

## **China's Expanding 'Coastal Waters'**

by Ralph A. Cossa

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Would someone please provide China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) spokesmen with a map! Over the last few months, since it was rumored, then denied, and then confirmed that the US would be conducting joint exercises off the west coast of South Korea involving the *George Washington* Aircraft Carrier Battle Group, PLA spokesmen – and others who wear the uniform and seem to have no problem speaking out – have been proclaiming they “resolutely oppose any foreign military vessel and aircraft conducting activities in the Yellow Sea and China's coastal waters that undermine China's security interests.”

China's coastal waters? While the area for the September west coast exercise involving the *George Washington* has not yet been demarcated, one assumes that it will be conducted in the general vicinity of the sinking of the ROK Corvette *Cheonan* by a North Korean torpedo, in or adjacent to South Korean waters off the North Korean coast. This will place the exercise area about 120 miles (roughly 195 kilometers) from the closest Chinese landmass on the Shandong Peninsula and 175 miles (280 kilometers) from the closest city of any significance, Dalian. And this undermines China's security interests how?

These facts of geography notwithstanding, we now have PLA commentators warning of a possible “collision” between US/ROK and PRC Navy ships, while another threatens “If no one harms me, I harm no one, but if someone harms me, I must harm them.” Since when is operating in or near South Korean coastal waters – the Yellow Sea touches the North and South Korean as well as the Chinese coast – threaten China or do it harm? Does the PLA now claim the ROK port of Inchon as part of its coastal waters? Do US (or ROK) ships have to get Chinese permission to sail in international waters significantly closer to the Korean mainland than to China? This is, of course, preposterous on its face.

The great irony is that it appears the US initially had no plans to send the *George Washington* into the Yellow Sea. Washington and Seoul were hoping that no major show of force would have even been necessary, which is why they postponed plans for their naval exercises in lieu of first taking North Korea to the United Nations Security Council, the “responsible” way to send a message. Unfortunately, it was Beijing's actions at the UNSC – where it played Pyongyang's defense attorney despite a pledge by Premier Wen Jiabao to scrutinize the results of the international investigation of the *Cheonan* attack in an “objective and fair manner” and “not protect anyone regarding the review” – that made the exercises

necessary, to counteract what Pyongyang was proclaiming to be its “great diplomatic victory” at the UN.

Even after China's actions at the UNSC made necessary a US/ROK show of force, the USN's preference was to limit the *George Washington*'s involvement to the initial joint exercise off the east coast of South Korea, as part of a significant show of force to underscore to Pyongyang that ROK and US tolerance had its limits and that future acts of aggression would not be tolerated. As Navy spokesmen explained at the time, the *George Washington* had been in the Yellow Sea last fall and had other duties planned (including a visit to Southeast Asia).

Then came Chinese ultimatums warning the USN to stay out of its “coastal – in truth, international – waters, followed by complaints from friends and allies (especially in South Korea and Japan) bemoaning the “fact” that the US seemed to be yielding – kowtowing? – to Chinese demands. This made a visit by the *George Washington* to the Yellow Sea essential, if the US Navy, not to mention the principle of freedom of the seas, was to maintain any credibility in East Asia.

This was an easily predictable response and one that I explained to one of the more vocal PLA pundits more than six weeks ago. As US spokesmen have repeatedly asserted, the exercises were not designed with China in mind; they were, and are, about sending North Korea a message. However, the PLA, by its outrageous warnings and pronouncements, has made it about China as well. Why?

Those inclined to mirror imaging posit that the PLA is trying to create or magnify an enemy to increase its share of the Chinese defense budget or to keep civilians who might otherwise be “soft on defense” on the defensive themselves. Perhaps! But I see another motive as well. One clear result of the PLA accusations has been a rise in anti-American sentiment. One only needs to read *China Daily* or *Global Times* to see daily accusations of American insults and insensitivity to Chinese concerns. Could it be that Chinese fascination, especially among the youth, for President Obama and the American process of choosing its leaders, is seen as particularly threatening to the PLA and to the civilian leadership that is preparing for its own 2012 leadership “elections?” After all, one assumes that President (and Party Chairman) Hu could keep his loose cannons under control if need be – after all, “the party controls the gun,” or so the leadership continues to claim.

We saw a similar phenomenon 12 years ago when, during the similarly popular US administration of President Bill Clinton, the PLA sent briefing teams to China's campuses in the wake of the accidental NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, asserting that the accident was a deliberate attack and drumming up anti-US feelings that

resulted in our Embassy being stoned and consulates attacked. Sounds like déjà vu all over again.

Had the PLA wanted assurances that the ROK/USN exercises were not aimed at or threatening to China, vehicles exist to discuss this, including the US-Chinese Military Maritime Safety Agreement consultative mechanism. Of course, that would have required the PLA to sit down and talk to the US military, something it seems increasingly reluctant to do. Who knows, maybe if they resumed currently stalled military-to-military discussions, the US Navy could have provided them maps delineating everyone's coastal waters.