

Can China And The United States Establish Mutual Respect To Lessen Tensions?



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On June 3, 2023, naval vessels from the United States and Canada conducted a joint military exercise in the South China Sea. A Chinese warship (LY 132) [overtook](#) the U.S. guided-missile destroyer (USS Chung-Hoon) and speeded across its path. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command released a [statement](#) saying that the Chinese ship “executed maneuvers in an unsafe manner.” The spokesperson from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wang Wenbin, [responded](#) that the United States “made provocations first and China responded,” and that the “actions taken by the Chinese military are completely justified, lawful, safe, and professional.” This incident is one of many in these waters, where the United States conducts what it calls Freedom of Navigation (FON) exercises. These FON actions are given legitimacy by Article 87(1)(a) of the 1982 [United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea](#). China is a signatory to the Convention, but the United States has refused to ratify it. U.S. warships use the FON argument without legal rights or any United Nations Security Council authorization. The U.S. Freedom of Navigation Program was [set up](#) in 1979, before the Convention and separate from it.

Hours after this encounter in the South China Sea, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. The Shangri-La Dialogue,

which has taken place annually at the Shangri-La Hotel since 2002, brings together military chiefs from around Asia with guests from countries such as the United States. At a [press gaggle](#), Austin was asked about the recent incident. He called upon the Chinese government “to reign in that kind of conduct because I think accidents can happen that could cause things to spiral out of control.” That the incident took place because a U.S. and Canadian military exercise took place adjacent to Chinese territorial waters did not evoke any comment from Austin. He emphasized the role of the United States to ensure that any country can “sail the seas and fly the skies in international space.”

Austin’s pretense of innocence was challenged by his Chinese counterpart, Defense Minister Li Shangfu. “Why did all these incidents happen in areas near China,” Li [asked](#), “not in areas near other countries?” “The best way to prevent this from happening is that military vessels and aircraft not come close to our waters and airspace... Watch out for your own territorial waters and airspace, then there will not be any problems.” Li contested the idea that the U.S. navy and air force are merely conducting FON exercises. “They are not here for innocent passage,” he said. “They are here for provocation.”

Tighten the Net

When Austin was not talking to the press, he was busy in Singapore strengthening U.S. military alliances whose purpose is to tighten the net around China. He held two important meetings, the first a U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral meeting and the second a meeting that included their counterpart from the Philippines. After the trilateral meeting, the ministers released a sharp [statement](#) that used words (“destabilizing” and “coercive”) that raised the temperature against China. Bringing in the Philippines to this dialogue, the U.S. egged on new military cooperation among Canberra, Manila, and Tokyo. This builds on the Japan-Philippines military [agreement](#) signed in Tokyo in February 2023, which has Japan pledging funds to the Philippines and the latter allowing the Japanese military to conduct drills in its islands and waters. It also draws on the Australia-Japan military alliance [signed](#) in October 2022, which—while it does not mention China—is focused on the “free and open Indo-Pacific,” a U.S. military [phrase](#) that is often used in the context of the FON exercises in and near Chinese waters.

Over the course of the past two decades, the United States has built a series of military alliances against China. The earliest of these alliances is the Quad, set up in 2008 and then [revived](#) after a renewed interest from India, in November 2017.

The four powers in the Quad are Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. In 2018, the United States military renamed its Pacific Command (set up in 1947) to Indo-Pacific Command and developed an [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), whose main focus was on China. One of the reasons to rename the process was to draw India into the structure being built by the United States, emphasizing the India-China tensions around the Line of Actual Control. The document shows how the U.S. has attempted to inflame all conflicts in the region—some small, others large—and put itself forward as the defender of all Asian powers against the “bullying of neighbors.” Finding solutions to these disagreements is not on the agenda. The emphasis of the Indo-Pacific Strategy is for the U.S. to force China to subordinate itself to a new global alliance against it.

Mutual Respect

During the press gaggle in Singapore, Austin suggested that the Chinese government “should be interested in freedom of navigation as well because without that, I mean, it would affect them.” China is a major commercial power, he said, and “if there are no laws, if there are no rules, things will break down for them very quickly as well.”

China’s Defense Minister Li was very clear that his government was open to a dialogue with the United States, and he worried as well about the “breakdown” of communications between the major powers. However, Li put forward an important precondition for the dialogue. “Mutual respect,” he said, “should be the foundation of our communications.” Up to now, there is little evidence—even less in Singapore despite Austin’s jovial attitude—of respect from the United States for the sovereignty of China. The language from Washington gets more and more acrid, even when it pretends to be sweet.

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