

Are China-US Relations Entering Dangerous New Phase In South China Sea? - OpEd



Lightning behind an aircraft carrier in the Strait of Malacca. Credit: pxhere.com

Most analysts agree that China and the U.S. are locked in a seminal long-term struggle for dominance in Asia. With the military of both sides engaging in nearly simultaneous shows of force in the South China Sea and sensationalist headlines blaring alarm around the world a casual observer could be forgiven for thinking the “strategic competitors” are on the verge of war. <http://www.news.com.au/military/beijing-launches-enormous-south-china-sea-livefire-exercise-as-three-us-carrier-battle-groups-pass-by/news-story/bb837b51545c2370283257d415046b92>; <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/2141169/us-aircraft-carrier-sails-disputed-south-china-sea-display-military-might>

This is not so - not yet anyway. But a new and more dangerous phase in their troubled relationship may be beginning and one window on this evolving dynamic

is their behavior in the South China Sea.

Now that US President Donald J. Trump's administration has declared China "a strategic

competitor"

<https://www.ft.com/content/215cf8fa-e3cb-11e7-8b99-0191e45377ec> and China President Xi Jinping has assumed total long term power and is promoting a more nationalist Communist agenda, the two powers are increasingly likely to come face to face politically and militarily in the South China Sea or at other 'hot spots' in the region. China scholar and government advisor Shi Yinhong has postulated four scenarios for the future of China-US relations. "First, China undertakes a historic contraction, thus averting a clash. Second, the U.S. and China gain equal power in the Pacific, and Washington recognizes Beijing's strategic advantage in the western area. Third, the two sides enter a cold war or quasi cold war. Fourth, they engage in direct confrontation." <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2069520/trump-era-we-cant-rule-out-war-between-china-and-us-whether>

The situation seems to be entering Shi's third scenario -in which the two competitors "enter a cold war or quasi-cold war" -and could well- in the South China Sea (or in the even more fraught East China Sea or Taiwan issues), -proceed to the fourth—"direct confrontation". While the U.S. and China seem to have reached an uneasy and unsteady *status quo* in the South China Sea <https://ipreview.com/index.php/Blog/single/id/688.html> some see this as a proverbial calm before the storm.

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For many years the two have shadow boxed in, over and under that Sea. Despite numerous US warnings, China has continued its construction and "militarization" of disputed features and apparently maintains and even, occasionally enforces its historic claim to a large part of the Sea, its features and resources. China has been altering the *status quo* in steps just small enough to avoid provoking a

military response from the U.S. It has deftly used coast guard vessels, lawfare, and economic coercion to advance and back up its claims vis a vis other claimants including US ally, the Philippines. According to Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, former senior Asian officials responsible for Asia policy in the Obama administration, “Washington is at risk of adopting an approach (to Asia) that is confrontational without being competitive. Beijing, meanwhile, has managed to be increasingly competitive without being confrontational.”

<http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/american-policy-toward-china-due-reckoning>

This -and the *status quo* -may be about to undergo more rapid change—for the worse. China has now installed missile systems with ‘offensive’ reach on three of its occupied features and the White House has declared that there would be “near-term and long-term consequences” for doing so. [https://www.cnbc.com/video/2018/05/03/white-house-says-china-faces-consequences-](https://www.cnbc.com/video/2018/05/03/white-house-says-china-faces-consequences-for-)

[for-](#)

[militarization-of-south-china-sea.html; https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchina-sea-china-missiles-usa/white-house-says-will-be-consequences-for-china-militarizing-south-china-sea-idUSKBN1I42FY?il=0](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchina-sea-china-missiles-usa/white-house-says-will-be-consequences-for-china-militarizing-south-china-sea-idUSKBN1I42FY?il=0)

However, one can debate what constitutes offensive and defensive weapons or military posture. For example, are US ‘forward deployed forces’ in Asia and the South China Sea, its FONOPs, and its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance probes all purely ‘defensive’? Or do some have ‘offensive reach’—or can they be interpreted as having such by objective observers?

