

BOOK REVIEWS

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Incidents at Sea: American Confrontation and Cooperation with Russia and China, 1945–2016 by David F. Winkler. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017, 320 pp.

David F. Winkler, a former commander in the US Navy, is indisputably the leading scholar of the Incidents at Sea Agreement, a 1972 accord negotiated between the United States and Soviet Union (USSR) that regulated maritime interactions on the high seas and contributed considerably to the Cold War staying cold. In *Incidents at Sea*, Winkler updates his now 20-year-old doctoral dissertation in a fascinating enquiry that shows that navies can cooperate and coordinate their behavior not just despite broader political tensions but also because of them. His narrative can be summarized by dividing the Cold War at sea into four phases.

In the first of these, the 1950s, American naval dominance was unchallenged because Soviet strategists believed the nuclear revolution had made naval power irrelevant. Even so, confrontations in the sky were common because American Navy and Air Force aircraft operated alongside—and even within—Soviet territory on “ferreting” missions intended to detect Soviet radars. The agitated Soviets did not have much success against American ferrets, and instead only managed to mostly down American aircraft outside their territory. The violence, however, was not one way, as seen by the American fighters that shot down a Soviet passenger plane in July 1953 in airspace the United States claimed to be North Korea’s and the USSR claimed as China’s. In this phase, more than one hundred airmen would die.

Happily, satellite technology, which could perform reconnaissance activities formally reserved to aircraft, helped move relations to a new phase by the fall of 1960, after which hazardous ferreting missions receded. But what technology gave with one hand, it took with the other, as the Soviets realized when the submarine *George Washington* successfully fired a Polaris ballistic missile underwater in July 1960: the nuclear revolution had moved beneath the waves. In response, the USSR reprioritized its navy, beginning with disguised trawler-type spy vessels Western navies called auxiliary general intelligence (AGI) ships. AGIs commonly performed aggressive maneuvers, both to harass US vessels and to gain the best information, particularly from aircraft carriers. Crashes between vessels would occur, but because AGIs were unarmed the potential for escalation was limited.

As the Soviet Navy grew in the second half of the 1960s, this changed, ushering in a third phase of relations. A series of high-profile incidents followed; warships of adversarial nations rubbing hulls and playing games of chicken, as they did in the Sea of Japan in 1967, was not a recipe for stability, particularly given rising tensions from unrelated developments, such as Israel’s 1967 War. In 1968, the Department of State approached the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs to propose holding discussions on the “safety of the sea.” This was the genesis of what would become the Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA), the negotiations for which were led by John W. Warner, Under Secretary and then later Secretary of the Navy. The formal negotiations, which were preceded by laborious interdepartmental preparations in Washington, DC, were welcomed by the Soviets, apparently because they had a real fear that their young and inexperienced naval officers might rashly precipitate a superpower showdown. The announcement that Pres. Richard Nixon would visit Moscow in spring 1972 lent an urgency and legitimacy to the negotiations. The final agreement essentially regulated the game of naval chicken, laying out fairly

objective standards of behavior. Winkler stresses that the provisions for communication about INCSEA covenants via naval attachés (rather than via foreign affairs personnel) and annual review meetings were essential to the durability of the agreement.

After the agreement was inked, Winkler demonstrates that the number and severity of incidents at sea declined dramatically—moving the narrative to the fourth conceptual state of the Cold War at sea. Trouble began to brew again, however, when Pres. Jimmy Carter in 1979 launched a newly aggressive Freedom of Navigation (FON) program. The INCSEA agreement only covered interactions on the high seas; consequently, in disputed zones such as the Black Sea, the rules were no longer clear. As if to intentionally antagonize the Soviets, the Reagan administration, in early 1988, dispatched two warships to exercise “innocent passage” in the waters just off the Crimean Peninsula. Both were rammed, in a precarious incident that can be watched today on YouTube. At the INCSEA annual review that summer, a Soviet admiral protested that such US operations were “unnecessarily provocative.” Vice Adm Henry Mustin, America’s representative, concurred with his Soviet counterpart and thereafter “recommended that we [the United States] back off.” In a fascinating development, the United States did just this: in an implicit exchange, at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the USSR acknowledged the right to innocent passage and the United States acknowledged there was no longer any need to provocatively demonstrate this right. Shortly thereafter, the Cold War was over, and INCSEA annual meetings had become almost a formality.

The perceptive reader will at this point be wondering why this review has not yet mentioned China. The reason is: despite the title of the book—evidently added to draw interest—China remains only a short afterthought in the text. The book is also subject to more-serious criticism. Essentially, Winkler, despite his undeniable fair-mindedness, has provided a one-sided or “national” history. He appears to have interviewed or corresponded with virtually every important player on the American side. Yet he uses virtually no Russian sources, not even secondary or translated sources—with the only exception being a handful of token references to articles in *Morskoy Sbornik* (*The Russian Naval Digest*). As a consequence, he leaves many questions unanswered. Did Soviet officials agree that Americans were virtually always “in the right” vis-à-vis the “rules of the road?” Or was the belief of Soviet officials essentially parallel to that of their American colleagues—i.e., that the other side was almost always at fault? Even more intriguingly, how did the Soviets envision the strategic function of incidents at sea vis-à-vis the sending of “costly signals?” As relations become tenser between the US and China today, having some grasp on the answer to both questions could provide insights valuable to understanding, and regulating, maritime interactions.

Looking forward, the agreement of the September 1989 Jackson Hole summit may be the most important episode for contemporary policy makers to rediscover. FON operations today in the South China Sea are just as provocative to China as such operations were to Russia in the 1980s. A bargain that mixed explicit acknowledgements on the part of China and implicit commitments on the part of the United States could be a realistic compromise that would reduce the likelihood of an incident at sea resulting in a new world war.

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