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Watch Out in the South China Sea

As U.S.-China tensions increase, the chance of a miscalculation grows.

By The Editorial Board

With the world preoccupied by the coronavirus pandemic, China has been looking to exert more military control in the South China Sea. This week three warships from the U.S. Seventh Fleet, joined by an Australian frigate, responded by sailing into the disputed waters in a show of force. The danger is that Chinese naval officers misread America's public mood and think they can embarrass the U.S. without escalation.

The South China Sea is a critical waterway in the Western Pacific, bordered by Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei. Beijing has long claimed control over it, and during the Obama Administration it moved on its claim by militarizing islands despite international protests.

This month Vietnam said a Chinese ship deliberately rammed and sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat. Indonesia's fishermen are also reporting escalating harassment, and in recent weeks Chinese government and militia ships have been tailing Malaysian oil-exploration boats.

U.S. freedom of navigation exercises are intended to affirm that Beijing cannot unilaterally seize control of the waterway. Some waters of the South China Sea are claimed by multiple neighboring countries, but China is the strongest power in the region and last week it announced its sovereignty over more islands over objections from Vietnam and the Philippines. China wants to assert its dominance, chasing other countries' commercial maritime traffic out of waters even near their own coasts.

It's widely believed that Chinese military officers are more hawkish and anti-American than Beijing officialdom claims to be. While the military has historically been reined in, President Xi Jinping has been doubling down on nationalism to consolidate his control amid the coronavirus crisis. Chinese propaganda has also amplified the virus troubles aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier, a premier American naval asset in the Pacific, to suggest U.S. vulnerability.

Another potential flashpoint is Taiwan, which has won deserved international recognition for its handling of the coronavirus. That's also infuriated China, which has increased military flyovers close to the island.

U.S.-Chinese tensions are also increasing, as Americans blame China for its deceptions about the coronavirus in an election year. Chinese propagandists have claimed the U.S. may have created the virus.

Under these circumstances the chance of a military miscalculation increases. Even something like the Hainan Island incident, when a U.S. and Chinese plane collided in 2001, would require careful de-escalation. The coronavirus is consuming most of America's political oxygen, but Chinese military commanders should not think this is a moment to tangle with the U.S. if they encounter each other at sea. China's geopolitical opportunism amid the pandemic has turned opinion against Beijing.

Freedom of navigation exercises are important but not enough to secure the Western Pacific from Chinese domination. The U.S. has remained neutral on territorial claims, but it may need to start recognizing claims of countries like Vietnam to make China pay a price for further expansion. The U.S. should also try to maintain its defense pact with the Philippines under mercurial President Rodrigo Duterte.

China's recent behavior has badly damaged its claims to be a global stakeholder that plays by the rules. The U.S. is right to make clear that it remains a Pacific power and that the coronavirus hasn't lessened its resolve.