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Confronting both China and Russia: U.S. Risks Military Clash With China In Yellow Sea

by Rick Rozoff
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Delayed until after the United States achieved a United Nations Security Council statement on July 9 condemning the sinking of a South Korean warship in March, Washington's plans for naval maneuvers in the Yellow Sea near Chinese territorial waters are forging ahead.

The joint exercises with South Korea, as news sources from the latter nation have recently disclosed, will be conducted on both sides of the Korean Peninsula, not only in the Yellow Sea as previously planned but also in the Sea of Japan. (Referred to in the Korean press as the West and East Seas, respectively.) Confirmation that the U.S. nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS George Washington will participate has further exacerbated concerns in Northeast Asia and raised alarms over American intentions not only vis-a-vis North Korea but China as well.

An exact date for the war games has not yet been announced, but is expected to be formalized no later than when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates arrive in the South Korean capital of Seoul on July 21.

For weeks now leading Chinese foreign ministry and military officials have condemned the U.S.-led naval exercises, branding them a threat to Chinese national sovereignty and to peace and stability in the region.

China's influential Global Times wrote on July 12 that "The eventuality that Beijing has to prepare for is close at hand. The delayed US-South Korean naval exercise in the Yellow Sea is now slated for mid-July. According to media reports, a nuclear-powered US aircraft carrier has left its Japanese base and is headed for the drill area." [1]

Permanently based in Yokosuka, Japan, the USS George Washington is an almost 100,000-ton supercarrier: "The nuclear carrier, commissioned in 1992, is the sixth Nimitz-class vessel, carrying some 6,250 crew and about 80 aircraft, including FA-18 fighter jets and E-2C Hawkeye airborne early warning aircraft." [2]

The F/A-18 Hornet is a supersonic, multirole jet fighter (F/A is for Fighter/Attack) and one of its primary roles is destroying an adversary's air defenses. The E-2C Hawkeye has been described as the "eyes and ears" of American carrier strike groups, being equipped with long-range surveillance radar.

In addition to the nuclear aircraft carrier, "an Aegis-equipped destroyer, an amphibious assault ship, about four 4,500-ton KDX-II-class destroyers, the 1,800-ton Son Won-il-class submarine and F-15K fighter jets are expected to join the exercise." [3] U.S. Aegis class warships (destroyers and cruisers) are equipped for Standard Missile-3 anti-ballistic interceptor missiles, part of a U.S.-led Asia-Pacific (to date, along with the U.S., Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Australia) and ultimately international interceptor missile system.

The F-15K ("Slam Eagle") is a state-of-the-art multirole (used for both aerial combat and ground attack) jet fighter supplied to South Korea by the U.S.

The presence of a U.S. nuclear aircraft carrier and scores of advanced American and South Korean warplanes off the coast of China in the Yellow Sea – and near Russia's shore in the Sea of Japan if the Washington is deployed there – qualitatively and precariously raises the level of brinkmanship in Northeast Asia.

The drumbeat of confrontation has been steadily increasing in volume and tempo since the sinking of a South Korean corvette, the Cheonan, on March 26 with the resultant death of 46 crew members.

An investigation into the incident was organized by the U.S. and included experts from the U.S., South Korea, Britain, Australia and Sweden, but not from China and Russia which both border the Korean Peninsula. On May 20 the five-nation team released a report blaming a North Korean torpedo for the sinking of the Cheonan. North Korea denied the accusation and neither Russia nor China, excluded from the investigation, have concurred with the U.S. accusation.

American provocations escalated dramatically at the Group of 20 (G20) summit in Toronto on June 27 when U.S. President Barack Obama (in his own words) held a "blunt" conversation with China's President Hu Jintao, accusing him and his nation of "willful blindness" in relation to North Korea's "belligerent behavior." Upbraiding his

Chinese counterpart, Obama stated, “I think there’s a difference between restraint and willful blindness to consistent problems.” (On the same occasion Obama praised South Korea’s President Lee Myung-bak for his “extraordinary restraint.”)

“My hope is that president Hu will recognise as well that this is an example of Pyongyang going over the line.”

President Hu and the Chinese government as a whole would be fully justified in suspecting that mounting U.S. threats are aimed not only (and perhaps not so much) against North Korea as against China itself.

