

Naval incidents highlight tense US-China relations

John Chan
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A series of naval scuffles over the past week involving US and Chinese vessels has provoked a sharp spike in tensions between the two countries. While the issue was played down in talks yesterday in Washington between US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, the incidents underscore the potential for underlying frictions to flare up dramatically.

According to the Pentagon, the incidents began last Wednesday when a Chinese fishing patrol boat used a high-intensity spotlight to illuminate the USNS *Victorious*, a surveillance ship operating in the Yellow Sea. The following day, a Chinese Y-12 maritime surveillance aircraft buzzed the vessel 12 times, flying overhead at an altitude of just 120 metres.

Another American ship, USNS *Impeccable*, operating in the South China Sea off China's sensitive Hainan Island has also been involved. The US military claimed last Thursday that a Chinese frigate approached the *Impeccable* without warning and crossed its bow, passing within 90 metres. Two hours later, a Y-12 aircraft buzzed the ship at low altitude. On Saturday, a Chinese vessel radioed the *Impeccable*, telling it to leave or "suffer the consequences".

The most serious incident took place on Sunday. Again by the Pentagon's account, five small Chinese vessels "shadowed and aggressively manoeuvred in dangerously close proximity" to the *Impeccable* in an apparent attempt to drive it out of the area. The crew of the US ship responded by using fire hoses to spray the Chinese ships. The *Impeccable* was forced to stop in order to avoid a collision after two Chinese ships blocked its route and threw debris into the water.

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee yesterday, US Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair described the confrontation as the "most serious" military dispute between the two countries since a midair collision in 2001 that led to the death of a Chinese pilot and forced an American surveillance plane to land on Hainan Island.

Pentagon spokesman Stewart Upton declared: "Chinese ships and aircraft routinely steam or fly near US navy ships in this area. However, these actions were considerably more aggressive and unprofessional than we have seen, and greatly increased the risk of collision or miscalculation." He insisted that all US navy ships have been operating in international waters.

Chinese authorities have not provided details of the incidents, but have accused the US ships of spying on key military facilities on Hainan Island, which include a major naval base with underground submarine pens. Moreover, Beijing insists that such intelligence gathering activities are banned under international law within China's Exclusive Economic Zone, which extends 200 nautical miles from its coastline. The *Impeccable* was about 70 nautical miles south of Hainan Island. The US is not a signatory to the international law of the sea, but disputes China's interpretation.

US defence analysts acknowledge that the *Impeccable* was engaged in tracking Chinese submarines, possibly including the new Shang-class nuclear-powered attack submarines. The *International Herald Tribune* reported a US Navy photo showed a Chinese sailor using a long pole to try to snag a cable used by the *Impeccable* to tow an underwater listening device.

The head of US Pacific Command, Admiral Timothy Keating, told reporters last month that the US was considering a code of naval conduct with China to avoid confrontations. At the same time, however, he expressed the Pentagon's growing concerns about China's naval build-up. Noting that 65 of the 200 submarines operating in the Pacific were Chinese, Keating said: "We want to understand why the Chinese feel compelled to develop underwater capability to the extent that they are... Their submarines do not keep me awake at night but we are watching with great interest Chinese submarine development."

For decades, the Chinese navy was in no position to challenge the US. In recent years, however, China has been expanding its fleet of destroyers, frigates, amphibious assault ships and submarines, supported by long-range aircraft and missiles. While still much weaker than its American counterpart, the Chinese navy is becoming more sophisticated. In 2006, a Chinese submarine caused a stir in US defence circles by suddenly surfacing near the American aircraft carrier, the USS *Kitty Hawk*, after approaching undetected. China also has plans to build its own fleet of aircraft carriers.

The Obama administration has made certain conciliatory gestures toward China. Hillary Clinton's first foreign tour as Secretary of State was to Asia, including China. Even as rivalry continues, the economies of the two countries are closely intertwined. US corporations rely on China as a huge cheap labour platform and China depends on the US as a major market for its goods. Clinton urged Beijing to continue to use its huge foreign reserves to buy US

bonds—and help prop up the debt-laden American financial system.

