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Strengthening Sino-US Maritime Crisis Management: Urgency, Dilemmas and Solutions

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SYNOPSIS

Maritime crisis management mechanisms can foster predictability and stability in interactions between great powers, thereby preventing all-out conflict from arising from unexpected maritime accidents. Since the end of the 20th century, China and the United States have continued to cooperate in maritime crisis management mechanisms. However, the catch-up competition mode of the two countries and their mismatched maritime interests pose obstacles to the practice of maritime crisis management between the two sides. Therefore, China needs to further promote and improve the maritime crisis management mechanisms with the United States as well as encourage ASEAN and its members to play a more useful role in the process.

COMMENTARY

Why Is It Urgent to Strengthen Sino-US Maritime Crisis Management?

The competition between China and the United States continues to intensify across various fields such as economy, technology, maritime affairs, and regional influence. The ocean is a highly fluid area, and maritime competition between major countries is complicated and subject to many uncertainties. Sino-US interactions in the maritime domain are primarily reflected in the following characteristics.

First, there is a high frequency of direct encounters between the two sides at sea. According to an [incomplete report on US military activities in the South China Sea in 2023](#) released by the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative, the US military deployed approximately 1,000 large reconnaissance aircraft of diverse types

to conduct reconnaissance missions in the South China Sea throughout the year. Around 100 of these sorties ventured into the airspace near the Chinese mainland and Hainan Island, and most of them were less than 30 nautical miles away from the baseline of the territorial sea. US military reconnaissance aircraft also frequently intruded into China's near seas and airspace, disrupting the normal exercises and drills of the People's Liberation Army and leading to close encounters with Chinese alert forces.

Second, there is a high likelihood of military clashes between China and the United States in the maritime domain. The latter has enhanced its military activities in the South China Sea, thereby increasing the risk of friction and conflict between the two countries. At the same time, the extensive use of unmanned platforms by both China and the United States elevates the risk of maritime and aerial friction between the two sides.

Historically, crises between China and the United States have primarily occurred in the maritime domain. Three maritime military crises occurred in the Taiwan Strait between China and the United States in the 20th century. Then, on 1 April 2001, a US EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft collided with a Chinese J-8 fighter over the southeast coast of China's Hainan Island, resulting in the death of the Chinese pilot, Wang Wei. In response to then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan on 2 August 2022, China suspended the China-US maritime military security consultation. Maritime military communication between the two countries gradually resumed after US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in San Francisco in November 2023.



A US Navy EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft, similar to this one, collided with a Chinese J-8 fighter over the southeast coast of China's Hainan Island on 1 April 2001, resulting in the death of the Chinese pilot, among several other maritime military incidents. Given that crises between China and the United States have mostly occurred in the maritime domain, both countries must continue to develop strong maritime crisis management mechanisms to avoid escalation into an all-out conflict. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

According to a report titled [“Assessing Military and Non-Military Incidents at Sea in the Asia-Pacific”](#), released by the Asia Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) in July 2023, at least 79 air and sea encounters involving warships, aircraft, coast guard vessels, and fishing boats occurred in the Asia-Pacific region from 2010 to 2023. Frequent close encounters between Chinese fighter jets and US reconnaissance aircraft have the risk of escalating into an all-out conflict. Although most Sino-US air and sea encounters are safe and professional, the highly provocative, close-range intrusion of US forces into China’s territorial waters and airspace continues to pose a challenge to the stability and effectiveness of a series of existing rules of conduct between the two sides, such as the Defense Consultative Talks (DCT), Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), the Memorandum of Understanding on Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism, and the Memorandum of Understanding Regarding the Rules of Behaviour for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters.

Furthermore, third parties have added uncertainties to Sino-US maritime interactions. The United States has security commitments to its allies in the Asia-Pacific, namely, the Philippines, Japan, and Australia. These commitments make it highly likely that the United States might become embroiled in maritime conflicts involving China and US allies. In this context, the escalating Sino-Philippine maritime dispute has deepened concerns among countries in the region about the potential for a maritime crisis in the Asia-Pacific. On 29 February 2024, Philippine envoy Jose Manuel Romualdez described the [South China Sea as the “real flashpoint” in Asia](#). The existing Sino-US maritime rules of conduct mentioned above do not necessarily apply to the encounters that are most likely to result in a potentially escalatory incident.

Dilemmas of Strengthening Sino-US Maritime Crisis Management

Although the United States and China have shown greater willingness since the turn of the century to develop maritime crisis management, it is difficult to fully realise that willingness in practical terms because of several irreconcilable dilemmas.

For one thing, both sides are in a competitive mode, which impedes maritime crisis management. According to the [2024 “Global Naval Power Rankings”](#) released by the World Directory of Modern Military Warships (WDMMW), the United States ranks first, with a score of 323.9, followed by China, with a score of 319.8. Facing an irreconcilable conflict between the protection of its maritime rights and the United States’ global maritime hegemony strategy, China has been seeking to close the capability gap. Although China’s navy will continue to lag behind the US navy in the short term, the United States is worried that its maritime military superiority will be weakened as China seeks to build up its navy. This situation has created a structural dilemma for both sides in constructing maritime crisis management mechanisms.

