

# US condemns China over close aerial encounter

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The Obama administration yesterday accused China of “a deeply concerning provocation” following an alleged close encounter between an American surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter jet over the South China Sea on Tuesday.

The strident protest by US deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes is part of a mounting American propaganda campaign to portray China as “aggressive” and “expansionist.” Claiming that the US had “encouraged constructive military-to-military ties with China,” Rhodes declared that “this type of action clearly violates the spirit of that engagement.”

Pentagon spokesman Admiral John Kirby claimed that the encounter between a US Navy P-8 Poseidon and a Chinese SU-27 fighter was “very, very close, very dangerous.” He said the Chinese aircraft performed a series of manoeuvres that brought the two aircraft to within 10 metres of each other, including a barrel roll, “we believe to make a point of showing its weapons load.”

“We have registered our strong concerns to the Chinese about the unsafe and unprofessional intercept, which posed a risk to the safety and the well-being of the air crew and was inconsistent with customary international law,” Kirby stated. He dismissed any suggestion of any “Machiavellian intent” in the three-day delay in reporting the encounter.

Beijing is yet to respond to the Pentagon’s demarche or formal protest. Whatever the exact details, however, the incident is another sign of the rising tensions in the South China Sea that the Obama administration has deliberately stoked as part of its “pivot to Asia” and military build-up against China.

Kirby declared that the US surveillance flight had been on a “routine mission” in “international air space.” However, there is nothing innocent about the

Pentagon’s regular missions, which are to spy on military facilities and activities along the Chinese coast. The “intercept” took place some 200 kilometres from China’s Hainan Island, home to a number of sensitive Chinese air and naval bases, including for its nuclear submarines.

China has long objected to US surveillance operations and claims that American naval vessels and war planes are violating its Exclusive Economic Zone. The US has ignored Beijing’s protests, insisting on its “right” to spy on China’s military. If China began surveillance flights along the US West Coast, off the San Diego naval bases for instance, they would undoubtedly be greeted with howls of protest from Washington.

Previous incidents include a mid-air collision in 2001 between a US Navy spy plane and a Chinese fighter, which crashed, killing the pilot. The American aircraft was forced to make an emergency landing on Hainan Island, provoking a protracted diplomatic standoff before the crew was finally released. In 2009, the USS Impeccable, a navy spy vessel, was forced to halt its surveillance of Chinese submarine activity about 70 nautical miles from Hainan Island after being crowded out by a flotilla of small Chinese vessels.

The latest Chinese “intercept” may well be a response to stepped-up US surveillance operations. The *Financial Times* explained that it followed “Washington’s quiet development of new military tactics in the region to deter China’s slow but steady territorial advances in the South China Sea. The new US tactics included more aggressive use of surveillance aircraft, like the Navy P-8, and naval operations near contested areas.”

The *Wall Street Journal* reported in April that the Pentagon had drawn up an “action plan” for what

officials described as “a muscular response to any future Chinese provocations in the South and East China Seas, ranging from displays of B-2 bomber flights near China to aircraft carrier exercises near its coastal waters.” Former and current US officials indicated that “more provocative options on the table to counter China would include expanded US surveillance flights and sending US aircraft carriers through disputed waters close to the Chinese coast, including the strait of Taiwan.”

US officials now regularly brand Chinese actions, particularly in the South China Sea, as “provocative” while portraying its own military activities as routine and defensive reactions. All of this is relayed uncritically in the American and international media and used to justify the Obama administration’s Asian “pivot” and its military encirclement of China by US bases, allies and strategic partners.

The heightened tensions in the South China Sea follow US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s declaration in 2010 that the US had “a national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in its waters. Washington has encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam, in particular, to take more aggressive postures on their longstanding territorial disputes with Beijing over islands and shoals in the South China Sea.

As well as using the disputes to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours, the Obama administration has exploited the opportunity to establish a far-reaching basing agreement with the Philippines and closer military ties with Vietnam. By 2020, the Pentagon plans to locate 60 percent of its air and naval assets in the Asia-Pacific region. US war planning against China includes an economic blockade, making naval dominance over the South China Sea a matter of central importance.

Despite Pentagon spokesman Kirby’s denial that the US has any “Machiavellian intent,” yesterday’s formal protest against China was clearly a calculated decision. According to a *Foreign Policy* article, Chinese “intercepts” of US spy planes took place in March, April and May, leading to a demarche that was not made public.

The public denunciations of China over the latest air incident are likely to be the precursor for further provocative US military activities in the South China Sea, heightening the danger of miscalculations or

accidents leading to open conflict.



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