

A very dangerous game

Off the coast of Libya, a very large and very belligerent American fleet is playing a perilous game of chicken with Libya's Col. Khadafy. The fickle media, diverted by Haiti and the Philippines, has almost failed to notice just how dangerous the waters of the Mediterranean have become.

Two U.S. carrier battle groups, with some 180 warplanes and a score of escorting cruisers, frigates and supply ships, are operating just outside — and sometimes inside — Libya's territorial waters. American aircraft routinely intrude into Libyan airspace, jamming Libyan radio and telex communications and daring Libya's inept air force to respond.

Heightening this tension, last week's skyjacking of a Libyan civilian aircraft by Israel was clearly staged in close co-operation with the U.S. Navy. Israeli intelligence, which has extremely close links to U.S. Naval Intelligence, targeted the radical PLO leader George Habash for kidnapping. Habash almost invented the concept of air piracy back in the early 1970s.

U.S. electronic intelligence aircraft eavesdropped on Libyan communications and found when Habash was due to be flown from Tripoli to Damascus, Syria. Habash did not board the plane; the Americans, unaware, tracked the aircraft as it flew eastward from Libya across the Mediterranean towards Syria.

Near Cyprus, the Americans gave intercept data to the Israelis whose F-16s then ambushed the aircraft and forced it down inside Israel.

An embarrassed Israel was left to take most of the heat for the fiasco. Once again the UN condemned Israel and once again the U.S. stood alone against the world with its ally by vetoing the resolution. Col. Khadafy responded by asserting that his air force would force down Israeli aircraft carrying people whom the Arabs considered terrorists — like Vice Premier Shamir or General Sharon.

Now, a still angrier and more frustrated Reagan administration has ordered its ships and aircraft to intensify provocative measures against Libya. So far, Col. Khadafy has refused to take the bait, keenly aware that Washington is only waiting for a chance to attack his military installations, oil facilities and perhaps himself.

The U.S. Navy, led by its politically ambitious secretary, John Lehman, is hotly pressing for an attack on Libya. Doing so reinforces Navy demands for more aircraft carriers and neatly illustrates their utility in punishing Third World malefactors.

All of this would be merely serious rather than dangerous except that the U.S. Sixth Fleet is no longer the only naval power in the Mediterranean.

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Close to the Americans, in some cases within eyesight, are heavily-armed units of the Soviet Mediterranean Eskadra.

After Israel's air attack on PLO headquarters in Tunis, the USSR stationed radar picket ships off Israel's coast to give Libya early warning of any Israeli air attack. U.S. warships are shadowing them and attempting to interfere with Soviet communications and electronic spying.

Similarly, Soviet ships off Libya are listening in on U.S. naval communications and reminding Washington that any attack on Libya may bring a direct clash with Soviet forces.

In Libya, a small number of Soviet pilots are reportedly flying reconnaissance missions over the U.S. Sixth Fleet. Moscow could, in an emergency, fly pilots and ground crews to Libya within hours. There, the Soviets could man part of Libya's vast arsenal of modern Soviet equipment, ready to fly combat missions against the U.S. Navy.

All of this cutlass rattling in the narrow, con-

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gested waters of the Mediterranean makes for a very dangerous situation. A simple navigational or communications error by U.S., Soviet, Libyan or Israeli aircraft or ships could quite easily provoke an armed clash. A confused melee in such a tense situation could quickly explode into a major air and naval clash between U.S. and Soviet forces.

It is just such a scenario that many defence experts judge to be the likeliest cause of a flashfire nuclear war. One wrong reading of a radar blip could trigger weapons release. Incoming conventional weapons could easily be mistaken for nuclear attack — with appropriate response.

All of this may scare Col. Khadafy; it certainly scares nearby Europeans — and it scares the hell out of me.