

# Evolution, Drivers and Implications of the UK's South China Sea Policy

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Since 2016, the United Kingdom has changed its previous stance of not taking sides in the South China Sea issue, and started to pressure China in high profile. Several senior officials, including the prime minister, have voiced their opinions on South China Sea disputes and the freedom of navigation, demanding China abide by the award of the so-called South China Sea arbitration. In 2018, the UK successively deployed three warships to the Asia-Pacific region, with the HMS *Albion* even sailing into the territorial waters of China's Xisha Islands (Paracel Islands) without prior permission on August 31, making it the only country besides the United States that conducts freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to challenge China's legal regime and claim of territorial waters. These actions indicate a shift of the UK's South China Sea policy. What elements does the changed policy include? How come such a dramatic "upgrade" of the policy in just two years, despite the context of deepening "Golden Era" of China-UK relations? Why is the UK coming all the way to the South China Sea to challenge China in the absence of any maritime security threat to itself? And what implications will this policy change have? This article intends to analyze the underlying logic of the change and make some initial predictions on the UK's future actions in the South China Sea.

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## From “Principled Statement” to “Freedom of Navigation Operations”

The United Kingdom has no territorial claim on the South China Sea. Before 2016, it adopted a prudent and neutral approach on the issue, only participating in issuing “principled statements” under the framework of the European Union and the Group of 7 (G7).<sup>1</sup> The wording of these statements is mostly cautious, reaffirming general principles like the compliance to international law and peaceful settlement of disputes, without specifically clarifying positions or laying blame on China. For example, in the statement regarding the 2014 China-Vietnam tensions in the South China Sea, the UK government only indicated its support for the EU to “urge all parties concerned to seek peaceful and cooperative solutions in accordance with international law ... and to continue ensuring safety and freedom of navigation,” and “call on the parties to undertake de-escalating measures and refrain from any unilateral action.” The UK only briefly added the request for all parties to “exercise restraint” further to the EU statement.<sup>2</sup> The G7 Foreign Ministers’ Declaration on Maritime Security in April 2015, which the UK signed, did not mention the South China Sea in the part about the freedoms of navigation and overflight, only indicating “We continue to observe the situation in the East and South China Seas and are concerned by any unilateral actions” without explicitly naming China.<sup>3</sup> The UK government did not even post the statement on its website.

It was from 2016 that the UK government dropped its prudent and neutral position on the South China Sea issue. The change is mainly reflected in two aspects. First, abandoning neutrality over South China Sea

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1 HM Government, *The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security*, Cm 8829, May 2014, p.26; Mathieu Duchâtel, “Europe and Maritime Security in the South China Sea: Beyond Principled Statements?” *Asia Policy*, No.21, 2016.

2 “UK Speaks in Support of EU’s Statement on Tensions in South China Sea,” UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, May 10, 2014.

3 “G7 Foreign Ministers’ Declaration on Maritime Security in Lübeck, 15 April 2015,” German Federal Foreign Office, April 15, 2015.

disputes and publicly imposing pressure on China. In March 2016, the UK government published on its official website the EU's declaration on recent developments in the South China Sea, which "urges all claimants to resolve disputes ... in accordance with international law including UNCLOS and its arbitration procedures."<sup>4</sup> In May the same year, then UK Prime Minister David Cameron "adopted his toughest stance yet on China's claims" when he arrived in Japan for the G7 summit, and openly demanded China "respect the ruling ... by the permanent court of arbitration in The Hague."<sup>5</sup> At first sight, it was just a continuation of the UK's consistent position that all parties should respect international law. However, given that China has clarified its stance of no participation and no acceptance early when the Philippines initiated the arbitration, the UK has in fact formally dropped its neutral position.

Second, challenging China's legal regime and claim of territorial waters in the South China Sea through diplomatic announcements and freedom of navigation operations. In January 2016, then Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond indicated that freedoms of navigation and overflight are "red lines" for the UK. Speaking in Washington in December the same year, the UK Ambassador to the US Kim Darroch outlined the UK's plans to get increasingly involved in the South China Sea, to "protect freedom of navigation and to keep sea routes and air routes open." In July 2017, then Defense Secretary Michael Fallon revealed to Reuters that the UK would send a warship to the South China Sea in 2018, to demonstrate the UK has "the right to exercise the freedom of navigation." In the same month on a visit to Australia, then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said that the UK's two new aircraft carriers, when they came into service, would be sent to the South China Sea as one of their first assignments, to "vindicate our belief in ... the freedom of navigation." In February 2018 when visiting Australia and again in June at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Defense Secretary Gavin

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4 "Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the EU on Recent Developments in the South China Sea," UK Trade and Investment, March 18, 2016.

