

US ready to combat PRC aggression

Written by Joseph Bosco
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The new cold war with China is on. Last week, China celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) by flaunting its naval might in a parade of ships off the port of Qingdao to impress and intimidate countries from the region and around the world.

Meanwhile, the white-and-orange ships of the US Coast Guard are joining the gray hulls of the US Navy in the "gray zone" waters of the South China Sea. Their mission: To assist in confronting increasingly aggressive maritime activities by the PLAN.

The coast guard deployment is an astute response by the administration of US President Donald Trump to the military component of the global offensive China has been waging unilaterally against the US without serious pushback from previous administrations.

The cutters will operate under the command of the US Navy's 7th Fleet, which is charged with maintaining freedom of the seas and regional peace and security in the Asia-Pacific (now known as the Indo-Pacific to include the expanding role of India).

In peacetime, the coast guard normally is part of the US Department of Homeland Security "except when operating as a service in the navy."

US Code Title 14, Section 3 states: "Upon the declaration of war if Congress so directs in the declaration or when the President directs, the Coast Guard shall operate as a service in the Navy."

Although the US Congress has not declared war since Dec. 8, 1941, the US has been involved in several wars since then, and in every one of those conflicts the coast guard was incorporated as an integral component of the US Navy.

However, now, as tensions rise in this new quasi-cold war period, the coast guard is edging closer to a continuing wartime relationship with the navy.

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Most recently, its ships were attached to the 7th Fleet in the East China Sea to combat the ship-to-ship transfers with North Korea of coal and other goods prohibited under UN and US sanctions.

The additional US maritime assets would also prove useful in any conflict that might erupt over North Korea's stalling and outright reneging on North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's denuclearization promise to Trump.

As a further demonstration of the coast guard's increasing role in strategic deterrence, last month, USCGC *Bertholf* accompanied a navy destroyer in a Taiwan Strait transit strongly criticized by Beijing.

The South China Sea deployment is the latest in a series of joint navy-coast guard operations in peacetime, demonstrating the Trump administration's adeptness in coping with China's growing assertiveness in the "gray zone."

The contribution of ships from the other maritime service helps fill gaps in what US Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Karl Schultz has called an "oversubscribed" US naval capability in the face of challenges from China, Russia, North Korea and Iran.

At the same time, it cleverly matches Beijing's own use of its coast guard assets and even fishing boats to assert its unjustified maritime claims in the region.

The risk, of course, is that the proliferation of combatant and combat-capable ships from China and the US in relatively closer quarters would produce an incident that could quickly escalate.

Near-collisions have occurred because of China's reckless provocations. The Trump administration seems determined to ensure that Beijing will bear the onus for whatever consequences might ensue from such aggressive tactics.

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Even more important than the physical lethality of the newly deployed ships is the political and psychological message they send to Beijing: (a) we see what you are doing and understand your malign ambitions, and (b) we have both the capabilities and the will to defeat them.

These and other administration actions serve to implement the policy prescriptions inherent in the *National Defense Strategy*, which explicitly identifies China and Russia as “revisionist powers” that seek to undermine the US-led, rules-based international order.

Recognition of that existential threat was awakened in Washington at the time of China’s downing of a US EP-3 reconnaissance plane in 2001, but the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks quickly diverted the US security attention to the new global “war on terror.”

The National Defense Strategy has restored Washington’s perspective on the greater danger. Fresh terrorist events, such as the horrific attacks in Sri Lanka, must not again be allowed to distract the West from meeting both challenges at the same time.

The US president and his national security team have arrived not a moment too soon. It is essential that the resolve being demonstrated in the East and South China Seas and on Taiwan continue to be applied on North Korea’s denuclearization and the trade negotiations.

This historical inflection point in US-China relations will not come again.

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