

CHAPTER 9

Coping with the Worsening Geostrategic Environment in Asia

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The visible worsening of Sino-US relations serves as Beijing's most serious worry concerning its security environment. Generally speaking, the year began well with announcement of the Xi Jinping-Obama summit, seven months prior to the meeting, which was unique in itself. However, throughout the year the South China Sea (SCS) dispute became a major thorn that gradually oriented the bilateral tension towards possible military standoff by year-end when the Pentagon sent a naval vessel and B-52 bomber within 12 NM of China-held reefs. Then Washington approved arms sales to Taiwan. Subsequently two more intrusions into areas within 12 NM of China-held islands were arranged by US Pacific Command with one into the Parcel area, which was regarded as a most serious challenge. Since Sino-US relations are not really bilateral, any major disagreements would involve US allies and partners and Chinese mobilization for regional support from both US partners and adversaries. In 2015 a stronger sign of allied coalition against China's SCS moves emerged and gathered momentum, heralding further isolation of China in the SCS seesaw battle in the coming year, as the Philippines' legal suit would add more negativity for China to handle the dispute management.

Interestingly, 2015 witnessed the highest frequency of Sino-US military exchanges. Chinese naval chief Admiral Wu Shengli even characterized this development as "the best time in Sino-US naval cooperation." China and the US signed a number of documents to regulate their naval actions and civilian maritime law enforcement agencies when ships encounter each other in high seas, including in the waters within the Chinese EEZ. In the year we saw parallel and ironic evolution of worsened animosity *and* enhanced interaction between the two militaries. Certainly the former defined more of the nature of the bilateral military ties. For a long time US close-in spy activities have been an acute security worry of the Chinese political and military leadership. The worry has gained more currency as the US steps up such activities. According to ex-vice PLA Air Force commander Chen Xiaogong, US close-in aero and maritime reconnaissance activities reached 1,200 times in

2014, steeply up from that of 260 times in 2009.¹ In *the 21st International Sea Power Symposium* in the US Naval War College on 18 September 2014 PLAN commander Admiral Wu Shengli told his counterpart US Naval Chief that since the US would continue to conduct close-in spy activities, the PLA's countering operations would also continue, although both sides agree to follow agreed anti-collision measures so that past accidents would be prevented in the future.²

Collision with US military platforms at sea or in mid-air has become a constant nightmare haunting PLA leaders because each such event would be crisis-inducing. Politically the series of CBM agreements on naval encounters has been a signature of both sides to avoid unwanted confrontation for the sake of maintaining a broadly-based and mutually beneficial relationship. Tactically these set rules of engagement are regarded as crucial in disciplining the individual behavior of the front-line officers so that excessive provocations are prohibited. However, the significance of these agreements is not to be overstated, as not only will they not remove sources of hostile naval interactions in the proximity of Chinese waters, but also not even reduce the frequencies of occurrence of ill-intended encounters in the air or at sea. As long as the Pentagon targets China as a potential adversary in its war scenarios, US military surveillance will only be enhanced rather than scaled down as demanded by the PLA. Similarly, PLA intercepts will increase to match US patrols near the Chinese EEZ. The texture of this “cat and mouse” game is simply zero-sum, as the two countries are locked in structural conflicts of geopolitical interests. This is not something one can prevent with tactical CBM efforts in the form of naval-encounter agreements so as to substitute trust with suspicion. Confrontation is waiting to happen in this area of Sino-US military relations. Yet the key question is whether the severity of confrontation can be lowered and whether the damage can be managed once a grave event occurs. Pentagon's decision of 12 NM entry in the Spratlys has enlarged the likelihood of collision. This paper will assess two inter-related worries of Beijing in managing an increasingly more confrontational Sino-US and worsening Sino-regional relations: US spy activities in the Chinese EEZ and US 12 NM entry of China-held reefs in the SCS. Each has grave military implications to the bilateral relations.

¹ Citation from the documentary on current Sino-US relations by CCTV-4 documentary [Deep analysis of current affairs](#), 17 July 2015.

² “Admiral Wu Shengli's talk in NWC”, *Xinhua News Agency*, 19 September 2014.