5 "David Cameron: China Must Abide by Ruling on South China Sea," *The Guardian*, May 25, 2016.

Williamson twice claimed that British warships would exercise the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.<sup>6</sup>

The UK is not just bluffing in this regard. From the beginning of 2018, it successively deployed two frigates and one amphibious assault ship to the Asia-Pacific region, and sailed through the South China Sea for several times. Particularly, the amphibious assault ship HMS *Albion* sailed into the territorial waters of China's Xisha Islands without prior permission on August 31, triggering Beijing's open protest.<sup>7</sup> According to exclusive report by Reuters, which first covered the British warship's operation in detail, the UK was to challenge the so-called China's "excessive maritime claims around the Paracel Islands," which it does not recognize, and the warship "did not enter the territorial seas around any features in the hotly disputed region."<sup>8</sup> Besides, looking from the deployment sequence and navigation status of the British warships, the UK seems set to maintain the "three ones" pattern, namely ensuring one British warship navigates in the Asia-Pacific while the other two respectively are on the way to and way back from the region. This is the first time since 2013 the Royal Navy sends three warships to the Asia-Pacific region, and the first time over two decades it takes steps to maintain regular maritime presence in the region.

The abovementioned actions demonstrate that the UK's South China Sea policy has greatly changed: diplomatically, it abandons neutrality and demands China observe the award of the so-called arbitration. Militarily, it conducts regular cruises in the Asia-Pacific, and challenges China's legal regime and claim of territorial waters in the South China Sea through

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6 "China Lands More Planes on Its Man-Made Island in the Disputed South China Sea," *Mail Online*, January 7, 2016; "The British Are Coming... To the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, December 9, 2016; "Britain Plans to Send Warship to South China Sea in Move Likely to Irk Beijing," *Reuters*, July 27, 2017; "Britain's New Aircraft Carriers to Test Beijing in South China Sea," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2017; "UK to Send Royal Navy Warship through Disputed South China Sea in Challenge to Beijing," *Independent*, February 13, 2018; "France, UK Announce South China Sea Freedom Of Navigation Operations," *Naval Today*, June 6, 2018.

7 "Defense Ministry: British Warship in S China Sea 'Provocative'," Chinese Ministry of Defense, September 6, 2018; "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on September 6, 2018," Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 6, 2018.

8 "Exclusive: British Navy Warship Sails near South China Sea Islands, Angering Beijing," *Reuters*, September 6, 2018.

freedom of navigation operations.

Three obvious characteristics can be seen from the UK's policy change. First, it started from scratch. The UK did not have territorial claims in the South China Sea; it did not even have a clear-cut South China Sea policy as the issue gradually escalated over more than two decades. Now the policy has basically taken shape. Second, the policy evolved from ambiguity to clarity. After making the abovementioned statement in July 2017, Fallon denied at the Conservative Party's annual meeting that the UK had plans to send warships to the South China Sea.<sup>9</sup> Johnson also said within minutes after reiterating the pledge to send aircraft carriers, "We haven't yet quite decided to do that."<sup>10</sup> However, by early 2018, the time, pattern and even ship types of the UK's freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea had been decided. Third, the change escalated quite rapidly. While it took about one year for the UK to shift from not taking sides to abandoning neutrality, it probably took only seven months from formulating plans to actually sending warships. Moreover, by choosing the China-controlled Xisha Islands as the target of its first freedom of navigation operation, and denying the territorial sea around the islands, the UK has adopted a dramatic approach with strong provocative flavor.

