

Responding to PRC Arctic Activity

Crafting US Messaging in Response to Chinese Arctic Activity

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Executive Summary

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has dramatically expanded its Arctic activity in recent years. Much of this activity – particularly that undertaken with Russia – has gone beyond operational exercising, taking on political messaging geared towards both American and domestic Chinese audiences. As such, the tone and substance of the US response is critical to denying China its political objectives. This note analyzes likely PRC objectives and offers strategic messaging options to frame future American responses.

Background

In 2022, the Chinese Navy began regular operations in the North Pacific and, since then, has expanded its operating area further north. People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and China Coast Guard (CCG) ships now regularly deploy to the American exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off the Aleutians and, in October 2024, reached the Bering Sea. These operations are now frequently undertaken jointly with the Russian Navy, as well as the maritime component of the FSB Border Service (Coast Guard). On October 2, 2024, a joint fleet passed through the Bering Sea, marking the furthest penetration north by Chinese vessels to date.

These voyages fit within China's broader objectives of operating further afield and demonstrating presence in the 'far seas.' They are also part of a much broader effort to demonstrate the strength of the Sino-Russian relationship as a means of pushing back against real and perceived American attempts to isolate both nations. These particular voyages, however, have an added and unique symbolic value. They are more an exercise in dual-purpose maritime diplomacy than operational training or joint exercising. They are first and foremost an attempt to send the United States a message and provoke a response favourable to established Chinese propaganda narratives.

Context

China's objectives in deploying naval and coast guard vessels to the region are primarily diplomatic in nature. At the heart of this effort is the desire to create a stark differentiation between Beijing's 'peaceful' operations and the 'destabilizing' voyages undertaken by the US and its allies in waters closer to China. In part, the Chinese operations are an attempt to use their navy and coast guard to apply retaliatory pressure. During the PLAN's July 2024 operation, for instance, the Chinese informed the US Coast Guard (USCG) that their purpose for being there was "freedom of navigation operations."¹ That messaging was laid clear in October 2024 as well, when the *Global Times* boasted that the PLAN and CCG voyage "exposes the US' double standard that only allows its military presence near other countries" and fails to accept "other countries' military presence near it," with observers "urging the US to reflect on itself."² Similar language can also be seen surrounding the joint Sino-Russian bomber flights into the Bering region in July 2024. Then, the *Global Times* boasted that, if "the US feels uncomfortable seeing a Chinese military presence on its doorstep, it should get used to it, or reflect on its own military presence on China's doorstep, which poses much greater security concerns to China."³

Yet it is likely more than a tit for tat. At the heart of this diplomatic messaging is the notion that Chinese voyages are different: they are peaceful and in support of regional security. An October 2024 *Global Times* report summed up a common refrain, that China's Bering Sea operations with Russia "stressed counter-terrorism, peacekeeping and regional security issues, rather than bloc confrontation like West-led drills."⁴ These 'peaceful operations' are often contrasted with 'aggressive' and 'destabilizing' US freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). That line is a common narrative and was well articulated during the PLAN's 2023 operations off the Aleutians by a Ministry of Defence official, who was quoted in national media as saying that "the Chinese Navy's behaviour is therefore completely different from the practices of some other countries that cling to the Cold War mentality, engage in camp confrontation and bully hegemony everywhere."⁵

Retaliation for US FONOPs is part of this enterprise, and the involvement of Russian partners is clearly calculated to enhance the perceived threat to the US homeland. The 'peaceful deployment' narrative is also intended to contrast these missions with US operations long seen as an insult to Chinese sovereignty. More than that, however, Chinese voyages also seem to be fishing expeditions for US outrage, as a means of amplifying and proving metanarratives of American aggression, Sinophobia, and hypocrisy.

How these voyages are handled diplomatically – and how US officials respond publicly – is therefore as important as the actual operational elements involved in monitoring their ships.



From the Global Times

What China wants from the US was most clearly illustrated during its largest joint deployment to the region to date (in 2023). The dominant theme in Chinese media was not only that these voyages were peaceful, but that US criticism of them revealed an obvious hypocrisy. *China Daily* offered the best example. In an August 11, 2023, article in its English-language edition, the paper positively reveled in the fact that the exercise “has riled up the US media” and “reveals the US’ double standard in that it frequently deploys warships and aircrafts to the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait for so-called freedom of navigation operations but does not accept other nations’ military presence close to them.”⁶

For China, that exercise furthered several of its highest political objectives. It pushed back against what it perceives as US intrusions into its backyard, while using America’s reaction to delegitimize the US Navy’s own FONOPs. As an added bonus, it displayed China’s “high level” of “military cooperation and mutual trust” with Russia and demonstrated its ability to project power into the North Pacific and towards the strategically significant entrance to the Arctic Ocean.⁷

What the Chinese government wanted more than anything from these exercises was an aggressive and confrontational response. This would signal that they had successfully hit a nerve – as the US Navy repeatedly does in the South China Sea. It would also provide propaganda fodder for use in delegitimizing American FONOPs. How can the US pretend to be enforcing international law when it behaves differently in its own back yard?