The US 12 NM Entry as a Game Changer in the Bilateral Military Rivalry

US SCS intervention has weakened the Chinese position in regional territorial strife. The Pentagon made true its May 2015 promise to dispatch aircraft and vessels into the 12 NM of the China-held Spratly Islands.³ Generally speaking Beijing is concerned more about the entry of US naval vessels into 12 NM than aircraft overflight over the air space of those reefs. 5,000 metres above the tiny reefs it is hard to ascertain whether or how much the plane is inside or outside the 12 NM of the reefs, when it flies very fast. This is especially true as China has not announced its territorial base line and points in the Spratlys. Even if the plane is inside the 12 NM of the reefs, it is still in the international flight path. Flight above disputed reefs is very different from 12NM naval entry into one country's maritime space or EEZ. With no physical contact, the aero entry is largely a diplomatic or media show causing no personnel engagement. When a B-52 passed through the Huayang Reef on 10 December 2015, Beijing raised the tone of the war of words by characterizing it as an act of military provocation, lifting the depiction of the USS Lassen's entry into the Subi areas on 28 November, an act that Beijing called political provocation. Yet it was still a war of words. In comparison, direct naval confrontation can happen more readily inside the 12 NM, as shown by Cold War history, e.g., between Soviet and NATO vessels. The challenge to Beijing is that when US warships get inside the 12 NM of its SCS reefs, the PLA surface combatants have to shadow them and their physical distance can be as close as hundreds of meters. Expected or unexpected collision is a constant possibility. More dangerously, the Lassen case revealed that both US and Chinese submarines were accompanying the surface vessels at the time and at a high combat alert level.⁴

Such escalation of tension seems to be predestined with the seemingly open-ended upward spiral of sovereignty disputes now embedded in major power rivalry. Domestically Obama had to show resolve to China's SCS assertiveness at the time of a US presidential election and under the urging of the US' Asian allies. The Congressional testimony by DoD assistant secretary David Shear that no US warship

³ David Yang, "Risk of US-Chinese maritime confrontation increases in South China Sea", *HIS Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, 14 May 2015.

⁴ The PLA officially revealed one month after the Lassen entry that a PLA Kiso submarine, No. 372, was at the alert level (grade-one) and within torpedo distance of the Lassen at the time. Not far away there was a US nuclear attack submarine. *The PLA Daily Report*, CCTV-4, 28 November 2015.

had entered the 12 NM of China-held reefs since 2012 aroused serious backlash against Obama's handling of Sino-US relations.⁵ There is also a civil-military-relations challenge to Obama facing mounting pressure from the Pentagon to exercise freedom of navigations operations (FONOPs) inside 12 NM of China's reclaimed reefs.⁶ These multiple sources of pressure joined hands in eventuating an unthinkable scenario only a few years before. Two naval entries up to April 2016 were still too infrequent to measure how the bilateral relations were hurt. That Xi Jinping attended the 4th Nuclear Summit and Obama held the only bilateral talk with him is a testament to their resolve to put the matter of 12 NM entry into broader perspectives. The conflicting signals have raised more questions concerning US FONOPs than answers to define this new round of Sino-US tension in the maritime domains.

Was the USS Lassen's entry an innocent transit or a real challenge to China's excessive sovereignty claims on reclaimed reefs through the demonstration of naval power? Most Chinese and Western media reports point in the former direction.⁷ Rear Admiral Yin Zhou confirmed from PLAN sources that when she passed the Subi Reef area, her fire-control radar systems were turned off, the helicopter on board was stationary and the gun/missiles were in a non-combat gear.⁸ It is still uncertain whether the Pentagon informed the PLA prior to the entry but it is certain that both sides had pre-entered acquiescence on how the US acted and the PLA responded.

It is not yet clear whether the 12 NM entry is meant to be routine or symbolic. It has so far been symbolic. If it is true that Pentagon has a plan to have two entries per quarter, the endeavor will remain symbolic, although sporadically routine, as Washington would see it. Strategically a high frequency of entries will be seen by the Chinese as going beyond FONOPs, and may cause grave damage in overall Sino-US relations that Washington seems to be not ready for. It is interesting to point out when Lassen sailed through the Subi area, US and Chinese navies were conducting joint exercises in China and in the US, unprecedentedly for the first time along America's east coast. For this, both US naval chief and Chinese naval commander praised that "this was the best moment for Sino-US naval exchanges." Obviously

⁵ Sydney Freedberg "U.S. Has not Challenged Chinese Islands since 2012", DEFI, 17 September 2015.

⁶ Amitai Etzioni, "Is the Pentagon out of Step with the White House on China?", *Diplomat*, 23 December 2015.