## Drivers of the UK's Policy Change

The change and escalation of the UK's South China Sea policy in such a short span of time results from multiple factors. China's response of no participation and no acceptance to the so-called South China Sea arbitration constitutes a direct trigger to the UK's policy change, but that alone would not push London so far as to challenge China in the South China Sea. The multifold pressure brought by the UK's divorce from the EU, or Brexit, is the major motivation for the policy escalation. In

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9 "British Defense Secretary: UK Has No Intention of Conducting 'Freedom of Navigation' Flights over South China Sea," *People's Daily*, October 12, 2017.

10 "Britain's New Aircraft Carriers to Test Beijing in South China Sea," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2017.

particular, the political pressure imposed by the United States is the main external factor. Finding its diplomatic maneuvering space contracted in the context of Brexit, the UK has to align its South China Sea policy with the United States' to a certain extent in a bid to strengthen the UK-US "special relationship." Other important drivers of the policy change include enhancing political and military ties with Asia-Pacific allies and partners, promoting arms export, and internal struggle among departments of the UK government.

### **South China Sea arbitration and rules-based international system**

China made clear its basic position of no acceptance and no participation early when the Philippines initiated the South China Sea arbitration in 2013. Immediately after the award was released on July 12, 2016, the Chinese government announced the award as invalid and having no binding force, which would not be recognized or implemented. It also reiterated it would continue to work with states directly concerned to resolve relevant disputes in the South China Sea through negotiations and consultations.<sup>11</sup> Over the four years, China has openly expounded its position on the arbitration through multiple channels and on multiple occasions, and published a position paper on the matter of jurisdiction in the arbitration in later 2014.<sup>12</sup> Chinese Ambassador to the UK Liu Xiaoming even specifically elaborated on China's position in British newspapers.<sup>13</sup> The UK government and public would not be surprised at China's refusal to recognize the arbitration award. Given this, the question becomes: why did the UK openly give up its neutral approach at the

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11 "Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China on the Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Request of the Republic of the Philippines," Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 12, 2016; "China Adheres to the Position of Settling through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea," Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 13, 2016.

12 "Position Paper of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines," Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 7, 2014.

13 Liu Xiaoming, "Stop Meddling in the South China Sea," *The Times*, May 4, 2016.

expense of impairing the “Golden Era” of its relations with China, which it also valued much?

The UK government has never clarified specifically what potential consequences China’s non-recognition of the arbitration award would entail, and why it found them so serious that it must openly impose pressure on China. Instead, it has only indicated that the arbitration result is equally binding to China and the Philippines and that China must adhere to the ruling.<sup>14</sup> In spite of this, the statements by Cameron and other government officials have still demonstrated the roots of the UK’s position change. From London’s perspective, China’s attitude toward the arbitration and its ruling is a grave challenge to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and even to the international law and the rules-based international order. Bill Hayton, Associate Fellow at the Chatham House, frankly revealed the logic of “domino effect” which UK officials may never express in their diplomatic language publicly. “UNCLOS is a cornerstone of international peace and security ... UNCLOS provides a neutral mechanism to allocate the world’s maritime resources but what we are seeing in the South China Sea is an effort by China to overturn it ... If this is allowed to succeed, UNCLOS will be weakened everywhere, not just in the South China Sea. If countries can treat international treaties as simply ‘pieces of waste paper’ then no agreement is safe: international order begins to break down.”<sup>15</sup> Once China’s position on the South China Sea arbitration was deemed as a “challenge” to UNCLOS and international rules, the UK’s perception of China would witness serious deterioration. As an island nation highly dependent on maritime trade and sea lines of communication, the UK has stressed, throughout its four hundred years of modern history, the

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14 “Written Evidence from Foreign and Commonwealth Office,” UK Parliament: Foreign Affairs Committee, April 17, 2018, p.8; “South China Sea: Britain Says Court of Arbitration Ruling Must Be Binding,” *The Guardian*, April 19, 2018.