The dilemma extends to Chinese and American societies, triggering a psychological cognition that further impedes the two countries’ efforts at maritime crisis management. The resulting intense nationalistic sentiments have induced both China and the United States to see each other as a growing external threat. On 27 July 2023, [a Pew Research Center survey](#) revealed that 50% of Americans name China as the greatest threat to their country.

Another factor that limits the effectiveness of existing maritime crisis management mechanisms between the two sides is their mismatched interests. China and the United States have asymmetrical interests in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait, and the balance of their maritime interests is at a relatively low level. For example, China's interests in the South China Sea fall under its core maritime interests and important interests. China's concerns include its territorial sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and its near-shore strategic security, sovereign rights over marine resources in its exclusive economic zone, historical rights, and the economic and developmental interests involved in the sea lanes of the South China Sea. China also has an interest in shaping the rules governing the South China Sea. Comparatively, scholars mainly understand US interests in the South China Sea from the aspects of freedom of navigation and the upholding of regional stability.

In other words, the United States does not view the South China Sea as a core interest, unlike China. As a result, there is basically no room for China to compromise on the South China Sea issue. This mismatch of interests means that the room for consensus on maritime communication and consultation between the two sides is limited. In addition, the existing maritime crisis management mechanisms between the two countries have several shortcomings in practice.

Methods of Strengthening Sino-US Maritime Crisis Management

First of all, China needs to focus on refining and improving the application of the Sino-US maritime crisis management mechanisms at the regional and operational levels. It needs to accelerate the establishment of a Crisis Prevention and Communication Framework between the two countries. At the same time, it is important to overcome some of the technical shortcomings that could hinder effective crisis management during ship and aircraft encounters. For example, it is crucial to clarify the minimum distance that must be maintained between two sides' vessels or aircraft in various encounter situations.

Second, to reduce the maritime risks that could arise from unmanned devices, particularly in the deep sea, the two sides can consider developing behavioural norms in this new field of encounters and explore the new solutions brought by artificial intelligence in maritime crisis management. Scholars specialising in maritime military science and technology can facilitate discussions on risk management and help to establish behavioural norms and regulations.

Furthermore, China should consider solutions for "intentional encounters" between vessels and aircraft at sea and in military exercise areas and fine-tune existing mechanisms. To illustrate this point in the case of the Taiwan Strait, if US warships and military aircraft carry out provocative actions such as "freedom of navigation operations" or close reconnaissance against China, the Chinese side's identification, interception, monitoring, or expelling of US warships and military aircraft to prevent a potential intrusion could lead to "[intentional encounters](#)". The existing Sino-US maritime rules of conduct mentioned above are hardly applicable to such "intentional encounters", and it is worth considering how to resolve such issues.

Southeast Asia's Responses

Amid escalating Indo-Pacific disputes, ASEAN, through its "[Indo-Pacific Outlook](#)", released in June 2019, demonstrated a strong collective voice in an effort to prevent the deepening of miscalculations and mishaps rooted in zero-sum games. According to [The State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report](#), concern among Southeast Asian countries whether China is willing to resolve territorial and maritime disputes peacefully has significantly increased, considering the impact that unresolved disputes can have on the region. The number of people who expect China to resolve disputes peacefully has notably increased from 59.8% in 2023 to 67.0% in 2024.

Some ASEAN members also show great concern about the potential for a Sino-US maritime conflict. I would like to take Singapore as an example. At the 7th Xiangshan Forum in 2016, Singapore's Senior Minister Ong Ye Kung said Singapore had [proposed](#) to extend the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) to all participants in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus forum to better harmonise the behaviour of regional countries in the event of maritime encounters.

As the 2018 ASEAN chair, Singapore's Minister of Defence, Dr Ng Eng Hen, initiated the development of guidelines for encounters between regional military aircraft and [the strengthening of ASEAN-China cooperation through multilateral exercises](#). At the [Munich Security Conference 2019](#), Dr Ng spoke again about the importance of multilateral cooperation and interstate transparency in avoiding conflict. In September 2022, Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Singapore prime minister Lee Hsien Loong made a [joint statement](#) underscoring the importance of a peaceful resolution of disputes. On the issue of South China Sea disputes, Singapore has adopted a conciliatory tone – a position that is helped by the fact that it is not directly involved in the disputes.

Conclusions

Against the backdrop of the continuous development of the United States' "Indo-Pacific Strategy", the ocean has become a risk arena for China and the United States. The competition mode and conflicting core maritime interests between China and the United States have increased the difficulty and complexity of maritime crisis management for both parties. China should step up to lead the reconstruction of a crisis consensus between China and the United States in the maritime domain, refine maritime crisis management between China and the United States, and strengthen the resilience of China's crisis diplomacy. At the same time, efforts should be made to enhance regional maritime domain awareness, making it difficult for large-scale military deployments to occur, thereby reducing the likelihood of maritime crises in the Western Pacific.

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