⁷ Preeti Nalwa, "China's 'undeterred' strategy on the South China Sea: a 'challenge' for the US", *PacNet* # 3, 7 January 2016.

⁸ *News in Focus Today*, CCTV-4, 29 November 2015.

they both tried to play down the impact of the Lassen incident so that bilateral naval contacts would continue. Despite rising voices against PLA participation in the 2016 Pan-Pacific Naval Exercises in Washington D.C. Secretary Carter insisted that the Chinese navy would be there and the formal invitation was confirmed by the Chinese foreign spokeswoman.

Technically the shallow waters around the Spratly reefs would relatively easily beach US warships of deep draught, like what a US destroyer experienced near a Filipino-held island in 2010, and the US commanders would have to factor in PLAN ramming possibility against LCSs. A non-frequent entry seems to underline the Kerry/Yang Jiechi acquiescence on the Chinese phasing out land reclamation and US constraints on sending ships close to China-held reefs in May 2015, which may also guide the Carter/Fan Changlong negotiations in Washington D.C. one month later.⁹ Much depends on how US constraints are defined. Yet the potential for escalation is there if one side takes a confrontational approach. For instance, the Pentagon increases entry frequency and the PLA adopts more aggressive shadowing against the intruding ships.

Was the US entry designed for media and psychological warfare, mainly aiming at naming and shaming the Chinese and at showing US resolve to restate that it is the boss of the sea, or part of a geostrategic Cold-War-type containment mechanism to blockade the PLAN's continued expansion under an Indo-Pacific "two-ocean" strategy? The line between the two is really thin.

Was the entry meant to encourage US allies and partners to take similar actions so that the SCS dispute would be further internationalized and collective pressure would be heightened to isolate China in the rivalry for defining the rules of the game for the Asian maritime security order? If this is the case, Chinese response will be retaliatory, taking advantage of its weight in economics/trade, global governance and other strategic issues of world concern. This underlines the Australian and Japanese approach towards the FONOPs: supporting US actions but no entry into 12 NM of

⁹ The first casualty of such a clash is the regional economies. Delegates to the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue from Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia told me during the Dialogue that their government officials in the Dialogue tried to calm US officials down about the 12NM entry. They said that they would have to bear the first brunt in such a confrontation but I told them that that would not happen as the Kerry/Yang Jiechi acquiescence already took care of their concern. However, brinkmanship calculus is still real now and will be more so in the future depending on how each side evaluates the consequences of a naval standoff.

China-held reefs. So far Japan has not conducted any FONOPs in the SCS, while Australia has under the scheme of “Operation Gateway,” which has been going on for years prior to the worsening of SCS disputes, but the naval sailing and aircraft flights have been nowhere near the 12 NM of China-held reefs in the SCS. Chinese and Australian navies concluded a joint exercise in Oceania in January 2016. Here the cost for Beijing to defy international pressure is differently calculated by Chinese and Western analysts. While the latter see the cost increasingly unbearable for China, to the former however, it is real but quite mild, mainly in the category of international image. The benchmark for cost calculation by Beijing’s decision-makers is domestic politics and the trigger of war, both being core national interests that far outweigh other considerations. So far Beijing has believed that despite mounting international pressure by the end of the day it would have its cake and eat it too, if it carefully sets red-lines for its assertiveness. This confidence is reflected by the PLA’s continued deployment of weapons systems on the reclaimed islands, ignoring US criticism of China militarizing SCS dispute. This confidence is rooted in Chinese perception of US reluctance to confront China head-on on SCS issues when the two major powers have to cooperate on many global issues, e.g., Pyongyang’s 4th nuclear test in January 2016.

The last but not least question is whether the 12 NM entry would gradually slide into Sino-US military confrontation from an initial diplomatic strife in the form of a tactical show of force. It is likely that some sort of standoff would be anticipated. According to the view of a PLA officer it could not be ruled out that US naval vessels would be deliberately stationary within 12 NM of Mischief Reef to challenge Chinese sovereignty claims. This would be a major test of Xi Jinping’s resolve and PLA capability in response. Then the question becomes whether both sides would be able to compartmentalize their contest over the ESCS dispute so that the overall bilateral relations would not be hurt beyond repair. Again what appears to be an initial tactical show of force for exerting diplomatic pressure on Beijing may end up in military standoffs if the crisis management measures fail to prevent escalation. Here it is unlikely that the rules of encounter engagement between the two militaries would work effectively due to the fact that these rules are tactical measures that cannot deal with strategic design, say US containment of Chinese naval expansion in the SCS. The PLA also seems to be determined to deploy more weapons systems in the reclaimed SCS islands. The potential for conflict has only been enlarged.