15 Bill Hayton, “Two Years On, South China Sea Ruling Remains a Battleground for the Rule-Based Order,” Chatham House Expert Comment, July 11, 2018; for Chinese scholars’ rebuttal of the binding effect of the arbitration, see Gao Sheng-ti, “Ineffectiveness of the South China Sea Arbitration,” *International Studies*, No.5, 2015.

open and integral nature of the ocean, referring to the high seas as part of the “global commons” that lies beyond the political ownership or control of any single nation-state.<sup>16</sup> UNCLOS is thus considered by the UK as an important guarantee for global maritime order and international collaboration. The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security, published in 2014, stated that “to defend the maritime domain and enable freedom of movement on the high seas,” the UK would “secure compliance by other states with UNCLOS” and “monitor situations where the rules in UNCLOS are not being complied with and, in collaboration with allies and partners, to use best efforts to bring States into compliance .”<sup>17</sup>

### **Brexit and escalation of the UK’s South China Sea policy**

While the South China Sea arbitration prompted the UK to drop its previous neutrality, it is still not enough to push the country to take concrete actions and challenge China far in the South China Sea. As mentioned above, China has announced its stance of no acceptance and no participation with regard to the arbitration early in the 2014 position paper, which was later reiterated repeatedly. China’s response to the eventual award should not surprise the UK. For quite a period before 2016, the UK did not substantially alter its position; instead, it was actively developing relations with China. The year 2015 witnessed the UK’s entry into the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the launch of the “Golden Era” of bilateral relations. It is the multifold pressure brought by Brexit that pushed the UK to escalate its South China Sea policy and send warships to challenge China. London came to find that it must sacrifice its friendly ties with China to some extent in order to maintain alliances and demonstrate its great-power status in the context of Brexit.

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16 HM Government, *The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security*, p.25; for a summary of Anglo-American perception of freedom of the seas, see Geoffrey Till, “Freedom of the Seas: Why It Matters,” UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, November 30, 2011.

17 HM Government, *The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security*, pp.26-27.

**Strengthening UK-US “special relationship.”** Against the backdrop of Brexit, the UK can no longer remain indifferent in the face of political pressure from the US government. The UK’s national security has been built on three interconnected core pillars, namely the country’s own prosperity and stability, its global network of alliances and partnerships, and an international system that serves its interests. In particular, maintaining and strengthening the “special relationship” with the US is the top priority, and has been the UK’s established policy since the end of World War II.<sup>18</sup> However, the “special relationship,” which has offered many benefits to the UK in terms of security, politics and economy, is not free lunch. The UK not only needs to follow the US on many foreign policies, but also needs to maintain its unique strategic value. However, Brexit would greatly weaken the UK’s influence on the European Union, fading its role as a bridge between the US and Europe. In the context of Brexit, the UK, finding the maneuvering space of its foreign policy contracted, has to respond more actively to US concerns. Cameron’s open pressure on China was obviously influenced by previous criticism by the Obama administration. Since taking office, Trump has repeatedly asked traditional allies, to whom he has not shown much mercy, to share more responsibilities, while dramatically increasing provocations in the South China Sea. Given this, the UK has not only reinforced its commitment and contributions to NATO, but has also followed the US on the South China Sea issue, to demonstrate that it is the most reliable ally of the US.<sup>19</sup>

**Realizing the objective of “Global Britain.”** To mitigate the uncertainty brought by Brexit, the UK needs to manifest its global

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18 HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategy Defence and Security Review 2015: a Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, Cm 9161, November 2015, p.51; for a summary of the UK-US “special relationship,” see Xu Ruike, “Anglo-American Special Relationship in the Post-Brexit Era,” in Wang Zhanpeng, ed., *Annual Report on Development of the United Kingdom (2016-2017)*, Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2017, pp.145-151.

19 “Defence Secretary Confirms UK-US Relationship Remains Unparalleled,” UK Ministry of Defence, August 8, 2018; for the Trump administration’s escalation of its challenge in the South China Sea, see Liu Lin, “An Analysis of US Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary American Review*, Vol.2, No.1, 2018, pp.89-93.

