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Deep reasons for China and US to bristle

By Jingdong Yuan
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SYDNEY, Australia - China's strong reaction to the United States' call for multilateral negotiation to resolve territorial disputes in the South China Sea fits the rising tide of tensions between Beijing and Washington over a number of issues.

Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi stated that interventions last month from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested the US was ganging with other countries in the region against China. Chinese analysts also point to US-South Korea military exercises staged in the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan as nothing but provocation and infringements of China's maritime interests.

However, beneath the public exchanges are deeper reasons for the apparently more assertive and even confrontational posture being adopted by both sides. For the United States, China's continuing economic rise and growing military power pose serious challenges, both to its predominance in Asia and its ability to deal with global issues ranging from nuclear non-proliferation to climate change. China's economy seems on a roll compared with a stagnant US economy, where unemployment has remained unacceptably high since the financial crisis started two years. China is on target to replace Japan as the world's second-largest economy.

Military modernization also marches on in China, with a focus on a strategy of anti-access and area-denial that could seriously threaten the ability of the US navy to gain access to the region. A report released this week by the Pentagon points to Chinese

procurement and [deployment](#) of anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, new submarines and surface ships, and asymmetrical capabilities such as cyber warfare.

Washington is concerned that growing economic power and military capabilities could embolden the Chinese leadership to take a more assertive line in foreign policy and become less willing to cooperate with the international community on issues where China's role is critical. At the same time, such a role also requires Beijing to sacrifice its own interests for the larger public good, including measures to deal with climate change and Iran's nuclear program.

Of particular concern is what Washington views as China's deliberate efforts to nudge the US out of Asia. Chinese assertions that the South China Sea is one of its core interests on a par with Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang indicates that Beijing will no longer tolerate foreign meddling on the territorial issue and could strong-arm other parties to the dispute into submission on its own terms.

Beijing has equal, if not greater, grievance against US actions that it considers detrimental to Chinese national interests. The arms sales and President Barack Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama are viewed as continued American interference in China's domestic affairs.

On the Taiwan issue in particular, cross-strait relations have been relatively stable ever since Ma Ying-jeou took the president's office in Taipei. Bilateral economic ties have continued to deepen and the two sides have recently signed the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) that would further facilitate bilateral economic interactions. Cross-strait ties have also been strengthened through [direct flights](#) and educational and [tourist](#) agreements. Under such circumstances, US arms sales touched off strong reactions from Beijing.

Chinese analysts argue recent US policy shift toward Asia is aimed at constraining and even containing China's rise and influence in the region. US calls for resolving maritime disputes in the South China Sea are interpreted by Beijing as deliberate attempts to draw some of the parties to the dispute into US embrace for the latter's strategic objective of reasserting dominance after a period of neglect.

An indication of this strategy is reflected in the apparently warming ties between Washington and [Hanoi](#). The two countries recently marked their 15th anniversary of diplomatic relations with joint naval exercises involving the *USS John McCain*. What is most significant is the reported US-Vietnam negotiation of nuclear cooperation where the US would allow Vietnam to enrich uranium.

US-South Korean naval exercises in the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan, which included the participation of the [aircraft carrier](#) *USS George Washington* and ostensibly as a show of resolve and response to North Korea's alleged sinking of the South Korean ship the *Cheonan*, are viewed by Chinese analysts as a provocation. Added to this was the new US-ROK "2+2" meeting held in Seoul that involve the two countries' foreign and defense

ministers. The signal is not lost to Beijing: Washington's efforts to strengthen military alliances in the region are aimed at reasserting US dominance and containing China's influence.

Underlying the growing tension and maneuvering is the lack of mutual trust and in-depth strategic [communication](#). This has left much room for mutual suspicion, misapprehension, and even miscalculation. And this is taking place at a time the US is seeking to reassert its primacy in Asia while China is trying to claim what it views its rightful place in the region. The contest could put East Asia's stability and prosperity at great peril to the detriment of all involved.

Clearly, managing the changing Sino-US relations is a critical task for leaders and strategists in both countries. However, differences in perceptions and interests, coupled with domestic politics in China and the United States, make such a task at once difficult and imperative. Obama needs to assert himself and dispel the notion that he is weak and too accommodative on foreign policy issues. In China, the pending leadership transition also raises the stakes for contenders to appear firm on issues vital to China's core interests.

It is not inevitable that the two countries are destined on a slippery slide to confrontation. After all, too much is at stake and neither power can afford another cold war in the 21st century. However, such recognition is hardly a guarantee that future conflicts can be avoided. Much depends on whether cooler heads will prevail in Beijing and Washington even if they have to live with a strategic rivalry for decades to come.