

吴士存：美军来得越频繁，越容易造成“擦枪走火”
**Wu Shicun: More Frequent US Military Comes Near Us, More Likely It is to Cause
“Guns and Misfires”**

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Summary

Professor Wu Shicun 吴士存 is president, China SCS Research Institute. The USS Ronald Reagan and USS Nimitz returned to SCS and conducted military exercises on 17 July. This was the US navy aircraft carrier's second exercise in the month of July. A few days earlier, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a statement on 13 July in which he not only reiterated the PCA decree on SCS four years ago, but also publicly opposed China's position on the SCS issue. In response to the frequently malicious acts of the United States in SCS, 观察网 Guancha.cn or Observer.com recently interviewed Professor Wu Shicun, and invited Professor Wu to express his views on various issues including the motives and impact of the US military operations in SCS, in the larger context of Sino-US relations.

This is the full interview of Professor Wu Shicun. Excerpts from the interview were published in ICS Translations Issue No. 3 - Editor

Source: https://m.guancha.cn/WuShiCun/2020_07_21_558362.shtml

Series Editor: Hemant Adlakha

Observer.com: Since early July, the US has been proactively present in the South China Sea. Is the US intervening in SCS to divert attention from internal problems such as continuously spreading rising pandemic, racial violence etc?

Professor Wu Shicun: The reason why the US continues to increase its military and diplomatic operations in SCS has nothing to do with the internal politics but everything to do with its deep-rooted ill-designs to contain China. The US is not happy to see the possibility that China will become sole independent power in SCS. The US is also unhappy to see China-ASEAN relations growing steadily.

I must point out this has been consistent US policy to use SCS issue to contain China. Since 2010, especially following the implementation of the US strategy of “Pivot to Asia” and Asia Pacific “Re-equilibrium”, the United States has never stopped its provocative military activities in the South China Sea. Though the US maintains it has remained neutral on the issue of territorial sovereignty disputes in SCS, the fact is it not only has been proactively involved in the SCS affairs but has also been “taking side.” By “taking side” I mean if any country challenges or opposes China, the US immediately starts backing up that country. The Scarborough Shoal (“黄岩岛对峙事件” *Huangyan dao duizhi shijian*) incident between the Philippines and China in April 2012, the Philippines filing SCS arbitration case in 2013, and Sino-Vietnam “981” oil rig crisis – in all

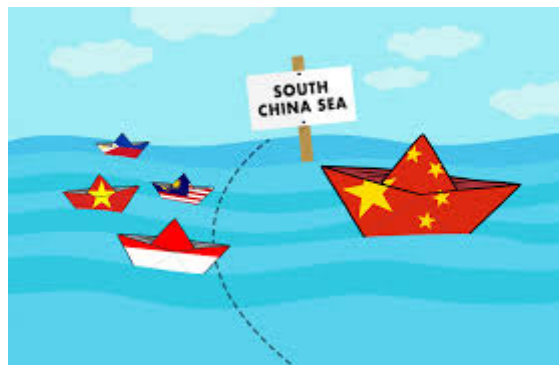
these the US State Department had repeatedly issued official position papers accusing China and supporting other countries.

It is puzzling that since the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, the intensity of US military operations in the South China Sea has not decreased but increased. Up to now, the United States has carried out five “Freedom of Navigation Operations” against China in SCS this year, this number stood at four in 2017, six in 2018, and eight in 2019. In addition, the US military has conducted nearly 2,000 air reconnaissance operations against China this year.



Against the background of the United States continuously increasing military and diplomatic involvement in SCS, the decline and deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations have extended or spilled over into the political and security arena from the fields of trade and technology. Sino-US relations have evolved from "domain confrontation" to "all-round confrontation." Therefore, the South China Sea issue is precisely an important game point

between China and the US in the security field. The South China Sea issue has already hit the US maritime supremacy in the Western Pacific. This is the reason as to why the United States has not relaxed its military activities in the South China Sea or stopped taking provocative actions against China even in view of the pandemic.



Source:Jakartaglobe.id

Observer.com: Do you think the US has any consideration of diverting the domestic pressure?

Professor Wu Shicun: The general public in the US is least bothered about the Trump administration indulging in belligerent acts against China in SCS.

