

# China's Rising Navy Is Increasingly "Assertive" At Sea

Written by Robert C. O'Brien

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ROBERT C. O'BRIEN, NOV 16 2011

A number of recent articles have addressed China's rapid maritime rise and strategy for dominating large swaths of the Pacific, including a recent commentary that I wrote for *The Diplomat*.<sup>[1]</sup> The sea trials of China's first aircraft carrier, the ex-Ukrainian *Varyag*, have garnered significant international press coverage.<sup>[2]</sup> The launch of the Chinese carrier, the first of at least two such warships,<sup>[3]</sup> is emblematic of a ship building program not seen since Kaiser Wilhelm II decided to challenge British naval power by building the High Seas Fleet at the turn of the last century.

China's naval buildup will soon give it the means to use military force to back up its extravagantly expansive territorial claims to essentially the entire Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea.<sup>[4]</sup> In response, Southeast Asian nations, Japan, India and Australia have all embarked on significant defense force modernization programs of their own and increased their budgets for major air and naval platforms.<sup>[5]</sup> Submarines are in particular demand.<sup>[6]</sup>

Despite using the term "peaceful rise" for almost a decade to describe its global diplomatic, economic and military growth, China has not hesitated to support its territorial claims in the Pacific with what senior American officials have repeatedly labeled as "aggressive" naval action by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy), Air Force and auxiliary forces.<sup>[7]</sup> While individual incidents at sea have been reported in regional, maritime, military or, on occasion, mainstream press, the full extent of China's efforts to exert control over nearby international waters has not been widely covered. Governments, on the other hand, are increasingly concerned about China's naval behavior in the region. Indeed, Japan accused Beijing, for the first time, of "assertiveness" in an official government White Paper issued in July 2011.<sup>[8]</sup> Japan's characterization of Chinese action in an official government document is blunt in "diplospeak."

As China asserts its claims in the Pacific, it has made no secret of its opposition to United States freedom of navigation operations in nearby international waters, and it has not confined its unhappiness to mere diplomatic protests. Instead, Chinese forces have confronted the world's leading navy at sea. Representative examples of PLA Navy and Air Force conduct in this regard, that are available from open sources, include the following encounters:

- In 2001, the "Chinese interception of an American EP-3 surveillance aircraft flying in international airspace over the East China Sea" forced the damaged plane to land at a Chinese military base, almost triggering a major political problem for China and the new George W. Bush Administration.<sup>[9]</sup>
- In October 2006, the stalking of the USS *Kitty Hawk* by a 160-foot Chinese Song-class diesel-electric attack submarine culminated in the surfacing of the Chinese sub within torpedo firing range of the American carrier.<sup>[10]</sup>
- In November 2007, China denied the *Kitty Hawk* carrier group entry to Victoria Harbor (Hong Kong), when the ships were seeking refuge from "building seas and deteriorating weather." Such an act is considered especially unfriendly by mariners who must confront dangerous weather at sea.<sup>[11]</sup>
- On March 4, 2009, a Chinese Bureau of Fisheries Patrol vessel used a spotlight to illuminate the USNS *Victorious* and crossed the American vessel's bow at a range of 1,400 yards at night without notice or warning while the ship was conducting operations in international waters in the Yellow Sea. The next day, a Chinese Y-12 maritime surveillance aircraft conducted 12 fly-bys of the *Victorious* at low altitude.<sup>[12]</sup>

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- In the same month, PLA Navy ships engaged in extensive harassment of the USNS *Impeccable*, while *Impeccable* was conducting survey operations in the South China Sea. A Chinese frigate approached the American ship and proceeded to cross its bow at a range of approximately 100 yards. Two hours later, a Chinese Y-12 conducted 11 fly-bys of the *Impeccable* at low altitude. Two days later, five Chinese ships surrounded and harassed the *Impeccable* in the South China Sea.[13] The Chinese discontinued the harassment when the US destroyer, *Chung-Hoon*, arrived to "keep an eye" on *Impeccable*. [14]
- In June 2009, a Chinese submarine followed the US destroyer John S. McCain in the East Sea, apparently colliding with and damaging its towed array sonar instrumentation.[15]
- In late-June 2011, Chinese Sukhoi-27 fighters shadowed an American reconnaissance plane causing Taiwan to send two F-16 fighters to intercept the Chinese jets near the central line across the 113-mile wide Strait, the first such incursion by China in 12 years.[16]

China has been even more "assertive" in militarily confronting its Asian neighbors at sea. In recent years, notable incidents of China actively asserting control of international waters that it claims as its own, include the following events:

- In July and August 1995 and March 1996, in response to certain measures in Taiwan interpreted by China as moves toward Taiwanese independence, China conducted "missile tests and other military exercises" near the Taiwan Strait. In March 1996, the U.S. responded by sending "two carrier strike groups (CSGs) toward the region . . .".[17]
- In 2005, China and Japan "sparred" over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, "along with sizable deposits of undersea oil and natural gas." [18]
- In April 2010, "Japan claims two Chinese submarines and eight destroyers passed through its waters in a brazen incursion." [19] "When two Japanese destroyers began following the Chinese ships, a Chinese helicopter flew within 300 feet of one of the destroyers." [20]
- On April 23, 2010, when a PLA Navy flotilla ventured near a group of disputed islands close to Okinawa in the East China Sea, the PLA Navy "sent out a helicopter that buzzed Japanese navy ships monitoring their movement" [21] at a distance of just 90 meters.[22]
- On August 26, 2010, despite the assertion of claims to territory in the South China Sea being made by Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan, on Thursday, China claimed "it had used a small, manned submarine to plant the national flag deep beneath the South China Sea . . .".[23]
- On September 7, 2010, a Chinese fishing vessel rammed Japanese patrol boats in two separate incidents near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands in the East China Sea.[24] "[T]he Japanese coast guard arrested the captain of a Chinese fishing trawler after it twice collided with patrol boats in disputed waters controlled by Tokyo . . .".[25] Japan eventually released the Chinese Captain after China escalated the dispute into a major diplomatic incident and threatened to cut off certain trade with Japan.
- In March 2011, Japanese F-15J fighters intercepted Chinese Y-8 surveillance planes about 30 nautical miles from the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, reportedly the closest distance Chinese military aircraft have been detected to that disputed sites.[26]
- Also, in March 2011, a helicopter from China's State Oceanic Administration reportedly buzzed the Japanese destroyer *Samidare* at a range of 70 meters, near an East China Sea gas field where both nations claim exploration rights.[27]
- In March 2011, two Chinese gunboats with the markings No. 71 and No. 75 tried to drive away a Philippines Department of Energy research vessel from the Reed Bank in the vicinity of the Kalayaan Island Group, controlled by the Philippines, which is part of Spratlys. The incident prompted the Philippine government to file a diplomatic protest that was summarily dismissed by China.[28]
- In May 2011, two Chinese MIG-29 Fulcrums reportedly buzzed two Philippine Air Force OV-10 Broncos on a routine reconnaissance patrol in the vicinity of the Kalayaan Island Group.[29]
- In May 2011, Chinese ships cut cables on a Hanoi-chartered survey vessel working for foreign oil and gas exploration firms in the South China Sea.[30]
- In July 2011, the Indian amphibious ship *Airavat* was on a show-the-flag mission when it was challenged as it sailed from Vietnam's Nha Trang port near Cam Ranh Bay. A purported Chinese naval officer radioed the ship that it was entering Chinese waters as it approached Haiphong.[31] While it is likely that the call was

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not made by the PLA Navy but perhaps instead by a Chinese fisherman with nationalist leanings, the incident has "calcified into fact among Indian commentators"[32] and shows the danger of how incidents at sea can escalate.

As the United States and Asian nations consider the implications of China's massive naval buildup and expansive territorial claims in the Pacific, they must do so in light of China's proven willingness to use its armed forces as a means to enforce such claims. The list of foregoing incidents at sea involving the PLA Navy, Air Force and auxiliary forces is remarkable in that the confrontations have taken place during a period in which the United States Navy has been dominant in the region.

As the PLA Navy continues its impressive growth and as the United States Navy shrinks as a result of significant cuts in defense spending,[33] it is quite possible that Chinese-initiated confrontations will increase if the balance of forces in the region dramatically tilts in China's favor. Indeed, China's party-controlled press seems to foreshadow such a situation. Discussing the refusal of Asian nations to accede to China's South China Sea "core interest" claims, China's Communist Party Newspaper warned last month that if neighboring nations "don't change their ways with China, they will need to mentally prepare for the sound of cannons. We need to be ready for that, as it may be the only way for the disputes in the sea to be resolved." [34] This course is fraught with peril for not only the United States and Asian nations but for an assertive China as well.

