

How China Plans to Win a War in the South China Sea

By James Holmes

National Interest, August 27, 2017

Think about a "People's War."

Last year China's defense minister, [General Chang Wanquan](#), [implored the nation to ready itself for a "people's war at sea."](#) The purpose of such a campaign? To "safeguard sovereignty" after an adverse ruling from the [International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea](#). The tribunal upheld the plain meaning of the [UN Convention on the Law of the Sea](#) (UNCLOS), [ruling](#) that Beijing's claims to "[indisputable sovereignty](#)" spanning some 80-90 percent of the South China Sea are bunk.

A strong coastal state, in other words, cannot simply wrest away the [high seas](#) or [waters allocated to weaker neighbors](#) and make them its own.

Or, at any rate, it can't do so lawfully. It could conceivably do so through conquest, enforced afterward by a constant military presence. Defenders of freedom of the sea, consequently, must heed General Chang's entreaty. Southeast Asians and their external allies must take such statements seriously—devoting ample forethought to the prospect of marine combat in the South China Sea.

That's the first point about a people's war at sea. A clash of arms is possible. Statesmen and commanders in places like Manila, Hanoi, and Washington must not discount Chang's words as mere bluster.

Indeed, it's doubtful China could comply with the UNCLOS tribunal's ruling at this stage, even if the Chinese Communist Party leadership wished to. Think about the image compliance would project at home. For two decades now, Beijing has invested lavishly in a great navy, and backed that navy up with shore-based firepower in the form of combat aircraft, anti-ship missile batteries, and short-range warships such as fast patrol craft and diesel submarines.

Party leaders have regaled the populace with how they will use seagoing forces to right historical wrongs and win the nation nautical renown. They must now follow through.

(This first appeared in 2016.)

It was foolish to tie China's national dignity and sovereignty to [patently absurd claims to islands and seas](#). But party leaders did so. And they did so repeatedly, publicly, and in the most unyielding terms imaginable. By their words they stoked nationalist sentiment while making themselves accountable to it. They set in motion a toxic cycle of rising popular expectations.

Breaking that cycle could verge on impossible. If Beijing relented from its maritime claims now, ordinary Chinese would—rightly—judge the leadership by the standard it set. Party leaders would stand condemned as weaklings who surrendered sacred territory, failed to avenge China's [century of humiliation](#) despite China's rise to great power, and let jurists and lesser neighbors [backed by a certain superpower](#) flout [big, bad China's will](#).

No leader relishes being seen as a weakling. It's positively dangerous in China. [As the greats of diplomacy teach](#), it's tough for negotiators or political leaders to climb down from public commitments. Make a promise and you bind yourself to keep it. Fail to keep it and you discredit yourself—and court disaster in the bargain.

Like any sane leadership, Beijing prefers to get its way without fighting. Fighting, though, could be the least bad of the options party leaders have left themselves. Quite the predicament they've made for themselves.

Which leads to the second point. Judging from Chang's words, [small-stick diplomacy](#) has run its course. Small-stick diplomacy was about deploying the China Coast Guard and fellow nonmilitary sea services to police waters Beijing claimed. It depicted China's sovereignty in the South China Sea as a fact, and dared woefully outmatched rivals to reverse that fact.

Left unopposed, de facto Chinese sovereignty—a [near-monopoly on the use of force](#) within borders sketched on the map—would have become entrenched over time. Once it became the new normal, it might even have taken on an aura of legitimacy among seafaring states.

The UNCLOS tribunal struck China's approach a grievous blow, collapsing the quasi-legal arguments underlying small-stick diplomacy. The tribunal's decision makes it clear that Chinese maritime forces operating in, say, the Philippines' exclusive economic zone are invaders or occupiers—not constables.

If Beijing can't get its way through white-hulled coast-guard vessels, that leaves military force. Sovereign states deploy law-enforcement assets to police what is rightfully theirs. They deploy military forces to fight for things that are in dispute. Chang's warlike talk implies that Beijing has abandoned the softly, softly approach and has tacitly admitted Southeast Asia constitutes a contested zone.

And the lingo he employs matters. People's war is a Maoist phrase used to convey certain martial ideas. Mao Zedong's Red Army waged people's war to seize contested ground from Japanese invaders and Chinese Nationalists. It appears China now sees the South China Sea in similar terms—as an offshore battleground where rivals must be overcome by force.

But not by military force alone. Beijing won't withdraw the coast guard, maritime enforcement services, or the fishing fleet—an unofficial militia—from embattled waters. They will stay on as part of a composite whole-of-government armada. But

the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and Air Force will figure more prominently in the force mix.