

authority. It also adds to the sophistication of Beijing's means to respond to an international dispute. When the National People's Congress (NPC) Foreign Relations Committee protests a U.S. congressional resolution on a Taiwan issue, its statement should not be discounted, because the NPC is really an instrument of policy made in the party, the real seat of power. It should be seen instead as Beijing's use of the corresponding institution by protocol in responding to the specific source on the U.S. side, and so be taken with due regard for its authority, not its actual power and policy influence within the Chinese system.

### **Conclusion—A Hypothetical South China Sea Signaling Scenario**

Nothing would be more destructive of Sino-American relations and Asia's security dynamics than a decision by China to threaten a military confrontation in order to change a U.S. course of action Beijing perceived as threatening its interests in the South China Sea. It would create a political-military crisis far exceeding those that erupted from the accidental 1999 bombing of China's Belgrade embassy or the 2001 collision between two U.S. and Chinese military aircraft. Such a crisis would stem from two conditions. The United States would view such a threat as the first Chinese effort to challenge American military supremacy in Asia's maritime periphery. Second, all of Asia would perceive the potential military confrontation as possibly determining the future security dynamics of the region. Beijing's decisionmakers would recognize the probable strategic implications of such a decision. Conceiving of events that could lead to such a perilous decision is in itself confounding. Consequently, the suggested scenario will focus on a low level of coercive diplomacy that goes beyond the harassment which U.S. intelligence-collection missions have faced over the past decade, but which is far less threatening than an outright military confrontation.

#### **The Scenario**

The core of this scenario is based upon the proposition that Beijing perceives closer military ties among the United States, the Republic of the Philippines (RP), and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) as a threatening strategic trend much as it did Hanoi's November 1978 security treaty with Moscow. It is a trend Beijing identifies as originating in U.S. Secretary of State Clinton's firm position on U.S. South China Sea interests at the Hanoi-hosted ASEAN meetings of July 2010. Whereas Beijing saw the Hanoi-Moscow treaty as confirming its perception that Vietnam and the USSR were colluding to establish "regional hegemony" over Hanoi's Indochina neighbors and possibly over all Southeast Asia, the closer links it sees emerging among Washington, Hanoi, and Manila are viewed in this scenario as potentially

presenting a military coalition designed to offset China's growing military presence in the South China Sea. The existing U.S. mutual defense treaty with Manila is seen as providing expanding access to RP military bases and, Beijing fears, presumably allowing a buildup of logistic support for American regional military operations. U.S. port visits and closer political links with the SRV are suggesting a level of cooperation that would include improving combined operational capabilities between Vietnamese and U.S. forces. These developments could possibly lead to the United States gaining access to SRV military facilities, including its air bases, even as Hanoi improves its own military capabilities with acquisitions of advanced submarines and fighter aircraft from Russia. China's signaling is designed to indicate the seriousness with which Beijing views this strategic trend.

The United States finds its position in this scenario problematic for several reasons. It is not seeking to build a regional alliance against China. As part of its strategic "rebalancing" toward Asia, however, Washington seeks to assure regional friends and allies that the United States will maintain a strong regional military presence. An aspect of this strategy is to guarantee freedom of navigation through the South China Sea. In support of this objective, at the time Beijing initiates signaling China's concerns, the USS *George Washington* carrier strike group (CSG) has been scheduled to conduct a FON exercise in the South China Sea. As part of U.S. regional assurance policy, Vietnamese political and military officials have been invited aboard for a couple of days to observe flight operations. A long-planned, combined exercise between U.S. and Philippine marines is also about to get underway. For the purpose of illustrating the full range of Chinese signaling behavior, we postulate disagreements among U.S. policymakers about whether to cancel or postpone these activities in response to Chinese concerns or whether such actions would be interpreted as signals of weakness that would damage the U.S. reputation in Beijing and in the region. In the scenario, these policy disagreements delay clear substantive U.S. response to Chinese signals, prompting policymakers in Beijing to move up the signaling ladder.

Beijing's signaling begins at the lower level of authority with a commentary by a PLAN political commissar at the South Sea Fleet Yulin naval base on Hainan Island. His commentary includes a military assessment of developments in the South China Sea stressing the increasing military cooperation between the United States and the naval forces of the Philippines and Vietnam. He details the port calls made by U.S. naval ships to Vietnam and the Philippines as part of his assessment. This review is paralleled by a *Liberation Army Daily* article on the same topic stressing China's commitment to cooperation and stability in the South China Sea even as it safeguards its national maritime rights. During a visit by the commander of the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) to PLAN headquarters, China's naval commander makes similar points

in his discussion stressing the need for cooperation between the U.S. and Chinese navies and with their regional counterparts. This first step is signaling the United States that China's maritime interests, particularly in the South China Sea, are a matter of importance requiring discussion between the two defense establishments.

