

Reckless challenge

Mark Valencia says the dire consequences of a confrontation are not worth the risk the US is taking with its provocative flights near Chinese features in the South China Sea

The CNN-filmed flight of a US surveillance plane near Chinese occupied features in the South China Sea has created an international incident with dire potential political implications. Indeed, as the United States and China exchange threats, US allies and friends in the region are becoming increasingly nervous. The knock-on effects of a US-China confrontation and a resultant sharp deterioration of relations would be very damaging to their economies and security. Essentially, they would be forced to abandon their hedging strategies and choose sides.

In Washington, Daniel Russel, the US assistant secretary of state for East Asia, said: "Nobody in our right mind is going to stop the US Navy from operating. That would not be a good step." However, Wang Yi (王毅), China's foreign minister – presumably in his "right mind" – told US Secretary of State John Kerry this month that the "determination of the Chinese side to safeguard our own sovereignty and territorial integrity is as firm as a rock and it is unshakable".

The *Global Times*, which often reflects the views of the Chinese leadership, editorialised that "Washington is purposefully raising tensions with China, a move that has created a higher risk of a physical confrontation between both sides". The spokesperson for China's foreign ministry Hong Lei (洪磊) warned the US not to take "any risky and provocative actions".

It is small wonder that former CIA deputy director Michael Morell told CNN that there is "absolutely" a risk of the US and China going to war. Even UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon chimed in, calling on "all parties concerned to resolve their disputes through dialogue, in conformity with international law".

According to former Australian foreign minister Bob Carr, his nation's business community is worried about the risks to the economic relationship with China engendered by siding with the US. But what may be at stake is Australia's strategy of being "friends with both".

Vietnam, one of the chief proponents of greater US involvement in the issue, may be softening its position. Last week, Le Hai Binh, a spokesperson for Vietnam's foreign ministry, said that Vietnam urged all parties concerned to respect the sovereignty of coastal states in accordance with international law and to fulfil obligations under the status quo. While this could be interpreted as being aimed at China, it may also reflect deeper worries that Vietnam may get caught in the crossfire.

The US surveillance aircraft involved in



the incident flew out of Clark Airbase in the Philippines. This operational support for the US threatens ASEAN solidarity. Indeed, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations may well respond to the current US strategy by subordinating its concerns with its "reputation" and even stepping up its tactical assertiveness. Indeed, it is likely that China will ignore the US gambit and continue its reclamation efforts.

The current US approach is not 'containing' China or even significantly moderating its actions

Secretary Soeng Rathchavy tacitly support China's position on settling the South China Sea disputes by arguing that territorial conflicts should be addressed between claimants and not involve ASEAN.

The US resort to threatening the use of military force through its so-called "freedom of navigation" activities indicates that it has run out of good options. Its current approach is not "containing" China or

even significantly moderating its position and actions, or those of other claimants.

The more muscular US tactic may also reflect its growing concern regarding the credibility of its security relationships in Asia as well as the effectiveness of international security arrangements there. The US theory seems to be that China is paying an increasing "reputational cost" for its actions in the South China Sea and will eventually moderate its behaviour due to international public pressure.

However, by its actions, the US may have "boxed in" the Chinese leadership, which is feeling internal pressure from an increasingly vocal nationalistic populace. China may well respond to the current US strategy by subordinating its concerns with its "reputation" and even stepping up its tactical assertiveness. Indeed, it is likely that China will ignore the US gambit and continue its reclamation efforts.

The worst fears of the US and others may then materialise if China declares an air defence identification zone over the Spratlys – or at least those island features it occupies – and militarises them. In the worst-case scenario, the US and China would become open rivals, the region would be polarised, an arms race would ensue and crises would be frequent and frightening.

Ironically, the US may then also find itself in a diplomatic corner with a growing

domestic constituency pushing it to "stand up to China". It will have created a situation in which its military prowess and the credibility of its security guarantees to its allies and friends are at stake.

Already, some are calling this issue a test of freedom of navigation, US treaty obligations, existing international law and order, and US preeminence in the region. The clamour for a robust response to China will only grow louder as the US presidential campaign moves into full swing.

In the incident documented by CNN, the US has now clarified that its aircraft stayed outside the 12-nautical-mile territorial sea that the Chinese feature may generate. Under international law, a foreign aircraft cannot fly over the territory or territorial sea of another country without its permission. Moreover, it is questionable whether a military vessel entering a territorial sea simply to demonstrate a right of passage is "innocent passage".

But the plot is thickening. The Pentagon has warned that entry into or over Chinese-claimed insular territory and its 12-nautical-mile territorial sea would be the "next step".

All we can do now is hold our collective breath.

Mark J. Valencia is an adjunct senior scholar at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, Halkou, China

Trivial pursuits

Peter Kammerer says while we are engrossed in feeding our inane addiction to social media, we miss making connections for real



Every language seems to have a term for them: the looking-down generation, the people, so many of us among them, who are so engrossed in their electronic devices that they walk into others. When they're not scrolling through pages, they're pulling out their selfie stick for a happy snap, no matter how trivial the moment may be. Each to their own, of course, but as with any addiction, there's a point where more is being lost than achieved. For too many of us, what is disappearing is life.