So far China has not dramatized US FONOPs in its 12 NM waters for the sake of maintaining an overall workable relationship with America. Similarly, the Pentagon has simultaneously tried to play down the significance of such intrusions while continuing the intrusion. For instance, the B-52 overflight was said to be an error due to bad weather. It was not armed and without escorts.¹⁰ For such an easy target – slow flying with a huge size – its show simply informed the PLA that “we are here with no combat intent.” So far both sides seem to have drawn important distinction between symbolic US entries to protest China’s excessive maritime claims under FONOPs guidance and a pattern of persistent entries to challenge Chinese sovereignty claims from a geostrategic angle. Logically each has pretended not to construe the nature of the entry in the latter manner, even though it is indeed about geostrategic contention. If their mutual intent is to contain the tension caused by the 12 NM entry below the level of confrontation, an equilibrium may emerge reflecting Sino-Japanese action-reaction patterns inside the Senkaku/Diaoyu 12 NM. Such a developmental trend underscored Xi’s recent instruction that “the SCS tension will be protracted and the PLA should be constantly prepared in ensuring stability in the strategic directions and points in the SCS.”¹¹ The PLAN has to react strongly enough so that Xi’s nationalist legitimacy would not be substantially hurt in the eyes of the population but at the same time the reaction has to be measured so that the overall Sino-US relations would not be irreversibly undermined.¹² Therefore the distinction of the two types of entry, routine or symbolic, dictates great subtleties in PLA response. If US entry remains symbolically routine, it gives the PLA room to exercise maximum restraints. It is logical and likely that the Pentagon may also reciprocate it by conducting minimum numbers of entries in the foreseeable future, to save Sino-US cooperation beyond the SCS. The Spratly rocks do not present a case to sabotage the overall relations but the danger is there for temporary loss of control. This certainly reflects Beijing’s grave worry.

¹⁰ Admiral Yin Zhuo’s comments to *News in Focus Today*, CCTV-4, 12 December 2015.

¹¹ Comments by senior colonel Li Li, *News in Focus Today*, CCTV-4, 23 July 2015. This specifically indicates Obama’s praise of US exceptionalism in his 2016 State of the Union Address.

¹² As for PLA countermeasures, Senior Colonel Du Wenlong listed a few from radio broadcast to vigilant ship escorts to expulsion through ramming to fire warning, depending on the circumstances. *News in Focus Today*, CCTV-4, 11 October 2015.

The Nature of the Close-in Spy Activities

The above fatalist characterization of the enduring Sino-US seesaw battle in maritime domains is first of all rooted in their fundamentally different understanding of aero and naval EEZ operations. Daniel Russel conveniently blamed PLA transparency problems to highlight the logic of US close-in spy activities while PLA analysts criticize US exceptionalism and “gunboat diplomacy” as the source of danger.¹³ Such opposing views will persist to underline the nature of the close-in spy activities.

Different understanding of the military EEZ operations

To the US military its EEZ operations are premised on a number of justifications. Legally they take place in international air and maritime space where freedom of navigation is a global norm and principle. Culturally, surveillance of nations – friends or foes – with an impact on US national security is part of US military organizational tradition of maintaining superiority over adversaries by clarifying and understanding their capabilities and intents. In the US community of PLA researchers these activities are viewed as non-threatening.¹⁴

Chinese strategists argue that these US justifications lack convincing power. First, FONOPs have now become a catered carrier of geostrategic politics when these are executed inside 12 NM of China-held islands in the SCS and lifted major power conflict to the semi-military level. Secondly, PLA intercepts are not about preventing US aero-maritime passages through Chinese EEZ. Innocent overflight and navigation near Chinese territorial space and waters has not been a problem but it is an entirely different matter if the activities involve significant doses of war motivation and behavior. Thirdly, when the FON concept disguises intentions of leveraging absolute military superiority through accessing the opponent’s defense intelligence, legality amounts to technicality interpretations that reduce both its moral and legal good faith. As such, major general Zhang Shiping equates it to “a policy of gunboat diplomacy.”¹⁵ Cultural factors are relevant as well. China’s century of humiliation has created a unique strategic culture among the ordinary Chinese that restricts leaders’ options in responding to issues of sovereignty and

¹³ Comments by Senior Colonel Li Li to *News in Focus Today*, *CCTV-4*, 19 September 2014.

