

China and the USS *Kitty Hawk*

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In the last few weeks, China has denied entry to the port of Hong Kong to several U.S. Navy ships and a U.S. Air Force cargo plane. Just before Thanksgiving, the Chinese denied entry to the aircraft carrier USS *Kitty Hawk* and several accompanying ships. This visit was requested in advance, so much so that many navy families had already traveled from the *Kitty Hawk's* forward-deployed base in Japan to join their sailors for the holiday. Hours after denying the ships permission to enter Hong Kong harbor, China reversed the decision and announced that it would permit entry on “humanitarian grounds.” The *Kitty Hawk* and its accompanying ships had already started toward Japan and did not reverse course back to Hong Kong. Days before the *Kitty Hawk* incident, China had denied entry to two U.S. Navy minesweepers seeking safe harbor while navigating around a tropical storm. Additionally, China refused the USS *Reuben James*, a navy frigate, a Christmas port call in Hong Kong and denied entry to a U.S. Air Force C-17 that had been scheduled for a routine resupply of the U.S. consulate.

Q1: Why did China cancel the port visit of the *Kitty Hawk* to Hong Kong?

A1: China was signaling its concern about and retaliating against recent U.S. actions that it believes have damaged U.S.-China relations. These actions include notifications to Congress of pending arms sales to Taiwan and President Bush’s attendance at the ceremony on Capitol Hill at which the Dalai Lama was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. The Chinese have denied U.S. ship visits to Hong Kong in the past to underscore their dissatisfaction with U.S. policy, but usually in response to more severe actions, such as the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999.

Q2: From a military perspective, why should this be of concern to us?

A2: In the case of the minesweepers, cooperation among seafaring people in the face of dangerous weather is the norm not the exception. Denying safe harbor to two vessels the size of minesweepers, forcing the ships to refuel at sea in order to safely complete their voyage, runs counter to maritime custom. To other seafaring nations and their military or civilian fleets, this incident calls into the question the willingness of China to render assistance in times of need.

In the case of the *Kitty Hawk*, it is the unpredictable nature of these events coupled with the lack of explanation that is striking. The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operations will only increase in the near future, and encounters between the PLAN and the U.S. Navy at sea are inevitable. Predictable and professional behavior is essential to safe maritime encounters, especially between warships. Last-minute denials to enter port and the failure to provide any explanation are inconsistent with predictable and professional conduct between our navies. Misperception and miscalculation are logical outgrowths of such behavior and dangerous for both sides.

Q3: What does this incident tell us about Chinese crisis decisionmaking?

A3: The recent incidents raise concerns about China’s crisis management abilities, as did the Chinese handling of the collision of a U.S. EP-3 and a Chinese fighter jet in 2001 and the January 2007 Chinese antisatellite test. The initial denial and subsequent granting of permission to the *Kitty Hawk* suggest the absence of effective coordination among various parts of China’s decisionmaking apparatus. The failure to provide an explanation underscores the need for greater Chinese transparency as well as the political will to use communication channels. On his recent trip to China, Defense Secretary Robert Gates agreed with his Chinese counterpart to establish a hotline for crisis communication between our two militaries. It is clear who will be at the U.S. end of the hotline and what authority is vested in that individual. Events like this make it unclear if the same is true for the Chinese side.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Q4: What is the way ahead?

A4: The president and senior defense officials are correct in demanding a full accounting of the events. This is not simply to determine why these denials were issued but also to prevent the reoccurrence of similar events in the future. A discussion that focuses on both the reasons for the denial and seeks to identify the appropriate entry point to the Chinese national security decisionmaking apparatus for U.S. crisis managers would be helpful. In a true crisis, there will be little time or tolerance for the lack of explanations, shifting explanations, or worse yet, conflicting explanations. The Military Maritime Consultative Agreement between China and the United States may be the appropriate venue to discuss these issues in greater detail and start on the path to establishing effective crisis management procedures.

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