operational capabilities and strengthen economic ties with other Commonwealth nations and the Asia-Pacific region. What are the prospects of the UK's economic development after it leaves the EU? Will the world witness a decline in the UK's capabilities and willingness to fulfill its commitments to global allies? British answer to these two questions has been closely followed by its allies. To assuage external concerns and demonstrate its determination to continue in-depth engagement with world affairs, the UK government has proposed the policy objective of "Global Britain," reiterating its commitments to allies and actively displaying its global operational capabilities.<sup>20</sup> Sending warships to the Asia-Pacific waters constitutes part of UK actions to realize this objective. The three British warships sent to the region so far have conducted various activities. From the UK and through the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and Western Pacific, they have held coordinated training and joint exercises with France, Australia, Japan and Brunei, supervised the implementation of UN sanctions on North Korea, visited ports of multiple countries, and hosted open days and war commemorative activities, to highlight the Royal Navy's capability of regular overseas deployment.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the UK has been actively communicating with other Commonwealth nations and major Asia-Pacific economies on post-Brexit free trade arrangements. In particular, Australia and Japan are two key states that the UK intends to strengthen ties in the region.<sup>22</sup> Given Australia's strained relations with China in recent years, the South China Sea issue has become an effective leverage for the UK to show support for foreign policies of Commonwealth partners, highlight its leadership status, and enhance economic and trade ties. In fact, the British warships' activities in the Asia-Pacific and the South China Sea have boosted the

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20 For "Global Britain" and the impact of Brexit on British diplomacy, see Cui Hongjian, "Change of British Diplomacy in the Process of Brexit," in Wang Zhanpeng, *Annual Report on Development of the United Kingdom (2016-2017)*, pp.21-28.

21 News of the British warships' activities could be obtained from the Royal Navy's official website.

22 "UK Chief of Defence Staff Reaffirms Commitment to Australia," UK Ministry of Defence, February 7, 2018; "UK Reaffirms Relationship with Asia Pacific Partner Japan," UK Royal Navy, March 5, 2018.

UK's defense exports to Australia. BAE Systems, a British defense company, won the bid for building 9 Australian frigates in 2018, which was worth 20 billion pounds. It is the largest international warship deal over the past decade and gives a strong impetus to British defense industry against the backdrop of Brexit.<sup>23</sup>

**Seeking for increase of defense budget.** The UK Parliament and the Ministry of Defense would like to win more input in defense by means of warship deployment. While the UK is about to leave the EU, the geographical reality of its location in Europe's western frontier would not change. The close relationship formed over the decades with the rest of Europe means the security on the continent would still have implications for the UK. In other words, Brexit would not lead to decreased UK investment in European security affairs. Reinforcing security commitment outside the region while maintaining and even strengthening input in European defense would impose no small pressure on the UK's already strained defense budget. Reports of the Parliament, in addition to consistent stress of Russia threat, have begun to highlight potential Chinese "threat to freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea, in a bid to seek for more defense investment.<sup>24</sup> The Ministry of Defense has also been actively lobbying the royal family and members of the Parliament to exert pressure on Prime Minister Theresa May, who has shown no interest in increasing military input and maintaining the UK's status as a "tier one" military power. It's reported that Defense Secretary Williamson once even issued a political threat to May.<sup>25</sup> Government officials have even collaborated with the media to play up the Royal Navy's predicament when encountering Russian warships in European waters and the "encirclement"

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23 "Defence Secretary Meets Australian Defence Minister Following £20bn British Warship Deal," UK Ministry of Defence, July 10, 2018.

24 House of Commons Defence Committee, *Beyond 2 Percent: A Preliminary Report on the Modernising Defence Programme*, HC 818, June 18, 2018, pp.10-11.

25 "Revolt in PM's Ranks as Military Chiefs Seek Royal Support for Bigger Budget," *The Times*, July 1, 2018.

it ran into in the South China Sea.<sup>26</sup>

## Demonstration Effect of UK Operations

On the South China Sea issue, the response of most US allies has been limited to diplomatic statements, that is, they stopped short of taking concrete actions to follow the US freedom of navigation operations despite their support for the arbitration award and US position on the South China Sea. Australia, Japan and France have all openly expressed intention to conduct freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, but none have taken action so far. Warships of the three countries are mostly treading a fine line by conducting navigation and exercises in undisputed areas, which has not triggered formal protest from the Chinese government besides arousing some concerns.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the US was once the only country that arbitrarily sent its warships into China's territorial waters to conduct exercises, and publicly challenged China's notification system and claims of territorial waters. The UK's operation in the South China Sea broke the situation, which would not only provide "legitimacy" for the US to continue freedom of navigation operations, but also set an example for Australia, Japan, France, India and those Southeast Asian countries which dispute with China on South China Sea claims.

