

Policy Forum 10-011: US Maritime Security Priorities in East

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US Maritime Security Priorities in East Asia

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By Mark Valencia

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I. Introduction

Mark Valencia, Nautilus Institute Senior Associate, writes, "It seems inevitable that warships, submarines and military aircraft of the two will increasingly confront each other in and over the South and East China Seas. Needed urgently is at least an Incidents at Sea Agreement if not an informal set of agreed guidelines regarding the operations of US military vessels and aircraft in China's claimed waters. Otherwise, the seas of East Asia may become increasingly dangerous for all

concerned -both politically and otherwise."

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II. Article by Mark Valencia

- "US Maritime Security Priorities in East Asia"

By Mark Valencia

According to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech in Honolulu on 12 January "the US is back in Asia __ to stay ". Given this reaffirmation and that much of Asian geopolitics is maritime, it is appropriate to review and update US maritime security priorities in Asia. First and foremost for the US is keeping critical military and commercial sealanes open, safe and secure for its vessels and those of its friends and allies like Japan. Such sealanes include strategic straits -like the Malacca/Singapore Strait, and certain Indonesian straits like Lombok, Makassar and Ombai-Wetar as well as the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Strait in Northeast Asia. The other side of this coin - not often mentioned by US government spokespersons - is the US strategy to deny use of these straits to enemies in time of conflict. Such potential enemies include China which claims much of the East China and South China Seas in various ways for various purposes. This 'strategic denial' imperative is the "dark" side of US "defense" planning and underlies much of US military and foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

To achieve its strategic goals, the US government has offered military "assistance" to the Malacca Strait countries, and proposed the Regional Maritime Security Initiative and its follow-on, the Maritime Domain Awareness program. Singapore, using its own self preservation calculus, has always supported direct US military involvement in securing the Malacca and Singapore Straits. But Malaysia and Indonesia have been wary of such direct foreign military involvement and have skillfully demurred regarding these initiatives. So far the United States is not directly involved, i.e. there are no naval assets based in the Malacca Strait. But the US is quite persistent and this probably remains a US goal, despite denials to the contrary. Meanwhile its warships already frequent the area and "show the flag" by calling at Singapore and at Port Klang in Malaysia, and by transiting the Strait. Moreover, since 911, the US has been concerned with the possibility of maritime "terrorism" in Southeast Asia and its intelligence agencies work closely with those of its allies and friends to prevent attacks on its vessels and assets in their ports and waters.

As part and parcel of this US interest in securing these sealanes, it undertakes military surveys and surveillance of the region including in Chinese claimed waters as well as of China's naval assets, much to China's chagrin. As China expands its interests and capabilities seaward, these interests clash, producing international incidents such as the downing of the US EP-3 in April 2001, the September 2008 confrontation in the Yellow Sea between the US Navy survey ship Bowditch and a Chinese destroyer, and in March 2009 the dangerous maneuvers in the South China Sea between the US Navy surveillance vessel Impeccable and Chinese vessels.

Another US maritime security priority in Asia - which can-- given the right circumstances - supersede the first-- is to constrain shipments of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), their components and delivery systems.. This is a global struggle but it focuses on East and Southeast Asia because a main concern is the transfer of WMD components from North Korea to the Middle East, especially Iran, and between Pakistan and North Korea. What was transferred in the past probably moved mainly by sea. But now movement by air is probably the main mode of conveyance. Nevertheless the seaborne option remains and if this could be closed off then the US could

concentrate on air and land routes. In 2003, the US created the Proliferation Security Initiative to prevent the transfer of WMD, their components and delivery systems. But Malaysia and Indonesia-as well as China, India and Pakistan-- have declined to formally and fully participate and Russia and South Korea's participation is spotty. Nevertheless, the US is nothing if not persistent in attempting to obtain these countries' full participation.

A subsidiary US maritime security priority is to ensure the safety of US companies and their personnel in their efforts to explore for and exploit offshore oil in the region. In early 2008 US giant ExxonMobil quit a major offshore concession in the South China Sea granted to it by Vietnam because of veiled threats from China which also claimed the area. There are many other disputed areas with petroleum potential of interest to US companies in the South China and East China Seas.

As Secretary Clinton said, the US is "back to stay". But China never really left and is bent on reclaiming its sphere of influence and control over islands and areas that it believes were stolen from it by colonial powers and are now held by their former colonies. It seems inevitable that warships, submarines and military aircraft of the two will increasingly confront each other in and over the South and East China Seas. Needed urgently is at least an Incidents at Sea Agreement if not an informal set of agreed guidelines regarding the operations of US military vessels and aircraft in China's claimed waters. Otherwise, the seas of East Asia may become increasingly dangerous for all concerned -both politically and otherwise.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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