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The Possibility of the U.S.-China Military Conflict in the South China Sea

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English Abstract

The U.S. pressure on China, which began with the U.S. demanding China to rectify unfair trade practices, has extended into political, human rights, and military sectors. Then, the U.S.-China conflict turned into a system competition over the responsibility for the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019. In the midst of all these, China has sought ways to increase its maritime influence. It conducted a large-scale military exercise with aircraft carriers (Liaoning) in the South China Sea (Taiwan Strait) while the U.S. aircraft carriers in the Western Pacific have stopped operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such led the U.S. to strengthen the implementation of Freedom of Navigation Operation in the South China Sea and dispatch two recovered aircraft carriers (Nimitz and Reagan) to the South China Sea. Consequently, international concerns are mounting over a potential military clash—accidental or intentional—between the U.S. and China.

Nonetheless, an actual armed conflict is unlikely to occur for various reasons. First, the U.S. military power outpowers the military strength of China; China will not be able to make preemptive, armed provocations. Second, China's provocation will be completely reckless as it could lead to a joint response from the U.S. and other neighboring countries. Third, the U.S. will not launch a preemptive attack as it wants to avoid any military conflict with China. Fourth, the U.S. and China are currently engag-

ing in dialogues to alleviate their heightened military tension. The call between the two defense ministers (August 6, 2020) implies the two sides' willingness to solve the problem through dialogues despite their heated conversation. In addition, China's order of banning preemptive shooting on U.S. troops (August 11, 2020) signifies China's determination to not aggravate the situation.

Territorial issues are the core interests of all countries. In other words, the South China Sea is an area of interest not only to China but also to Vietnam, the Philippines, and the rest of countries in the area. For the United States, the South China Sea is not necessarily a territorial issue but a matter of value, which ensures freedom of navigation. Therefore, the conflict in the South China Sea should be resolved in a way that China coordinates with relevant countries through negotiations while complying with the South China Sea Arbitration (July 12, 2016). ❖

※ Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.