

U.S.-China Crisis: From “Gunboat Diplomacy” to Confrontation

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Global Research, August 18, 2010

[Stop NATO](#) 18 August 2010

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

On August 16 the U.S. and its South Korean military ally began this year’s Ulchi Freedom Guardian military exercises in South Korea. The ten-day warfighting drills involve 56,000 troops from the host country and 30,000 from the U.S. Last year’s version of the annual war games featured the same amount of South Korean soldiers but only a third as many American troops, 10,000. The commander in charge of the American forces, General Walter Sharp, described the current exercise as “one of the largest joint staff directed theater exercises in the world.” In all over 500,000 South Korean military and government participants are involved. [1]

Ulchi Freedom Guardian 2010 is the latest and largest in a series of almost uninterrupted war games and naval maneuvers conducted over the past five weeks in the region: The Korean Peninsula, the seas on either side of it, and the South China Sea.

Three of the four nations involved are regional actors: South Korea, China and Vietnam. The other is not: The United States.

Washington led the four-day Invincible Spirit joint war games with South Korea in the Sea of Japan off the east coast of the Korean Peninsula from July 25-28, which were highlighted by the participation of the almost 100,000-ton nuclear-powered supercarrier USS George Washington among 20 warships, 200 warplanes including F-22 Raptor stealth fighters, and 8,000 troops. A Chinese news agency said of the exercises that “they were no ordinary war games” but “were unprecedented in the past three decades both in terms of scale and weaponry. The resources involved were said to be enough for launching a full-scale war....”

“The US-South Korean war games were said to be aimed at preventing a repeat of incidents like the sinking of South Korea’s Cheonan warship and maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula. However, the war games were more than enough to intimidate the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea....They were actually a show of force against China....” [2]

After their completion, the South Korean government announced that the U.S. and Seoul will conduct “a joint military exercise every month until the end of the year.” [3]

The Nimitz class aircraft carrier George Washington returned to its base in Japan only to head to the South China Sea eleven days later to engage with another major U.S. warship in the first-ever joint naval exercises with Vietnam in the neighborhood of the Spratly and Paracel islands. The docking of the USS John S. McCain destroyer in a Vietnamese harbor and the “lurking” of USS George Washington in the South China Sea near the two island chains were both unprecedented events.

The maneuvers were an open challenge to and clear act of defiance toward China, following by two weeks U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's announcement in the Vietnamese capital that the U.S. was prepared to intervene in territorial disputes over the above-mentioned islands on behalf of claimants Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei, the Philippines and Malaysia against China.

Two days before throwing down the gauntlet to Beijing, Clinton and Robert Gates, Admiral Michael Mullen, and Admiral Robert Willard – the last three America's top defense official, top military commander and chief of its largest overseas combat command, U.S. Pacific Command – were in South Korea to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War. The conflict whose start they marked soon escalated into the U.S.'s first war with China, a point hard to miss in the current context.

While in South Korea, Gates, Mullen and Willard confirmed plans for regular U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises, including in the Yellow Sea off the west coast of the Korean Peninsula. The bulk of the sea's coastline is Chinese territory.

The four-day U.S.-South Korean naval exercises late last month were initially to have been conducted in the Yellow Sea, but were moved to the other end of the Koreas, the Sea of Japan, because of Chinese objections.

If the ongoing Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise is an annual event and one scheduled well in advance, the U.S.-led naval exercises off Korean and Vietnamese shores were not. And if the Invincible Spirit war games were announced as strictly targeted at North Korea, joint maneuvers with Vietnam in the South China Sea had nothing to do with the March 26 sinking of the South Korean Cheonan warship.

The past month has witnessed an unbroken succession of military activities near and off China's coasts; some scheduled, some hastily arranged; some routine, some extraordinary; some conducted by one or another regional state, several under the lead of the U.S.

To place matters in perspective, on March 4 the Chinese government announced a \$78 billion defense budget for 2010 with the lowest annual growth rate – 7.5% – since 1989, half that of recent years. According to a New York Times report on the topic and on the date in question, "China's military spending is still dwarfed by that of the United States, which has about \$719 billion in outlays this year for national defense." [4] Assuming the accuracy of the above figures, U.S. military spending per capita this year will be almost forty times that of China, \$2,330 to \$60.

