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Focus

US NAVY COLLISIONS
WINDFALL FOR CHINA

A spate of deadly collisions involving US Navy warships in Asian waters has provided a propaganda windfall to rivals like China and given already rattled regional allies further reason to fret, analysts say. Four accidents this year alone, including two fatal ones in two months, resulted in the dismissal this week of the commander of the iconic US Seventh Fleet - the centerpiece of the American military presence in Asia.

The timing could hardly be worse, with the Japan-based fleet at the heart of ongoing US efforts to project an image of military strength and effectiveness in the face of threats from nuclear-armed North Korea and an increasingly assertive China. The latest incident left the guided-missile destroyer, USS John McCain limping into port in Singapore on Monday with a gaping gash in its hull following a pre-dawn collision with an oil tanker that left 10 of its crew feared dead.

Just days before, the same ship had taken part in a "freedom of navigation exercise" - sailing close to a contested island in the South China Sea in a show of strength to challenge Beijing's territorial claims there. The incident, and a similar collision involving another warship off Japan in June that left seven dead, has been seized on by China as an illustration of US military overreach and incompetence. "It's a lot of good propaganda for the Chinese," James Char, a regional security specialist at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, told AFP. It comes as "China is trying to tell the region, 'you cannot count on the US for your security needs,'" he said.

'Hazard in Asian waters'

The Chinese foreign ministry voiced concern that US warships posed a "security threat" to civilian vessels in the South China Sea - a criticism echoed in the state media. Warning that the US Navy was "becoming a hazard in Asian waters", a China Daily editorial questioned why such sophisticated warships were unable to avoid other vessels. And the nationalist Global Times said the collisions reflected how the US Navy's combat readiness and military management levels "have both declined".

The tabloid claimed there was "applause from Chinese netizens about the latest accident" on the internet, reflecting public anger over American operations in the maritime region. Beijing claims nearly all of the resource-rich South China Sea, despite partial counter-claims from Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam. Its claims are backed by a military that Chinese President Xi Jinping has modernized in line with the country's growing economic muscle.

Already boasting the world's largest army, China unveiled its second aircraft carrier this year and it opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. "China is trying to increase its status in the region as a security provider" and the US accidents could help push some countries towards "China's embrace," Char said, citing Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's overtures toward Beijing.

Warning against 'foolhardy' actions

For key US allies already worried by mixed messages from President Donald Trump's administration regarding military commitment to the region, the troubles afflicting the Seventh Fleet have simply added to their concern. Hideshi Takesada, a regional security expert and professor at Japan's Takushoku University, said that while the accidents would not have a "critical" operational impact, they had inflicted some "psychological damage".

Daniel Pinkston, a regional security specialist at Troy University in Seoul, said allies like Japan and South Korea were already nervous about US commitments and resolve. "The naval accidents... certainly don't help in the current political environment," he said. A day after the USS John McCain collision, the head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, warned it would be "foolhardy" for any country to read it as a sign of weakness or vulnerability. "The US Navy is large, and we have a lot of capacity and we'll bring that capacity forward if we need to," Harris said at a US air base in South Korea. —AFP

YINGLUCK TRIAL : EX-PM 'FLEES THAILAND' AHEAD OF TRIAL VERDICT



YINGLUCK'S FLIGHT PROVIDES JUNTA WAY OUT

Thailand's generals could hardly have planned it better. The flight of ousted prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra before a court verdict for negligence leaves the populist movement that has dominated Thai politics for a generation leaderless and in despair. It also means Yingluck doesn't become a martyr, as she could have done if she had been jailed over the costly rice subsidy scheme, or get let off lightly, which could have raised awkward questions over why the military overthrew her in 2014.

What it doesn't do is eliminate the Shinawatras' power base: the largely poor and provincial Thais who have had the numbers to deliver them victory in every election since 2001 despite the best efforts of pro-army and deeply royalist conservatives. Yingluck fled just before a court verdict on her criminal negligence trial over a multi-billion dollar scheme to help poor farmers, sources within her Puea Thai Party said.

They said she had gone to Dubai to join her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, the self-made billionaire and family patriarch who was overthrown as prime minister in 2006 and fled to escape a corruption conviction he says was politically motivated. Neither Thaksin or Yingluck could be reached for comment. "The party has no true leader right now. Without

Yingluck the party is headless," said one senior Puea Thai Party member, who declined to be named because he was not authorized to speak to the media. "It doesn't have a figurehead that the people love."

Figurehead

Yingluck, 50, had been banned from politics for five years by the junta in 2015, but could have rallied support for her party at elections the army has promised for next year. That would have been harder if she had been sentenced over the estimated \$8 billion losses on the rice scheme, but jail would have made her a rallying point with glamorous star power at home and abroad. Her departure meant she would not become Thailand's version of neighboring Myanmar's once long-detained Aung San Suu Kyi.

"This will embolden the military government because they did not have to put her in jail," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, the director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University. Government spokesman Weerachon Sukhontapatipak declined to comment on the case or the implications of Yingluck's absence. There was no evidence the junta had been aware Yingluck might have intended to skip bail, but

suspensions circulated among her supporters that her departure was very convenient for the military government.

"She was closely monitored by authorities. It isn't possible that she left the country without help," said Thanawat Wichaidit, of the red-shirt United Front For Democracy Against Dictatorship political movement that supports the Shinawatras, without offering any proof. The crowds of supporters bearing roses and bunches of rice at Yingluck's previous court appearances had shown her enduring support despite crackdowns on dissent since the coup.

In the red-shirt heartlands of Thailand's rural northeast, the mood was somber. Yingluck supporters sympathized with her for fleeing, but didn't know who could replace her. Yingluck took over despite being a political novice after Thaksin fled into exile and succeeded through personal charm and charisma - as well as his distant backing. There are no obvious candidates now. "I don't know who could replace her," said Monthathip Kovitcharoenkul, 58, a businesswoman who had been talked about as a potential candidate, told reporters.