Beijing is not alone in entertaining suspicions that Washington is employing the sinking of the Cheonan as the pretext for achieving broader geopolitical objectives. On July 14 Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in speaking of the Cheonan incident and its aftermath, pleaded: “I believe that the most important [concern] at the present time is to ease the situation, avoid agitation, escalation of emotions and start preparing conditions for the resumption of the six-party [North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, the U.S. and Japan] talks.” [4]

Portraying the UN Security Council statement on the matter last week (which was not the harsh condemnation of North Korea Washington had pushed for) as being a balanced one, he also said, “It is important that nobody tries to distort the evaluations given.”

In addition, referring to North Korea’s latest reaffirmation of its willingness to jointly investigate the Cheonan’s sinking with South Korea, Lavrov said: “This statement is not new. From the very beginning the DPRK confirmed it wanted to participate in the investigation.

“I hear, the sides were to agree on some format of interaction.” [5]

When on June 27 President Obama stated “our main focus right now is in the U.N. Security Council making sure that there is a crystal-clear acknowledgement that North Korea engaged in belligerent behavior that is unacceptable to the international community” [6], his characterization of the latter entity excluded not only North Korea but China and Russia as well.

The severity and urgency of mounting U.S. threats is illustrated in a recent column by Shen Dingli, executive dean of the Institute of International Studies and director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai. His comments end with a frightening parallel and a dire warning:

“The US and South Korea are implementing joint military exercises this month in the Yellow Sea, with the possibility of deploying the US aircraft carrier George Washington.

“The running of such exercises so close to China’s waters has left China strongly, and rightfully, dissatisfied.

“The US and South Korea may argue that the exercise is not in China’s territorial waters, so China has no right to comment.

“However, even if the joint exercises are not in Chinese sovereign waters, they may take place in the waters of China’s interests as the international waters [in the] Yellow Sea near China’s exclusive economic zone are extremely important to China’s interests.

“Given the sophisticated equipment it carries, the George Washington poses a real potential threat to Chinese territory.

“Even if the US-South Korea military exercises are outside China’s territory, the striking power of the US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier also poses a serious threat to neighboring countries.

“The US and South Korea have said the military exercises are being held in order to deter North Korea because of the sinking of the South Korean Cheonan corvette and the death of 46 South Korean sailors.

“But the case for the possible North Korean sinking of the Cheonan has not been thoroughly established.

“South Korea refused to let North Korean officials present their case against the evidence for their supposed complicity in the sinking.

“When South Korea launched the so-called international survey, it refused the participation of China and other countries, which did not increase the credibility of the so-called findings.

“These exercises are needlessly provocative, and will eventually backfire on the US and South Korea.

“During the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when the Soviet Union established nuclear missile bases on the island, the US objected to the close proximity of the Soviet weaponry even though they traveled only through international waters to reach Cuba, and the US set up a blockade to stop them being deployed.

“When the US ponders the idea of deploying its nuclear aircraft carrier in the Yellow Sea, very close to China, shouldn’t China have the same feeling as the US did when the Soviet Union deployed missiles in Cuba?

“China may not have the military strength to forcibly prevent such exercises now, but it may do so in response to such provocative actions in the future.” [7]

The only surviving head of state of the nations involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis, former Cuban president Fidel Castro, has issued several warnings lately that a U.S. and

allied attack on North Korea (and Iran) could result in regional conflagration and even nuclear war.

A Chinese commentary last week provided more details of the threat that a U.S. nuclear aircraft carrier off its shore will pose to the nation and also contained a blunt warning, stating “the anxiety on the Chinese side will be huge if a US aircraft carrier enters the sea connecting the Korean Peninsula and China – it would mean that major cities like Dalian, Qingdao, Tianjin and even Beijing are within US attack range.

“At this stage, China may not react through a show of force to the US fleet cruising into the international waters of the Yellow Sea. But it does not mean that the Chinese people will tolerate it. Whatever harm the US military maneuver may inflict upon the mind of the Chinese, the United States will have to pay for it, sooner or later.” [8]

Washington’s recent deployment of two nuclear-powered guided missile submarines to China’s neighborhood – the USS Michigan to South Korea and the USS Ohio to the Philippines [9] – only add to China’s concerns.

