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South China Sea Series

Rising Tension in the Waters: China, US and Unintended Crisis

By Zhang Baohui

Synopsis

The US is planning further patrols in the South China Sea, following the USS Lassen's successful freedom of navigation operation. Although China did not take action to confront it, the risk of an unintended crisis escalating from future patrols remains high.

Commentary

ON 27 OCTOBER 2015, USS Lassen, a guided missile destroyer, entered the 12-nautical mile zone of one of the Chinese-controlled features in the Spratly islands, which are currently going through massive land reclamation. China immediately issued strong protests against the US act. However, the Pentagon and the US Navy have stated that the so-called "freedom of navigation patrols" will become routine in the future.

Although China did not take concrete actions this time to confront the US warship, future such operations could gravely destabilise the South China Sea situation, even peace and stability of the whole region. They could touch off an unintended escalation and push the two countries towards military conflicts. The logic is quite obvious.

Dynamics of Escalation

More actions by the US Navy will corner the Chinese leadership and force them to respond to perceived provocations to its national interests and power reputation.

After all, the South China Sea constitutes an essential part of China's geostrategic interests. Moreover, China's reputation as a great power is at stake when its key interests face a direct and deliberate challenge by another great power.

Further, China may feel the urge to stand firm in order to deter future escalation in US challenges to its interests and reputation. Chinese decision-makers may worry that if China does not respond to this perceived US provocation, Washington may escalate pressures on China in the future.

The above strategic imperatives could result in Chinese decisions and measures to resist further US naval intrusions into the 12-nautical-mile zones around its claimed islands in the Spratly chain. Indeed, on 2 November 2015, Vice Admiral Yi Xiaoguang, PLA's Deputy Chief of Staff, stated that China "will use all means necessary to defend its sovereignty" if the US takes similar actions.

The next day, General Fang Changlong, vice president of the Central Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party, told Admiral Harry Harris Jr. commander of the United States Pacific Command, that any future actions by the US Navy could trigger accidental escalations that harm the interests of both countries.

Chinese military's response

Indeed, the Chinese are also escalating their actions. The PLA revealed that its air force conducted war games on 30 October in the South China Sea. Specifically, the photos released by the PLA suggest the war games involved Chinese J-11b jet fighters taking off from Woody Island, which has the closest airport to support military operations in the Spratlys chain of islands. Then, the PLA Air Force announced that it conducted a joint war game on 2 November that included a H-6k bomber launching cruise missiles in the South China Sea.

Finally, on 3 November, the PLA released rare photos of the JL-2 sea-based strategic missile, which is borne by China's Type 094 nuclear submarines, lifting out from the sea. Chinese media analyses all suggest that the unexpected release of the photos is meant to deter the US.

Therefore, it is obvious that China has stepped up deterrence against a potential repeat of similar US operations in the South China Sea. Various Chinese rhetoric and measures suggest that China could resort to more concrete and forceful measures to confront the US navy. If so, a face-off between the two navies becomes inevitable. Even worse, the face-off may trigger an escalation toward military conflicts.

However, the US military appears oblivious to this scenario. A logical answer lies in the current conventional military imbalance between the two countries. The vast US conventional military superiority in theory discourages China from responding forcefully to the projected scenario. It is highly likely that US decision-makers assume China would adopt a policy of inaction when facing intruding American naval vessels.

Flawed US perception

This US expectation is flawed, as China is a major nuclear power. When cornered, nuclear-armed states can threaten asymmetric escalation to deter an adversary from harming its key interests. The 3 September military parade in Beijing revealed that China's new generation of tactical missiles, such as the DF-26, can be nuclear-armed. Recent information also indicates that China's air-launched long-range cruise missiles can also carry tactical nuclear warheads. Indeed, the latest photos of the JL-2 sea-based nuclear missile lifting out of the sea could be a veiled nuclear signaling by China to deter the US.

The challenge for the US is that while the South China Sea concerns China's strategic interests, few would think that these Spratly islands constitute US core interests. The asymmetry in stakes would certainly give China an advantage in "the balance of resolve" over the US.

If so, when a crisis situation escalates and starts to involve potential nuclear scenarios, the US faces the stark choice of either backing down first or facing the prospect of fighting a nuclear-armed China. Neither option is attractive and both exact high costs, either in reputation or human lives, for the US.

Therefore, it would be imprudent for the US to challenge China. By underestimating Beijing's resolve to defend its interests, reputation and deterrence credibility, this plan could touch off a spiral of escalation that would in the end harm US interests.

Need for greater consideration

What is vital for peace and stability in the South China Sea is that all concerned parties should base their strategies and policies on worst-case scenarios. Both China and the US need to consider how their actions may lead to unintended consequences, especially unintended escalation toward military conflict.

Prudence is very much needed at this stage of Sino-US relations, when mutual mistrust has reached an all-time high. Imprudent actions by one or both parties may well turn mistrust into bloody military conflicts. Nobody, especially countries in the region, wants this scenario. If the US claims to be the defender of world peace and regional stability, it must do everything to avoid this scenario through unintended escalations.

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