Despite these moves, tensions have never been far below the surface. In January, prior to his installation, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner provocatively accused China of "manipulating" its currency—an accusation that, if acted on, could result in punitive trade measures under US law against China. Sections of the Democratic Party are already beginning to stir up protectionist sentiment, particularly aimed against China, as a means of deflecting social discontent at home.

The naval incidents, however, come somewhat out of the blue. During her trip, Clinton announced the restoration of mid-level military exchanges between the two countries, which were cut last October when the Bush administration proceeded with a \$6.5 billion arms sale to Taiwan. Just one week after the two countries resumed formal military discussions, the US-China naval confrontations began.

Behind these tensions are more fundamental geopolitical shifts driven by the declining economic power of the US and the rapid rise of China as a potential challenger to American interests in Asia and internationally. China's demands for raw materials and energy to provide for its huge manufacturing industries has forced it further a field into the Middle East, Central Asia, Latin America and Africa, and fuelled rivalry with the established powers—above all, the US.

Not accidentally, the conflicts have emerged in the naval sphere, where the strategies of the two countries are sharply at odds. Since World War II, American strategists have regarded the Pacific Ocean as an American lake. The US deployment of military forces in Japan, South Korea, Guam and the Philippines was part of the Cold War containment of the Soviet Union and China. At the same time, US control of the major sea lanes, particularly from the oil-rich Middle East, served in part to ensure that Japan could not re-emerge as a major threat to US interests.

China is acutely conscious that US control of the major sea lanes is also a threat to its vital supplies of raw materials, particularly oil and gas. Beijing's decision to build a blue water navy as well as a series of ports—known as the "string of pearls"—from the Middle East through South East Asia is aimed at protecting these key strategic routes. At the same time, China confronts challenges from Japan, the main US ally in Asia, to its sovereignty over the Diaoyutai Islands (known in Japanese as Senkaku) in the East China Sea, and has longstanding disputes in the South China Sea with Vietnam and the Philippines over the Spratly and Paracel islands and surrounding waters.

It is not surprising if the Chinese military irritated by the presence of American spy ships not far off its coastline decided to take a more assertive stance. Its decision in January to dispatch two destroyers to protect Chinese vessels off the coast of Somali from pirates was a sign that Beijing intends to use its growing military muscle to defend its economic and strategic interests. However, as in the case of the anti-piracy operation, China has generally calibrated its moves quite carefully so as not to provoke a military confrontation, particularly with the US.

For its part, the Obama administration has not backed away from President Bush's efforts to contain China through a series of strategic

alliances and basing arrangements, stretching from Japan and South Korea through South East Asia and Australia to the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Within the American political establishment, while tactical approaches vary, there is a general consensus that China is emerging as a major challenge to US interests.

Among the most militarist layers, the view is that the US will have to confront China. A study published by the right-wing American Enterprise Institute in January asserted: "The minimal aim of American strategy must remain what it has been for the past century: to preclude the domination of Asia by any single power or coalition of hostile powers. This is necessary to prevent others from threatening our security and prosperity through any attempts to control the region's resources, form exclusive economic blocs, or deny our physical access to and through Asia." The think tank concluded that the most likely "hostile power" was China.

An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* on Tuesday took a particularly belligerent attitude to the naval confrontation on Sunday, stating: "The incident with the Impeccable is another reminder that China's ambitions for regional dominance, and for diminishing US influence, remain unchanged despite a new American administration." The newspaper continued: "Next time the Impeccable sails in these waters—and for the sake of responding to China's provocation it should be soon—President Obama ought to dispatch a destroyer or two as escorts."

What the US-China naval skirmishing has revealed is a tinderbox of economic and strategic rivalries in Asia and internationally, made even more combustible by the deepening global recession. The danger is that any, even insignificant, incident has the potential to produce a far wider conflict, irrespective of the initial calculations of the protagonists involved.



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