Reducing the types of sea incidents discussed herein and the assertive behavior behind them requires maintaining an equilibrium in which the risk of escalation is too great for China to engage in such conduct. In an era of a smaller United States Navy, achieving balance can be accomplished using tools such as deploying a greater percentage of the US fleet to the Pacific. This step is already underway.[35] Those ships must continue to engage in freedom of navigation cruises in international waters seaward of China's 12 mile territorial waters. Providing regional allies with the platforms necessary to defend themselves is perhaps the most cost-effective approach to the problem. The United States, however, has refused to sell Japan the F-22 Raptor fighter jet[36] and recently refused to sell Taiwan the F-16C/D variant fighter jet, which is a defensive fourth generation plane.[37] The refusal to arm our allies sends the wrong message to China and our friends. Of course, it also undermines the American industrial base. Encouraging our allies to adequately fund their own navies and to increase their training tempo with the United States and each other is critical as well. China's maritime rise has already served as a catalyst in this regard.[38]

On the diplomatic front, the United States must make clear that it will scrupulously honor its defense treaty commitments to Pacific partners such as Australia, Japan and the Philippines. America should also continue to support ASEAN efforts to implement the 2002 Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. The July 2011, Bali Guidelines are a small step forward on this front, but more must be done and United States diplomatic support will strengthen ASEAN's hand in its negotiations with China.[39]

The best ally of peace in the Pacific is a strong United States that is committed to working with its allies and demonstrating such commitment to China to ensure that China's maritime rise is peaceful rather than assertive.

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[1] Robert C. O'Brien, *China's Two Pronged Maritime Rise*, The Diplomat, July 24, 2011 <<http://the-diplomat.com/2011/07/24/china%E2%80%99s-two-pronged-maritime-rise/>>

[2] See, e.g., Hugh White, *China Shifts Pacific Waters with its Aircraft Carrier Trials*, The Sydney Morning Herald, August 30, 2011 <<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/china-shifts-pacific-waters-with-its-aircraft-carrier-trials-20110829-1jib4.html>>

[3] Ben Blanchard and Benjamin Lim, *China boosts naval power with carrier program: sources*, Reuters, July 27, 2011, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/27/us-china-carrier-idUSTRE76Q1X120110727>>

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[4] Minnie Chan, *Beijing Lists Unity and Security as Core Interests*, South China Morning Post, September 7, 2011 ("Wang Hanling, an expert on maritime affairs and international law at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, said the country's sovereignty did not only cover its land area of 9.6 million square kilometers but also the islands and islets in the South China Sea which are claimed by other countries. 'Despite the agreement to 'put aside disputes and jointly develop' the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands after territorial disputes with neighboring countries, China's stance of claiming sovereignty over those islands is unquestionable and undoubtable,' Wang said. 'China has insisted that we have had sovereignty over the two island chains since ancient times.'"). See also Michael Richardson, *Alarm Bells Over S. China Sea Claims*, The Straits Times (Singapore), August 30, 2011 ("Official Chinese maps show a U-shaped outline marked by nine dashes that appear to indicate China's maritime boundary in the South China Sea. It covers about 80 per cent of the sea and stretches as far south as coastal waters off Indonesia's Natuna Islands and East Malaysia. If accepted or enforced, the claim would make China an immediate neighbor of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei. Vietnam already has both land and sea borders with China...").

[5] See Amol Sharma, Jeremy Page, James Hookway and Rachel Pannett, *Asia's New Arms Race: As China grows wealthier and builds up its military, other nations in the region are taking note—and amassing weapons of their own*, The Wall Street Journal, February 12, 2011, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704881304576094173297995198.html>>

[6] Ibid.

[7] *Fighter pilots classed as 'aggressive'*, CNN, April 5, 2001, <[http://articles.cnn.com/2001-04-05/world/china.fighters\\_1\\_fighter-pilots-intercepts-chinese-f-8?\\_s=PM:asiapcf](http://articles.cnn.com/2001-04-05/world/china.fighters_1_fighter-pilots-intercepts-chinese-f-8?_s=PM:asiapcf)> ("U.S. military officials who have overseen surveillance flights near China say the United States is familiar with the flying tactics of all Chinese fighter pilots like the kind that intercepted a U.S. Navy plane Sunday, and have made prior complaints about their 'aggressive' maneuvers."). See also Bill Gertz, *Blair: China gets 'more aggressive' against U.S. ships*, The Washington Times, March 11, 2009, <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/mar/11/beijing-gets-more-aggressive-against-us-ships/?page=all>> ("In the past several years, they have become more aggressive in asserting claims for the [200-mile Economic Exclusion Zone], which are excessive under almost any international code," [National Intelligence Director Dennis] Blair told the Senate Armed Services Committee.")

[8] Yoree Koh, *Japan Sharpens Rhetoric on China, Calling It 'Assertive' for First Time*, Wall Street Journal, August 3, 2011, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903520204576483783143922152.html>>

[9] James Kraska, *Sovereignty at Sea*, Survival, Jun.-Jul. 2009, at 13.

