

US and Chinese naval vessels in near-collision

Tom Peters
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Reports surfaced last Friday that the US guided missile cruiser USS Cowpens nearly collided with a Chinese naval landing vessel in the South China Sea on December 5. While the collision was avoided, the incident is another warning of the dangers of conflict and war posed by rising tensions in East Asia.

A US military official told *Stars and Stripes* that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) vessel was "moving to impede and harass the Cowpens," which was forced to take evasive action. The US State Department said it "raised this issue at a high level with the Chinese government."

The US Pacific Fleet issued a statement claiming that the Cowpens was "lawfully operating in international waters" when the PLA vessel approached. But the *Washington Free Beacon*, which first reported the confrontation, said the Cowpens "was conducting surveillance of the Liaoning," the PLA's aircraft carrier, which was exercising in the area.

While Beijing made no official statement on the incident, Chinese general Yin Zhuo told the *People's Daily* yesterday that the US cruiser was navigating within the Liaoning's fleet formation. China's state-run *Global Times* cited an unnamed source familiar with the confrontation who said the Cowpens was "tailing after and harassing the Liaoning formation" and "took offensive actions" first. According to the newspaper, military surveillance planes from the US and Japan had also tailed the Liaoning since it began its voyage late last month.

While the US and Western media blames China for the escalating tensions in the South and East China Seas, in reality they are the result of Washington's vast military build-up in the region. The US military-diplomatic "pivot" or "rebalancing" to Asia is designed to contain China, which the US sees as its main potential rival in the Asia-Pacific region.

The latest standoff occurred during US Vice President

Joe Biden's visit to Beijing amid sharp tensions over China's announcement in November of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in disputed waters in the East China Sea. On the same trip, Biden visited Seoul and Tokyo and reaffirmed that the US would defend Japan in the event of war with China. The US and its allies said they would ignore the zone and have repeatedly flown military aircraft into it.

The reckless interventions by the US and its allies into China's naval exercises are particularly heightening the danger of a clash. The USS Cowpens' confrontation followed an incident in October when a Japanese destroyer entered a live-fire zone in the Pacific during one of China's largest naval drills. The Chinese defence ministry denounced the move as a "dangerous provocation."

The USS Cowpens is part of a battle group attached to the aircraft carrier USS George Washington, which has staged several exercises in the South China Sea during recent months. The US is strengthening its military ties with Vietnam and the Philippines and supporting them in their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Washington is pushing for permanent US bases in the Philippines, to enable up to 4,500 US troops to be stationed on coasts facing China.

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday announced increased military assistance for Vietnam, including five Coast Guard patrol boats, to ensure "effective law enforcement in territorial waters."

At a press conference in Hanoi, Kerry denounced China's ADIZ, saying it "clearly increases the risk of a dangerous miscalculation or an accident," potentially leading to conflict between Japan and China. He made clear that the US would do nothing to lower the risk, however, asserting that the zone "will not affect US military operations in the region." He added: "China should refrain from taking similar unilateral actions elsewhere, particularly in the South China Sea."

The US navy asserts its “right” to patrol the waters off China’s southern coast and carry out surveillance. Washington claims that it has a “national interest” in maintaining “freedom of navigation” in the sea’s shipping lanes, which are a vital trade route for China. The real purpose of the US military presence in the region is to ensure that in the event of a conflict it can cripple China with a naval blockade.

Since the December 5 incident there have been more calls within the US political establishment for greater militarisation. Republican Randy Forbes, chair of the House Seapower Subcommittee, declared on December 11 that a comprehensive strategy was needed to prevent China’s “naval modernisation” from “pushing back the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.” Analysts from several strategic think tanks told the subcommittee that the US should buy more Virginia-class attack submarines and prioritise long-range anti-ship missiles, carrier-based drones and missile defence technology to counter China.

Naval analyst Ronald O’Rourke, from the Congressional Research Service, listed “US strategic considerations related to China’s naval modernisation effort.” These included “preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon in one part of Eurasia or another” and “preserving the US-led international order that has operated since World War II.”

With the centenary of the outbreak of World War I approaching, not a few commentators have pointed to the alarming similarities between the situation in East Asia and that in the Balkans that provided the trigger for conflict 100 years ago.

Writing in the *Australian* in February, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd warned: “These are no ordinary times in East Asia. With tensions rising from conflicting territorial claims in the East China and South China seas, the region increasingly resembles a 21st-century maritime redux of the Balkans a century ago—a tinderbox on water.”

While Rudd blamed China, the prime responsibility rests with US imperialism, which is shifting military resources into the region and encouraging its allies to take a tougher stance against China in a bid to maintain American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. Since February, the tensions have only escalated, creating a powder keg, where one misstep or minor incident could lead to war.



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