet operates in the South China Sea, as they have for decades.'⁶⁷ Spokesperson for the PLA's

Southern Theatre Command Tian Junli, said that the U.S. was stirring up trouble and that it continued to be the principal threat to peace and stability in the South China Sea.⁶⁸ Indeed, a *Global Times* ran a contentious editorial:

*...the Chinese side will undoubtedly make comprehensive preparations, demonstrating a firm determination and strong capabilities to defend national sovereignty, security, and the peace and stability of the South China Sea region. Anyone who misjudges or underestimates this is playing with fire... It is essential to emphasize to the US that at any time, there can be no "guardrail" for US military adventurism and provocative actions against China. This is akin to high-altitude operations without a safety rope; a momentary lapse can lead to a fall, and the risks involved would be unbearable.*⁶⁹

This editorial clearly alluded to the potential for escalation in the South China Sea if the U.S. did not scale back its FONOP program. Not only did China use U.S. actions as justification for its own militarisation, but it also made a thinly veiled threat of retaliation.

Despite the consistency of U.S. messaging over seven years, and the regularity of the FONOPs, China's responses became more oppositional over time. During the same period, the Philippines continued to maintain a positive perception of the program. The fact that the same messages were being received in such different manners by two different audiences suggests that the message itself is not the key factor that determines the response. China and the Philippines responded in accordance with their relationship with the U.S. Each state's initial perception of the U.S. influenced the way they interpreted U.S. messaging. Pre-existing beliefs are an important aspect to consider when designing strategic messaging campaigns.



CONCLUSION

The findings of this report have significant implications for naval policy and planning. This report demonstrates that there is no objective reality to strategic communication. The message that is sent and the message that is received are two separate signals. This report also questions the utility of strategic messaging campaigns directed towards states that are negatively predisposed towards the messenger state. The seven-year FONOP program has seen China go from measured rejection of U.S. messages to more explicit hostility. In this case, repetition and consistency, even of a rational and reasonable message, has exacerbated already tense relations. The Philippines, on the other hand, remained supportive of U.S. messaging. This outcome is positive, but it may not justify the resources expended in these operations.

This report has highlighted the effects of consistency theory and confirmation bias on strategic messaging. Practitioners understand intuitively that if a state has a negative relationship with another state, it is more likely to interpret that state's messages in a negative way. It does not matter how reasonable, nuanced or diplomatic

the message may be. Analysts often argue that more targeted diplomatic communications could improve the perceptions of operations.⁷⁰ However, this report looked at FONOPs accompanied by carefully crafted rhetoric and FONOPs without any explanation or justification. There was no significant difference in the ways that these messages were received.

From a theoretical perspective, this report has contributed to the literature on peacetime maritime signalling. Most of the literature on deterrence focuses on crises. However, the majority of maritime signalling occurs during times of peace. Therefore, it is just as important to understand the dynamics of peacetime signalling. It has also identified the gap in the way that practitioners and scholars typically view strategic communication. Scholars tend to discuss strategic communication as a soft means of advancing strategic goals. Practitioners, on the other hand, understand that action also sends a message. The communicative function of naval action is an underexamined area of analysis.





SIGNIFICANCE AND FUTURE INDICATIONS

This report suggests that some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning strategic communication campaigns should be subjected to closer scrutiny. A key assumption is that states can send messages to potential adversaries that will cause them to alter their behaviour. However, I suggest that the very fact that a state is a potential adversary means that strategic communication is unlikely to bring about any change in behaviour. If anything, it may make that behaviour more entrenched.

This is significant for FONOPs across the region. These operations are routinely used to uphold legal rights and to deter excessive maritime claims. If the objective is simply to maintain a legal right, then these operations can be said to be effective. The simple act of sailing the ship prevents the creation of customary law rights which could restrict freedom of navigation. However, if there is a broader deterrent or compellent purpose to these operations, it is unlikely to succeed. If the broader purpose is to shore up alliances, demonstrate commitment to maintaining the rules-based global order or demonstrate responsible global citizenship, these objectives may well succeed. This is because the target audiences of these messages are likely to be partners and allies that are positively predisposed to the communicating state. However, given the cost involved in conducting FONOPs, it may be worth asking whether reassuring friends is worth the expense.

A necessary limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size. This study only examined FONOPs between 2016 and 2023 and focused on those that were directed towards Chinese claims. It also only examined the strategic communication between the U.S. and China and the U.S. and the Philippines. Future studies could examine a longer time frame and could also encompass additional states. The U.S. conducts FONOPs against other Pacific states, including Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei. These states have more nuanced relationships with the U.S. Therefore, analysing and charting their responses to U.S. FONOPs would provide more robust and generalisable findings.

In addition, different U.S. administrations have taken different approaches to the FONOP program. These have also been interpreted in different ways by leaders across the region. An analysis of the influence of administrations and leaders was beyond the scope of this report but would provide valuable insights into strategic communication. This report, however, has provided a proof of concept. The analysis indicates that the rationale and efficacy of FONOPs should be subjected to closer scrutiny. More analysis is needed to fully assess the efficacy of these operations and to establish best practice guidelines for strategic communication.

ENDNOTES

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