

US intervenes in South China Sea dispute

Peter Symonds
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In a direct intrusion into territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the US has called on China to halt construction activity on Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands. The comments, which Beijing has already rejected, will only exacerbate the already sharp tensions between China and its neighbours.

US State Department spokesman Jeff Rathke told the media on Monday that “large-scale construction or major steps to militarise or expand law enforcement operations at outposts would complicate or escalate the situation.” He called on China and other countries in the region to “avoid certain actions” during negotiations over disputes.

While he did not specifically refer to China, Rathke’s remarks followed the release of a report last week by the British-based security group, IHS Jane’s, which claimed that Chinese reclamation work on Fiery Cross Reef was creating a landmass large enough for a 3,000-metre airstrip. The Chinese navy already has a base on the island.

In comments to the AFP last Friday, US military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Pool was more blunt, saying: “We urge China to stop its land reclamation program and engage in diplomatic initiatives to encourage all sides to restrain themselves in these sorts of activities.”

Washington’s posturing as an honest broker in the longstanding, competing claims in the South China Sea, involving China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan, is completely cynical. The Obama administration, as part of its “pivot to Asia” directed against China, has deliberately inflamed the disputes as a means of driving a wedge between Beijing and neighbouring countries.

Since the beginning of the year, there has been an aggressive shift in the US stance. Washington dropped its previous pose of neutrality in the disputes and publicly challenged the legality of China’s claims in

the South China Sea. At the same time, the US assisted the Philippines to mount a case against Beijing’s maritime claims under the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea—a treaty that the US has not signed—and is encouraging Vietnam to do the same. (See: “Manila files legal case against Beijing’s South China Sea claim”)

At an international defence conference in Beijing last weekend, former US chief of naval operations Gary Roughead, as reported by the *New York Times*, challenged Chinese maritime claims, questioning whether they were compatible with international laws allowing freedom of navigation.

The latest comments by US spokesmen are in line with US Secretary of State John Kerry’s call in August for an end to “provocative actions” in the South China Sea and a freeze on construction in areas under dispute. Washington’s habitual use of the word “provocative” to describe any action by Beijing in the South China Sea is part of a propaganda campaign designed to paint China as “expansionist” and actions by the US, thousands of kilometres from its own territory, as benign.

The focus on Chinese construction activity in South China Sea areas under its administration ignores the fact that other countries have done exactly the same. While claiming that China was seeking to coerce other countries, the IHS Jane’s report pointed out: “China has been at a distinct disadvantage compared to other claimants in the Spratly Islands as it is the only claimant not to occupy an island with an airfield. Taiwan has Itu Aba (Taiping) island, the Philippines has Pagasa island, Malaysia has Swallow Reef (a reef on which it reclaimed land and built an airstrip), and Vietnam has Southwest Cay.”

China rebuffed the US call to halt construction work. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a media briefing on Monday that no country had “a right

to make irresponsible remarks” about land reclamation. Major General Luo Yuan told the state-owned *Global Times* that China’s construction was “completely legitimate and justifiable,” adding that “the US is obviously biased, considering that the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam have already set up military facilities.”

The Obama administration has been systematically strengthening its military presence in South East Asia, as well as defence ties, particularly with the Philippines and Vietnam. During his visit to the Philippines in April, President Obama signed a far-reaching basing agreement that provides virtually unlimited access for US military forces within the former American colony.

With US encouragement, Vietnam and the Philippines are collaborating more closely. On Tuesday, two Vietnamese warships made the first-ever port call to the Philippines. The advanced Russian-built frigates, equipped with stealth technology, anti-ship missiles and anti-submarine helicopters, docked in Manila Bay. The three-day visit follows staff-to-staff talks between the two navies in March to step up the sharing of intelligence, naval technology and training.

The US challenge to China over its construction on Fiery Cross Reef comes in the aftermath of a belligerent speech on November 15 by Obama at the G20 summit in Australia. Obama aggressively reasserted US determination to maintain “American leadership” in the Asia Pacific, declaring that the US had invested “blood and treasure” in the region, and, by implication, would do so again.

The US “pivot to Asia” has greatly intensified tensions throughout the volatile region. Long-running but relatively localised disputes in the South China Sea have been transformed into dangerous flashpoints that could trigger a disastrous conflict in Asia and around the world.



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