Response to “Tempting the Dragon”

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Policy Forum Online 09-020A: March 12th, 2009

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, " Tempting the Dragon " by Mark Valencia, Visiting Senior Fellow at the Maritime Institute of Malaysia (MIMA), which appeared as Policy Forum Online 09-020: March 12th, 2009.

This response includes comments by Mel Gurtov, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Portland State University, Visiting Professor, University of Oregon, and Editor-in-Chief, Asian Perspective.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Comments by Mel Gurtov

I think Mark's assessment is balanced and accurate with respect to the legal contentions of the US and China. But let's face it: The disagreements are not really about differing interpretations of the Law of the Sea and navigational rights; nor are they about the details of the incident itself. I would say that two factors are more fundamental. First, the United States presumes the right to conduct intelligence gathering (spying, in short) from overhead (as in the EP-3 incident) or, as in the *Impeccable* case, in waterways, international or not. China does not like to be spied on, certainly not where its submarine fleet is located. Second, the unbalanced power situation between the two countries means that the United States has the capability to carry out spy missions over and around China; China lacks such capability. To the Chinese leadership, such spying, which it cannot carry out along US coasts, must be humiliating, a constant irritation. One recalls here how angry Khrushchev and his colleagues were at the time of the shooting down of the U-2, for such overflights of Soviet territory had been carried out with impunity by the United States for quite a few years--and with no way for the Russians to respond in kind. Can you imagine the American reaction if a Chinese spy ship were confronted off the coast of Richmond?

Mark concludes with a perfectly reasonable call for US-PRC consultations, CBMs, and the development of guidelines that might avert another incident. Perhaps the resumption of military-t--military talks will include the avoidance of incidents at sea. I recall, however, that the idea of military consultations were also discussed after the EP-3 incident, to no avail. If the considerations above are a valid interpretation, I am not optimistic that guidelines will be agreed upon anytime soon. More likely, the Chinese, especially the PLAN, will be motivated by the latest incident to argue for more countermeasures and an upgrading of naval capabilities so that China is not "bullied" or taken advantage of by the arrogant Americans. And I think the navy's pleas will be heard.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)

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