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## Slouching Toward Confrontation in the South China Sea *Provoking China*

by PEPE ESCOBAR

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It happened now and it will happen again: a near-collision between an American and a Chinese naval vessel in the South China Sea.

The USS *Cowpens*, a 10,000-ton guided-missile cruiser, got “too close” to a drill involving the *Liaoning*, China’s first aircraft carrier, and its carrier task force, according to the Global Times.

The US Pacific Fleet stressed that the cruiser had to take emergency measures to avoid a collision. Yet the Global Times accused the cruiser of “harassing” the *Liaoning* formation by taking “offensive actions”.

The paper spelt it loudly; “If the American navy and air force always encroach near China’s doorstep, confrontation is bound to take place.”

Finally, China’s Defense Ministry intervened to clarify that the vessels had “met” each other in the South China Sea but the worst was avoided via “effective and normal communication”.

Communication had better be damned “effective” from now on as China asserts itself as a rising sea power and it’s obviously unclear who can really do what in the South as well as the East China Sea, not to mention the oceans beyond.

It’s a fact that China’s still booming economy is directly dependent on its complex maritime lines of supply (and demand) – mostly over the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. But that does not mean that China is trying to control its surrounding seas by imposing a sino-version of the 19th century Monroe Doctrine, which was essentially a continental strategy of hemispheric domination (ask any informed Latin American about it).

Beijing is indeed increasing maritime patrols in the South and East China Sea. There have been some scuffles, mostly rhetorical, with, for instance, the Philippines. And as Beijing decided to create its new air defense identification zone (ADIZ), commercial airlines – not inclined to jeopardize their insurance arrangements – are all filing their flight plans with Beijing, which means they acknowledge China’s right and authority.

Let’s say China is now in the stage of creating facts on the sea. For the moment, a kind of uneasy accommodation seems to prevail involving the Americans and also the Japanese. Beijing knows that the US Navy and the Japanese navy have better training – and more experience – than the Chinese navy. Once again, for now.

### **Slouching across the Rimland**

This is a pretty decent summary in the South China Morning Post of the recent growth of China’s naval power in the context of a speech given by then president Hu Jintao last November “against the backdrop of US President Barack Obama’s ‘pivot to Asia’.”

It does connect a few dots between the new mantra coined by President Xi Jinping – the “Chinese dream” – and the rise of China as a maritime power.

But there’s way much more to it. There’s no question Chinese strategists have stripped Obama’s “pivot” upside down, and that means furiously brushing up on their Mahan, as in US Navy captain Alfred Mahan, and specifically *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, published in 1890.

Yes, it’s always about a “pivot”. Mahan believed that the geographical pivot of empires was not the Heartland of Eurasia – as with Mackinder – but the Indian and Pacific oceans. For Mahan, whoever controlled these oceans would be able to project power all around the Eurasian Rimland, and also affect the “Heartland”, deep in Central Asia. The Chinese know how this has translated into the US Navy being able to become a factor in Eurasia – part of that “sea-to-shining-sea” domination enshrined in Manifest Destiny.

Our strategists in Beijing are very much aware of how China – as a state and even more as a civilization – extends from the Heartland to the warm waters of the Pacific Rim. They are also aware of an absolutely crucial text, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power*, published by the US Navy in 2007. This is essentially the blueprint for Obama’s pivot, based – in

theory – on cooperation with local navies (Australia, Singapore, Philippines) rather than dominance. (Incidentally, the navy advertises to whomever is concerned that “sea power protects the American way of life”.)

Inevitably, our Chinese strategists also brushed up on their Spykman, as in Dutchman Nicholas Spykman, who founded the Institute of International Studies at Yale in 1935. It was Spykman who conceptualized South Asia, Southeast Asia, China and Japan, as well as the Middle East, as part of the Rimland, which for him was the key to world power (not the Heartland).

And it’s also here that we see how what a sea power like the US calls “containment” is interpreted by a Heartland power like China (not to mention Russia) as “encirclement”.

It’s also easy for Westerners to forget how China was once a formidable sea power, at the apex in the 15th century, via the exceptionally gifted Admiral Zheng He, commanding an extensive fleet of often remarkably large ships under the Ming emperors.

Now the sea power has re-awakened. No more *taoguang yanghui* – as in “keeping a low profile”, the notorious Deng Xiaoping motto.

And it’s as if Spykman had also somewhat seen the future. Just check this passage of *America’s Strategy in World Politics: the United States and the Balance of Power*, published in 1942:

A modern, vitalized, and militarized China ... is going to be a threat not only to Japan, but also to the position of the Western Powers in the Asiatic Mediterranean. China will be a continental power of huge dimensions in control of a large section of the littoral of that middle sea. Her geographic position will be similar to that of the United States in regard to the American Mediterranean. When China becomes strong, her present economic penetration in that region will undoubtedly take on political overtones. It is quite possible to envisage the day when this body of water will be controlled not by British, American, or Japanese sea power but by Chinese air power.

It’s happening now, only seven decades later, as Obama’s Mahanian “pivot” slouches towards ever more containment of rising China. May we live in “effective and normal communication” times.