As do the ongoing U.S.-led Angkor Sentinel exercises in Cambodia with over 1,000 troops from 26 nations, including American and NATO and Asian NATO partners like Britain, France, Germany and Italy (along with the U.S., the NATO Quint) and Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan and Mongolia. The last country, wedged between China and Russia, is being integrated into the American global military network, even supplying troops to serve under NATO in Afghanistan. [10]

“This is the first time in the history of the Cambodian military that we are hosting [exercises] with the participation of many countries...which encompasses such a multi-national military basis,” a Cambodian general said of the training. [11]

“Addressing the ceremony, US Ambassador Carol Rodley said Washington remained committed to enhancing its military relationship with Cambodia. She added that Angkor Sentinel provided a ‘unique opportunity’ to deepen the two countries’ friendship.” [12]

Cambodia is only once removed from China, the two nations connected by both Laos and Vietnam.

An Agence France-Presse dispatch reported “The United States and Laos pledged to step up cooperation after their highest-level talks since the Vietnam War, the latest country in a renewed US effort to engage Southeast Asia,” after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with Laotian Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith in Washington, D.C. on July 13.

Sisoulith, also his country’s deputy prime minister, is the first major Laotian official to visit the U.S. since before 1975.

State Department spokesman Philip Crowley told reporters “The United States is committed to building our relationship with Laos as part of our broader efforts to expand

engagement with Southeast Asia,” and Agence France-Presse added “President Barack Obama’s administration has put a new focus on Southeast Asia, saying the region was overlooked as George W. Bush’s former administration became preoccupied with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” [13]

Next week Clinton will visit Afghanistan, Pakistan, Vietnam and South Korea. The first three countries border China and South Korea faces it across the Yellow Sea. The Pentagon and NATO have ensconced themselves in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, all five of which border western China. [14]

Clinton will visit Vietnam to attend meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Lower Mekong Initiative (consisting of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam).

The State Department’s Vietnam hand, Joe Yun, said that it will be part of “Secretary Clinton’s fourth trip to East Asia in the past year.

“Her engagement in this region demonstrates the vital importance of the Asia-Pacific region, and especially Southeast Asia, to the future of the United States.”

Fellow Southeast Asian nation Malaysia has just announced the deployment of its first military contingent to assist NATO’s war in Afghanistan, “as ties with the United States deepen.”

“In an April meeting between Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak and US President Barack Obama, the two leaders agreed to cooperate on key security issues to create a stronger relationship.” [15]

Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recently toured the Mountain Home Air Base in the American state of Idaho where 400 of his country’s pilots and other service members and their families are now stationed. “The Singapore military personnel will be at the US base for the next 20 years or so.” [16] Singapore troops have been assigned to NATO in Afghanistan and are facing a long stay there also.

Malaysia and Singapore are currently participating for the first time in the mammoth U.S.-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) war games in the Pacific which will continue into August.

To indicate to what purpose the U.S. is “expanding engagement” with Vietnam in particular and Southeast Asia in general, the aforementioned Yun revealed that “we also look to Vietnam as ASEAN’s Chair to exercise leadership, including in sensitive areas such as North Korea’s attack on the South Korean naval vessel, the Cheonan. We would like to see Vietnam exercise its influence to press for a genuine dialogue so that the people of Burma can work with the existing government to move forward, and to press Burma on the need to fully implement UN Security Council Resolutions 1718 and 1874.

Burma ought to be transparent with the international community in its dealings with North Korea.” [17]

North Korea and Burma (Myanmar) are, like Vietnam, southern neighbors of China’s and along with the seclusive kingdom of Bhutan are the only nations near China with which the U.S. is not cultivating closer military ties.

Also to China’s south, its giant neighbor India has been pulled deeper into the Pentagon’s orbit since the New Framework For The U.S.-India Defense Relationship was signed in June of 2005, including hosting U.S. warships, warplanes and troops for annual Malabar war games off its coasts. Last December U.S. Pacific Command chief Admiral Robert Willard stated that the Pentagon and India “are in talks to convert their bilateral Malabar series of naval exercises into a joint services war game involving their navies, air forces and marine commandos.” [18] This year's Malabar 2010 included a U.S. guided missile cruiser and frigate and two destroyers as well as a fast attack submarine.

