

Is Naval Conflict With China Inevitable?

Written by Nguyen tien think
Saturday, 03 September 2016 00:00

This week, President Obama is making his final trip to Asia. With the presidential election looming, it is the right time to reflect on Obama's foreign policy, and to think about what is to come. A key component of the next president's foreign policy must be to compel China to respect international law. Otherwise, we may be faced by a conflict with a growing navy at a time when ours is decreasing in size. Obama has not made this imperative any easier.



On July 12 an international tribunal at The Hague found that China possessed neither an historic claim over disputed islands in the South China Sea nor a legal basis for sovereign claims over its waters. On the same day Beijing landed civilian aircraft on two of the three reefs—Subi and Mischief—that China has turned into armed islands. This gives China three working runways in the disputed Spratly Islands the nearest of which is 600 miles from China.

Notwithstanding Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2015 statement to President Obama that the manmade islands would not be militarized, continued construction of hardened hangars demonstrates Beijing's intent to deploy combat aircraft to the islands. The CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency website shows what the islands will look like when People's Liberation Army Air Force fighter aircraft arrive.

The Obama administration's response to the international court's decision wholly ignored the military character of China's actions to date in the South China Sea: "The decision today by the Tribunal in the Philippines-China arbitration is an important contribution," said State Department spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby, (USN, ret.), "to the shared goal of a peaceful resolution to disputes in the South China Sea." RADM Kirby is right that China prefers a peaceful resolution

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to the islands dispute. Beijing would like to resolve the matter by threats, rather than the use of force. This is not a solution that the U.S. government should embrace. Still, Kirby's statement is entirely consistent with long-standing U.S. policy.

Since the Reagan administration U.S. policy has sought to make China a stakeholder in the liberal international order. This means that China would have a stake in such characteristics of the current system as freedom of navigation in international waters, respect for international agreements it had ratified, the rule of law, as well as for other states' sovereignty—to name a few. To encourage Chinese rulers to identify their nation's own interest with that of the international order, senior-level officials from both countries have been meeting together since the Nixon administration. With U.S. support China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. In 2016 the People's Liberation Army Navy participated for the second time in the large naval exercise that the U.S. conducts with other Pacific Rim states. The list of U.S. overtures is a long one.

No joyful music has followed them. Quite the opposite. Encapsulating China's view of its relations with other states, Beijing's foreign minister at the time, Yang Jiechi, told other Asian senior officials at a 2010 meeting in Hanoi when the subject of China's claims in the South China Sea was raised that, "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's a fact."

China's brand of exceptionalism reinforces Minister Yang's blunt assertion that might makes right. The qualification "with Chinese characteristics" has become a commonplace in international lingo. The press and scholarly publications have reported on 'a global order with Chinese characteristics.' Ditto foreign aid, environmental law, nuclear deals, and commercial practices. The list of accepted international practices "with Chinese characteristics" is long, showing that China's exceptionalism lies neither in adherence to principle, nor to law, nor accepted norms of international behavior, but rather in deflection from these.

U.S. policy toward China has failed spectacularly. China's actions show that it sees us as a strategic competitor. We have chosen to see China as a large market that can be cajoled into joining us as a defender of international security and economic stability. U.S. policy makers hoped that the large volume of trade between China and the U.S. and the accompanying economic progress in the former would remold Chinese rulers to look, think, and act more like us. The evidence does not support this roseate hope.

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The next U.S. administration needs to understand that our fate as a great power is inseparable from America's continued role as a great Pacific power. This does not mean aggressive policies or military confrontation. It does mean active diplomacy with the nations on China's periphery who fear its hegemony. It means credible combat power to foreshorten China's mis-behavior and militarized ambitions, including consistent, reliable, and frequent U.S. Navy freedom of navigation operations in the international waters of the South China Sea. No less important, it means increasing the U.S. naval advantage over China by building substantially more attack submarines, and exploiting this asymmetric advantage by deploying them to the South and East China Seas.

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