

# The Crisis

## Operations in the South China Sea

by Benjamin Jensen

**T**he following is the first in a series of fictional accounts of a U.S. joint maritime campaign based on unclassified war games conducted by the TECOM Warfighting Society (TWS), which was introduced in the June 2019 edition of the Marine Corps Gazette. The story is based on observations from five iterations of fighting a contemporary scenario with students from the Marine Corps University, School of Advanced Warfighting (SAW), members of the TWS, and Soldiers from the 75th Innovation Command in the U.S. Army Reserve. The first article introduces the crisis. In the tradition of *Defense of Duffer's Drift*, a classic military book published in 1904 by Sir Ernest Dunlop Swinton, the subsequent articles will analyze the outcomes of the unclassified war games as different dreams the joint task force commander has the night before a major battle. The references in the article demonstrate the unclassified nature of the material and establish key background for readers interested in exploring contemporary great power competition, joint maritime campaigns and territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

LtGen Ender "Ellis" Wiggin, Commander of U.S. Marine Forces Pacific, drove to work while listening to a podcast round up of the daily news. During a diplomatic standoff over maritime boundaries, Chinese and Filipino forces exchanged fire.<sup>1</sup> The Philippines claimed they were acting in self-defense; Chinese news reported the attack was unprovoked, leading to a social media protests and spiraling unrest.

When he got to work, a young staff officer's hands shook as he handed Wiggin a tablet with his classified read book. A wave of cyberattacks had crippled the Philippines.<sup>2</sup> Chinese mobs attacked the Filipino embassy in Beijing. Filipino mobs attacked ethnic Chinese

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citizens and businesses in Manila. In response, China deployed two surface action groups into the South China Sea, began conducting anti-surface/anti-air drills at facilities in Subi, Mischief, and Cross Reefs, and established a large air defense identification zone.<sup>3</sup> Using anti-ship missiles fired from the militarized reefs, Chinese forces sank two Filipino Navy modernized Hamilton-class cutters. The ships were originally from the U.S. Coast Guard but were later sent to the Philippines under a Foreign Military Sales program.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the cutters, the Chinese sank three multi-purpose attack craft built in Taiwan while enforcing an exclusion zone with combat air patrols. Chinese media outlets blamed the Philippines and countries supporting Manila's armed forces including the United States, Japan, and Taiwan. There were indications and warnings that Beijing was preparing for possible large-scale attacks against Taiwan and Japan. On the diplomatic and economic front, intelligence analysts predicted China would leverage debt obligations across the region linked to the Belt Road Initiative to keep Southeast Asian countries on the sidelines.<sup>5</sup> These countries were already littered with 5G infrastructure that gave Chinese officials a backdoor to spy on the entire population.<sup>6</sup>

LtGen Wiggin took the tablet and walked to the INDOPACOM Commanding General's office. There was already a horde of restless modern-day camp followers clogging the outer of-

fice. Contractors, would-be think tank prophets, and staff telling low-level political appointees and journalists on the phone to "please hold" created a growing cacophony. The general's aide grabbed LtGen Wiggins by the arm and pulled him into the inner office. ADM Corbett, Commander INDOPACOM, was there with her primary staff. They were busy finalizing plans to stand up a joint task force (JTF) to respond to the unfolding crisis. The JTF would build on a forward deployed littoral combat group (LCG), a formation Wiggin had pioneered as a MEU commander some years ago, currently operating on the western side of the Philippines.<sup>7</sup>

The LCG consisted of an amphibious transport dock (LPD), a guided missile destroyer (DDG), and a littoral combat ship alongside forward deployed elements from 12th Marines (one x HIMARs battery) and an aviation detachment with unmanned aerial vehicles (Shadows), heavy-lift (CH-53s), and Marine wing support squadron enablers.<sup>8</sup> Over the last month, the LCG had been conducting exercises with Filipino Marines and supporting two Special Operations Command Pacific detachments as part of a larger theater exercise designed to deter Chinese aggression.

ADM Corbett's staff discussed the crisis. The situation was rapidly deteriorating. The majority of Chinese surface combatants and aircraft appeared to be mobilizing for possible strikes against Taiwan and Japan while retaining a large surface action group and dedicated

aviation and missile regiment assets to support surface action groups operating in the South China Sea. China was gambling they could use the crisis to change the regional balance of power. The political risk of strikes against Taiwan and Japan meant INDOPACOM would have to divert two carrier strike groups to deter Chinese efforts to expand the conflict. That would leave limited forces to support the Philippines. The staff scrambled and came up a plan.