First, it would boost US confidence in continuing freedom of

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26 "Cash-Strapped Navy Forced to Send Pint-Sized Vessel to Intercept Two Russian Attack Subs," *The Sun*, January 31, 2018. It is mentioned in "Revolt in PM's Ranks as Military Chiefs Seek Royal Support for Bigger Budget" that "HMS *Sutherland*, a Royal Navy frigate, was shadowed by 16 Chinese vessels recently as it passed through the sea." It's not novel that people from the British military circle exaggerate, colluding with media, the Royal Navy's predicament to strive for more defense budget. As early as late 19th century, British sailors leaked information to the media, propagating the Royal Navy's weakness and French Navy's threat vigorously. Parliament was finally persuaded to pass the 1889 Navy Defence Act and the Royal Navy's expenditure was increased. See Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905*, New York: Octagon Books, 1976, pp.59, 121-122, 126-129, 131-133.

27 Florence Parly, French Minister of the Armed Forces, said at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue that French warships once sailed through the South China Sea. It seems the French freedom of navigation operations differ from those of the US since the Chinese government has never lodged a diplomatic protest to France. For Florence Parly's remarks, see "Raising the Bar for Regional Security Cooperation," IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, June 3, 2018.

navigation operations in the South China Sea. The US government has long hoped to jointly conduct the operations with its allies, but there has been a lack of substantial response. As mentioned above, the activities of Australian and Japanese warships in the area have not violated China's territorial sovereignty, nor have they challenged China's notification system with regard to the territorial sea. By comparison, the UK, as a European country far from the South China Sea, chose Xisha Islands, which are fully under Chinese control, as the target of its first provocation. Moreover, this operation was conducted solely by the HMS *Albion*, which once served as the flagship of British fleet. The US government would thus be greatly encouraged with stronger confidence.

Second, it might lead Australia and Japan to follow suit and take similar actions. The UK operation is not only likely to set an example for the two countries, both key US allies just like the UK but had been hesitant previously, but may also force the two to take concrete actions to avoid being left behind in the competition to strengthen strategic ties with the Trump administration. The Japanese Ministry of Defense confirmed on September 17, 2018 that the JS *Kuroshio*, a Maritime Self-Defense Force submarine, conducted anti-submarine drills on September 13 with three warships including the helicopter carrier JS *Kaga*. This was the first public revelation of a Japanese submarine with active mission conducting exercises in the South China Sea, despite the absence of real provocation and deliberate low-profile handling by the Japanese government.<sup>28</sup> It might be the UK's previous operation that motivated the rare Japanese action.<sup>29</sup> In addition, according to information on the Royal Navy's official website, British warships might

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28 "Japanese Sub Conducts Drills in South China Sea for 1st Time," *The Asahi Shimbun*, September 17, 2018.

29 The South Korean destroyer ROKS *Munmu the Great* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Xisha Islands for 10 minutes without seeking prior permission on September 16, 2018. Although the Chinese government later accepted South Korea's explanation that the destroyer had no time to seek a permission since it was encountering a typhoon, the South Korean government, which had been usually prudent on South China Sea disputes, was suspected of following the UK's example. For this incident, see "South Korean Warship Sails by Disputed South China Sea Islands," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 2018; for an analysis of South Korean position on South China Sea, see Zhang Chi, "South Korean Perspective on South China Sea Disputes and Their Implications," *Pacific Journal*, Vol.23, No.9, 2015, pp.33-42.

continue to be regularly deployed to the Asia-Pacific region. This is likely to motivate France and India, both also external countries, to step up interference in South China Sea disputes and increase risks of accidents.

Last, it might affect the cooperation momentum of Southeast Asian countries having disputes with China in the South China Sea. Even though the British warships' operations in the waters are not intended to support the claims of Southeast Asian states, they might have influence on the countries' attitude toward cooperation with China. It was on its way to Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City that the HMS *Albion* sailed into China's territorial waters of Xisha Islands and challenged the so-called Chinese "excessive maritime claims" to indicate its non-recognition of territorial waters around Xisha.<sup>30</sup> This would further encourage Vietnam's claims on the islands.

