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Abstract

This paper tries to demonstrate how important national interests are to security competition between great powers during peacetime. Recent US naval strategy and force structuring can be interpreted as an affirmative naval stance against China in the East Asian seas. On the other hand, PLAN has been developing new platforms and capabilities that will extend its operational reach to address other concerns within the East and South China Sea, the Yellow sea, and possibly to the Indian Ocean and beyond the second island chain in the western Pacific. Remaining problems such as tensions between the US and China in the Yellow Sea, the Taiwan issue, and the Spratly Islands accelerate the possibility of naval conflict between the US and China in the East Asian seas. Moreover, their competition for security will bring negative consequences to the security environment of the East Asian seas. The US and Chinese naval security competition will worsen the maritime security environment in East Asia and maritime conflicts in East Asia are directly connected to Korea’s maritime security. Having these situations in mind, this paper offers several policy recommendations for preparing an optimum naval strategy and enhancing Republic of Korea (ROK) naval forces in the future.


I. Introduction

As Aaron Friedberg points out, both the US and China are locked in an intense struggle for power and influence not only in Asia but around the world.1) It is certainly too difficult to reach any firm conclusions about the result of US-Chinese security competition. Nonetheless, this paper wants to try to follow the security

competition and make a meaningful prediction based on the previous experiences of security competition between the two great powers. The ultimate goal of this paper is to present why the US and China compete for security over the East Asian seas and whether this competition will continue or not in the region. Therefore, it is crucial to observe the security strategy and policy of the US and China in order to sufficiently address the question of why the US and China are engaging themselves in maritime disputes and tensions in East Asia and what will be the future prospect of said issue.2)

In fact, both the US and China have posed no direct threats to their security so far. Geographically, the US and China are divided by the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans. Their mutual interdependence is inseparable and people-to-people exchanges between the two great powers might hinder them from confronting each other in military conflicts.3) Furthermore, the two countries show signs of cooperation in terms of economic and transnational issues. The leadership of the US and China are often showing their emphasis on both nations’ cooperation. US President Barack Obama said that “the US has a positive, constructive and comprehensive relationship with China” during a dialogue with Chinese youth in Shanghai, China.4) Chinese President Hu Jintao also emphasized the importance of the two countries’ sound relationships.5) In China’s perspective, it is important to prevent any chances of the US intervention and containment; thus it is important for China to maintain a cooperative relationship with the US.6) Such phenomena directly contrast the situation during the Cold War when the US and Soviet Union constantly confronted each other.

However, despite their recognition of the necessity for mutual cooperation, both the US and China have had several experiences of confrontation in security issues, and the two countries have constantly engaged in naval skirmishes with each other since the end of the Cold War. Under these circumstances, this paper raises the following question: Why have naval skirmishes continuously arisen between the US

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2) Since the previous studies and discussions focused on specific cases such as the Taiwan Straits or the Korean Peninsula rather than focusing on a general idea and gathering reasons of such confrontation, the analysis and prospect of the effect of the US-Chinese maritime competition over the East Asian maritime security environment are not sufficient. Therefore, this paper is likely to deal with recent incidents between the US and China and their strategic preparedness of naval forces in the East Asian Seas.