[10] Robert D. Kaplan, *The Geography of Chinese Power: How Far Can Beijing Reach on Land and at Sea?*, Foreign Affairs, May/June 2010, at 34.

[11] See *ibid.*

[12] Robert C. O'Brien, *The Korean Crisis Demonstrates the Need for a Strong United States Navy*, The Daily Caller, November 10, 2010, <<http://dailycaller.com/2010/11/29/the-korean-crisis-demonstrates-the-need-for-a-strong-united-states-navy/>>; see also *Chinese boats harassed U.S. ship, officials say*, CNN, May 5, 2009, <[http://articles.cnn.com/2009-05-05/world/china.maritime.harassment\\_1\\_chinese-ships-chinese-vessels-yellow-sea?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2009-05-05/world/china.maritime.harassment_1_chinese-ships-chinese-vessels-yellow-sea?_s=PM:WORLD)>

[13] Kaplan, *The Geography of Chinese Power: How Far Can Beijing Reach on Land and at Sea?*, at 34. See also O'Brien, *The Korean Crisis Demonstrates the Need for a Strong United States Navy*.

[14] Anil Dawar, *Naval standoff threatens US-China military relations*, The Guardian, March 13, 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/13/us-china-naval-standoff>>

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[16] Malcolm Moore and Alex Spillius, *US to continue spy flights after jets 'pursued' by China over Taiwan*, The Telegraph, July 26, 2011, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/8663186/US-to-continue-spy-flights-after-jets-pursued-by-China-over-Taiwan.html>>

[17] Andrew S. Erickson, *China's Evolving Anti-Access Approach: Where's the Nearest (U.S.) Carrier?* 10 China Brief (Sept. 10, 2010, 12:55 PM) <[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=36810&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=2b3f00b616](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36810&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=2b3f00b616)>

[18] James Holmes & Toshi Yoshihara, *Ryukyu Chain in China's Island Strategy*, 10 China Brief (Sept. 10, 2010, 1:03 PM) <[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=36812&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=df4eee55b8](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36812&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=df4eee55b8)>

[19] Alan Mascarenhas, *China's Navy Is Worrying Its Neighbors*, Newsweek (Aug. 1, 2010), <<http://www.newsweek.com/2010/08/01/china-s-navy-is-worrying-its-neighbors.html>>

[20] Edward Wong, *Chinese Military Seeks to Extend Its Naval Power*, N.Y. Times, Apr. 23, 2010, available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/world/asia/24navy.html>>

[21] *Japan may place troops close to disputed islands*, Taipei Times, November 10, 2010, <http://www.taipetitimes.com/News/front/archives/2010/11/10/2003488154>.

[22] Rory Medcalf, *Asia's maritime security is all at sea*, The Australian (Sep. 15, 2010 12:00 AM), <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/asias-maritime-security-is-all-at-sea/story-e6frg6zo-1225922896731>>

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[24] *Ocean collisions trigger spat*, The Straits Times (Sept. 8, 2010, 7:12 AM) [http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Asia/Story/STIStory\\_576147.html](http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Asia/Story/STIStory_576147.html).

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Jaime Laude, *Chinese jets buzz PAF patrol planes*, The Philippine Star, May 20, 2011, <<http://www.philstar.com/ArticlePrinterFriendly.aspx?articleId=687844&publicationSubCategoryId=63>>

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[30] Greg Torode, *Beijing pressure intense in South China Sea row: Leaked cables show a campaign to force oil giants to pull out of exploration deals with Vietnam or put them on hold was more extensive than first thought*, South China Morning Post, September 23, 2011.

[31] Sanjeev Miglani, Reuters, *Analysis: India, China Navies Square Off in Nearby Seas and Beyond*, September 6, 2011.

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[32] James R. Holmes, *Phantom Incident Dangers*, The Diplomat, October 27, 2011, <<http://thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2011/10/27/phantom-incident-dangers>>

[33] See e.g., Leo Shane III, *USS George Washington gaining attention as possible budget casualty*, Stars & Stripes, October 7, 2011, <http://www.stripes.com/news/uss-george-washington-gaining-attention-as-possible-budget-casualty-1.157209> ("The idea of shelving the ship, based in Yokosuka, Japan, has been mentioned by lawmakers and budget experts in the last few months, as Congress struggles to find billions in savings to help balance the federal budget.") and Michael Melia, *Navy Explores Longer Sub Deployments*, Military.com News, October 3, 2011, < <http://www.military.com/news/article/navy-explores-longer-sub-deployments.html>> ("Vice Adm. John Richardson told the AP that keeping subs out longer is one of several options the Navy is considering as the number of attack subs is projected to continue dropping in the next decade and beyond.").

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