

U.S.-China Conflict: From War Of Words To Talk Of War

Part I

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Relations between the U.S. and China have been steadily deteriorating since the beginning of the year when Washington confirmed the completion of a \$6.4 billion arms deal with Taiwan and China suspended military-to-military ties with the U.S. in response.

In January the Chinese Defense Ministry announced the cessation of military exchanges between the two countries and the Foreign Ministry warned of enforcing sanctions against American companies involved with weapons sales to Taiwan.

The Washington Post reported afterward that during a two-day Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing this May attended by approximately 65 U.S. officials, Rear Admiral Guan Youfei of the People's Liberation Army accused Washington of "plotting to encircle China with strategic alliances" and said arms deals with Taiwan "prove that the United States views China as an enemy." [1]

During the 9th Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue conference) in Singapore in early June a rancorous exchange occurred between U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Major General Zhu Chenghu, director of China's National Defense University. The Chinese official lambasted the U.S. over more than \$12 billion in proposed arms transactions with Taiwan in the past two years, stating they were designed to prevent the reunification of China.

The preceding week China had rebuffed Gates' request to visit Beijing after the Singapore summit.

At that conference Gates spoke of "our collective responsibility to protect the peace and reinforce stability in Asia" in reference to the sinking of the South Korean corvette the Cheonan in late March.

Major General Zhu reacted by casting doubts on the U.S. account of the ship's sinking and indicated that "America's stance over the Cheonan was hypocritical given its failure to condemn the Israeli commando raid on a flotilla of ships carrying supplies to Gaza on May 31, which resulted in the death of nine activists." He also warned that the latest Taiwan arms package threatened China's "core interests." [2]

At the same event, General Ma Xiaotian, deputy head of the People's Liberation Army General Staff Department, itemized obstacles to the resumption of U.S.-China military relations, including Washington providing weapons to Taiwan and "frequent espionage

activities by US ships and aircraft in the waters and airspace of China's exclusive economic zones." [3]

Matters went from bad to worse after Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited South Korea in late July, accompanied by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen and Admiral Robert Willard, commander of U.S. Pacific Command, and on July 20 Gates, Mullen and Willard announced the U.S. would conduct a series of war games with South Korea in the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan.

The first such exercise, the four-day Invincible Spirit naval maneuvers, started on July 25 and was led by the USS George Washington Carrier Strike Group, named after the 97,000-ton nuclear-powered supercarrier at its core, and involved 8,000 military personnel, 20 warships and 200 warplanes, including F-22 Raptor fifth generation stealth fighters, deployed to the region for the first time. Shifted from the Yellow Sea, which borders the Chinese mainland, to the Sea of Japan (on which Russia has a coastline) at the last moment, the drills nevertheless antagonized China and were transparently intended to produce that effect.

While in South Korea five days before the naval exercises began, Admiral Willard – head of the largest U.S. overseas military command, Pacific Command – announced that future war games of comparable scope would be held in the Yellow Sea, where China has an extensive coastline and claims a 200-mile exclusive economic zone. (For a map of the Yellow Sea, see: <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/yellowsea.htm>)

Joining a chorus of major U.S. military and civilian officials making statements that could only be intended to taunt China, "Willard said he is not concerned about China's feeling about U.S.-South Korean naval exercises in that area."

In his own words, "If I have a concern vis-a-vis China it's that China exert itself to influence Pyongyang to see that incidents like Cheonan don't occur in the future." [4]

His comment is entirely in line with others issued before and afterward.

During the Group of 20 (G20) summit in Toronto on June 27 U.S. President Barack Obama held a "blunt" conversation with Chinese President Hu Jintao and accused him of "willful blindness" in relation to the Cheonan incident. [5]

In mid-July Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell dismissed and belittled China's concerns over not only large-scale but ongoing U.S. naval exercises on both sides of the Korean Peninsula by stating, "Those determinations are made by us, and us alone....Where we exercise, when we exercise, with whom and how, using what assets and so forth, are determinations that are made by the United States Navy, by the Department of Defense, by the United States government." [6] On August 6 Morrell confirmed that U.S. warships will lead exercises in the Yellow Sea in the near future.