After debating a range of options to

and combat support to coordinate cyber, electronic, and space-based effects along with an LCU 2000 (Runnymede) for littoral mobility.<sup>10</sup> No additional forces were available given additional Chinese task forces standing up and oriented towards Taiwan and Japan and the threat of a larger “Pacific war.”

ADM Corbett briefed LtGen Wiggin his staff would form the nucleus of the JTF. The admiral wanted them moving out with the expeditionary strike group as fast as possible to link up with

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respond to the South China Sea crisis, the staff recommended forming a small force, JTF-77, consisting of an expeditionary strike group, naval aviation assets, an agile combat employment (ACE) group from PACAF and an Army multi-domain task force.<sup>9</sup> The expeditionary strike group would consist of an amphibious assault ship (LHA), an amphibious transport ship (LPD), two guided-missile destroyers, a guided-missile cruiser, an attack submarine, and two supply ships. The Marine element included a HIMARs battery, an infantry company, two platoons of LAVs, and additional ground support assets alongside F-35s, light attack aircraft, and MV-22s. There would also be a naval aviation detachment with patrol aircraft (P-8s), unmanned surveillance aircraft (MQ-4C Triton), and tactical airborne early-warning (E-2). The ACE would consist of F-22s, B-1 bombers, global hawks, and a mix of refuelers and airborne early-warning, and command and control platforms (E-3s) operating out of Guam and Australia. JTF-77 would also have an Army multi-domain task force that consisted of air defense artillery (one x patriot battery), long-range precision fires (one x MLRS battery), a Stryker company with additional electronic attack assets,

the LCG and develop viable military options for de-escalating the crisis and defending U.S. treaty commitments.

While the strike group was sailing toward the crisis, power went out at an airport on a key island in the Philippines and a series of cyberattacks disrupted local communications. There were initial reports that a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) airborne element seized the airfield. U.S. and allied special operations elements on the island reported interdicting Chinese special operations forces surveying beach landing sites. Social media reported Chinese military vehicles operating in the vicinity. Intelligence reports indicated there were at least three amphibious ships (Type 71s) full of Chinese Marines heading toward the island along with a large surface action group including destroyers and frigates likely to link up with airborne forces at the airfield.<sup>11</sup> China had not declared war. Media outlets linked to the Chinese Communist Party reported that “sympathetic elements” were conducting a non-combatant evacuation operation to save Chinese tourists.

Wiggin’s J2 briefed him abroad the LHA. There was no change to Chinese nuclear posture and their road mobile missiles and subs remained at low-alert levels. Intelligence reports indicated

this posture was signaling a desire to avoid nuclear escalation. Diplomats from intermediary nations confirmed this posture saying China did not seek a “strategic war” against the United States. Chinese forces were not attacking space-based assets and there was no change in the posture of facilities associated with counter-space activity, a move that surprised many U.S. observers.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, there were indications and warnings of strategic mobilization activities indicative of a possible large-scale conventional attack against Taiwan and naval and air actions against Japan continued at an accelerated pace. Global stock markets plunged, and the price of gold skyrocketed.

On a secure line, ADM Wiggins brought LtGen Wiggin up-to-date on the larger strategic situation. During a National Security Council meeting, the U.S. President requested viable military options for countering Chinese aggression that demonstrated U.S. capability and resolve, reassured treaty partners in the region, and avoided nuclear escalation. Following the meeting, the Secretary of Defense contacted ADM Corbett. In consultation with the Joint Chiefs, they determined that countering the Chinese through conventional operations targeting Chinese forces involved with seizing the Filipino airfield was the only viable military option to manage vertical and horizontal escalation risk. They stressed that the operation must involve limited military objectives that did not signal a threat against mainland China and avoided striking dual-use nuclear facilities.

The INDOPACOM Commander worked with his planners and adapted portions of a key contingency plan. The plan called for using flexible response options—with an emphasis on diplomacy to build a counter-China coalition and apply economic pressure while conducting a limited military operation to demonstrate capability and resolve and signal the risk of further conventional military escalation.<sup>13</sup> With multiple carrier strike groups and larger portions of the U.S. Air Force tied up with separate plans to defend Japan and Taiwan, the task fell on JTF-77. The inside force was going to war.

INDOPACOM ordered JTF-77 to support Filipino forces clearing the island of Chinese military forces. The purpose was to ensure that Chinese forces did not use the island as a lodgment to threaten key sea lines of communication and other islands in the Philippines, that the conflict was contained, and China had crisis off-ramp options while U.S. treaty commitments were upheld. INDOPACOM ordered JTF-77 to seize the airfield in order to establish a secure lodgment for follow-on forces; and establish sea control at least 100 km west of the island in order to secure sea lines of communication in the area.

