

Time for US carriers in the Strait

Written by Joseph Bosco
Thursday, 30 July 2020 05:17

The US Navy's aircraft carrier battle groups are the most dramatic symbol of Washington's military and geopolitical power. They were critical to winning World War II in the Pacific and have since been deployed in the Indo-Pacific region to communicate resolve against potential adversaries of the US.

The presence or absence of the US Seventh Fleet — the configuration of US Navy ships and aircraft in the Indo-Pacific region built around the carriers — generally determines whether war or peace prevails in the region. In the immediate post-war period, Washington's strategic planners in the administration of then-US president Harry Truman shockingly determined that the US' Pacific security perimeter could exclude Taiwan and South Korea.

Washington's civilian and military leaders at the time — US secretary of state Dean Acheson and US General Douglas MacArthur — conveyed that lack of strategic concern by pointing out lines on a map, and backing up the perverse decision by withdrawing the US Navy from the Taiwan Strait and the immediate environs.

The communist dictators in Moscow, Beijing and Pyongyang welcomed what they saw as a green light for aggression, and the Korean War was on.

Then Truman, ruing his administration's grievous mistake, announced: "The occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area. Accordingly, I have ordered the Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa. As a corollary of this action, I am calling upon the Chinese Government on Formosa to cease all air and sea operations against the mainland. The Seventh Fleet will see that this is done."

Henry Kissinger, later US secretary of state, wrote of the reciprocal strategic miscalculations that precipitated the war: "We didn't expect the invasion; China did not expect our reply."

After the war in Korea ended with an armistice, then US-president Dwight Eisenhower dispelled further confusion over the US' security commitment to Taiwan and South Korea.

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In 1954, his administration executed identical mutual defense treaties with the Republic of China and the Republic of Korea. The US Navy carriers and their supporting complements were, again, the designated enforcers.

Almost two decades later, then-US president Richard Nixon, who had been Eisenhower's vice president, decided to shake things up. The lifelong anti-communist would open relations with a hostile "Red China" because "we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors... China must change."

Nixon and Kissinger, US national security adviser at the time, decided that pre-emptive concessions were the way to win then-Chinese leader Mao Zedong's (毛泽东) trust. Since Mao understood the strategic significance of the US Seventh Fleet and those carrier strike groups, he demanded their removal from the Taiwan Strait before talks could begin. Nixon complied, setting the stage for his historic trip.

The carriers stayed out of the Strait for 23 years. In 1995, China showed its displeasure at then-president Lee Teng-hui's (李登辉) reunion visit to Cornell University by firing missiles toward Taiwan. Then-US president Bill Clinton dispatched the USS Nimitz through the Strait. Beijing protested the incursion into "Chinese waters" and the Clinton administration "explained" the transit as a "weather diversion."

Months later, as Taiwan's first direct presidential election approached, China again fired missiles across the Strait. This time, Clinton sent two carriers, the USS Nimitz and the USS Independence. Beijing said they would face "a sea of fire" if they entered the Strait. They stayed out.

The carriers avoided the Strait for another 12 years, as did all other US Navy ships. In 2005, then US-president George W. Bush's defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, learned of the self-imposed Strait aversion and directed the US Navy to resume normal operational transits.

It was not until two years later, though, that a carrier battle group made the passage, after

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Beijing abruptly canceled a Thanksgiving port visit to Hong Kong by a USS Kitty Hawk-led group. The rejected ships returned to their home port in Yokosuka, Japan, by passing through the Strait.

Beijing voiced its predictable protest. Initially, the US Navy again cited weather as the operational reason for the transit, but Beijing was not satisfied with the explanation.

US Admiral Timothy Keating, then-head of the US Pacific Command, gave a less ambiguous response: “We don’t need China’s permission to go through the Taiwan Strait. We will exercise our free right of passage whenever we need to — correct that — whenever we choose to.”

However, the White House, through a spokesperson, took a more conciliatory tone: “The president believes we have good relations with China. We work cooperatively with China on so many different issues. This is one small incident. And in the big picture, in the big scheme of things, we have very good relations.”

For the rest of the George W. Bush administration, then through eight years of former US president Barack Obama’s administration, and so far during US President Donald Trump’s term, the US Navy apparently has felt neither the need nor the desire to send a carrier strike group through the Strait — though single US Navy ships have been transiting at an increasing pace since 2016.

Reports suggest the current US administration has contemplated sending the carriers, but has been reluctant to “provoke” Beijing while a US-China trade deal remains unconsummated. During that same period, China has been less inhibited about asserting its growing naval power, twice sailing its own newly-minted aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, through the Strait, and its planes frequently have made incursions into Taiwan’s airspace.

In the past seven years, China has made more carrier Strait transits than the US has in half a century.

While the US Navy reinforces the principle of free navigation and Washington’s commitment to

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Taiwan, every time an individual cruiser or destroyer traverses the Strait, nothing reinforces that dual message more than the transit of a carrier strike force or two.

China measures the depth of an adversary's resolve in millimeters. Beijing might soon question Washington's will to confront it in a potential conflict situation when the US Navy is manifestly reluctant to make a perfectly legal passage in peacetime.

As it happens, the USS Nimitz and USS Ronald Reagan-led strike groups are on station in the South China Sea carrying out freedom of navigation operations. They also support US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's warning to China last week that its illegal claims and aggressive actions in that sea would no longer be accepted by the US and the international community.

However, only two US carrier passages in 48 years could help explain why China believes it can succeed with its aggression against Taiwan.

The Nimitz would be an appropriate candidate to complete the deterrent mission a spooked Clinton administration aborted in 1996. (One former US official called the incident "our own Cuban missile crisis; we had stared into the abyss.") A warship named after former US president Ronald Reagan has special meaning in the new "cold war" against a hostile communist power.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2020/07/30](#)