¹⁴ Mark Redden and Philip Saunders, “The US-Chinese Maritime Dynamic—Catalyst for Cooperation or Confrontation”, in Peter Dutton and Ryan Martinson (eds.), *Beyond the Wall: Chinese Far Seas Operations*, *CMSI Paper 13*, US Naval War College, 2015, p. 99.

¹⁵ Zhang Shiping, *中国海权* (China’s sea power), Beijing: The People’s Daily Press, 2009, p. 168.

foreign bullying. Yet cultural relevance is not confined to historical memory, which is actually a small part of the cultural roots of PLA intercepts. It is universally true that peeping at one's doorstep is culturally rude. When this is coupled with military intentions, the level of felt insult is higher, and reaction is qualitatively different, as compared with encounters that occur in a faraway place. Finally the claim that sovereignty concerns are a dominant force behind the Chinese moves seems to be sensible but not accurate.¹⁶ China does not lose an inch of land because of US surveillance in the Chinese EEZ. Despite potential nationalist explosion due to a Sino-US military clash near Chinese borders, the Chinese population would not know about individual cases of US spy activities if the government does not reveal them in public and Beijing does not normally reveal specific information about it, except for some general description of US activities. Therefore, the sovereignty challenge posed by US spy activities is intangible, not tangible. It can be made big or small, as testified by Beijing's low-key response to the "2,000" such cases in 2015. In these cases Beijing was loud in criticizing US acts but extremely cautious in reaction, including hiding the events from the Chinese public. Put in another way, while sovereignty concern is real, it is not something that is claimed to dominate PLA counter-measures.

The recent US SCS intervention has lifted the weight of Beijing's sovereignty concerns in the PLA exercise of maritime rights in the SCS as a result of US FON activities into the 12 NM of China-held Spratly islands.¹⁷ This sovereignty/nationalism nexus is no longer the issue of US spy activities near Chinese military facilities but geo-strategic dynamics of major power rivalry in the region. The danger is magnified as the rivalry takes the form of military brinkmanship tactics in the context of real preparation for a worst case scenario by the both sides.

The electronic warfare: the primary PLA concern

The crux of Chinese intercepts of US operations in China's EEZ is actually deprived from PLA depiction of such US operations in terms of being actual warfare without smoke.¹⁸ This underlines Beijing's identification of US SCS surveillance behavior as

¹⁶ Mark Redden and Philip Saunders, p. 109.

¹⁷ David Yang, "Risk of US-Chinese maritime confrontation increases in South China Sea", *HIS Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, 14 May 2015.

¹⁸ Major general Qian Lihua's talk to a conference on Taiwan and regional security, organized by the Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, Taipei, 19 December 2013.

violating its “core interest.” When such a concern was raised in March 2010 it was deliberately misconstrued by US and Japanese media as Beijing incorporating the SCS as its core interests. Suspension of Sino-US military-to-military ties prevented formal PLA participation in the meeting between top Chinese and US diplomatic and defense officials in March 2010 where Dai Pinguo relayed the PLA concern to Bader and Steinberg that the US close-in spy operations greatly hurt China’s core security and military interests in the SCS (the Hainan part). He demanded that Washington should decrease and eventually phase it out.¹⁹ However the US and Japanese media unspecifically used the words SCS to indicate the Spratly part of the SCS. The intention was clear as it would surely arouse ASEAN and regional alert on China’s SCS policy: protection of core interests in Beijing’s strategic vocabulary can trigger military actions.²⁰ Furthermore, Beijing cannot deny that its SCS interests are not core interests, which would generate strong domestic backlash.