The U.S. has eleven aircraft carriers, ten of them nuclear-powered supercarriers, and eleven carrier strike groups. China has no aircraft carriers. Unlike the U.S., China is not building a global interceptor missile system with land, sea, air, and space components nor is it developing an equivalent of the Pentagon's Prompt Global Strike project to strike any spot on earth within minutes.

China has not been guilty of military aggression against another nation since 1979, when it attacked northern Vietnam (with Washington's blessing).

In anticipation of the deployment of USS George Washington to what at the time what thought to be the Yellow Sea, China's People's Liberation Army held a military supply exercises in that sea on July 17 and 18. Codenamed Warfare 2010, drills were held "amid

reported tension over a scheduled joint exercise between the United States and Republic of Korea (ROK) navies.” [5]

The exercises were held “deep in the Yellow Sea” [6] and “aimed at improving defense capabilities against long-distance attacks.”

“Four helicopters and four rescue vessels were deployed for the exercise....Tanks were also loaded onto vessels at a port in Yantai, Shandong province....Similarly, rail[s] transported tanks to ships and other military equipment was transferred to vessels....The exercise focused on transporting military supplies for future joint battles....The drill came at a sensitive time with Washington and Seoul scheduled to hold a joint military exercise in the Yellow Sea.” [7]

As the U.S.-South Korean naval, air and anti-submarine exercises began on July 25, China’s navy (People’s Liberation Army Navy: PLAN) “conducted a large-scale, live-ammunition exercise in the South China Sea,” days before the arrival of USS John S. McCain and USS George Washington in the sea. They were supervised by Chen Bingde, commanding general of the People’s Liberation Army General Staff Department.

“Main battleships, submarines and combat aircraft from the PLAN’s three fleets took part in the drill, believed to be the largest naval maneuver since 1950 when the PLAN was formally formed....State media say China’s military forces this week conducted the largest exercise of its kind since the founding of the military, known as the People’s Liberation Army. The official Xinhua news agency reports numerous warships, submarines, and combat aircraft took part in live fire exercises held Monday [July 26] in the South China Sea.” [8]

On August 3 China launched major air defense exercises which included 12,000 troops and 100 aircraft. China’s five-day exercise, called Vanguard 2010, took place “over the central province of Henan and the eastern coastal province of Shandong, which borders the Yellow Sea.” [9] The maneuvers also involved air defence missiles and artillery units.

Two days later South Korea began its largest-ever anti-submarine drills in the Yellow Sea with several thousand military personnel, 29 ships and 50 aircraft. Marines based on islands close to the border with North Korea conducted live-fire exercises during the five-day event.

A report at the time provided details: “The military practiced sinking enemy submarines, and responding to coastal artillery fire. It also conducted a drill to deal with North Korean commandos....Some 4,500 people from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and maritime police are taking part in the exercise. The military has mobilized nearly 30 naval vessels, including the 14,000-ton amphibious landing ship Dokdo, 4,500-ton KDX-II class destroyers, and about 50 aircraft, including KF-16 fighter jets.” [10]

No sensible observer can believe that all of the above developments – moves and countermeasures, drills and counter-drills – are actuated by the sinking of a South Korean corvette with the death of 46 sailors almost five months ago. The Chinese military establishment is not buying the argument.

In the last two and a half weeks articles have appeared in the Chinese press containing language that has not been heard in decades, perhaps in half a century. Warnings of military threats, appeals for caution and conciliation, fundamental reevaluations of U.S.-Chinese relations, pleas for de-escalation, and at times uncharacteristically harsh criticism

of U.S. motives and actions.

Toward the end of July General Ma Xiaotian, deputy chief of general staff of the People's Liberation Army, and Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang "spoke out against foreign warships entering, and military aircraft passing over, the Yellow Sea or any other offshore areas, because they pose a threat to China's security."

"China has to be alarmed when other powers display their military might near its territory. Will the US allow China to conduct military drills with neighboring countries in the Gulf of Mexico?"

"Geographically, the Yellow Sea is the door to the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, which has important security implications for the Bohai Sea Rim, an important economic zone in China," Xinhua pointed out. [11]

The same feature mentioned that USS George Washington has an operational range of 600 kilometers and the warplanes on its deck a speed of 1,000 kilometers an hour, leaving even the Chinese capital of Beijing vulnerable to attack.