If the U.S. is at all thinking about diverting domestic attention, it is most likely due to impending general election. In order to seek re-election suppressing China on issues involving China is the “politically correct” thing to do for Trump, to some extent. Increasing military operations in the South China Sea and issuing high-profile South China Sea policy statements can just show the toughness (of Trump administration). Therefore, if you put the recent U.S. behaviour in the South China Sea into the context of the overall confrontation in Sino-U.S. relations, you will find that the United States is taking some intensive actions at this time including on the issues like Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and even Taiwan. I think it is largely due to the upcoming elections in the US.

Observer.com: Mike Pompeo recently again brought up the Philippines arbitration issue, the PCA decree issued in 2016. How do you evaluate the 2016 decree, do you think the decree was the result of political pressure? Why is Pompeo suddenly going back to and raising the issue? At this point in time, do you think there is anything special to it?

Professor Wu Shicun: The Philippines' South China Sea arbitration case from the beginning was a US “act”. The Philippines was just a puppet. Benigno Aquino III was used by the Americans to initiate the arbitration case. The whole thing was scripted, acted and directed by the US. Even the relevant content of the PCA ruling was packaged with the help of the United States. Therefore, the ruling completely negated China’s legitimate rights and claims in the South China Sea. It was done entirely out of the strategic interests of the United States.

Even after four years, the US has not been able to accept the fact that China has refused to acknowledge the ruling; the US continues to feel indignant that China had dismissed the decree as

“a piece of waste paper” and the US has continued its efforts to find ways to somehow enforce The Hague ruling on China.

The foreign ministers of US, Japan and Australia continued to issue joint statements during the ASEAN foreign ministers meet for three successive years in 2016, 2017 and 2018, asking China to respect the so-called “ruling” and forcing China to accept it.

Today exactly four years have passed, and the United States has once again entered the election cycle. Coupled with the recent heating up of the South China Sea issue, new factors of instability have emerged in the South China Sea. Under this background, the US Secretary of State suddenly issued a statement on July 13th. It is not surprising, thus, that he talked volubly of the content of the arbitration award and repeated it.



Source: orfonline.org

Another important reason behind the US reviving the PCA decree issue now has also much to do with the political situation in the Philippines. The important consensus established between China and the Duterte

government to keep aside the “ruling” and move ahead through bilateral negotiations to resolve the SCS dispute, has been unacceptable to the US. As Duterte has entered the last leg of his presidency, the “pro-US” and “anti-China” forces in the Philippines have become proactive to sabotage the “Duterte-China consensus”. So, the US is raising the issue again with the twin purposes: first, to once again alert the international community; second, to cheer up the spirits of pro-US and anti-China forces inside the Philippines.

In February this year, the Duterte administration announced that it would terminate the Philippines-US "Visiting Forces Agreement," but on June 1 it announced a moratorium on the termination. It can be seen from this that pressure from the US and the "pro-US forces" at home is gradually increasing on Duterte since entering the last leg of his presidency.

Observer.com: You mentioned in an earlier interview that the U.S. policy in the South China Sea has been evolving continuously. After the "Mischief Reef Incident" in 1995, the U.S. changed from neutrality to limited intervention. In October 2010, Hillary Clinton's speech during ASEAN foreign ministers' meetings marked the transition in US position to active intervention, while Pompeo's statement marks complete abandonment of "neutrality" by the United States and an all-round confrontation with China. In your opinion, to what extent the United States, which is compulsorily opposing anything Chinese (逢中必反 "Anything but

China"), will actively intervene in the South China Sea? Will the United States have any concerns?

Prof. Wu Shicun: The United States has almost exhausted all its cards in the South China Sea and doesn't have a new card to play. As the next step, in addition to continuing to carry out joint military exercises with allies and partner countries inside and outside the region, the United States may make some new moves.



Political Map of SCS

Source: nationsonline.org

One is that the United States may increase its military bases in the South China Sea. For example, in addition to the existing military bases in the Philippines and Singapore, the United States may also use port visits and other methods to use Vietnam as an important military base for deployment and operations in the South China Sea.