To PLA analysts the Spratly disputes can be managed relatively easily if one does not flag on major power rivalry.²¹ Largely Beijing is able to control the rhythm of dispute and determine where the red-lines are set. By launching land reclamation and phasing it out, the PLA have laid necessary conditions for building facilities in the Spratlys at an affordable diplomatic price. The reclamation decision has now proved that Xi is more strategic and dialectical than his predecessors in choosing from two “evils”: diplomatic backlash and military needs when his judgment leans clearly towards the latter. Eventually if Sino-US and Sino-ASEAN relations remain basically positive, it would prove Xi’s sensibility in biting the bullets, as by the end of the day he has “his cake and eats it too.”²² Beijing’s decision on land reclamation might have been now or never, given substantial change in the Asia-Pacific geostrategic situation after the regime changes in Taipei and Washington in 2016. The cost of the move was carefully measured and reflects Xi Jinping’s bold but cautious leadership personality. However, Beijing has no control over what the US military would do in China’s aero and maritime neighbourhood. It is plausible to assume that Beijing did not expect US vessel entry into the 12 NM of its islands in

¹⁹ Interviews with senior Chinese IR specialists and diplomats in Beijing, 2012. Some US think-tank researchers and practitioners also confirmed with me that in the meeting the Spratly dispute was not discussed. The SCS was mentioned in general terms in regard to US close-in activities.

²⁰ See Michael Swaine’s papers on China’s core interest in *China Leadership Monitoring*, No. 34, 2012.

²¹ General Sun Jianguo’s speech to the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 1 June 2015.

²² Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi expressed such confidence in a TV interview during the 2015 ASEAN foreign ministers’ conference in Kuala Lumpur on 6 August 2015. He expressed the view that after China dredging activities stop, Sino-US relations will be stabilized. *The Morning News*, the [Phoenix TV](#), 7 August 2015.

the SCS. People may have different assessment on the gain/loss of the reclamation project. Beijing's is that the gains outweigh the loss by a big margin, even if the cost is also high.

If one has a closer look at how the past Sino-US military incidents took place, a clearer understanding can be achieved to establish a pattern of Chinese intercepts: where they become aggressive and where the constraints are the order of the day. In April 2001 when the EP-3 approached the clashing scene it was at a time when the PLAN South Sea Fleet was conducting a scaled-down war drill. The communication signals were intensively exchanged between participating warships and combat aircraft, representing a good opportunity for the EP-3 to pick up their electromagnetic spectrums and frequency spectrums. When this information was gathered, analysed and computerized, it would put Chinese warships and aircraft in greater jeopardy in times of military conflict than losing one polite. Wang Wei and his winger adopted close-in tactics to edge the EP-3 out of the scene. The *USNS Impeccable* incident happened in a similar situation. It is part of a carefully designed move to 'tickle' PLA radar stations, interfere with ship to shore communications and detect how Chinese submarines enter and leave their bases. The *USNS Impeccable* arrived just in time when the PLAN's 094 SSBNs approached its home base (Yalong Nuclear Submarine Base) in Hainan Island, during which process large volumes of communications were generated between the SSBNs and surface combatants and base commands.²³ With its highly sophisticated sonar systems on board the *USNS Impeccable* is particularly capable of collecting submarines' crucial information such as the radio frequencies, tail waves, water temperature differentials and magnetic signature of each submarine. This would tremendously add vulnerability to the PLAN's 09 Unit. Given SSBN 094s' extreme importance for China's nuclear deterrence as a much weaker power vis-a-vis the US, their safety is of core national security interest and has to be protected even with a level of excessive intercepts. This is hugely more valuable than the value of Spratly rocks and reefs and served as the reason why China's fishery administration ships used the most primitive measures of disruption against the *USS Impeccable* sonar systems. Certainly the consequences were negatively dire and represented a dangerous pattern of incidents.²⁴ Yet the

²³ Mark Valencia, "The South China Sea Brouhaha: Separating Substance from Atmosphere", *Policy Forum*, 10-044, 10 August 2010.

²⁴ Chris Rahman and Martin Tsameny, "A Strategic Perspective on Security and Naval Issues in the SCS", *Ocean Development & International Law*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2010, p. 327.

question is what better alternatives the PLA had in dealing with such activities.

Under the circumstances the range of choices was very narrow for the PLA: it had to choose between allowing top military secrets to be stolen by a more powerful enemy and reacting assertively to protect its vital interests, though at a risk of engendering a crisis in Sino-US relations. In making a hard choice a pattern of the PLA conducting intercepts has emerged. It is selective, distinguishing hard or soft intercepts according to the situation of whether there is a major PLA war drill either in the sky or at sea when US close-in spy activities happen. It is relatively relaxed when PLA units in exercises are well prepared for US surveillance at a relatively distant range and it is restrained when there is a major Sino-US diplomatic event in store, such as a state visit by either a US or Chinese leader, as the intercepting units receive tighter orders from the CMC. This actually explains why when the frequencies of US close-in spy activities have become visibly increased the number of incidents has not risen in proportion. Hard intercept is projected only when it is absolute necessary.

