

Response to PacNet #35 “Rescind China's invitation to join RIMPAC” by Sean P. Quirk

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Shirley Kan’s “Rescind China’s invitation to join RIMPAC” ([PacNet #35](#)) offers a thought-provoking recommendation on dealing with China’s increasingly belligerent strategic behavior. Rescinding China’s invitation to the 2016 *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* exercise would further exacerbate the tense US-China relationship, however, and increase the likelihood of lethal military mishaps. Washington should focus on strategically mollifying China’s aggression in the East and South China Seas, not cancelling tactical exercises with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) that seek to make US-China military encounters safer and more amicable.

China is behaving badly, as Kan rightly notes. “China marginalizes itself” when it fails to adhere to international rules and norms of the Asia-Pacific security architecture. Particularly, artificial-island construction in international waters of the South China Sea and the “nine-dash line” on official maps are brazen Chinese acts that seem to take aim at US security guarantees in the region.

Washington’s response, however, must be at the strategic level, not uninviting China to a multinational exercise. The United States should take steps such as praising Japan’s Self-Defense Force for normalizing its security posture, enlarging the US disposition of forces in Singapore and Australia, and announcing joint patrols in the South China Sea with the Philippines. Washington is taking all these steps. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter’s April 14 announcements of expanded US-Philippine cooperation on military facilities, exercises, and patrols are the sort of strategic reactions Washington should take to respond to Beijing.

Rescinding the RIMPAC invitation, on the other hand, is a diplomatic slap in the face. If China’s bad behavior “marginalizes itself,” canceling China’s RIMPAC participation ensures that China stays marginalized. Should the United States push China further into the corner? Or should the US offer a hand, setting an example for China?

Revoking China’s participation in RIMPAC would be stooping to Beijing’s level of petty international politics. The US would be undermining “the regional consensus that favors diplomacy and opposes coercion” if it forbade China to participate in the exercise. Kan notes, “Precluding PLA

participation at RIMPAC would ensure that limited financial and other resources are focused on allies and partners, and are not diverted to benefit China.” It is unclear to which “financial and other resources” Kan is referring. Surely neither Third Fleet nor the US Navy is paying for the PLA(N)’s gas to Pearl Harbor, so perhaps (finally) the Chinese are on the deficit side of the US-China ledger for their net expenditures.

China’s RIMPAC participation poses no reasonable threat to national security. Kan cites China’s Defense White Paper of 2013 that describes the use of “combined exercises with foreign militaries to ‘accelerate’ the PLA’s modernization.” China is not talking about RIMPAC in this paper. First, the paper is from 2013, one year before China ever participated in RIMPAC; China’s white paper likely refers to the routinely intensive joint-military exercises with Russia and Pakistan. Second, even if the chronology was in order, the flag-hoist and compliant-boarding drills China conducts during RIMPAC are professionalizing but not accelerating the “PLA’s modernization” at the price of US national security. The United States Navy restricted China’s RIMPAC 2014 exercises to: “drills on surface warfare; counter-piracy; humanitarian assistance/disaster relief and military medicine; search and rescue; and salvage involving explosive ordnance disposal.” Authorized events for China’s RIMPAC participation fall outside the FY2000 NDAA, P.L. 106-65 realm of prohibited activities that would “create a national security risk due to an inappropriate exposure” of the PLA to sensitive training. Indeed, failure to conduct US-China military-to-military exchanges at all could run the greatest risk to national security, as growing unfamiliarity can lead to miscalculation in the seas and skies of the Asia-Pacific region.

Military-to-military (mil-to-mil) engagement is a good thing for both the United States and China, if for no other reason than it humanizes the people in different-colored uniforms. PLA(N) vessels *Zheng He* (Type 679, Hull 81), *Jinan* (DDG-152), *Yiyan* (FFG-548), and *Qiandaohu* (AOE-886) have all come to Pearl Harbor in recent months, conducting formal receptions with US Navy crews hosting them there. US vessels similarly make routine port calls to Chinese cities. More than superficial pleasantries, prominent mil-to-mil engagements have led to the multilateral Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES). This agreement and further memoranda of understanding between US and Chinese defense agencies help keep inevitable military encounters peaceful; CUES practice has become the norm of interactions between US and Chinese units. These small steps help incorporate generations of sailors and airmen into a status quo of safe and peaceful exchange with their counterparts. It is easier to disavow this unit-level engagement from an office in Washington than it is from the bridge wing of a US destroyer in contested waters, a few thousand yards from a Chinese warship.

Although not of strategic consequence, *RIMPAC* is an important tactical and operational exercise in which China should participate. Kan argues that proof of *RIMPAC*'s importance to the PLA is that the PLA did *not* "spurn" the exercise "when President Obama released long-overdue notifications to Congress on arms sales to Taiwan last December." China's inaction simply shows that it did not deign to ban tactical engagement due to the arms sales. The positive proof of *RIMPAC*'s importance to the PLA comes later in Kan's article when she notes that the Chinese infamously sent an auxiliary general intelligence (AGI) to *RIMPAC* 2014 to spy on events. China was invited to the party last time, and they still crashed it. One can safely presume they would send a party crasher again, especially if they did not receive an invitation. China's official participation, moreover, allows the United States to observe the PLA's level of development just as much as the PLA intently watches foreign militaries.

Kan writes, "The United States will look silly and weak after *RIMPAC* 2016 if the PLA is embraced only to have the regime in Beijing then claim a 'South China Sea ADIZ,' coerce a US ally, or provoke collisions with US or allied aircraft and ships." These events are more conceivable in a world where the United States marginalizes China, such as preventing it from participating in the international maritime order. Indeed, the United States would look "silly and weak" if it uninvited the world's second-biggest power to the largest international maritime warfare exercise on the planet. Washington should continue to ratchet up pressure on Beijing for its belligerence in the South China Sea. But that is better done off China, not Hawaii.

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