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THE COMING OF CHINESE HAWKS

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A new feature in U.S.-China relations is taking shape these days – it is the Chinese hawkish take on controversial issues between the two nations. The most recent Chinese objections stem from U.S. joint military exercises with South Korea and Vietnam in the East and South China Seas. The joint U.S.-South Korea military exercise was unmistakably intended to put North Korea on notice for its putative sinking of a South Korean warship in March 2010; the U.S.-Vietnam joint naval exercise was to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the normalization of relationships between the two countries. However, the Chinese interpreted both military exercises as a U.S. show of force directed toward China. The Chinese hawks are calling for a direct Chinese response with possibilities ranging from the drawing of a firm line regarding U.S. naval activities in the western Pacific to declaring Chinese resolve on a confrontation with the United States – “war is not our choice, but if it is forced upon us, we are not afraid” – and quoting Chairman Mao’s famous line that “we will not attack unless we are attacked; if we are attacked, we will absolutely fight back.” Earlier in 2010, Chinese hawks also took issue with the Obama Administration for its order to sell arms to Taiwan and for meeting with the Tibetan religious leader, the Dalai Lama, in Washington. At that time, they asked the Chinese government to “set rules for the United States to follow,” to “draw lines in the sand for the United States to observe,” and to “prepare for a showdown with the United States over the arms sales issue in 10 years.”

Are the Hawks a New Service in Chinese Foreign Affairs?

Yes, but they are an unofficial one. The Chinese government appears to like this “unofficial branch,” because the hawks have become a convenient conduit to disseminate “angry” messages that the government is ill placed to deliver. When the hawks go too far, the government can always make an excuse that the hawkish sound bites do not represent China’s official position. The other side of the story, however, is that China has indeed become more pluralistic. The Chinese government no longer has the monopoly on foreign affairs. Consequently, the Chinese leaders feel that it is good to

have the hawks play the role of the bad guy while the government can be perceived as more rational and moderate.

The Chinese hawks are a natural outgrowth of China's rising power. They are not ordinary individuals. Many of them are senior officers in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) or freshly retired PLA officers. They are joined by a growing number of international affairs professors and researchers from many of China's prestigious universities and high-profile think tanks. They are empowered by China's growing national strength. They have the Chinese government's blessing to make their "individual calls." Their hawkish remarks easily make national headlines, and they have a huge audience, approximately 300 million Chinese netizens who represent the world's largest pool of Internet users.

The Chinese hawks correctly note that China is no longer a weak nation and that the Chinese will not simply take whatever is forced upon them. "The power to speak in international affairs," for instance, has been a privilege of the United States and the West for too long. The Chinese hawks are fed up with their American counterparts' "China threat" allegations. They want China to seize the initiative and set the course of future international relations on Chinese terms.

Many Chinese netizens celebrate the emergence of the Chinese hawks. The netizens are actively joining the hawks to call for the Chinese government to abandon its tao-guang yang-hui strategy (keeping a low profile, hiding intentions, biding time, and striving to make measured moves), and they are praising the hawks for displaying China's "true colors." They pray for more hawks and want them to stay engaged.

Be Careful Of What You Ask for . . .

So far, the Chinese hawks have been playing by the rules of being politically correct, that is, their hawkish attacks on the United States are still in line with positions taken by the Chinese government except that they are outrageous expressions of it. But real hawks do not play by these rules. American hawks, for example, are known for their aggressive take on U.S. foreign policies. Repeated calls for a cold war with China are perfect examples. There is no reason to expect the Chinese hawks to be different. Indeed, in China there is concern that the Chinese hawks may become irresponsible and bellicose.

These concerns are well taken, for U.S.-China relations are entering a stage where quarrels take on risky dynamics as a result of the changing power balance between the two nations. Chinese hawks say that George Soros's recent comment about the United States hit the nail right on its head: a declining superpower which has lost its political and economic dominance, but which preserves military supremacy, is a dangerous mix. They should also know that an economically overheated, politically overconfident, but still militarily inferior China, which is increasingly eager to say no to the United States, can be equally as dangerous. The hawks can incite these dangerous tendencies.

However, the Chinese hawks also provide indirect benefits to the United States primarily because they are straightforward. As a recent Chinese publication, *The China*

Dream, puts it, China has the capacity and ambition to become No. 1 in the world, no matter how modest current Chinese leaders make it appear; the United States is currently the more powerful of the two and the U.S. is making every effort to defend its title; China and the United States are destined competitors; China's best bet to win this contest is to develop its military power to the extent that the United States will not contemplate military action against China; to avoid mutual destruction, China and the United States should view their contest as a sport – there are always winners and losers, no one stays on top forever.

The coming of Chinese hawks is a mixed blessing for U.S.-China relations. One should not overestimate its significance, but it will be at our own peril to dismiss these hawkish cries.

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