If the US navy is indeed conducting freedom of navigation assertions (FONAs) as a mission to oppose excessive claims by some littoral states over their adjacent waters, the action is about application of US legal interpretation of the “rule-based-system” that would not trigger naval confrontation. US scholars even trace the conceptual origins of FONAs from IR theory of liberalism and realism.²⁵ However, EEZ operations are clearly military in nature, inherently with a hostile intent.²⁶ The PLA depiction of the nature of US close-in spy activities as electronic warfare, not FONOPs sets the intercepting behavior as it has been in the last 30 years. That this war without smoke will determine PLA survival in times of war dampens PLA confidence in the so-called mechanisms of accident-aversion that regulate both sides operating near China’s inshore strategic military facilities. As far as PLA commanders are concerned, such mechanisms are meant to bind the PLA’s hands and present the entry ticket to US intruders. Respect for the safety rules of engagement may mean easy exposure of top PLA secrets and incur unbearable cost to the PLA in future warfare if the PLA loses the immediate and on-going electronic warfare in the EEZ. Placing the overall Sino-US relations above the PLA’s perceived vital interests of life-or-death renders it in a “damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-

²⁵ Amitai Etzioni, “Freedom of Navigation Assertions: the United States as the World’s Policeman”, *Armed Forces & Society*, published online, 8 September, 2015.

²⁶ Sam Bateman, “Clash at Sea: When Chinese vessels harass US ships”, *RSIS Commentary*, 13 March 2009.

don't" situation. The PLA's accumulated anger and frustration was vividly expressed by the maneuvering of a J-11B pilot vis-a-vis the US P8-A in a range of 6 meters in August 2014. The barrel roll the PLA pilot conducted means in Chinese "henggun" (横滚) – horizontal flip. Here 滚 means "to get out" in Chinese. In fact since the EP-3 incident the temper of Chinese pilots conducting intercepts has remained high, a sign of worry as increased US close-in spy activities only heat it up.

The Way Out and Ahead

There is surely no easy way out for the current "cat-and-mouse" game in regard to US close-in spy activities and PLA intercepts, given the zero-sum nature of the game. However, a way out has to be found, given the strategic nature of the bilateral state-to-state and mil-to-mil relations that have global implications. Therefore, the core of the challenge is not resolution of the duel but how to manage it for the sake of the larger and overall Sino-US relationship. From this perspective the two militaries have done relatively well given the tiny number of standoffs that have occurred in the last two decades thanks to bilateral constraints, again given the rapid rise of the numbers of intrusions and intercepts. The PLA has particularly emphasized its "strategic patience" of being victimized, as the events all happen at the door steps of its key bases. The US side has not dispatched any armed platforms inside the Chinese EEZ in carrying out surveillance, still less sending combat platforms as escorts to the EEZ missions. Therefore it is not accidental that an irreversible downfall has not been triggered, despite the temperature of the game.

On the other hand prospects of mid-air collisions are inherent in this game. Generally speaking the US is the strategic aggressor as its close-in spy activities take place near the PLA bases and stake the survival of key PLA weapons systems, such as the 09s, in times of war. This obliges the PLA to play the role of an aggressor on the spot. Some of the actions by overzealous PLA pilots, such as Wang Wei, are clearly dangerous but not necessarily unprofessional in carrying out his job of mid-air expulsion. Without being at a close range PLA aero intercepts cannot be effective on two accounts. Technically, the relatively less than advanced electronic equipment onboard PLA aircraft, i.e., the J-8s, propels the pilots to get near the spy planes to disrupt their collection of intelligence signals. More strategically, as far as PLA pilots are concerned, without being dangerous their US counterparts feel no taboos

in conducting close-in spy operations and they will do the job at great ease. It is a foregone conclusion that US EEZ spying will continue and so will PLA intercepts, occasionally in a visibly provocative mode. Accidents are bound to happen, and both sides have been prepared both psychologically and operationally. As a result it is not difficult to infer that even if such an incident happens, even with loss of lives, in anticipation of it both sides would be in a position to contain the worst out of it.