To confirm Chinese apprehensions, on August 6 a U.S. armed forces publication disclosed "The USS George Washington will participate in a joint U.S.-South Korean military exercise in the Yellow Sea in the near future, despite China's opposition to the aircraft carrier operating near its eastern waters."

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell stated on August 5 that the nuclear-powered supercarrier will participate in war games in the Yellow Sea which will "include anti-submarine, show-of-force and bombing exercises." [12] The George Washington may join the recently commenced Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercises which continue to August 26.

Rear Admiral Yang Yi, former head of the Institute of Strategic Studies at the People's Liberation Army's National Defense University, said of the news that "China will definitely react harshly to the move. It's hard to predict its specific reaction, but that will for sure cast a shadow over Sino-U.S. military relations." [13]

An unsigned editorial in the Global Times of August 9 titled "Taking a stand on US provocation" reacted to the Pentagon's latest threat to dispatch the George Washington to the Yellow Sea.

"The words added to the already sizable distrust accumulated recently between China and the US. They also shattered the illusion of some Chinese over how the US treats China.

"In a short period of time, the Sino-US relationship has ebbed quickly and seems to be still in a downward trend.

"Various US politicians have expressed that the US does not see China as an enemy. However, words like these and recent actions by the US to contain China's growth suggest otherwise."

The piece continued in language one would be hard-pressed to recall reading since the early 1960s on the Chinese side, where for four decades Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski have been the most revered foreign political personalities:

“It seems as if the US is good at playing games. US politicians are sweet-mouthed but then stab you in the back when you are not looking.

“This year the US is testing China’s resolve over issues ranging from China’s offshore ocean sovereignty, to the Chinese yuan, to trade. Each time it seriously damages the mutual trust previously built.

“Sovereign unity and national resurgence are two missions China must accomplish.

“The biggest obstacle to fulfilling those missions comes from the US, especially from the Pentagon.” [14]

A feature of the same day in the ruling Communist Party’s People’s Daily also commented on the deployment of the U.S. supercarrier, reminding its readers that “The Pentagon reportedly said Thursday, August 5, that the U.S. aircraft carrier USS George Washington would participate in a series of United States-Republic of Korea (ROK) joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea. This series of U.S.-ROK military exercises includes anti-submarine maritime interdiction operations, bombing and special armed forces’ operations for a ‘show of strength.’”

After quoting the president after whom the aircraft carrier was named that his nation should strive to cultivate amity and justice toward all and peace and harmony among nations, the Chinese newspaper asked: “With a lapse of more than 200 years, what kind of strength is the aircraft carrier named after this great American statesman to show?” [15]

Also on August 9, a commentary by Major General Luo Yuan of the Academy of Military Sciences bearing the title “Chinese people won’t stand for US naval provocation,” was published which contained these excerpts:

“Just imagine whether the Chinese people will believe US President Barack Obama’s statement that ‘the US does not seek to contain China’ or US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s claim ‘we are in the same boat’ if a US aircraft carrier bursts into the Yellow Sea.”

Until recently “the US could pretend to not know the likely reaction, saying that its military exercise with South Korea was just over the Cheonan issue. Yet now, as the Chinese government has clearly shown grave concern over the US action, the US remains hard-set on going its own way. This is a deliberate provocation.”

The author, in what a Western newspaper called “a remarkably forthright view from such a senior military figure,” [16] also implied a reaction of a non-military nature: “Imagine what the consequence will be if China’s biggest debtor nation challenges its creditor nation....They should know that China’s rise is the general trend, and no weapons could resist it. China is the world’s largest market, so offending China means losing, or at least decreasing, market share.”

And he provided an example of the saying that turnabout is fair play: “Imagine how the US would feel if China showed the same ignorance of US interests and security as the US is doing now, and operated military exercises with US neighbors or competitors in its neighboring or sensitive regions.” [17]

Four days later another article by the same writer appeared in the People’s Daily under the title “US engaging in gunboat diplomacy.” As “the United States has insisted on sending

aircraft carriers to the Yellow Sea to provoke China," it is clear to the military strategist that "the foreign policy of the United States is still showing three features that have long been part of its global strategy."

The three components identified are hegemony, gunboat diplomacy and unilateralism.

Luo Yuan defined and gave examples of each:

Hegemony: "The philosophical foundation of the American hegemonic mindset is the deep-rooted 'manifest destiny' theory held by some Americans.

