

Top US and Chinese generals exchange words over South China Sea

By John Chan
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Tensions between the US and China over the South China Sea were on public display during a joint press conference in Beijing on Monday by the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, and his Chinese counterpart, General Chen Bingde.

Mullen was in China on a four-day visit, supposedly to improve military relations between the two countries. Beijing had cut off defence ties in protest at the Obama administration's decision to sell \$6.4 billion in arms to Taiwan in January 2010. Relations resumed this year with a visit by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates to China in January and a trip by General Chen to the US in May.

At Monday's press conference, the underlying differences quickly became evident. In his opening remarks, Chen directly questioned US intentions in the South China Sea—a strategic area close to the China mainland, through which China's imports of energy from the Middle East and Africa pass. Over the past year the Obama administration has deliberately heightened tensions in the waters by encouraging South East Asian countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam to be more assertive in their maritime disputes with China.

Chen objected in particular to the holding of US joint naval exercises in the South China Sea during Mullen's visit. "On various occasions, the US has expressed that it does not intend to intervene in South China Sea disputes. However, we have observed the latest joint exercises between US and other countries—for example, Philippines and Vietnam... The timing of those joint exercises is inappropriate, as we see it."

There is no doubt that the exercises were a calculated US show of force. As Mullen was on his way to China, the US, Japan and Australia held their first-ever joint

naval exercise in the South China Sea, in waters near Brunei. Last Friday, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia had an 11-day drill with American warships in the same area.

Mullen did not directly respond to Chen's remarks, but observed: "There remain between us many issues of misunderstanding and, quite frankly, apprehension... But we cannot let that history render our future more perilous than it is already."

Answering a question from a Chinese state television reporter about the US joint exercises, Mullen made clear that the US had no intention of allaying Chinese concerns about US naval operations in sensitive waters close to China. "The United States has had a presence in the Asia-Pacific region for decades," he declared. "And we've exercised with our allies and friends in this part of the world for decades. And we will continue to do that."

Questioned by the Associated Press on China's military build-up, Chen pointed to the obvious disparity between Chinese and American defence spending. "The US has a military budget over \$700 billion, whereas ours is only 800 billion renminbi [\$US123 billion]. This is not in the same scale. So it is not really necessary for our American friends to worry about that."

Noting the "financial difficulties" in the US, Chen suggested: "If the US could reduce its military spending a little, and spend more on improving the livelihood of the American people and doing more good things for the world—wouldn't that be a better scenario?"

The press conference soon returned to the issue of the South China Sea when the *Wall Street Journal* asked Mullen and Chen whether any compromise had been reached during their discussions.

Mullen insisted that the US was only interested in ensuring “freedom of navigation”: “This is a critical area, critical sea lane, lots of commerce. Many countries depend on it, not just China, and the United States.” The US, he claimed, sought a peaceful resolution to the territorial disputes and “took no position how the disputes should be resolved.”

Chen flatly declared that Mullen’s contention that the US was not intervening in the disputes was “simply words.” He continued: “What we are observing is that, at this particular time, when China and other claimant countries have some difficulties and problems with each other, the US decides to hold large-scale exercises. At the very least, I think this is bad timing.”

As for the US claim that it was defending “freedom of navigation,” Chen asked rhetorically: “Is there any case in which China acted in a way that really impacted on the freedom of navigation of the United States? Actually, in the South China Sea, freedom of navigation has never been an issue or a problem.” Chen accused the US of using “freedom of navigation” as “an excuse to sensationalise the issue.”

Chen also drew attention to what clearly irritates the Chinese military—frequent, close US surveillance of Chinese activities. “The closest distance between operating unmanned aerial vehicles [drones] of the US is as short as 16 nautical miles away from the Chinese territorial waters... This is very, very close. I hope our American friends can adopt measures in this regard that will fully consider the feeling of the Chinese people.”

The matter did not end there. Asked about the US presence in the area, Mullen emphasised that “we’ve operated in the South China Sea for decades and will continue to do that.” He defended US drone reconnaissance off the Chinese mainland, declaring that “these operations, these exercises are all conducted in accordance with international norms.”

As to the timing of the joint exercises, Mullen dismissed China’s objections, saying that the operations were “long-planned” and “not really large-scale.”

Not willing to let the matter rest, Chen insisted that the US should have put off the joint exercises at a time when China’s relations with Vietnam and the Philippines over the South China Sea were tense. Clearly annoyed, he pointedly asked: “Who are they targetting?” He did not need to supply the obvious

answer—China.

Chen concluded with the hope that the US presence in the South China Sea would contribute to “peace and stability”—rather than “anything unpleasant.”

Joint press conferences are not normally arenas for public debate. They are usually formal affairs, in which bland diplomatic language is employed to play down differences, no matter how sharply they have emerged behind closed doors.

The fact that Mullen and Chen engaged in a rather open slanging match over the South China Sea highlights the sharpness of US-China tensions, the fundamental character of the strategic interests at stake for both powers, and thus the growing danger of conflict in this global flashpoint.

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