Failing to receive a U.S. response in a week, China takes the next step upward by including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in the signaling process. At a weekly press conference, an MFA spokesperson includes a comment about the importance of China's national maritime rights in terms of sovereignty and access to maritime resources. Sovereignty and resources are the core of these remarks, not security or defense issues. *Liberation Army Daily* carries a signed article discussing what was said to be a regular PLAN exercise in the South China Sea and the importance of a powerful navy in defending China's maritime interests. Less emphasis is placed on the need for regional cooperation to ensure maritime security.

Not receiving any positive U.S. response, the next step up is taken by Beijing. An MFA statement and a *People's Daily* commentator article focus on China's maritime interests and the need to avoid military tensions through diplomacy and discussion to ensure that each party's interests are understood. To this end, where military tensions emerge the parties should agree to high-level discussions designed to ease if not eliminate the tensions.

With no definite U.S. response to the suggestion that a meeting should be held at a high enough level where Beijing can express its concerns directly, China's signaling escalates with more direct language. A vice foreign minister expresses China's intent to defend its sovereignty and maritime interests against any threats. This statement is paralleled by a *People's Daily* contributing editor article assessing U.S. strategy in the South China Sea. The article emphasizes what it sees as U.S. efforts opposing China's maritime rights and sovereignty by providing support, including military support, to Vietnam and the Republic of the Philippines. Both are declared to be pressing unwarranted and illegal claims against China's well-established and legal sovereignty rights in the South China Sea. This strategy is declared as undermining the tranquility of the South China Sea and creating unnecessary regional military tensions. Moreover, the United States is defined as an outside power creating regional tensions to serve its own hegemonic objectives through power politics. Unless the United States agrees to a high-level meeting with China to resolve their differences, it will have to accept the consequences of its ill-conceived strategy.

Just as the United States resolves its dilemmas and is about to propose a meeting at the Under Secretary of State and Under Secretary of Defense level, China takes the next escalatory step in its signaling strategy. The Minister of Foreign Affairs calls a press conference where he first declares that China's exercise of restraint in the face of U.S. provocative actions in the

South China Sea should not be viewed as weakness. China's forbearance should be recognized as demonstrating its commitment to building and sustaining a tranquil regional security environment. However, there is a limit to China's forbearance and restraint in the face of U.S. power politics seeking to maintain its hegemonic position. China has already urged the United States to agree to a senior-level meeting where their respective interests and policies can be discussed and differences resolved. Failure to schedule such a meeting will leave China no choice but to reinforce its military deployments in the region and the South China Sea to counter U.S. power politics and military strategy. This is not China's preferred choice, but a just response against U.S. bullying and power politics. Shortly after the Minister of Foreign Affairs makes his statement, China's most senior general, a vice-chairman of the CMC and a member of the Politburo, makes his own statement. He declares that the PLA is dedicated and prepared to defend China's sovereignty and national interests against all adversaries.

### **Comment**

The signaling employed in this scenario reflects a basic pattern Beijing has demonstrated since its first signaling exercise in 1950 when China sought to deter U.S. forces from crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel into North Korean territory. The core of these signaling patterns consists of the following:

- *Systematic integration of political and diplomatic action with military preparations as the signaling escalates through higher levels of authority.* Such preparations are often, if not always, overt and integrated into the political and diplomatic messages designed to deter the adversary from the course of action Beijing finds threatening.
- *Stating why China is justified in using military force should this prove necessary.* The message targets both domestic and international audiences. In essence, Beijing declares that China confronts a serious threat to its security and interests that if not terminated will require the use of military force.
- *Asserting that the use of military force is not Beijing's preferred resolution to the threat China faces, but one that will be forced upon it should the adversary not heed the deterrence warnings sent.* In short, Beijing's signaling strategy seeks to grant China the moral high ground in the emerging confrontation. Such argument supports China's self-identification as a uniquely peaceful country that employs military force only in defense

when provoked by adversaries threatening China's security or sovereignty. Presumably, Beijing believes that asserting the moral high ground in a confrontation can ease the international response to any military action China might take and thereby reduce the political costs of employing military force.

- *Emphasizing that China's forbearance and restraint should not be viewed as weakness and that China is prepared to employ military force should that be necessary.*