Second, the deployment and interaction of the US Coast Guard in the South China Sea may become normal. The United States has already deployed two Coast Guard ships at Japanese bases under the unified command of the Seventh Fleet. In the future, the US Coast Guard will enter the South China Sea more frequently and may even conduct so-called "law enforcement" in disputed areas in the South China Sea. However, according to international conventions and general international practice, the Coast Guard of a coastal state only enforces the law in the exclusive economic zone of its own country. The United States is not a coastal state in the South China Sea so its so-called "law enforcement" would only be considered as "exceeding one's functions and meddling in other's affairs".

The United States' freedom of navigation operations against China in the South China Sea have become a regular affair. Apart from continuously increasing the frequency and expanding the scope of such operations to the waters near the Paracel Islands, Nansha Islands, and Huangyan Islands, and conducting "dual carrier operations", the US is left with no new trick.

There have also been cases of high-level US generals bragging about resorting to force against the Nansha islands and reefs controlled by China, to blow up our expanded islands and reefs, but I guess the US military still dare not

act rashly. If the United States took such a step, it would be tantamount to provoking a war.

From this attempt of fomenting discord between China and other disputing countries by publicly supporting the positions of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia in the South China Sea in the statement, it can also be seen that the United States has been unable to play new tricks in the South China Sea.



Military training in SCS
Source:news.cgtn.com

Observer.com: In an earlier interview, you had said the real thinking in the US is not to take the side of the countries in South East Asia but there are several other cards the US has in mind. What are these other cards?

Professor Wu Shicun: The US has several tricks up on its sleeves, let me elaborate:

First, to rope in other countries from outside of the region, especially from among the US allies and form a new grouping called “paramilitary group” to start joint patrolling in SCS. For the US alone carrying out FONOP has proved out to be very costly and unsustainable. So, the US has been pushing (and luring) its allies and friendly-

partner countries to join the group. The idea is to divide responsibility and at the same time ensure the military pressure on China remains intact. Though the US allies and friendly-partners such as Japan, Australia, UK and even India are yet to formally respond to the US request, it is not unlikely given the US “carrot and stick” mechanisms and driven by their own respective national interests, the allies and friendly partners will sooner than later join the patrolling operations in SCS.

Second is the regular deployment of the US coast guard in SCS. The US has always maintained that the Chinese People’s Armed Police Force Coast Guard Corps, also called China Coast Guard is China’s “paramilitary force.” These “grey areas” have been the source of “asymmetry” in the balance of power between the US and China in SCS. Hence, the US desire to deploy coast guard in SCS for “law enforcement”. For the US will quickly act on the side of Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia as soon it gets an opportunity once there is escalation of tension with China and enter the conflict in the SCS.



Claims to SCS
Source:theconversation.com

Third, the US “Freedom of Navigation” actions against China will become more frequent and the US will also employ more diverse means to realize its goal.

Fourth, the United States will spare no effort to cooperate, support and encourage Vietnam to follow the example of the Philippines and initiate a new South China Sea arbitration.

Observer.com: Judging from your explanation, it seems that the United States may resort to quite a few actions. And this month, the United States sent two aircraft carriers USS Reagan and USS Nimitz in the South China Sea for conducting naval exercise. For the United States, which is still reeling under the impact of pandemic, is there any special significance behind conducting "dual carrier operations" in the South China Sea?

Professor Wu Shicun: After a lapse of 6 years, at the beginning of this month, the US military carried out "dual carrier operations" in the South China Sea twice within a week. There are three main meanings behind it:

First, in a sense, this is a "retaliatory backlash" by the US military in the South China Sea. From March to May, three US aircraft carriers had to be sent to Guam for overall quarantine after getting affected with COVID 19. For some time, the United States had “no” aircraft carriers in the Western Pacific. Now that they (the US navy) have somewhat controlled the pandemic, the

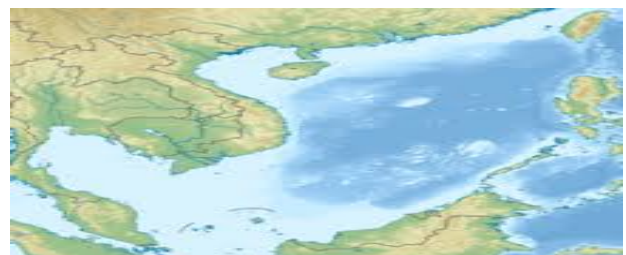
United States wants to make up for the lack of previous actions through intensive dual-carrier exercises.