JTF-77 planned to keep the expeditionary strike group at a distance until it established local air superiority. Planners envisioned using a combination of tomahawk land-attack missiles and joint air-to-surface standoff missile attacks by B-1 bombers against reclaimed island installations to lower Chinese aircraft sortie generation and the PLA's ability to control the South China Sea as well as project power into the Sulu Sea. Once these conditions were set, the expeditionary strike group would link up with the littoral combat group and conduct an amphibious assault to seize the airfield. Expeditionary advanced bases already set up by the littoral combat group would provide additional forward air refueling points for aircraft and strike sites for HIMARS platoons to support ground forces assaulting the airfield and establishing blocking positions to prevent Chinese amphibious forces from reaching the base.<sup>14</sup> These fire assets would link up with unmanned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms operating from the expeditionary advanced bases to attack Chinese surface connectors and initial troop concentrations on the beach.

After reviewing the initial plan, Wiggins walked around the tight headquarters assembled on the ship and finalized a video teleconference with the larger staff section operating remotely. He told his team to get some rest so they would have a clear mind for the days to come. Wiggins walked into his own quarters. As he went to sleep, his mind raced across the darkness. He thought

about the battles ahead of him. He saw flashes of staff officers shouting at computer screens distorted by the chaos of battle as icons fluctuated on and off the screen and human emotion collided with machine reporting. He heard layered whispers as the voices from old tomes on military history and theory he read across the years and his mentors debated what would happen and why. Once he was finally asleep, he dreamt.

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#### Notes

1. On patterns of South China Sea disputes, see the Council on Foreign Relations interactive Global Conflict Tracker, Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea, available at <https://www.cfr.org>.

2. On Chinese cyber operations targeting the Philippines, see Mark Manatan, "The Cyber Dimension of the South China Sea Clashes," *The Diplomat*, (August 2019), available at <https://thediplomat.com>; and Sean Lyngaas "Chinese-linked APT10 has been active in the Philippines, researchers say," *Cyberscoop*, (24 May 2019), available at <https://www.cyberscoop.com>. For an overview of cyber strategy, see Brandon Valeriano, Benjamin Jensen, and Ryan Maness, *Cyber Strategy: The Evolving Character of Power and Coercion*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

3. On Chinese surface action groups and evolving maritime concepts and capabilities, see Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

4. For an example of FMS programs, see Manual Mogato, "U.S. Raises Military Assistance to the Philippines," Reuters, (July 2013), available at <https://www.reuters.com>.

5. On Chinese economic coercion, see Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosenberg and Edoardo Saravalle, *China's Use of Coercive Economic Measures*, (Washington, DC: CNAS, June 2018), available at <https://www.cnas.org>.

6. On 5G, see Elsa Kania, *Securing Our 5G Future: The Competitive Challenge and Considerations for U.S. Policy*, (Washington, DC: CNAS, November 2019), available at <https://www.cnas.org>.

7. On the LCG concept, see Megan Eckstein, "Navy Tests 'Littoral Combat Group' Concept That Pairs DDG, LPD in South America Deployment," *USNI News*, (Annapolis, MD: January 2019), available at <https://news.usni.org>.

8. On the integration of HIMARs into sea control and sea denial, see Sydney Freeberg "Marines Seek Anti-Ship HIMARS: High Cost, Hard Mission," *Breaking Defense*, (November 2017), available at <https://breakingdefense.com>.

9. On the U.S. Air Force ACE concept, see Senior Airman Isaac Johnson, "Airmen Exercise Agile Combat Employment at Red Flag Alaska," *Pacific Air Forces*, (August 2019), available at <https://www.pacaf.af.mil>; and Amy McColough, "Ace in the Hole," *Air Force Magazine*, (March 2017), available at <https://www.airforcemag.com>.

10. On U.S. Army multi-domain task forces, see Sean Kimmons, "Army to Build Three Multi-Domain Task Forces Using Lessons from Pilot," Army News Service, (October 2019), available at <https://www.army.mil>.

11. On Chinese amphibious concepts and capabilities, see Peter Dutton and Ryan Martinson (editors), *China's Evolving Surface Fleet*, (Newport: U.S. Naval War College China Military Studies Number 14, 2017).

12. On Chinese space capabilities, see Kevin L. Pollpeter, Michael S. Chase, and Eric Heginbotham, *The Creation of the PLA Strategic Support Force and Its Implications for Chinese Military Space Operations*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017).

13. On flexible response options, see Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 5-0, Joint Planning*, (Arlington, VA: 2017). On the concept of competition, see Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning*, (Arlington, VA: 2018).

14. On EABs, see Art Corbett, *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations Handbook*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, 2018).