Some parents and teachers realise this: it's why they're confiscating phones and tablets or imposing screen-free days. But adults don't as often have someone to tell them enough is enough, especially amid so much gadgetry. When world leaders are busy taking selfies with each other, everyone has a Facebook account, Instagram postings become second nature and Twitter feeds are viewed as essential to stay informed, it's difficult to tear eyes away. We all know too much of one thing is not good, but how can connectedness and knowledge be bad?

Hip-hop artist Pitbull and rock music singer Roger Daltrey think otherwise. In interviews last week with US radio show host Howard Stern, they claimed that mobile devices were harming society. Pitbull contended all the downward-starting was leading people to miss the "big picture" – life. He has a rule when in family and social settings: "No phones, no pictures, no cameras – everything stays in your mind." For Daltrey, the constant flow of information, often of little or no consequence, was stifling creativity. "When we're doing nothing is when we get our great thoughts, our great artistic ideas," he said. "You're never going to get an epiphany when you're being fed stuff all the time."

But the inordinate attachment to smartphones is also stopping a generation from looking forward, around and at each other. While we're checking out a pinged Facebook update or reading comments from haters and thinking up ways to be mean back to them, we're ignoring the cooing pigeon that's landed on the window ledge, the flash of colour as the sun sets and the cute person of the opposite sex who has been eyeballing us from the other side of the MTR carriage. Instead, most of the time, we come away with something trivial or not urgent to attend to. Call them lost experiences or missed opportunities; whichever, they are life passing us by.

Anyone who has been around people with drug or alcohol addiction knows that these are similar symptoms. If a device is picked up absent-mindedly, has to be used in a meeting, while walking the dog, during a concert or at the meal table with the family, there's obviously a problem. Unfortunately, society doesn't yet view it that way.

Friends and family can help – if they can drag themselves away from their own gadgets long enough. Taking devices from children and encouraging other activities is good training. And for those who recognise they have a problem, there are some small steps to help with recovery: Not putting the phone under the pillow at night, reading books rather than Twitter, making meal times a screen-free zone and looking at strangers and smiling instead of swiping and scrolling. Society will be better for it.

Peter Kammerer is a senior writer at the Post

Tributes aside, leftists' instigating role in 1967 riots must not be whitewashed

Gary Cheung says the death of a ringleader of the riots exposes polarised views even today

Lyrics from the Simon and Garfunkel classic, *The Sound of Silence* – "People talking without listening, people hearing without listening" – may well sum up the divided response to the death of Yeung Kwong, the ringleader of the 1967 riots and veteran leader of the Federation of Trade Unions.

Pro-Beijing newspapers heaped praise on Yeung's "contribution to the labour movement" and people posted tribute messages like "we will miss our fellow fighter in the anti-British and anti-persecution struggle", which FTU lawmaker Alice Mak Meikun put up on her Facebook page.

Meanwhile, some internet users who are critical of the pro-Beijing camp posted messages like "Yeung Kwong, you are a murderer with blood on your hands" on Facebook groups set up by like-minded people.

The polarised views of Yeung, who was director of the All-Circles Anti-Persecution Struggle Committee during the 1967 disturbances, underscore the entrenched division between the leftist camp and mainstream society, long after the bombs and bloodied bodies have been cleared from the streets.

Forty-eight years on, the 1967 riots still polarise Hong Kong. While the leftist camp boasted their "righteous revolt" against the oppression by the colonial government, most people outside the camp highlighted the killing of Commercial Radio broadcaster Lam Bun in August 1967 after he criticised the rioters on his programme.

In their condolences, neither acting chief executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-nor nor the FTU, which Yeung led from 1962 to 1988, mentioned his role in the leftist-inspired riots. Lam praised Yeung for his contributions to the labour movement, reminiscent of the justification for awarding him the Grand Bauhinia Medal. Hong Kong's highest honour, in 2001.

The 1967 riots were seen as a spillover from the Cultural Revolution, which Mao Zedong (毛澤東) launched on the mainland a year earlier. While

Most leftist leaders remained silent and unrepentant about the excessive actions

Yeung led the struggle committee, the unrest was actually masterminded by the Hong Kong branch of Xinhua News Agency – which served as Beijing's de facto embassy in Hong Kong at the time. Yeung was chosen as the figurehead of the struggle committee largely because of Beijing's preference for a leftist union leader to highlight "the leadership of the working class".

Having said that, Yeung should shoulder some responsibility for the extremist

actions mounted under the name of the struggle committee. In a statement issued in June 1967, the committee threw its weight behind the bombing campaign, saying that the "anti-atrocities heroes" had adopted a "people's warfare" which had "exhausted" the colonial government.