However, serious damage will be done in such circumstances. It is better such unwanted standoffs will not happen, or at least not happen in a close interval to cause an inevitable freefall in bilateral relations. Thus the technical and primary responsibility lies in how the interceptors behave in doing their jobs. PLA pilots are highly disciplined but human beings are susceptible to temporary emotions. The same can be said of US ones. One just wonders, from his subsequent release of duty, whether the USS captain received orders to get to the inner ring of CV-16 escorts disregarding repeated warnings from Commodore Zhang Zheng or whether he just acted on his own. Factually speaking the pattern of PLA intercepts is not much different to that of US and Japanese ones. Armed Japanese F-15s often get very close to PLA aircraft passing through Japan's ADIZ. Senior Colonel Shen Jinke, spokesman for the PLAAF, revealed that a number of SDF F-15s entered China's ADIZ on 7 August 2014. One of them approached the Chinese surveillance plane within 15 meters. Shen released a video of the encounter and the Japanese SDF spokesman replied "no-comment."²⁷ According to Yang Zhiliang, deputy commissar of the Special Aircraft Division of the North Sea Fleet, in the last few years the pilots of his division have had over 200 close encounters with armed US and Japanese aircraft when they patrol the ESCSs. Many are as close as 30 meters.²⁸ US F-15s do the same to Russian bombers such as Tu-95s that intrude occasionally into areas along the coast of Alaska and even California. Someday the PLA pilots of the H-20 will say "Good Morning, US pilots" in the same places as Russian pilots do today.²⁹ What has happened in the Chinese/American aero game is actually an international one but the gravity of actions will gradually shift from today's one-way traffic along Chinese coasts towards US coasts via Guam and Hawaii in due time. Such prospects may moderate Chinese response to US spy activities in its EEZ.

²⁷ Cai Yongwei, "SDF twice entered Chinese ADIZ in August", *Lianhezaobao*, 8 August 2014.

²⁸ Cheng Ying and Wu Dengfeng, "The Elite Special Aircraft Division", *Oriental Observer Weekly*, 26 June 2015.

²⁹ "Revelation of Russian bombers close-in to US air space", *The Global Times*, 24 July 2015, p. 8.

Fortunately, there have been significant bilateral crisis-control mechanisms to prevent or contain the worst from happening. Although they are not the ultimate way out, they are useful traffic rules binding both sides, as seen from the list below:

- Strong political will and leadership determination to avoid EEZ confrontation, which imposes constraints onto first line commanders and pilots.³⁰ They have strategic designs for the bilateral relationship that is more important than close-in activities.
- Strong will of war-avoidance by the two militaries. The PLA understands well that US close-in spying is not for launching preemptive wars against China but for preparing for worst case scenarios and thus it shapes countermeasures accordingly. This means that soft intercepts are the norm, the hard ones exceptional.
- Both sides are aware that the spying/intercepts will last indefinitely. In the meantime incidents do happen. Therefore a level of ambiguity in crisis management has to be pursued to minimize their negative impact on the larger relations between the two states and two militaries.
- Both sides are aware that the causes for direct bilateral confrontation are scant but the third party factor may trigger such standoffs, such as Japan and the Philippines. Therefore it is necessary to set necessary red-lines on third party behavior governing crisis-prevention amidst rising maritime tensions.
- Codifying existing operational rules of contacts and itemizing them into handbooks of daily communications between the two sides, i.e., hotlines, patterns of greetings in unexpected encounters and required critical distance in intercepts.

Fundamentally there have to be detailed action-specific rules of the game that are fair and mutually acceptable. For instance, there must be conditions for the US to exercise freedom of navigation by way of electronic warfare in other countries' EEZs. In enforcing intercepts in China's EEZ, the PLA needs to avoid hard intercepts so that the chances of standoffs will be minimized. It is legitimate for people to remain pessimistic as incidents are bound to happen but there are also reasons to believe

³⁰ For instance one of the early speeches by General Lori Robinson upon assuming the position of commander of the US Pacific Air Forces in August 2014 was her willingness to establish mutually acceptable rules of the game governing EEZ operations and intercepts to avoid unwanted incidents. Wu Shengli and his counterpart also attach great importance to formulate effective accident-aversion regulations.

that, with the enormous efforts that both sides have invested in crisis-prevention and management, incidents would not lead to the breakdown of bilateral relations in a fundamental manner. The announcement of the Sino-US aero-encounter agreement during Xi Jinping's 2015 US visit pointed to a good beginning for crisis prevention. After all, mutually acceptable traffic rules generate positive anticipations and bilateral self-discipline in this cat-and-mouse game.