Power Base

The constituency the Shinawatras represented has not disappeared, however.

That potentially complicates the military's plans for an election even with a new constitution that entrenches the power of the generals for years to come. Electoral numbers show the poorer, aspiring parts of Thai society have more votes than backers of the entrenched elite and its yellow shirt followers. The majority Shinawatra-supporting northeastern and northern regions alone account for more than 45 percent of Thailand's population, according to the most recent official data. They accounted for less than 12 percent of the economy.

"If they field a dog as a candidate in the northeast it would win a seat in the election," said Wassawan Ken-kla, 40, a local leader in northeastern Udon Thani. After Yingluck's flight, poor, rural voters who had benefited from Shinawatra policies may become even more sympathetic, said Paul Chambers, a lecturer at Naresuan University in the northern Thailand. "Other Puea Thai leaders will soon emerge," he said. Even without the party, the red shirt movement said it would carry on. It played a pivotal role in backing both the Puea Thai Party and Thaksin's former party, Thai Rak Thai, which was dissolved in 2007. "We will vote for any party that supports us and is on the side of democracy," Thanawat, the red shirt activist, said. — Reuters

MERKEL REIGNS IN WORLD OF ERRATIC STRONGMEN

Alarmed by the rise of unpredictable strongmen around the world, Angela Merkel feels she must do more to defend the Western order on which Germany depends. It has been a transformation for the chancellor. Last year, she dismissed as "absurd" the idea that she should head a Western alliance shaken by Donald Trump's US election victory.

Weakened by Europe's migrant crisis, Merkel even wondered if she should run for re-election. "She asked herself: 'Can I do this? Am I ready for this?'" one close aide said. But now, with the migrant issue under control in Germany, the 63-year-old is ready. Visibly happier, she is campaigning for next month's election with renewed conviction: a resolve to secure a world order threatened by leaders like Trump, Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un.

On the campaign trail, she likes to invoke the "uncertain situation in the world". The message is clear. "Things have changed," the aide said. "This means Germany must take on more responsibility." German foreign policy has been constrained by the legacy of the last World War. But Merkel is pushing Berlin's interests beyond its traditional European sphere.

With North Korea, she says Germany is ready to offer diplomatic and political muscle if required, a senior government source said. Germany is one of the few Western countries with an embassy in Pyongyang and is willing to do what it can to use this channel to help bring about talks.

At the same time, Merkel is using the trade-based relationship she has nurtured with China to press Beijing to help defuse the dispute. "We must use our good relations with the Chinese to encourage them to come up with constructive proposals on what can be done," said Juergen Hardt, the German government's coordinator for transatlantic policies.

Guardian Angela

In April last year, Merkel described how she realized that trouble on the European Union's doorstep meant Germany must play a bigger role beyond its borders. Looking at a map showing the EU's passport-free area in one color and neighboring countries in another, she saw clearly how close Syria and Ukraine were. "This is Europe's neighborhood," she said.

Reacting to crises in this neighborhood, Merkel first strong-armed Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan into a deal to stem the migrant flow from Syria in exchange for EU economic aid. Now, she wants to slow the tide of refugees from Africa with a new "Marshall Plan" to bring investment and business growth that will persuade people to stay at home.

In Ukraine, Merkel is pursuing with France a joint diplomatic response to Russian meddling, though this has yet to produce peace. "All of a sudden, German policymakers realize they need to be much bigger stakeholders in this global order on which they depend but into which they have not invested as much as they should," said Jan Techau of the American Academy in Berlin.

Merkel is starting to take diplomatic positions out of conviction - a departure from her consensus-based style during the euro zone and migrant crises. This shift began after Trump's election, when she set out how she would deal with him: a readiness to work closely on the basis of the values of democracy, freedom, respect for the law and for the dignity of people.

Climate

For Merkel, climate policy belongs to this value set. She sees it as crucial to managing globalization and it has been her principal point of disagreement with Trump. "We Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands," she said, and when Trump announced he was quitting the Paris global climate change accord, she sought to isolate him.

She wanted the six members of the G7 other than the United States to issue a statement backing the accord, sources close to her said. In the end, Germany, France and Italy signed. Britain, Canada and Japan - all with close US ties - did not. Merkel stayed on the case. In the run-up to a July summit of G20 leaders, which she chaired, she made a point of courting a list of countries hoping to profit from trade with Germany.

The upshot was isolation for Trump at the G20 meeting, where 19 members agreed that the Paris accord was "irreversible". At the same time, the communiqué included a text all G20 countries could sign, a compromise achieved with German help. "In terms of global leadership, it's not hugely ambitious," one G20 diplomat said. "On the other hand, the success could be seen as getting Trump into the process: take a step back to get him in, and later move forward with him."

Compromised

Despite her growing diplomatic assertiveness, it is this instinct to compromise that handicaps Merkel's quest for a place in history alongside Konrad Adenauer, who led Germany's rebirth after World War Two, and Helmut Kohl, who reunified the country. Restricting Merkel's room for maneuver is the fact that many Germans are turned off by foreign policy, with one survey showing just 30 percent of voters think it is a top priority for Germany to do more to promote its interests abroad.

"The big problem is that this is not anything that sells at home," said Techau at the American Academy. "You can't win votes with this." Merkel is also hampered by Germany's Nazi past, which has left it without the military might needed to project power. Yet Kohl, Merkel's mentor, took chances, first with reunification and then by defying public opinion to bring in the euro.

Merkel is altogether more cautious. In 2015, "merkeln" - a verb meaning being to be unable to take decisions - was

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