Last October over 1,000 U.S. and Indian troops participated in the Yudh Abhyas 2009 military exercises in India, which was the first time the Pentagon deployed a Stryker armored combat brigade outside the Iraqi and Afghan war theaters. "The size and scope of this combined exercise is unparalleled" [19], stated an American commander present for the war games.

President Obama is scheduled to visit India in November and his trip there will “result in some 5 billion dollars worth of American arms sales to India....Observers point out that the role of India’s biggest arms supplier is shifting from Russia to the United States.” [20]

The arms transactions are reported to include Patriot interceptor missiles, thus complementing comparable missile shield arrangements the U.S. has with Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Australia in the Asia-Pacific area.

The projected deal also includes Washington supplying Delhi with 10 Boeing C-17 military transport planes: “Once India gets the C-17 transport aircraft, the mobility of its forces stationed along the border with China will be improved....[The] arms sales will improve ties between Washington and New Delhi, and, intentionally or not, will have the effect of containing China’s influence in the region.” [21]

The U.S. has also lately led joint military exercises in Bangladesh and East Timor, and the annual U.S.-organized Khaan Quest military exercises in Mongolia are to start next month.

A recent article in the China Times by an unidentified researcher with the Chinese navy’s military academy observed that “the US has seemingly become less restrained in its move to push forward an Asian version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization with its allies in the region.

“In so doing, Washington has harbored the obvious strategic intention of containing China – whose economic and strategic influence has kept increasing in the international arena....” [22]

It is against that backdrop, in the context of Washington putting the finishing touches to the consolidation of an Asian analogue of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, that China is being challenged in the Yellow Sea.

The last-cited source detailed the Pentagon’s encroachment near China’s borders:

“The radius of the US military operation has expanded to more than 1,000 kilometers, which means a US military mission in the waters off the ROK [South Korea] can still constitute a huge deterrence to China and other countries along the nearby coastline and strike at strategic targets deep inside their territories.

“With unchallenged armed forces, the US has never relented in its efforts towards long-planned strategic adjustment in the Asia-Pacific region. Under this strategy, the US has gradually increased the presence and activity of its warships and airplanes in China’s surrounding maritime area.” [23]

Regarding the naval exercise with the U.S., South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman Won Tae-jae recently affirmed that “We can say that it will take place sometime this month. This month, there are a variety of schedules concerning bilateral security and diplomatic issues, and the decision on the exercise will be made in consideration of those schedules.” [24]

China, which conducted a live-fire naval exercise in the East China Sea from June 30-July 5 “in an apparent show of...force ahead of the [U.S.-South Korean] exercise...appears unnerved as the 97,000-ton [USS George Washington] carrier has an operational range of some 1,000 kilometers and can glean intelligence on military facilities and installments along China’s eastern coastal regions once it is deployed in the West [Yellow] Sea.” [25]

The U.S. armed forces newspaper Stars and Stripes disclosed on July 14 that “In what the Pentagon says is a direct response to North Korea’s sinking of the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan, the U.S. and South Korea likely will agree to a series of new naval and air exercises next week, when Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton make a joint visit to Seoul.” [26]

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell was cited asserting that “The announcement is the result of direct instruction from President Barack Obama to find new ways to collaborate with...Korean counterparts following the attack....He would not offer specifics other than they would occur in the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea.”

In his own words, Morrell said “We are not yet ready to announce the precise details of those exercises but they will involve a wide range of assets and are expected to be initiated in the near future.” [27]

Gates and Clinton are to meet for the first bilateral talks with their South Korean counterparts Minister of National Defense Kim Tae-young and Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan on July 21 and, according to the Pentagon spokesman, will “discuss and likely approve a proposed series of US/ROK combined military exercises.” [28]

Regarding concerns voiced by China about the U.S. advancing its military so near its coast, Morrell said that “Those determinations are made by us, and us alone....Where we exercise, when we exercise, with whom and how, using what assets and so forth, are determinations that are made by the United States Navy, by the Department of Defense, by the United States government.” [29]

There is no way that such confrontational, arrogant and vulgar language was not understood at its proper value in Beijing. Nor is the prospect, as noted by Lee Su-seok, analyst at South Korea’s Institute for National Security Strategy, of “the involvement of a U.S. aircraft carrier in the Yellow Sea as having a possible link to plans by the U.S. to defend Taiwan” [30] likely to go unnoticed.