Meanwhile, the U.S. continues to push the limits of China’s tolerance with Freedom of Navigation Operations that publicly challenge China’s “illegitimate” maritime claims. Moreover, despite China’s strong objections, it continues its ISR probes over, in and under China’s near shore waters. Such probes and China’s kinetic responses thereto have resulted in a series of international incidents beginning with one involving an EP-3 (2001), and followed by those involving the Bowditch (2001), the Impeccable (2009), the Cowpens (2013) and Poseidon 8 (20014). Continuing these probes -or at least the particular actions China strenuously objects to -invites miscalculations and accidents.

The two have very different political narratives. According to Chris Buckley, writing in the *New York Times*, Xi has encouraged a rejection of Western influence and implicitly of Western models. According to Xi thought, 'many aspects of China's modernization process must have Chinese characteristics and the Chinese Communist Party must provide guidance on every aspect of human behavior'.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/world/asia/xi-jinping-thought-explained-a-new-ideology-for-a-new-era.html>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/20/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-helmsman-congress.html>

This is of course anathema to those who strongly believe in the superiority of Western values like the United States, especially under American hype-nationalist US President Donald J. Trump. The Trump administration, with new National Security Advisor John Bolton, is likely to strengthen its military ties with Taiwan back Japan's new muscular posture in the East China Sea, and be more aggressive militarily in the South China Sea. With a looming economic 'war' further tightening tension doing so may cross a red line for China.

There are many scenarios that could beckon the apocalyptic red horse of war. According to David C. Gompert former Deputy Director of the CIA, "Tensions exist between the United States and China on a number of issues," _ _ "and a crisis could occur and involve incidents or miscalculations that lead to hostilities. For example, China could try to intimidate its neighbors below the threshold of U.S. intervention and misjudge where that threshold is, or underestimate U.S. willingness to back Japan militarily in a crisis over disputed territory in the East China Sea." <https://www.wearethemighty.com/china-us-war-what-happens>. I would add to these worst scenarios a miscalculated confrontation in the South China Sea.

On 6 April, *news.Com.au* reported that "forty Chinese warships and three American aircraft carrier battle groups converge[d] in the South China Seas as dangerous tensions between the super powers simmer." The nearly simultaneous timing of these displays of force may have been completely coincidental but their messages were clear. Both have the intent and capability to use force if necessary to protect their interests in the South China Sea.

These exercises were followed by Chinese naval live-fire exercises close to China's coast opposite Taiwan and a foray of Chinese bombers east of Taiwan that theoretically could have threatened Guam. In what Taiwan has described as military intimidation, a Chinese air force sortie circumnavigated Taiwan. In what some say was a clear response, two US B-52H Stratofortress bombers flew over the Bashi Channel and within cruise missile striking distance of China. The B-52s are deployed to Guam are part of a 'continuous bomber presence mission' meant to reassure allies and display strength against potential adversaries- like China.

Both China and the U.S. have clearly stepped up their planning and exercises focused on potential military conflict in the Western Pacific. The US military has announced it will continue its contingency planning for a conflict with China. Admiral Philip Davidson, Trump's nominee to be the new US Pacific Forces Commander testified to Congress that he will "maintain a robust blunt layer that effectively deters Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific." To him, the Chinese military buildup is a "threat to US forces and bases (that is) substantial and growing."

<http://www.atimes.com/article/us-admiral-outlines-new-military-buildup-to-counter-china/> The enhanced US military posture in the Western Pacific is likely to include more submarines and warships as well as another aircraft carrier strike group and advanced warplanes and drones. Davidson would also like to have "hypersonic and directed energy weapons [and] resilient space, cyber and network capabilities _ _." His policy and wish list reflect President Trump and Defense Secretary James Mattis' desire to make confronting Chinese aggressiveness a strategic priority.

Meanwhile China's burgeoning military modernization continues. China is no match for the U.S. militarily on a global scale. Nevertheless it is making rapid progress particularly in military technology and already would pose a formidable challenge in a conflict in its near shore waters especially in the South China Sea.

The stage does seem to be set for a US-China confrontation in the South China Sea. Hopefully wise minds on both sides will recognize the disaster this would be for both—and for Asia—and will be able to find compromises for their differences.

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