

US inflames South China Sea disputes

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Top US intelligence and military officials used hearings of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) and House Appropriations Subcommittee of Defense on February 26 to step up accusations against China over its construction of facilities on islands and reefs in the South China Sea. The immediate result has been the rise of tensions between China and the Philippines—which lays claim to some of the same territory as Beijing—and warnings by Chinese officials for the US to stay out of the dispute.

Appearing before SASC to present a “Worldwide Threat Assessment,” Director of National Intelligence James Clapper asserted during questioning that China was making “aggressive” efforts to secure control over the South China Sea, through which passes 83 percent of China’s oil imports and global trade worth an estimated \$5.3 trillion each year.

Former Republican presidential candidate, Senator John McCain, displayed satellite images that have been widely published over recent weeks, purportedly showing Chinese construction on Gaven Reef and other reefs in the Spratly Islands. McCain labelled it “a rather dramatic change” and suggested that China was aiming to construct airfields and anti-ship and anti-air missile bases that would be used to deny the US Navy access to the area.

Clapper accused Beijing of being “more willing to accept bilateral and regional tensions in pursuit of its interests, particularly on maritime sovereignty issues.” In an open rejection of China’s territorial claims, Clapper labelled them as “exorbitant.” Last December, a US State Department report dismissed China’s so-called “nine-dash line” boundary, asserting that it “does not accord with the international law of the sea.”

At the House Appropriations Subcommittee of Defense hearing, in response to a question “do we still have the naval edge there [the South China Sea],” Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert warned

that if sequester budget cuts to the military were implemented, “sooner or later, we won’t have it.” In early February, Greenert visited Australia to canvass the possibility of basing US marine amphibious assault ships in Darwin and an aircraft carrier battle group in Perth and enhancing the American naval presence in the Indo-Pacific as part of the “rebalance” or “pivot” that was formally announced in November 2011.

An email sent to journalists after the SASC hearing by a Senate staffer stated: “While Washington is focused on happenings in Europe and the Levant, China has spent the last year quietly building 600 acres of tiny islands across the South China Sea.... Right now, we appear to just be watching all of this unfold while sending soft messages of our disapproval to Beijing and calculating that the costs of preventing further expansion are just too high. In another six months we could wake up to a far different operational and diplomatic situation in this maritime highway, where the Philippines and Vietnam are left with tangible reasons to question the resolve of our ‘rebalance’...”

The implication of such language is that the US military needs to accelerate its efforts to shift the weight of its air and naval power to Asia, and confront China more aggressively, in order to reassure its regional allies.

The sharpest tensions are developing between China and the Philippines. On February 26, the head of the Philippines’ military western command, Vice Admiral Alexander Lopez, told reporters that Chinese construction on Filipino-claimed territory was “continuous” and “aggressive” and added to the “destabilisation of the region.” He cited the arbitration case the Philippines initiated early last year, with US assistance, to have the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) support the Filipino claims over the islands and reefs against those of China. The officer declared: “We will not lose them. We will not

lose anything. Even if we have to die for it, the world will know this is ours. Even if they have built structures on them, they are still ours...”

Beijing has repeatedly and unambiguously issued statements that it will disregard any ruling by ITLOS that found against its claims, setting the stage for a further escalation.

In response to last week’s hearings in Washington, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hong Lei commented: “It is legitimate, reasonable, and rational for China to carry out activities around islands, reefs, and waters under its jurisdiction. Outsiders have no right to make groundless accusations. We hope the United States will honour its commitments, be prudent with its words and actions, and do more to contribute to China-US relations and regional peace and stability.”

The US, however, is taking action that only inflames the situation. On February 27, the day after the hearings, the Filipino military revealed that the US Navy has been flying a Poseidon surveillance plane from a base in the western Philippines over the disputed region. According to the reports, the aircraft flew 180 hours of operations between February 1 and February 21 and on occasions had carried Filipino personnel on board.

At the end of January, the commander of the US Seventh Fleet, Admiral Robert Thomas, provoked furious Chinese condemnations after saying that he would welcome the Japanese air force joining such surveillance of Chinese activities in the South China Sea. Thomas declared: “The alleged nine-dash line, which doesn’t comport with international rules and norms, standards [and] laws, creates a situation down there, which is unnecessary friction.”

On February 28, the *Wall Street Journal* featured the major military purchases and build-up being made across Asia by US allies and “strategic partners” in conjunction with the “pivot.” It noted that Vietnam had taken delivery of new Russian-made submarines and jet fighters and was purchasing US surveillance aircraft, the Philippines is purchasing new naval frigates, Japan had assembled amphibious assault forces and India was “testing ballistic missiles with a range of over 3,000 miles, which could strike inside China.”

Richard Javad Heydarian, a political science professor at De La Salle University in Manila, told the newspaper: “China is bound to face greater risks of

unwanted escalation and resistance.” All the developments across the region heighten the danger that a minor incident or clash could trigger an all-out war.



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