What the response to the U.S.’s increasingly more brash and adventurist policy might be was indicated in a recent Chinese editorial, which stated in part:

“In their recent responses, several high-ranking Chinese navy officials have made it plain that China will not stay in ‘hands-off’ mode as the drill gets underway. For that will make the US believe that China’s defense circle on the sea is small, and, therefore, US fleets will be able to freely cruise over the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea in the future.

“Military experts have warned that if the joint drill really takes place off the western coast of South Korea, Chinese airplanes and warships will very likely go all the way out to closely watch the war game maneuvers. Within such proximity on not-so-clearly-marked international waters, any move that is considered hostile to the other side can willy-nilly trigger a rash reaction, which might escalate into the unexpected or the unforeseen.

“One false move, one wrong interpretation, is all it would take for the best-planned exercises to go awry....The impact of a crisis on that scale would be tremendous, making any dispute over trade or the yuan’s value between the two in recent years pale in comparison....Tension is mounting over the US-South Korean joint exercise. Beijing and Washington still have time, and leeway, to desist from moving toward a possible conflict on the Yellow Sea.” [31]

A similar warning was sounded in another major Chinese daily:

“If the US and ROK continue to act willfully by holding the controversial military drill, it would pose a challenge to China’s safety and would inevitably provoke a huge backlash from Chinese citizens.

“Today’s China is no longer the China of a century ago that had no choice but to bend to imperialist aggression. After decades of development, especially since the adoption of the reform and opening-up policies, China has become the world’s third largest economy and possesses a modern military capable of any self-defense missions.” [32]

When Robert Gates and Hillary Clinton arrive in Seoul on July 21 it will formally be to mark the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War, which within three months drew China into the fighting.

When the two American secretaries meet with South Korea’s defense and foreign ministers and, as State Department spokesman Philip Crowley recently claimed, “likely approve a proposed series of U.S. and Korea combined military exercises, including new naval and air exercises in both the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea” [33], the world should prepare for the threat of a second Korean war, a second U.S.-China armed conflict.

Notes

- 1) Global Times, July 12, 2010
- 2) Korea Herald, July 13, 2010
- 3) Ibid
- 4) Russian Information Agency Novosti, July 14, 2010
- 5) Itar-Tass, July 14, 2010
- 6) White House, June 27, 2010

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-g-20-press-conference-toronto-canada>

- 7) Global Times, July 14, 2010
- 8) Global Times, July 6, 2010
- 9) Pentagon Provokes New Crisis With China
Stop NATO, July 10, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/07/10/2061>

- 10) Mongolia: Pentagon Trojan Horse Wedged Between China And Russia
Stop NATO, March 31, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/mongolia-pentagon-trojan-horse-wedged-between-china-and-russia>

- 11) Xinhua News Agency, July 12, 2010
- 12) Phnom Penh Post, July 13, 2010
- 13) Agence France-Presse, July 14, 2010
- 14) Afghan War: Petraeus Expands U.S. Military Presence Throughout Eurasia Stop NATO, July 4, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/07/05/afghan-war-petraeus-expands-u-s-military-presence-throughout-eurasia>

- 15) Radio Netherlands, July 15, 2010
- 16) Channel News Asia, July 12, 2010
- 17) VietNamNet, July 15, 2010
- 18) Press Trust of India, December 4, 2009
- 19) Embassy of the United States in India, October 19, 2009
- 20) Voice of Russia, July 11, 2010
- 21) Economic Times via Global Times, July 13, 2010
- 22) China Daily, July 12, 2010
- 23) Ibid
- 24) Korea Herald, July 13, 2010
- 25) Ibid
- 26) Stars and Stripes, July 14, 2010
- 27) Ibid
- 28) Agence France-Presse, July 14, 2010
- 29) Ibid
- 30) JoongAng Daily, July 12, 2010
- 31) Global Times, July 12, 2010
- 32) China Daily, July 12, 2010
- 33) Yonhap News Agency, July 15, 2010