



US Warships in the South China Sea: A Prelude to War?

By Mark Valencia / *Issue Briefings* 14 / 2016

As the US Navy increases its presence in the South China Sea in an attempt to maintain US primacy in Asia, it risks provoking a military clash with China. If regional stability is to be maintained, the US will need to rethink its strategy and seek a compromise.

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The South China Sea political situation has taken a decided turn for the worse. In early March the United States upped the ante in its contest of wills with China by deploying an aircraft carrier strike group to the South China Sea. The carrier *John C. Stennis* was joined in the region by the cruisers *Antietam* and *Mobile Bay*, and the destroyers *Chung-Hoon* and *Stockdale*. The command ship *Blue Ridge*, the floating headquarters of the Japan-based 7th Fleet, was also in the area, *en route* to a port visit in the Philippines. The *Stennis* deployed from Washington State on 15 January. This came on the heels of a warning from US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter that “China must not pursue militarization in the South China Sea.”

“Specific actions will have specific consequences,” Carter added in a March 1 speech at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco.

The strike group was preceded by US freedom of navigation operations using guided missile destroyers and overflights of the sea by US B-52 bombers. Beginning in April the US Pacific Command launched a series of patrols by A-10 Thunderbolt warplanes and Sikorsky HH-60

combat helicopters in international airspace near Scarborough Shoal. The use of American ground-attack aircraft and special forces helicopters could be interpreted as a threat, emphasizing Washington’s ability to mount operations against Chinese-claimed and occupied islets. Then on May 10, the guided missile destroyer USS *William P. Lawrence* sailed within 12 miles of disputed Fiery Cross Reef where the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has built an airstrip—prompting Beijing to scramble fighter jets and dispatch warships to monitor and warn off the US ship.

Such shows of force near a rival’s claimed territory invites a response and increases the risk of a military clash that could spin out of control. Indeed, this projection of one of the most prominent symbols of American power changes the nature and prognosis of the game. The situation has now reached a critical level that cannot be ignored. How did it get to this point and how can the two avoid or postpone the seemingly inevitable clash—or does the United States even want to do so?



The strategic context is important. The US rebalancing to Asia has come face-to-face with China's desire to control its near-shore waters. Indeed the two have converging strategic trajectories. Domination of control, communications, computer and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems (C4 ISR) in and over China's near shore waters is critical for both. Indeed, this is where their national security interests collide. This collision has produced a series of international incidents in which China has challenged US ISR vessels and aircraft like the EP-3 (2001), the *Impeccable* (2009), the *Cowpens* (2013) and another EP-3 in May, 2016.

Competing Goals

Politically, the United States and China also have competing goals. Simply put, the United States is unwilling to yield sufficient political or military space to satisfy China's ambitions. Apparently this fundamental dialectic cannot be changed. Moreover, the recent US show of force indicates that the US-China relationship, particularly the military relationship, is rapidly headed south. This is despite denials and upbeat rhetoric about routine operations, increased US Navy port visits to China, and cooperative bilateral agreements on at-sea communications and activities. Not only does China's leadership see through this smokescreen, but most observers do as well.

Fundamental Differences

The basic problem is that China is not behaving according to the US script. It has not ceased its assertive actions to back up its extraordinary

claims in the South China Sea, which include island building or expansion and their militarization. Indeed, it has undertaken massive reclamation activities and, in the view of Pacific Command's Admiral Harry Harris, militarized the South China Sea and thus changed the operational nature of the area.

"You would have to believe in a flat Earth to think otherwise," said Harris. This is not the Cuban Missile Crisis redux, however. China's actions in the South China Sea are not an existential threat to the United States, or even to the other claimants there. Is it really worth going to war over?

Bellicose nationalists in both countries, like US Senator John McCain and People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Fan Changlong think so, and they have called for tougher actions by their respective countries, forcing their by their respective governments into a corner.

Specifically, some US officials and many politicians and analysts say America should stand up to the PRC regarding its reclamation, militarization, and imposition of navigational restrictions around features there. But the real US angst is China's defiance of US preferences, warnings, and threats, and now even its show of force.