"According to the theory, the American nation is the most outstanding nation in the world. Its leadership in the world, which is bestowed by God, is undeniable. Therefore, Americans have the responsibility to handle world affairs and will appear wherever problems take place. Nevertheless, the results are usually the opposite - things become worse with the involvement of the United States....They believe that the American nation is the most excellent, so they must 'lead the world' and other nations have no choice but to follow them."

Unilateralism: "The philosophical foundation of American unilateralism is based on a zero-sum game and its basic principle is: what I obtain must be what others lose and vice versa, so what others obtain must be what I lose."

With an imaginary articulation of Washington's policy, the author wrote: "No matter how many people it involves, I am superior to all others, and I can do whatever I like. Everything must bend to American interests and will."

Gunboat diplomacy: "The best example of U.S. gunboat diplomacy is the Naval Operations Concept 2010 approved by the U.S. president in May of this year, which vividly described U.S. 'maritime interests.' According to the 2010 concept, U.S. naval forces will develop six core competencies: forward presence, deterrence, maritime security, sea control, power projection and humanitarian assistance." [18]

He analysed the document's six key elements [19] ad seriatim:

> so-called forward presence means that the United States can send its gunboats to every corner of the world, tyrannize the weak and extend its security boundaries to others' doorsteps. This way, the United States can even claim the Yellow Sea and the South China Sea are covered within its security boundary.

> so-called deterrence is no different from bully tactics, namely that "if you do not obey me, I will punch you."

> so-called maritime security is to ensure the inviolability of U.S. gunboats. The United States only cares about its own safety, and it should not be expected to ever care about others' safety.

> so-called sea control applies the logic of "whoever controls critical sea lanes controls the seas, and whoever controls the seas controls the world."

> so-called power projection is obviously for war rather than peace.

> so-called humanitarian assistance is only for the Americans and U.S. allies, while others only receive brutal and rough treatment from the United States.

A blunt indictment which also included the observation that “Ironically, the United States, which has a blind belief in its military force and ‘speaks’ only through its gunboats, is at once embarrassingly trapped in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” [20]

The day before the above comments appeared, Ni Lexiong, professor of international relations at the Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, wrote that “a potential military crisis is hidden in the gradually ‘maturing’ Sino-US relations. Why do both sides regularly organize military exercises? There must be specific imaginary enemies in military exercises. Regular and repeated military exercises are tests of national strategic plans and tactical details.

“Before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the German army had long been practicing the Schlieffen Plan, which called for a sudden attack on France on one side before Russia could mobilize on the other.” [21]

The following day Rear Admiral Yang Yi, the former director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at the People’s Liberation Army National Defense University who was quoted earlier, said in an analysis called “Cold War mindset harms peace” that:

“Washington has held intensive military exercises with allies in the Pacific Ocean and Northeast and Southeast Asia over the past months, quite close to China and its surrounding region....US-led exercises this year have drawn more concerns among regional members because of the unequivocal motive behind the exercises and the sensitivity of their locations....The large-scale military exercise [Invincible Spirit] is intended to send an unambiguous message to other regional countries, including China, that the US is still the strongest military power in the world and that Washington’s military dominance in Northeast Asia, and the wider Asia-Pacific region, cannot be challenged....As the world’s sole superpower with an unchallenged armed force, no single nation in the world can stop the US from conducting such activity, but Washington will inevitably pay a costly price for its muddled decision.”

He also warned that the global military colossus may have feet of clay: “When the long-established global strategic pattern changes to the US’ disadvantage, Washington’s adherence to the Cold War mentality and its excessive dependence on military means to resolve international disputes will lead the superpower to bigger strategic setbacks.” [22]

Last week a Chinese source added to Major General Luo Yuan’s use of a term once thought outdated, gunboat diplomacy, another one from the same era and mindset, brinkmanship: “Washington and Seoul have chosen to ignore China’s security concerns time and again, and this should not be allowed to fester at China’s doorstep. This brinkmanship is an open defiance of China’s security environment.” [23]

The Chinese press (on both sides of the Taiwan Strait) has recently published several features on the threat of the U.S. surrounding China with an Asian NATO, both analogue and extension of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. [3]

On August 14 the Xinhua News Agency wrote:

“The real intention of the US maneuvers in the waters of Northeast Asia...is to consolidate

the US-South Korea and US-Japan military alliance and boost US military presence in the region, and therefore intimidate and contain China.”

