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<http://atimes.com/2016/03/coming-soon-to-the-south-china-sea-beijings-best-weapons-of-war/>

Coming soon to the South China Sea: Beijing's best weapons of war

BY HARRY KAZIANIS

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The People's Republic of China continues to up the ante in the South China Sea. Various reports, including my own, suggest Beijing has now likely placed anti-ship missiles on Woody Island, a disputed island in this important body of water. This is on top of various other escalatory military deployments including advanced radar platforms, fighter aircraft, anti-aircraft batteries and various other systems that indicate China is seeking to expand its offensive and defensive military footprint. In fact, in a recent letter to US Senator John McCain, Director of U.S. National Intelligence James Clapper stated that "based on the pace and scope of construction at these outposts, China will be able to deploy a range of offensive and defensive military capabilities and support increased PLAN and CCG presence ...," adding that "once these facilities are completed by the end of 2016 or early 2017, China will have significant capacity to quickly project substantial offensive military power to the region."



James Clapper

Considering the speedy and comprehensive nature of Chinese island reclamation projects — with media reports offering the possibility Beijing may begin reclamation work at Scarborough Shoal— US military planners should begin to consider what other types of military assets China will likely place in the South China Sea in the months and years to come.

I would argue Chinese military experts are seeking to turn the South China Sea into a “no-go zone” for US and allied military assets across all possible kinetic combat domains if combat were ever to commence. Likely weapons platforms will very much be of the anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) variety—ie asymmetric-style weapons systems that would seek to deter or cost US military planners large casualties or capital ship mission kills if forces were to enter a contested area.

If one was to survey the vast array of possible Chinese military assets of an A2/AD nature, I would argue the below would be the most likely platforms to enter service in the South China Sea in the months and years to come. Such assets would create major challenges for US and allied planners for any South China Sea military contingency. Here are three very likely possibilities for deployment in the near future:

The DF-21D — The ‘Carrier Killer’:

If it could somehow be quantified, I would place a strong bet that the DF-21D is the most discussed piece of Chinese military hardware across the Internet—and with good reason.



Launch vehicles carrying China DF-21D missiles

The weapon is launched from a mobile truck-mounted platform into the upper atmosphere, with some likely combination of over-the-horizon radar, satellite tracking and possibly even unmanned aerial vehicles providing guidance information to lock in on and destroy an ocean-going vessel. It also incorporates a maneuverable warhead, or MaRV. Most military experts believe the missile has a range of roughly 1,000 miles.

While there has been spirited debate if such a missile would be truly effective in a wartime scenario — mostly due to the challenges of being able to find a moving vessel in the large, open

ocean that would have various evasion methods at its disposal (like a US aircraft carrier battle group with missile defense systems and various others abilities) — debate has shifted in recent years towards a quiet acceptance of its likely ability to inflict a mission kill, especially if fired in salvos. Indeed, I have been told by various US defense officials a large effort has been underway for a number of years to defend against China’s so-called “Carrier-Killer.”