After the anti-British disturbances were quelled, most leftist leaders remained silent and even unrepentant about the excessive actions taken by some militants in 1967. To date, Wong Kwok-kin is the only FTU leader to have said sorry for the atrocities suffered by innocent people during the riots.

As someone who has spent nearly two decades studying the 1967 riots, I think it is time to set the record straight on the fallacies put forward by the leftists about the disturbances. They have been arguing that they were moved to act by Hong Kong people's social discontent, pointing to the lack of labour rights protection and the plight of the underprivileged.

It is true that such social ills existed in the 1960s. Yet, when a 5-cent fare rise for the ferry ride between Central and Tsim Sha Tsui triggered the Star Ferry riots in 1966, the leftist camp had at first stood idly by. Editorials in pro-Beijing newspapers even threw their weight behind the colonial government's suppression of the disturbances.

The following year, however, after the Cultural Revolution had started, the leftists used the labour dispute to launch an anti-British struggle. Since the mid-1990s, the

leftist camp has also claimed that the riots sparked the sweeping social reforms of the 1970s. This is to downplay the social background to the riots.

It is worth noting that there was already momentum within the colonial government in the mid-1960s to initiate social reform. In early 1967, an interdepartmental report put forward an ambitious reform programme, including a mandatory provident fund and social insurance to protect the labour force. But the proposals were shelved because of opposition from the business community.

One of the unintended consequences of the riots was renewed momentum for social reforms to improve working conditions, which helped overcome opposition from business. It is fair to say that the riots served as the catalyst for reform, but were not the cause.

The riots claimed 51 lives, 15 in bomb attacks. But it is oversimplifying matters, and unfair, to assume that these bomb attacks represented the whole picture. Among the 1,396 people convicted during the disturbances, only 118 were found guilty of bombing-related offences.

Gary Cheung is the Post's political editor and author of Hong Kong's Watershed: The 1967 Riots

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Beware environmental costs of Chinese investment flood

Kamilia Lahrichi considers the impact of Latin American rail project

The visit of Premier Li Keqiang (李强) to Brazil last week has boosted bilateral trade but is likely to further worsen the reputation of Chinese companies for harming the fragile environment in Latin America.

Li inked 35 trade and investment agreements with Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff that will see Beijing invest billions in Brazil's decaying infrastructure. This will help build an ambitious 3,500km transcontinental railroad that will ease commodity exports to resource-starved China.

The railway will run from the Brazilian port of Santos on the Atlantic to the Peruvian port of Ilo on the Pacific. It is supposed to be completed in six years.

This project is crucial to the Asian giant as both Brazil and Peru are key suppliers to the Chinese market. Lima sends out copper and gold; Brasilia supplies iron ore and oil. Yet, it is a double-edged sword.

Li and Rousseff signed a declaration on climate change to reduce greenhouse gas emissions but they have neglected the major environmental impact the railway is likely to have. The rail network will probably worsen climate change, weaken fragile ecosystems, erode the soil, accelerate deforestation and put the livelihood of indigenous communities at risk.

Environmentalists worry that it will run through protected areas in the Amazon rainforest. The Brazilian organisation, the Amazonian Network of Geo-Referenced Socio-

Environmental Information, pointed out that the railroad would cross the lands of about 600 indigenous and protected communities. It could also spur illegal logging and encourage drug trafficking.

Chinese companies are already known in Latin America for failing to preserve the region's biodiversity and having poor environmental standards. Such claims will only further harm their reputation, which stems from their investment in extractive industries that cause the most environmental damage.

Chinese companies are already known for having poor environmental standards

Such industries are also a common source of social conflict among indigenous people over land rights. Extractive industries represent over four fifths of Chinese direct investment in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to a 2015 report from Boston University titled "China in Latin America: Lessons for South-South Cooperation and Sustainable Development". This includes 70 per cent in oil and gas. Chinese companies have also

prompted an outcry with their investment in oil development in an environmentally sensitive area in the north. Equally controversial, the Chinese-financed Nicaragua canal has triggered mass protests about fears of environmental degradation. Scientists said it could threaten wildlife.

The transcontinental railroad should have rung alarm bells, given that its predecessor, the interoceanic highway, completed in 2011, raised similar environmental concerns. The 2,600km route runs through the Andes mountains and the Brazilian Amazon.

In the end, however, Beijing should not be solely blamed for Latin America's environmental damage. Preserving the region's vulnerable ecosystem is a joint effort with local governments.

Brazil and Peru are keen to build the transcontinental railroad (Bolivia may be as well, if the network crosses the country). China has vowed to invest US\$20 billion in the region in the next five years, hence is becoming a powerhouse. Chinese-financed mega projects could encourage Chinese companies and Latin American governments to enforce environmental laws or replace lax regulations. In this way, China has a great opportunity to drive positive environmental change.

Kamilia Lahrichi is a foreign correspondent and recipient of the 2014 United Nations Foundation's "Global Issues" Journalism Fellowship. www.kamilialahrichi.com