## Future of UK Operations and China's Response

As mentioned above, the operations of British warships in the South China Sea are driven by multiple domestic and external factors, and to some extent influenced by China's response. It is simply difficult to predict details of the operations. However, a general judgment of the future of UK operations in the South China Sea can be made based on analysis of the country's motivations and public information of the Defense Ministry and the Royal Navy over the past year. British warships are likely to continue regular navigation in the Asia-Pacific region, but it will be difficult to expand the scale of navigation. The UK might continue to challenge China by playing the "edge ball," but stepping up provocation is not its option.

For warships to be deployed on a regular basis to waters far away from the home country and conduct joint exercises with other states, it takes not only equipment of superior performance and well-trained personnel, but also much planning, arrangement, communication and coordination, which makes it highly complicated. In fact, from the almost simultaneous

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30 "Exclusive: British Navy Warship Sails near South China Sea Islands, Angering Beijing."

statements by then UK Defense and Foreign Secretaries on July 27, 2017 to the initial sailing of HMS *Sutherland* to the Asia-Pacific region, it took the UK government at least seven months to formulate plans on the warship deployment.<sup>31</sup> The UK does not send its three warships simultaneously; instead, it has adopted the “three ones” pattern, namely ensuring one warship navigates in the Asia-Pacific while the other two respectively are on the way to and way back from the region, in order to facilitate rotation and recovery of both vessels and personnel. As per this pattern of deployment, the UK warships are likely to continue regular navigation in the Asia-Pacific in 2019.

However, due to security situation in its home waters, inadequacy of main surface combatants, and pressure of the defense budget, the UK will find it hard to expand the scale of Asia-Pacific navigation. Currently, the UK possesses 6 destroyers and 13 frigates, which totals 19 main surface combatants, as well as only 2 amphibious assault ships. Given that two frigates and one amphibious assault ship have been deployed to the Asia-Pacific, expanding the scale of navigation in the region may affect the UK’s deployment in European and Mediterranean waters, which are obviously of more importance. Admittedly, the UK media has exaggerated the Royal Navy’s predicament when monitoring Russian vessels, but the pressure of warship inadequacy is evident. The budget constraint will further limit the scale of navigation outside Europe. After all, as long as the UK’s real interests are not violated, pouring the already strapped expenditure into somewhere far from home can hardly convince the public, let alone the existence of dispute between May and Williamson over increasing defense spending.

Last, the UK lacks the willingness to step up provocation against China. As mentioned above, the UK’s freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea are largely influenced by the United States. Since its current activities in the Asia-Pacific region and particularly the South China

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31 “HMS *Sutherland* Deploys to Far East,” UK Royal Navy, January 10, 2018.

Sea are already able to echo US policies and serve most of its objectives, the UK will find it unnecessary to scale up provocation. Moreover, it has been an established policy in the UK's national security strategy over nearly two decades to strengthen engagement with China in economics, trade and investment.<sup>32</sup> Examples abound in this regard. For instance, the UK became the first major Western founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015. The same year also witnessed the launch of the "Golden Era" of China-UK relations. In a Brexit context, the UK not only needs to enhance economic and trade ties with Japan and Australia, but also needs to strengthen such relations with China. Despite the EU's increasingly strict scrutiny of inbound Chinese investment in recent years, the UK still adopts a welcoming attitude. Although re-examined, the involvement of Chinese investment in the Hinkley Point C project was not blocked. On August 25, 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the UK Department for International Trade reached consensus on "discussing the possibility of high-level free trade agreements after Brexit."<sup>33</sup> Continuing to provoke China would pay a heavy price.

The response of the Chinese government to the UK's operations in the South China Sea has been restrained. In fact, there is also need on China's part to maintain favorable relations with the UK in the context of escalating China-US trade frictions and emerging EU protectionism against China. While taking necessary countermeasures against the UK warships' infringement, China needs to prevent other countries from following suit and the UK from further aligning with the US on the South China Sea issue. Last but not least, accelerating consultations with ASEAN countries on an effective code of conduct in the South China Sea would be necessary to eliminate external forces' pretext for interference in regional affairs. 🇨🇳

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32 HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategy Defence and Security Review 2015*, p.58.

33 "The 13th Meeting of China-UK Joint Trade and Economic Committee Held in Beijing," Chinese Ministry of Commerce, August 25, 2018. It's interesting to note that data and reports of Chinese economy are constantly posted on the website of British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. See "China Economy Update" and "China Special Economic Reports," UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office.