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Tensions in the East China Sea: Time to Contain Naval Stand-offs

By Koh Swee Lean Collin

Synopsis

Recently, a Chinese frigate reportedly locked its radar onto a Japanese destroyer in the East China Sea, escalating Sino-Japanese tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands disputes. This warrants a serious look at operational naval arms control for all stakeholders.

Commentary

EVER SINCE tensions emerged over the Japanese-controlled Senkaku, which China calls Diaoyu and Taiwan Diaoyutai, maritime encounters involving Chinese, Japanese and Taiwanese government vessels have been confined to civilian law enforcement vessels. Except for water-cannon exchanges between Japanese and Taiwanese coastguards, none of the disputants had ever resorted to use of lethal force.

However, the reported illumination of a Japanese destroyer by the fire control radar of a Chinese frigate on 30 January 2013 - the radar "lock-on" incident - indicate a potential escalation when close encounters at sea involve regular, customarily heavily-armed naval forces.

Vulnerability of modern warships

Modern warships are well-equipped with sophisticated combat systems unlike cheaper, simply-equipped civilian law enforcement vessels. They are costly to acquire in large numbers and to operate and hence, modern warships are deemed capital assets. While their technological sophistication permits a wide range of roles, these prized assets are also vulnerable to comparatively cheaper yet lethal countermeasures, as borne out by recent incidents.

In 1982, the Royal Navy destroyer HMS Sheffield was fatally hit with a single Argentine Exocet anti-ship missile. The US Navy frigate USS Stark was struck by two Iraqi Exocet anti-ship missiles in 1987. The most recent was the Israeli corvette INS Hanit, which was put out of action by a single Hezbollah C-802 anti-ship missile off Lebanon in 2006. These episodes portend the dangers of modern naval armaments and their destabilising influence on inter-state maritime rivalries.

Modern warship fire control radars illuminate targets within engagement ranges and thereby feed data such as range and speed to the fire control computers, which then generate fire control solutions within mere seconds. This barely allows ample warning time for the targeted party to react before the attacker commits his weapons.

But because such “hostile intent” of illuminating the fire control radar could be (mis)interpreted as a prelude to impending “hostile action” (that is, firing of weapon), on-scene commanders could impulsively decide to preempt the imminent onslaught. This tendency could be fraught with error and miscalculation. In the event of a crisis or confrontation, such tactical-level actions could lead to inadvertent higher level conflict or even all-out war.

Modern naval combat systems could potentially amplify the consequences of stress-induced behaviour into a catastrophic tactical outcome within a few minutes or even seconds. Case in point was the US Navy guided missile cruiser USS Vincennes in 1988 when it shot down an Iranian airliner, which the commander mistook for an attacking Iranian fighter jet, amidst confrontation with Iranian gunboats in the Strait of Hormuz.

Risk of naval brinkmanship in the East China Sea

Prior to the latest Sino-Japanese maritime close encounters in the East China Sea, a similar case was reported in 2009 when an Indonesian Navy corvette reportedly illuminated its fire control radar on a Malaysian patrol craft in the disputed Ambalat waters in the Sulawesi Sea. The standoff fortuitously did not escalate because the Malaysian warship quickly exited the area.

However it would be inappropriate to compare the situations between Ambalat and East China Sea. Right after the standoff, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur moved swiftly to de-escalate tensions and reduced the number of warships in the disputed waters. In the case of the East China Sea, tensions have continued to fester since late 2012. The disputants’ civilian law enforcement ships have also grown in numbers and intensified their activities around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

There have been numerous close encounters, some of which developed into unpleasant standoffs. The most recent incident involved the interception by the Japan Coast Guard of a Taiwanese fishing boat, carrying activists and escorted by Coast Guard Administration vessels, near the disputed isles on 24 January. At the time of incident, Taiwanese military assets operated near the scene but were not committed into action. Given that regular naval forces of the three disputants are known to operate near the area as a form of “recessed deterrence” and poised to reinforce frontline civilian law enforcement ships, their involvement could raise the prospects of inadvertent escalation in the event of crisis.

Time for operational naval arms control

The current East China Sea situation might warrant the need to seriously consider the merits of naval arms control. Essentially naval arms control can be divided into structural and operational measures. Structural measures aim to limit the quantity and type of naval armaments. However, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to attain since naval platforms serve both peaceful and warfighting functions.

Operational measures have a greater potential since they do not limit armaments but entail certain constraints on naval forces’ deployments in contentious maritime zones. Such measures include air/sea keep-out zones, advanced mutual notification on naval movements or emergency communication procedures for military assets traversing disputed areas.

In 2011, China and Japan did mull some form of “crisis management mechanism” to forestall unfortunate maritime incidents but this has yet to materialise. With no immediate solution in sight to the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, it might be prudent for all disputants to seriously examine the introduction of operational naval arms control measures.

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