

China's blocking of US aircraft carrier highlights naval tensions in the Pacific

John Chan

10 December 2007

A diplomatic row between the US and China over the anchoring of American warships in Hong Kong harbour points to sharpening tensions between the two countries.

The issue first appeared publicly when Beijing reversed a decision to allow the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk and its escort warships to anchor at Hong Kong on November 21 for the Thanksgiving holiday. Hundreds of family members and friends had flown to Hong Kong to be with the crew of the ships, which at the last minute were denied entry to the harbour. Beijing backtracked the following day, saying the warships would be allowed entry on “humanitarian grounds,” but it was too late to revive the visit.

The US military was quick to protest. Admiral Timothy Keating, head of US Pacific Command, told reporters that China's stance was not “indicative of a country who understands its obligations as a responsible nation”. Just a few days earlier, Beijing had rejected the request of two US minesweepers to enter Hong Kong to avoid a storm. On November 28, the Pentagon summoned China's military attaché in Washington and issued a formal protest.

In a move designed to heighten tensions, the USS Kitty Hawk battle group headed to its home port in Japan by sailing through the sensitive Taiwan Strait. China, which regards Taiwan as a renegade province under its sovereignty, issued its own statement of “grave concern” over the US navy's actions. In 1996, amid a standoff between Beijing and Taipei, the former Clinton administration sent two aircraft carriers into the area near the Taiwan Strait.

American warships have used Hong Kong as a stopover port for decades. Since the former British colony reverted to Chinese rule in 1997, port calls have required Beijing's approval, which for the most part has been routinely granted. Refusals took place in periods of high tension, such as in 1999, when the US bombed the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia and in 2001, when a US spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter over the South China Sea.

Beijing initially played down the latest incident. During a meeting in Washington on November 28, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi reportedly told President Bush it was simply “a misunderstanding”. The following day, however, foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao contradicted the

media reports, saying the refusal was not a “misunderstanding”.

Yang himself expressed “grave concern” over Washington's recent decision to sell a hi-tech anti-missile defence system to Taiwan. He referred to President Bush's meeting with Tibet's exiled Dalai Lama in October, saying it had damaged the relationship between the two countries. While not explicitly spelled out, the refusal to allow US warships into Hong Kong was a political retaliation.

Liu's comment came just after a senior Chinese naval officer told the *Global Times*—Beijing's mouthpiece on international and foreign affairs—that the US was seriously harming Chinese interests and Sino-US ties. He noted that the weapon sales to Taipei had sent “a wrong signal” and encouraged Taiwan's pro-independence president Chen Shui-bian and his campaign for a seat in the UN. “That is why a lot of activity between China and America was stopped,” the naval officer said.

The row demonstrates the fragility of the “military-to-military” ties between China and the US. During his visit to Beijing in October, US defence secretary Robert Gates proposed to establish a “hotline” between the two countries to defuse potential confrontations. Shortly afterward, however, the Pentagon announced a \$940 million sale of the Patriot missile system to Taiwan, provoking protests from Beijing.

The dispute over the Hong Kong visits is continuing to escalate. Last week, a US defence department official revealed that China had barred the destroyer USS Reuben James from visiting the port on New Year's day. Another request for a US C-17 cargo plane to make a three-monthly flight to Hong Kong to supply the US consulate was also turned down.

Japan has become embroiled. On November 28, the destroyer Shenzhen made the first visit by a Chinese warship to a Japanese port since World War II. While the purpose of the visit was to improve relations between the two countries, Tokyo suddenly cancelled a tour by Chinese sailors of one of Japan's advanced Aegis-class destroyers, after the Pentagon objected.

Colliding interests

The emergence of tensions over the anchoring of US warships in Hong Kong is a sign of the developing rivalry between the two countries. In the aftermath of World War II,

the US treated the Pacific as “an American lake,” seeking to ensure Washington’s unchallengeable military superiority throughout the region. A string of US military bases in Japan, South Korea and Guam, as well as the Pacific Command centred in Hawaii, were all part of the Cold War framework aimed against China and the former Soviet Union.