Shortly afterward, while preparing to leave for South Korea, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mullen said, "the Yellow Sea specifically is an international body of water and the United States, you know, always reserves the right to operate in those international waters. That's what those are. Certainly, you know, I hear what the Chinese are saying with respect to that, but in fact we've exercised in the Yellow Sea for a long time and I fully expect that we'll do so in the future." [7]

On July 21 Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, who had recently returned from visits to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and Japan, spoke at the Nixon Center in Washington, D.C., and in addition to speaking of “our traditional alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines,” stated:

“I think the most important [problem with bilateral relations] is the continued unwillingness of China to deepen the mil-to-mil engagement between the United States and China.

“At the same time, so that there is no mistake about our intentions, we made clear that we will exercise when and where we want to when we need to consistent with international law. And that, as I’ve said, we’ve clearly indicated in the past. We’ve exercised in the Yellow Sea. We will exercise in the Yellow Sea again.”

To rub the salt deeper into the wound, he added: “We do not consult with China on Taiwan arms sales. We make a judgment based on what we believe are the legitimate defensive needs of Taiwan for arms sales.” [8]

While in South Korea last month for the first “two plus two” meetings between the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense and South Korean counterparts “to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Korean War,” [9] Hillary Clinton and Pentagon chief Robert Gates visited the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea, still technically at war, to “show solidarity with their allies in Seoul.” [10]

The following day Clinton arrived in the capital of Vietnam for the 17th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum and a U.S.-ASEAN post-ministerial meeting on July 23 and 22, respectively. While in Hanoi she spoke of territorial disputes over the Spratly and Paracel island chains between China on one hand and Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines (the last four members of ASEAN) on the other.

On July 23, in a blunt reference to China, she said that the U.S. “has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea,” where the islands are located, and that “We oppose the use or threat of force by any claimant,” as “America’s future is intimately tied to that of the Asia-Pacific.” [11]

Clinton formally initiated a campaign to recruit the ten members of ASEAN – Vietnam, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – into a rapidly evolving Asian NATO aimed against China.

After seven months of unrelenting challenges to China, when it appeared that enough gratuitous insults and mounting threats had already been issued, the USS George Washington aircraft carrier arrived in the Sea of Japan on July 25.

Three years before, the U.S. Defense Department released a report on China which claimed it was “pursuing long-term, comprehensive transformation of its military forces to enable it to project power and deny other countries the ability to threaten it.” [12]

Proceeding from that perspective, Washington is ensuring that China will be so thoroughly boxed in by U.S. warships, submarines, interceptor missile systems and advanced deep penetrating stealth bombers – and a ring of U.S. military client states ready to host American ships, planes, troops, missile shield installations and bases – that it indeed will not

be able to protect itself from the threat of attack.

Eleven days after the completion of the U.S.-South Korean naval exercises in the Sea of Japan, the U.S. Seventh Fleet began a weeklong series of naval maneuvers with Vietnam, the first-ever such joint exercises.

USS George Washington, fresh from the recently concluded naval war games with South Korea, arrived in the South China Sea for the occasion.

“The formidable USS George Washington is a permanent presence in the Pacific, based in Japan. As one of the world’s biggest warships, it is a floating city that can carry up to 70 aircraft, more than 5,000 sailors and aviators and about 4 million pounds (1.8 million kilograms) of bombs. It lurked Sunday [August 8] about 200 miles (320 kilometers) off the central coast of Danang, Vietnam’s jumping-off point for the disputed [Spratly and Paracel] islands.”

Captain Ross Myers, commander of the George Washington’s air wing, was quoted echoing Clinton’s earlier assertion that “The strategic implications and importance of the waters of the South China Sea and the freedom of navigation is vital to both Vietnam and the United States.” He was interviewed “as fighter jets thundered off the flight deck above.” [13]

Several high-ranking Vietnamese military and civilian officials as well as the U.S. ambassador to the country were flown onto the supercarrier “to observe the strike group as it operates in the South China Sea,” [14] near the contested Spratly islands.

With senior Vietnamese government and military officials aboard, USS George Washington “cruised near the Paracel Islands – another chain claimed by both China and Vietnam.” [15]

On August 10 the guided missile destroyer USS John S. McCain docked at Da Nang in central Vietnam, in its first visit to the country, to join the joint naval maneuvers in the South China Sea.

Rear Admiral Ron Horton, commander of Task Force 73 of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, said, “This is indicative of the increasingly closer ties between the U.S. and Vietnam. Exchanges like this are vital for our navies to gain a greater understanding of one another, and build important relationships for the future.” [16]

The U.S. Seventh Fleet is “the largest of the forward-deployed U.S. fleets, with 50–60 ships, 350 aircraft and 60,000 Navy and Marine Corps personnel.” [17] That is, the mightiest seaborne military machine in the world.