It is generally understood that China's government controls its media and strongly influences the opinion of its representatives as well as its pundits and academics. But what is the excuse for the US press and its analysts and academics operating in a free society? With a few notable exceptions they have been beating a drum for war. According to them, China is trying to



change the international rules, threatening freedom of navigation, bullying its rival claimants, militarizing the features it occupies, undertaking massive reclamation activities that damage the environment, and in general behaving badly.

Alternative Perceptions

This is mostly hyperbole. It is an unfair singling out of China or a critique of what China might, or could, do. Indeed this narrative is largely nonsense. In a conflict, the installations would be neutralized in a heartbeat. Other SCS claimants have militarized the features they occupy and damaged their environment. China's activities may be massive, but so is China, and therefore its capacity. Small countries always accuse their big-power opponents of bullying, including frequently the United States.

Moreover, China has never threatened international maritime commerce. As for violating the existing international rules, the United States has not ratified the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea which stipulates many of the rules in question. So its critique of China in this regard rings hollow. Some of the rules pertaining to military activities at sea are controversial and in flux. Indeed, there are few hard and fast relevant international rules that all nations agree on.

Ironically, China is essentially behaving and doing as the United States did in the last century; attempting to control its near shore waters and carve out a sphere of influence—like the United States did in the Caribbean and Central and South America.

The latest flap was stimulated by political pundits worried about China's placement of surface-to-air missiles and jet fighters on Woody Island in the Paracel Islands. This group is claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and has been occupied by China since it took them by force from Vietnam in 1974, at which time there was no protest regarding this shift in sovereignty coming from the United States.

While China is trying to extend control of what it views as its own backyard, the United States, in apparent response, is projecting power half way around the world. And now we have the spectacle of the commander of the world's most powerful Navy—US PACOM Admiral Harry Harris—publicly pronouncing on US strategy just before a critical visit of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Washington.

“China seeks hegemony in east Asia,” according to Harris. Not only did such a statement from a serving military officer come close to usurping the president's prerogative to make and pronounce on broad strategy, it certainly got the attention of China's leadership.

The nationalist *Global Times* called it China bashing. Compounding the issue, the White House did not disavow the statement. Perhaps China's leadership assumes this is US President Barack Obama's position.

Moreover, the admiral has now proposed a revival of a strategic coalition of the navies of Japan, Australia, India, and the United States in what would be a thinly veiled operational alliance against China—or at least it would be perceived as such by China.

Standing ground



As Australian analyst Hugh White has cogently argued, US strategy in the South China Sea is failing. The United States assumes that it can increase pressure on China with relative impunity until China blinks and backs off. China has so far not been cowed by US diplomatic and military warnings and shows of force and instead seems to be signaling by its statements and actions that it will risk a military confrontation to defend its position there.

The US carrier strike force returned to the South China Sea in mid-April to participate in joint US-Philippine exercises. Its presence undoubtedly sent a message that will resonate within PLA leadership and influence its thinking. Indeed, in a tit-for-tat reaction, China denied a request for the *Stennis* battle group to make a routine port call in Hong Kong, the first such denial in a decade.

Like the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, China is unlikely to forget or forgive. Indeed, this show of force will likely give rise to a new defensive strategy. China's new 7.6 percent military budget increase—while less generous than last year—is

still sufficient to enhance its control of near shore waters.

The US conundrum is how to avoid a US-China confrontation and maintain US primacy in Asia, but it cannot have its cake and eat it too. A mutual face-saving compromise is needed. Conceptually, the United States has to accept and accommodate a major role for China in Asian security. In return, China has to do the same regarding a continuing US role and military presence in the region. In practical terms, the United States should put less emphasis on the military dimension of its rebalance to Asia.

As a corollary, the US should diminish or cease its provocative, close-in surveillance of China. China should, in turn, not further overtly militarize the Spratly features, and more importantly not declare an air defense identification zone over them. Whatever the compromise, the United States should rethink its self-image as well as the limits of its power, and reformulate its strategy—and the sooner the better.

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