“In addition to more troops in Afghanistan, the US military is transforming Guam into its new strategic strike center that could cover large areas of the Asia Pacific. It redeployed 60 percent of its nuclear submarine fleet to the Pacific and has been consolidating its bases in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines.” [25]

Late last month an English-language Taiwanese newspaper reported that “According to Chinese media reports, the US’s support for Vietnam in its bids for the Spratly and Paracel islands is meant to threaten China’s core interests and build a grand strategic alliance surrounding the country.

“The US is capitalizing on the contradictions among East Asian countries to form a front against China....” [26]

A recent piece in the People’s Daily minced no words in reiterating the point:

“Relations between China and the United States have become decidedly testy in recent days and the US is anxious to find its proxies in the region by inciting their discontent with China and pulling them to the American side.”

The dynamic is being exacerbated with “tensions building and mounting in recent weeks over events in the Yellow Sea and the South China Sea, and with the signs that the US is trying to meddle [with] and dominate issues involving China.”

“The U.S. decision to include an aircraft carrier in the [upcoming Yellow Sea] exercise is considered especially provocative, and some Chinese suspect that Washington is sending a ‘strong message’ about American power to China as well as North Korea. And that the US carrier maneuvered to its former foe Vietnam arouses wild speculations about whether the US is bent on building up a NATO in Asian version.”

“The Obama administration...is experimenting with a new, more insidious but very risky diplomatic strategy in the region, where it has for long played [the role of a] hegemonic power, to contain an emerging great power: Drifting from confrontation to confrontation with a rising China, as Washington is now doing. This will bring about the doomed fallout. In a not very long American history, perhaps, the only bitter lesson to the super war machine was taught by China – which has never rewarded it with a single chance to declare a complete victory on whatever occasion.”

“Like a contemptible wretch making trouble, these mean and petty actions taken by the so-called super power would fail to help it get the desired fruit – to effectively counterbalance China in Asia.” [27]

Military strategist Colonel Dai Xu of the Chinese People’s Liberation Air Force wrote on August 11 that “One needs to have a basic understanding of the nature of the United States and its global strategy in order to comprehend its recent provocations in the Yellow Sea and the South China Sea. The 2010 US defense report said first and foremost the U.S. is a nation at war.

“From a historical perspective, the U.S. has continuously found enemies and waged wars. It has become part of its social formula. Without wars the US economy loses stimulus. Without

enemies the U.S. cannot hold the will of the whole nation.

“Its recent military drills in the Yellow Sea and announcement to intervene in South China Sea affairs were efforts made to encircle China. It is attempting to build an ‘Asian NATO’ with Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).”

He added a recommendation to combat that U.S.-led siege:

“In order to prevent the U.S. from surrounding it, China needs to draw a clear bottom line. The U.S. is not allowed to coerce China to give in on matters concerning China’s territory and maritime sovereignty, national solidarity and regional issues. And it is not allowed to jeopardize China’s national interest by collaborating with neighboring countries....If the U.S. is adjusting its global strategic emphasis, China needs to reevaluate its strategy toward the U.S. China loves peace, but it will staunchly safeguard its national interests.” [28]

A Global Times editorial of last week provided this perspective:

“In recent months, the US has been busy cementing alliances in Northeast Asia and inking a new agreement with China’s Southeast Asian neighbor Vietnam. The US intention is clear: to stir negative sentiment against China among neighboring countries.

“The US is trying to consolidate its scattered influence in the region. To some extent, it can manage to do so, given its geographic detachment, its global influence and its economic might....The US is returning to Southeast Asia with a clear political agenda. It is trying to expand US influence and strengthen cooperation with countries in the region, but seeds of distrust are also being planted with its attempt to contain China. Countries around the region must see these tactics for what they are.” [29]

The French statesman Talleyrand, never burdened by either scruples or principles, said that we were given speech not to disclose but to disguise our thoughts. (La parole nous a été donnée pour déguiser notre pensée.)

The words of major Chinese military leaders and strategists quoted above, however, are not those of dissimulation or evasion, vainglory or bravado. They should be interpreted at face value: As the most dire of warnings, particularly the references to World War I and the Korean War. An armed conflict between the world’s two main economic powers would be a catastrophe for more than just Northeast Asia and the Pacific Ocean region.

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

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/08/15/u-s-china-conflict-from-war-of-words-to-talk-of-war-part-i>

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