Second, after being hit hard by the pandemic, the United States needs to show off its superior military strength to assure its allies in the region that "the United States is still the only superpower in the world, and it is still capable of resisting Chinese threats in the region and providing security for allies and partners. At the same time, “the United States is still willing to provide security and protection when the situation requires it.”

Third, the United States is trying to show its strength to China through the dual aircraft carrier exercise, which is a manifestation of its "gunboat diplomacy."

Observer.com: What do you think China can do in the face of America's show of strength?

Professor Wu Shicun: China certainly does not lack corresponding countermeasures to counter US show of military strength. The United States also knows this well, so its two aircraft carriers cannot recklessly take military actions against China.



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Source:en.wikipedia.org

Therefore, China must do the following as the matter of top priority:

First, we must maintain composure and not get chaotic or impatient. In particular, China must not follow the United States, cannot be led by him, and cannot dance on the US tunes, (should not start doing what the US wants it to do). This is the most important thing. (We must remember) As far as actual substantive actions are concerned, US will not have many new tricks to play in the South China Sea.

Second, we must steadily advance our own capacity building. The reason why the United States dares to show its strength in the South China Sea and even at the door of China is that China's deterrence in the South China Sea is not enough to deter unilateral provocations by the United States. Therefore, China must integrate its existing maritime forces, focus on the changes in the form of future maritime wars, prepare for the deterioration of the situation in the South China Sea, and strive to form a deterrent force through capacity building to achieve the goal of "subduing the enemy without fighting."

Third, we must continue to accelerate China-ASEAN consultations on the "Code of Conduct for the South China Sea" so that peace and stability in the South China Sea will be based on a rule-based order.

Fourth, it is very important to stabilize China-ASEAN relations. The United States is not happy to see a positive development of China-ASEAN relations. In the first half of this year, ASEAN has surpassed the EU to become China's largest trading partner. At the same time,

China has maintained the status of ASEAN's largest trading partner for 11 consecutive years. The steady improvement of China-ASEAN relations is an important guarantee to prevent the United States from disrupting the South China Sea, which will also help stabilize the situation in the South China Sea.



Sino-US fire power in SCS
Source:globaltimes.cn

Observer.com: I want to ask you two more questions about ASEAN countries. Although ASEAN countries may know in their hearts that the United States is not their true ally, but will some claimant countries still take this opportunity to appear confused and join US as its pawn in order to take advantage of China?

Professor Wu Shicun: The statement made by US Secretary of State Pompeo actually sent a wrong signal to countries in the South China Sea. Some countries may mistakenly think that the United States will support them on some issues. Pompeo pointed to Wan 'an Beach (between China and Vietnam), some islands and reefs actually controlled by the Philippines (between China and the Philippines), and even talked about Nankang Shoal, Beikang Shoal, Zengmu Shoal (between China and Malaysia), and Brunei Exclusive Economic Zone, Natuna

Islands in Indonesia, etc. On these issues, Pompeo certainly supports these countries. Some countries may rush ahead into danger by mistakenly believing that if they take unilateral provocative actions in these areas, the United States will support them.

I think some countries may make a misjudgement and they can take provocative actions, thinking that due to US support for them China will not take strong countermeasures. I think this is the core problem with Pompeo's statement whose intention is to destabilise the South China Sea.



Disputed Islands in SC
Source:scmp.com

Observer.com: In recent years, in terms of disputes in the South China Sea, what consensus have been reached between China and ASEAN countries, especially with claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines? What are the issues that have not been agreed upon yet?

Professor Wu Shicun: There are many consensuses. On the one hand, several bilateral consultation mechanisms have been established. The bilateral government consultation

mechanism between China and Vietnam was established in the 1990s, and China and Malaysia are currently discussing the establishment of a bilateral government consultation mechanism. The China-Philippines bilateral consultation mechanism on the South China Sea issue was established in 2017, and 5 vice-ministerial meetings have already taken place under it. Therefore, consensus is greater than disagreement, and we must be aware of this. The reason why there is no major chaos in the South China Sea is that China and some other countries have maintained a certain degree of restraint. These mechanisms have played a positive role in suspending or shelving of unilateral actions through diplomatic channel consultations.

