RECENT AMERICAN AND CHINESE MILITARY EXERCISES: STRATEGIC SIGNALING

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Executive Summary

1. The sheer scale of the US-South Korea exercises strongly suggests that Washington is signaling to Beijing that its patience with China's North Korea policy has a limit and that if China will not take decisive action against the Kim Jong-il regime, America *may* choose to do so in a manner that *might* not take Chinese interests into consideration.

2. In late July, the U.S. Navy posted a photograph of its Busan, South Korea-docked nuclear-powered submarine. The nuclear-powered submarines Michigan, Ohio and Florida surfaced in Busan, Subic Bay in the Philippines, and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean nearly simultaneously.

3. This show of force likely sought to clearly communicate to China that the U.S. has no intention of relinquishing its maritime dominance in Asia and that theatre-level asymmetric capabilities will not alter this position. It also possibly communicated that Chinese inaction on a core American interest in East Asia has serious consequences on an Asia-wide scale.

4. Washington has pushed ahead with developing defense-based relationships, which will possibly include ballistic missile defense in certain instances, with some of China's neighbors, namely India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (in addition to traditional American allies like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines).

5. This strategy cannot be classified as containment in a Cold War sense. Rather, it can be more accurately defined as *constrainment* that provides strategic space and mechanisms for freezes and rollbacks depending on regional conditions and the state of China-U.S. ties. It is through this paradigm that the recent joint military exercises should be viewed.

6. China's political and military leadership believe that the recent U.S.-South Korea exercises threaten China's stability and sovereignty while an American-

induced collapse in North Korea could jeopardize China's national unity. As such, the PLA's exercises are driven by more serious long-term strategic concerns rather than to appear strong for a domestic audience or to establish some kind of basic short-term deterrence vis-a-vis the U.S. military.

7. This recent round of American-led armed diplomacy (and the future rounds to come) can be described as strategic signaling that is intentionally characterized by contradiction and ambiguity. The military capabilities and political attention are present but the probability of the use of force in the future is deliberately left unanswered thus demonstrating the constrainment policy at work.

8 Rising Chinese nationalism has led to China's tougher responses to perceived infringement of its "core" national interests by the U.S. If not controlled, this vicious cycle of US-China military suspicion and rivalry will continue to damage overall US-China relations.

9. The United States and China cannot be classified as adversaries. They have common and conflicting interests which lead to broad areas of potential cooperation even though they can also lead to areas of tension and dispute.

10. America's current constrainment policy with built-in hedges is largely a function of Washington's continuing inability to determine China's "grand strategy" with this concern being present across the political spectrum. While it is unlikely that China possesses (or even needs) a crystallized and clearly articulated grand strategy, increased military-to-military dialogue is necessary.