This approach was clear in Chinese media content, but also in what was excluded. Chinese reporting always omitted or downplayed the carefully considered official responses from US officials. Instead, media amplified the more confrontational voices coming from commentators and think tanks, which were used as proxies representing the response that Beijing had hoped to elicit. During its large 2023 operation, for instance, rather than citing the US government, the *Global Times* and *China Daily* elevated criticisms from commentators like Brent Sadler, a senior research scientist at the Heritage Foundation, who called the exercises “highly provocative.”⁸ This offered China its strawman reaction, enabling the government-controlled press to hit back, saying that “[n]othing can better describe the US’ reaction than ‘nonsense.’ The US could not even defend its own logic. If the China-Russia joint patrol was in international waters, how can it be viewed as a “provocation” or “aggression?””⁹ While strident, this was still a stretch – relying on American commentators rather than US government officials.

Indeed, the disciplined message control amongst US government and USCG officials likely drained much of the force from the Chinese messaging. During the July and October 2024 voyages that control was even tighter; Chinese media had little to work with and this seems to have resulted in far less media coverage. Interestingly, the *Global Times* continued to denounce the US ‘double standard’ but, lacking a good American strawman, it was forced quote its own (unnamed) experts as evidence of this.¹⁰ As a result, the messaging was far weaker.

Recommendation

Chinese naval and coast guard operations in the Bering Sea region (and eventually beyond) are designed with political as much as operational objectives in mind. The US response must adapt to that dynamic and craft responses that fit within the larger framework of Pacific security and freedom of navigation.

- 1) **Recognize** China's broader political and diplomatic objectives and take those into account when crafting public responses to any PLAN/CCG or joint Sino-Russian presence in the region. Any public statement on Chinese activity should be crafted to avoid feeding into Beijing's desired narratives of Western Sinophobia and hypocrisy. This approach requires messaging discipline and a consistent approach to what will become increasingly regular activity. Official messaging should be governed by a set of pre-approved talking points to maintain that consistency.
- 2) **Reverse** Chinese narratives by *welcoming* PLAN and CCG voyages. US officials should deliver the opposite message to that sought and expected by the Chinese government. More emphasis in official messaging should be placed on China's *right to be in the region*. As China seeks to implicitly tie its operations to American voyages in the South China Sea and Strait of Taiwan, the US government should do so explicitly. An overt recognition of China's rights to transit international straits and the high seas can be directly tied to international rights in those waters claimed by China.

This approach has clear benefits. It would deny China its first political objective, which is to cause political discomfort as retaliation for US FONOPs. By flipping the US narrative to frame the Chinese voyages in a positive light – namely as a confirmation of China's recognition of the freedom of the seas – the US could offer a confident 'tongue-in-cheek' welcome that would put the Chinese, not the US, on the defensive.

Such a response would also deny China the sought-after domestic propaganda narrative. Chinese media has used these voyages (with mixed success) to further its US aggression and hypocrisy metanarratives. A US welcome would be impossible to spin effectively for either its own audience or the global audiences touched by China's international media industry.

A 'welcome' narrative may be difficult to sell to a domestic American audience conditioned to view any Chinese presence as a threat. Despite this, a clear link between the Arctic 'welcome' and US rights to operate in the South China Sea and Strait of Taiwan should be sufficient to mitigate any negative backlash from US media.

A 'welcome' narrative should also be paired with a clear and effective US Navy and Coast Guard response to monitor any Chinese or Chinese/Russian activity in the American EEZ. This presence, paired with the suggested diplomatic approach, would allow the US government to advance a confident 'offensive' framing of Chinese voyages while casting the US as a good global citizen adhering to the rule of law, even in its own back yard. Meanwhile, the narrative surrounding Chinese voyages would be realigned away from Alaska and towards a discussion of China's own illegitimate maritime claims.



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Notes

¹ “US Coast Guard patrol spots Chinese naval ships off Alaska island,” *AP News* (July 11, 2024).

² Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan, “US hype of China-Russia joint naval patrol near Alaska is overreaction, exposes double standards,” *Global Times* (August 7, 2024).

³ Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan, “Chinese, Russian bombers appear in Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone,” *Global Times* (July 25, 2024).

⁴ Liu Xuanzun, “PLA celebrates Army Day with combat readiness,” *Global Times* (July 31, 2024).

⁵ Chinese Ministry of National Defence, “Cooperation between Chinese, Russian militaries open and transparent: Defense Spokesperson” (August 14, 2023).

⁶ Kamal Uddin Majumder, “China-Russia joint patrol crucial for regional peace and stability,” *China Daily* (August 11, 2023).

⁷ Liu Xuanzun, “Russian warships visit China following joint naval patrol in Pacific Ocean,” *Global Times* (August 22, 2023).

⁸ Kamal Uddin Majumder, “China-Russia joint patrol crucial for regional peace and stability.”

⁹ “Redline breaker US not qualified to accuse legal China-Russia patrol,” *Global Times* (August 7, 2023).

¹⁰ Liu and Guo, “US hype of China-Russia joint naval patrol near Alaska is overreaction.” And Russian and Chinese Coast Guard Joint Law Enforcement Patrols in the North Pacific Ocean, U.S. Media Renders “China’s Increased Presence in the North Pacific Ocean,” *Global Times* (September 30, 2024).

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