Over the past two decades, US corporations have joined the rush to exploit China as a vast cheap labour platform, but there are deep concerns in American ruling circles over China’s rise as a potential economic and strategic rival. For its part, Beijing is worried about Washington’s continuing efforts to encircle China through a series of strategic alliances, particularly with Japan, Australia and India. The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq raise the prospect that China’s growing demands for raw materials, including access to oil and gas from the Middle East and Central Asia, could be subject to Washington’s veto.

In response, China has formed a “strategic partnership” with Russia to counter the US, especially against the US military presence in Central Asia and the threat of a US attack on Iran. China’s strategic doctrine is undergoing a shift from defence of the homeland to “active defence” beyond its borders, with a new emphasis on building a blue-water navy, and in particular, a submarine fleet. As part of this strategy, Beijing has built a string of port facilities in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea that could be used by its navy to protect oil supplies from the Middle East. A debate is underway in China over whether to build aircraft carriers as a symbol of its emergence as “a sea power”.

The USS Kitty Hawk featured in another incident in October last year. While largely downplayed in the media, a Chinese Song-class submarine apparently surfaced just kilometres from the aircraft carrier during a routine exercise with a US battle group in the East China Sea. The ability of the Chinese submarine to emerge undetected so close to the heavily defended US warship reportedly provoked consternation in the Pentagon about China’s rapidly developing submarine capability. China denied US accusations that it had been shadowing the US fleet.

In the past four years, at least 16 new submarines have been added to the Chinese navy. Aside from conventional Song-class and Kilo-class subs purchased from Russia, China is building a new class of Type-093 nuclear-powered attack submarine and a nuclear-powered Type-094 submarine, armed with long-range nuclear missiles. Beijing has reportedly received crucial technical assistance from Russian shipyards.

The US is boosting its own naval capacity in the region. The conventionally-powered USS Kitty Hawk has been at the heart of the US 7th Fleet, which is tasked with deterring China from attacking Taiwan. It is due to be replaced next year by the more powerful nuclear-powered USS George Washington.

In a show of air power in February, the Pentagon sent its latest F-22 stealth fighters to Okinawa—their first deployment outside the US. Although these warplanes have returned home,

the message was clear. Beijing was particularly disturbed by reports of a US war game in July 2006, which simulated an intensive bombing campaign on coastal Chinese cities and other strategic targets using F-22 and F-35 planes from Okinawa, Guam and aircraft carriers.

Despite Beijing’s efforts at military modernisation, the US defence budget is still 12 times larger than China’s and its lead in key technologies remains substantial. The US has 11 aircraft carriers deployed around the world, each carrying up to 90 warplanes—China has none. In 2005, the US navy’s total tonnage was over 3 million—nearly 10 times the size of China’s, with just 340,000 tonnes. Even in the field of submarines, the US has 73, all sophisticated nuclear-powered vessels, compared to China’s 55, mostly conventional.

Despite its military might, however, US influence is declining. China’s rapidly growing economy has displaced the US as the largest trading partner for most Asian countries. Moreover, other powers are emerging in the region. Russia is planning to build six aircraft carriers in the next two decades—three of which will be deployed in the Pacific. Japan and South Korea are also expanding their naval capacity and Australia is actively intervening in the region. While formal US allies, these three countries have their own economic and strategic interests.

The potential for conflict, particularly between the US and China, was underscored by the comments of former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. Speaking to the *Foreign Policy* magazine in October, he urged Washington to seek closer cooperation with Beijing, saying: “It is not in the interests of United States to repeat the mistake that was made in 1914, which led to the collision that produced World War I. China has to be integrated into the system. That means it has the right to enjoy a proper place in it.”

During a visit to China in November, Brzezinski told a group of Chinese strategic analysts that a collision between US and China was not “inevitable.” He explained: “In the previous century, changes in global forces led to dependency, conflicts and even wars, [but] that is now history.” While the results of the failure of the established powers to integrate Germany and Japan into the global order are evident in two catastrophic world wars, Brzezinski offered no explanation as to how capitalism would avoid a third disaster.

Indeed, the recent naval “incidents” between the US and China point to conflicting economic and strategic interests that could well become the axis of a new global confrontation.



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