On the other hand, there are many consensuses at the multilateral level. For example, the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea" (DOC) signed in 2002, refraining from taking actions that may complicate the situation in the South China Sea, and so on. Everyone still exercises restraint and abides by the "DOC", creating a good external environment for the negotiation of the "Code (of conduct)".

I think these are the biggest stabilizing and positive factors: bilateral mechanisms are operating effectively, and multilateral mechanisms have consensus.



Recent situation in SCS
Source:iadllaw.org

Disagreements are also natural, because the South China Sea issue involves disputes over islands and reefs and delimitation claims, which are difficult to resolve in a short period of time. Therefore, it is unrealistic to say that there are no differences and no problems. Problems continue, and it may become the norm. However, it is also possible to manage the crisis and promote cooperation in less-sensitive areas where possible.

Observer.com: What do you think of the statement issued by the Philippine Foreign Minister on July 12 in support of the 2016 arbitration award which "conclusively settled the issue of historic rights and maritime entitlements in the South China Sea"?

Professor Wu Shicun: It is true that the Philippines never actually stated that it has abandoned the arbitration award. We too have not implemented it, nor did the Philippines complain that China is not complying. Since we do not accept the claims and actions based on arbitration awards, the Duterte administration is

driven by the practical need to improve Sino-Philippine relations. He knows that there is no scope for bargain and negotiation on the issue with China. The negotiation on the South China Sea issue between China and the Philippines is not based on the arbitration award, or to say that the award could be put aside for the time being (we just don't accept it). Duterte does not mention the award when he comes to Beijing to meet President Xi Jinping. Duterte only says that when China and the Philippines discuss the South China Sea issue, they put the award aside, but he has never said that he would abandon the arbitration award or that he does not comply with it.

In fact, since the award, the Philippines has made a lot of moves in this regard, and even amended the constitution to include arbitration awards as part of the future national territory of the Philippines. In fact, it is trying to affirm arbitration award through domestic legislation. So, you see Duterte has been constantly moving around arbitration awards during last four years. This is natural, because arbitration awards are completely beneficial to the Philippines and totally detrimental to China, which means the Philippines' claims and demands have been completely accepted; whereas China's legitimate interests and claims in the South China Sea have been denied completely. Therefore, no Filipino politician dares to abandon the arbitration award easily.

On the 4th anniversary of the arbitration award, the Philippine Foreign Minister issued a strong

public statement. We must first consider the American factor behind this. Obviously, the US factor is at work behind the statement. On June 1 the Philippines announced the suspension and termination of the "Visiting Forces Agreement" with the United States; on June 9, the Philippine Defence Minister visited Zhongye Island; then on July 12, the Philippine Minister of Foreign Affairs issued a statement revisiting the arbitration award, requiring China to comply with the ruling and so on. Therefore, it can be seen that during the last leg of Duterte presidency---his six-year term will come to an end in 2022---his domestic influence and the foundation of his government is weakening, while US influence and "pro-US" forces are growing in the Philippines. Coupled with the overall regional environment, the Philippines believes that China is having a rather rough time internationally. So, it believes that there would hardly be any costs for getting a little tough on China. This and many other factors have made its foreign minister come up with such a funny statement.



The Hague rejects China's claims in SCS
Source:aljazeera.com

Observer.com: If we put the South China Sea issue within the broader framework of Sino-US relations, Sino-US relations have fallen into a trough since the trade war. Recently, US has accused China for the pandemic and initiated sanctions against Huawei. Looking at this combination of punches ranging from technology to military, has the United States fully launched a diplomatic strategy to resist China's rise? How should China respond?

Professor Wu Shicun: I don't think I have any illusions about Sino-US relations, because the United States identified China as a "strategic competitor" in the 2017 National Security Strategy report, and it can be seen that today there is such a relationship between China and the United States---although we cannot call it the "new cold war"---- in which confrontation and competition dominate, instead of the original Sino-US bilateral relations which were both competitive and cooperative, yet where cooperation was the dominant. Some scholars called it "co-opetition" marked by both cooperation and competition. I think that Sino-US relations have now completely entered a stage of competition and confrontation. This time I define it as "comprehensive confrontation" because there is no area in which China and the United States can still cooperate.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, this has never happened. The consultation mechanism between governments has basically ceased. Not

a single mechanism is still working which could conduct effective dialogue and communication in accordance with the original agenda.



