


Could a Maritime Conflict Start a Sino-American War?

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by Mark Valencia

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I. Introduction

Mark Valencia writes, "There is now little doubt that China and the West are going to clash. They are already competing in both military and civilian areas and more fundamentally in values and the pursuit of political power. The as yet unanswered questions are will the conflicts become "physical" and, if so, how and why?"

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II. Policy Forum by Mark Valencia

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On August 26th, I read a rather frightening oped in the *Los Angeles Times* lead-authored by David Gompert—until recently the second-highest-ranking US intelligence official in the Obama Administration. What scared me was his sober assessment of the possibility that a conflict in the maritime arena could trigger a China-US Armageddon—at least for Asia. This is not a new thought but heretofore had been the realm of fiction writers, warmongers, wolf-criers and video game makers.

There is now little doubt that China and the West are going to clash. They are already competing in both military and civilian areas and more fundamentally in values and the pursuit of political power. The as yet unanswered questions are will the conflicts become "physical" and if so how and why?

China –according to Gompert—is particularly worried about a long war in which the technically superior U.S. forces would prevail. So their military is developing plans and tactics for early and swift strikes to take out US carriers, air bases, and command and control networks, including satellites. The US military has countered with its "air-sea battle" plan "designed to cripple such forces—missile launchers, air and submarine bases and command and control centers before they can be unleashed."

Gompert argues that as a result "crisis instability" involving the two is increasing rapidly. Crisis instability occurs when "the price of failing to attack before the opponent means *defeat*. Each side knows the other is thinking the same way and so has all the more incentive to act preemptively if war seems imminent. Or probable. Or maybe just possible. Given the penalty for attacking second, such spiraling logic can turn confrontation into conflagration."

This is where maritime issues come in. The US 'rebalance' toward Asia and China's inexorable rise puts their naval and air forces in close proximity-- especially at sea. Gompert identifies several flash points that could trigger war including use of force by China in its ongoing East China Sea confrontation with Japan. This could then draw in the U.S. as Japan's ally - at least for a counter show of force --which has its own hair-triggers. China considers sovereignty of the Japanese

administered islands as a 'core' interest'. Coast guard vessels and aircraft from both sides have played cat and mouse there for months ratcheting up the tension and increasing the possibility of a physical clash.

Another spark-filled scenario is the conflict between US views and backup actions regarding 'freedom of navigation' of its surveillance ships and aircraft in China's 200nm EEZ and China's views on the limits of this principle. The U.S. considers 'freedom of navigation' in the South China Sea a 'national security interest.' On 17 July, the *Washington Times* reported that in June 2013 Chinese vessels 'harassed' the US Navy ocean surveillance vessel *Impeccable* in what the US Navy claims were 'international waters' about 100 nm from Hainan. However there has been no confirmation of the incident from either side and no further news.

The last time such an incident occurred was in March 2009. In that incident the U.S. sent a guided missile destroyer to escort the sub-hunting *Impeccable*. China could have responded in kind. At the time a Pentagon spokesperson explained that "Chinese ships and aircraft routinely steam or fly near US navy ships in this area. However these actions [regarding the *Impeccable*] were considerably more aggressive and unprofessional than we have seen, and greatly increased the risk of collision or miscalculation."

This set the stage for a worst scenario of confrontation between warships and the incalculable consequences. US officials including Presidential spokesperson Robert Gibbs said publicly that the US navy will continue to operate in the South China Sea" and we expect the Chinese to observe international law around that." However cooler heads prevailed--- beginning with President Obama. He "stressed the importance of raising the level and frequency of the US-China military - to - military dialogue in order to avoid future incidents." And then US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said he did not think China was trying to prevent the US Navy from operating in the South China Sea and that he hoped armed escorts would not be needed in the future.

The real issue here is China's expanding blue water navy capabilities and its new submarine base at Yulin. Obviously it wants to protect its "secrets" in the area including the activities and capabilities of its submarines and the morphology of the sea bottom. And just as intently, the U.S. wants to know as much as it can about China's submarine capabilities and the area it may one day have to do battle in. Thus such incidents are likely to be repeated and become ever more dangerous.

Indeed on 19 August 2013, Guan Youfei, foreign affairs spokesperson for China's Defense Ministry complained about stepped -up, close-in surveillance by the U.S. explaining that "Any country would feel uneasy and threatened under such high-frequency reconnaissance." And on the same day after meeting US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, China's Defense Minister General Chang Wanguan warned that "no one should underestimate our will and determination in defending our territory, sovereignty and *maritime 'rights'* (emphasis added)." All can read between the lines of both country's rhetoric and hope that it is only rhetoric.

The critical questions are "if in a crisis, China's military leaders advised its political leaders that US forces were preparing for war and China's only chance to avoid defeat was to strike first—would 'Beijing' say "no"? And if senior US military leaders advised the president that China was preparing for a preemptive strike would he or she risk the loss of key assets by waiting?

Needed now is an agreement on a set of voluntary guidelines for military and intelligence-gathering activities in foreign EEZs and on definitions of permitted and prohibited conduct there. Such guidelines will provide indicators of friendly (and unfriendly) behavior and help parties avoid unnecessary incidents without banning any activities outright. Specific guidelines have been proposed by a group of international experts sponsored by Japan's Ocean Policy Research

Foundation. The most relevant of these voluntary guidelines would be the increasingly meaningful obligation to only use the ocean for peaceful purposes, and to refrain from the threat or use of force, as well as provocative acts such as collecting information to support the use of force against the coastal state, or more relevant - now - interfering with naval electronic systems. However, the U.S. has rejected any and all such guidelines—voluntary or not-- as unacceptable. It may be time for the U.S. to re-consider its position.

III. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSES

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