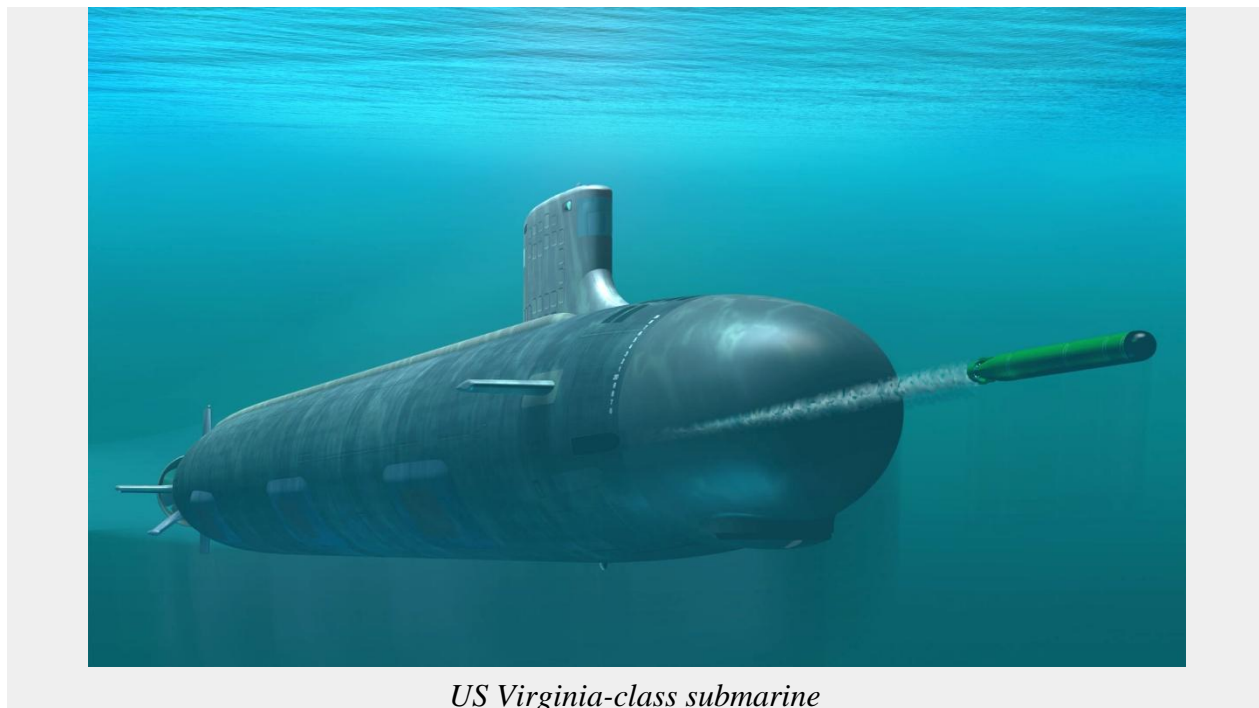
Land attack ballistic or cruise missile platforms:

Considering Washington and Manila have just recently expanded their mutual defense pact with the U.S. being able to utilize five additional bases in the Philippines with easy access to the South China Sea, Beijing may seek to negate such an advantage.

China may place varying types of sophisticated missile platforms that could deliver punishing strikes to allied airfields in the Philippines and beyond. With platforms that have various ranges, accuracy levels and can be either ballistic or cruise in nature, Beijing would have a number of options to damage critical runways, command and control nodes and various types of military aircraft. While missile defenses could be utilized to defend such bases, China could also utilize longer-range weapons from the mainland to ensure maximum damage via punishing saturation strikes.

Sonar nets:

While not an outright kinetic-style weapon, stringing together a sophisticated sonar network that could seekout US submarines —the very heart of America’s efforts to negate China’s A2/AD strategy — could provide a decisive advantage.



US Virginia-class submarine

While there is little in English-based open source documents, Lyle Goldstein and Shannon Knight have uncovered various Chinese language open source materials that show Beijing is

working on — as of at least 2014 — sonar net test sites in the East, South and Yellow Seas. It stands to reason that China has continued to work on and enhance such efforts. If Beijing were able to perfect such technology and deploy such a capability in such a manner where a new sonar net was set up in around China's new islands in the South China Sea, such a system might make Washington very wary of deploying advanced nuclear-powered subs there in a crisis. As I explained back in 2014:

“If Beijing were to perfect such technology it could largely negate the military capabilities of America's submarine forces, which in many respects are the foundation of the budding Air-Sea Battle operational concept [and very likely its successor, JAM-GC]. If China were able to field such a network ... American subs could be pushed back beyond the range of such networks. This would impact the ability of American forces in a conflict to deliver kinetic strikes on the Chinese coast [and as well as China's new South China Sea islands] by way of Tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAMs). Considering the investment Washington is making in new versions of nuclear attack submarines, specifically a new version of the Virginia Class that includes a new payload module to carry more TLAMs, Washington would be wise to consider how to respond to Beijing's latest move.”

Beyond the above mentioned systems, there are many other various weapons China could place on its new islands that would help create a deadly A2/AD battle network Washington and its allies might not want to cross. These would include the newly purchased Russian S-400 air-defense system and Su-35 fighter as well as ultra-quiet submarines that could possibly be based in the region. Beijing will also likely move assets, on a rotational basis, on and off the islands to keep US and allied planners guessing. And while space on the islands will be a big factor in how much military hardware Beijing can place on its new islands one thing is clear: the South China Sea will likely be a major headache for US and allied military planners for the foreseeable future.