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Source: amti.csis.org

There are some mechanisms where we convey to the Americans that it is the time to start a dialogue, or there are certain things that need to be discussed with the Americans. But the Americans simply choose to ignore them. Therefore, the Americans have already defined China as a "comprehensive strategic competitor." We should not have illusions about the United States. If Trump wins the election this year, China must mentally prepare itself for struggle due to deterioration in Sino-US relations in the next four years.

If the Democratic Party wins, then we still need to assess the direction of Sino-US relations. However, there would be no change with regards to considering China a strategic competitor. And the United States will continue to suppress China. My assessment of future Sino-US relations is "throw away illusions and prepare for struggle."

Observer.com: The last question is from netizens. As the situation in the South China Sea

heats up, there have been opinions on the Internet that there must be a battle between China and the United States, and the breakthrough point is likely to be in the South China Sea. In the recent tense situation "with swords drawn and bows stretched" in the South China Sea, is there a possibility that the two sides will lead to "guns and misfires" (sparking a conflict accidentally)?

Professor Wu Shicun: I think the strategic decision makers of China and the United States are not prepared for a war in the South China Sea, and the relationship between the two countries cannot afford a battle in the South China Sea. Under the conditions of modern warfare, China and the United States are both nuclear powers, and I think no one will easily fire the "first shot".

I think provocation of war will be disastrous for regional peace and stability and Sino-US relations. This is why we have to test each other's bottom line. The United States is currently not quite sure about China's bottom line in the South China Sea—its warships are also getting insatiable—and they want to see China's bottom line. Where they could take a chance and what lies beyond limits is still not too clear to the Americans.



Militarization in SCS

Source:thediplomat.com

As scholars, we often say that China should show the bottom line to Americans. I just had a “track two” online dialogue with the Americans not long ago, and I also discussed that each other's bottom line must be shared with each other. For one must avoid getting caught in a face-to-face situation. Because nobody wants to see another "aircraft collision incident" like the one in 2001 between China and the United States in the South China Sea, triggering a major setback in relations between the two countries.

If something like this happens again today, the consequences may be different. Today in the South China Sea, given our strength and equipment, we will certainly not swallow insult and humiliation silently, because the era of letting China swallow insult and humiliation silently has gone forever. Under the current circumstances, I think we still have to devote ourselves to the building of some crisis management and control mechanisms, make them work, and try best to avoid "guns and misfires".

However, based on the current development and evolution of the situation in the South China Sea, I believe that the possibility of “guns and misfires" is more than before:

First, the US warships and aircrafts frequently enter the South China Sea. Some mechanisms are already in place, but under certain circumstances situation can be extremely dangerous. For example, on September 30, 2018, the Chinese destroyer "Lanzhou" and the American destroyer "Decatur" made close contact near the Nansha Islands when they were only 41 meters apart. When a warship at sea is travelling at a high speed, it is entirely possible that a collision may occur due to irregular operations, and a collision may cause casualties. Therefore, one must try to avoid the occurrence of crises and avoid the escalation of crises into conflict events, which will lead to further escalation. Therefore, under certain special circumstances, these mechanisms may fail, and occurrence of "guns and misfires" is not impossible.



In the SCS

Source: economist.com

Second, US navy warships as well as U.S. Coast Guard ships are frequenting SCS. We also have Coast Guard ships, and the coast guards of the two countries do not have a crisis control mechanism between them. The Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) only apply to navy and air force. The crisis management mechanism for the Coast Guard ships has not been established. What if the US Coast Guard has entered the South China Sea and the Chinese Coast Guard enforces the law? Once the two sides meet, what rules will they follow? If at all, the operation is not standardized, collisions may occur.

Therefore, in this sense, the possibility of "guns and misfires" between China and the United States in the South China Sea is increasing. If the U.S. military activities in the South China Sea become more frequent, China will take corresponding countermeasures, such as tracking and identifying, warning and expelling. The more frequent and more the US military comes, the greater the probability of "guns and misfire".

The views expressed here are those of the translator and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies

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