As the U.S.-Vietnamese naval exercises were underway in the South China Sea, an article by a former commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet (assigned to U.S. Pacific Command), Retired Admiral James Lyons, appeared in the editorial pages of the Washington Times which advocated that “The United States should consider leasing big-ticket military hardware to the Philippines to give it the capability to defend its sovereign territory against Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea....”

In particular, he said “the US should consider leasing a squadron of F-16 along with T-38 supersonic trainers, an aircraft for maritime patrol, and two FFG-7 guided-missile frigates to provide a recognized capability to enforce the Philippines’ offshore territorial claims.”

He also wrote that “now that President Barack Obama’s administration has directly challenged China, the US should expand its relations with ASEAN ‘by building on our Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines.’

“The US should negotiate a commercial agreement for access to logistic support facilities in Subic Bay,” [18] where the U.S. maintained a naval base until the Philippine Senate ordered it closed in 1991.

Washington’s project for an Asian NATO designed to surround and neutralize China is not limited to Southeast Asia and ASEAN.

The U.S. is currently leading this year’s Khaan Quest (pronounced like conquest) military exercises in Mongolia on China’s northern border with troops from military partners Canada, France, Germany, India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore. Previous Khaan Quest exercises going back to 2003 trained Mongolian troops for deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan. [19]

On August 16 U.S. and British troops will begin ten days of military drills in Kazakhstan, on China’s northwest border, in the 2010 Steppe Eagle “multinational exercise, part of NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme....”

“The exercise is intended to assist Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Defence in its stated aim to generate a NATO inter-operable peace support operational capability,” according to British military attache Simon Fitzgibbon. [20] Kazakhstan deployed a “peacekeeping” contingent to Iraq in 2003 and may be tapped for one to serve under NATO in Afghanistan.

To China’s south, a senior Indian Air Force official recently disclosed that his government is upgrading another air base near the Chinese border to accommodate warplanes. According to the U.S. Defense News website, “The moves are part of the effort to strengthen India’s defenses against China.”

In June India approved a \$3.3 billion deal to purchase 42 more Su-30 air-to-air and air-to-surface jet fighters, bringing the planned total to 272 by 2018.

Regarding a joint Russian-Indian long-range multirole jet fighter/strike fighter adaptation of the Su-30, the same Indian official said “a nuclear-armed Su-30MKI could fly deep inside China with midair refueling.” [21]

On China’s Western flank where a narrow strip of land connects the two countries, the U.S. Defense Department announced on August 11 that, in addition to 30,000 U.S. forces not so assigned, “The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan now has almost 120,000 troops from 47 different countries assigned to it,” [22] including forces from Asia-Pacific nations South Korea, Mongolia, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand.

The noose is tightening around China and the nation’s military knows it.

Notes

- 1) Washington Post, June 8, 2010
- 2) Jamestown Foundation, June 24, 2010
- 3) China Daily, June 7, 2010
- 4) United States Department of Defense, July 20, 2010
- 5) U.S. Risks Military Clash With China In Yellow Sea

Stop NATO, July 16, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/07/16/u-s-risks-military-clash-with-china-in-yellow-sea>

- 6) Agence France-Presse, July 14, 2010
- 7) Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 19, 2010
- 8) United States Department of State, July 27, 2010
- 9) U.S. Department of State, July 21, 2010
- 10) BBC News, July 21, 2010
- 11) Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State
July 23, 2010
- 12) Voice of America News, May 26, 2007
- 13) Associated Press, August 8, 2010
- 14) Navy NewsStand, August 9, 2010
- 15) Voice of America News, August 10, 2010
- 16) Navy NewsStand, August 9, 2010
- 17) Wikipedia
- 18) Philippine Star, August 10, 2010
- 19) Mongolia: Pentagon Trojan Horse Wedged Between China And Russia
Stop NATO, March 31, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/mongolia-pentagon-trojan-horse-wedged-between-china-and-russia>

- 20) Reuters, August 13, 2010
Kazakhstan: U.S., NATO Seek Military Outpost Between Russia And China
Stop NATO, April 14, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/04/15/kazakhstan-u-s-nato-seek-military-outpost-between-russia-and-china>

- 21) Defense News, August 12, 2010
- 22) United States Department of Defense, American Forces Press Service,
August 11, 2010

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