

US threatens military confrontation with China in South China Sea

Joseph Santolan
14 May 2015

The US military is considering deploying military aircraft and warships within 12 nautical miles of territory claimed by China in the disputed Spratly Islands, according to a report published late Tuesday afternoon in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Washington is specifically targeting islands where China has engaged in reclamation work, dredging sand from the sea-bottom to expand the land mass of the rocks and shoals it occupies in the South China Sea.

The move is a calculated provocation to shore up US hegemony in the region and ratchet up pressure on China.

Vietnam, Taiwan and the Philippines also have military and civilian forces stationed on disputed islands in the South China Sea. Vietnam and Taiwan, like Beijing, are actively engaged in reclamation activity. China is the exclusive target of Washington's ire, however.

The total land mass reclaimed by China amounts to two square kilometers, according to the most recent information from the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative run by the US think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). This is the equivalent of approximately two golf courses.

The US move would be an act of military brinkmanship calculated to force China to back down on its territorial claims. The *Wall Street Journal* quoted the anonymous defense department official as stating: "Ultimately no matter how much sand China piles on top of a submerged reef or shoal ... it is not enhancing its territorial claim. You can't build sovereignty."

Over the past year, the rhetoric with which Washington previously prefaced statements on the South China Sea, that it took no sides in the disputes, has largely been dropped. Washington has pushed forward the case filed by the Philippines before the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea contesting China's territorial claims. In December, the US State Department published issue number 143 in its "Limits in the Sea" series dedicated to

examining the validity of China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. The document rejected China's nine-dash line historical claim to the South China Sea. China's claim, it explicitly stated, "does not accord with the international law of the sea."

Washington's hypocrisy is stunning. The 26-page document based its entire denunciation of China's territorial claims upon the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a treaty that the US has refused to sign for over 32 years.

On March 31, Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, denounced China's reclamation activity in the South China Sea as the construction of "a great wall of sand." On April 22 the CSIS published an article calling on Washington to have a US Navy ship "transit within 12 nautical miles of one of these reclaimed features."

Looking to stem the military escalation being prepared by Washington, China offered the United States and other countries joint use of its facilities in the South China Sea for humanitarian rescue and disaster. On April 30, Chinese Naval Admiral Wu Shengli extended this offer to his American counterpart, Admiral Jonathan Greenert. Wu added that Chinese activities "will not threaten freedom of navigation and overflight." US State Department acting deputy spokesperson Jeff Rathke said the US was "not interested" and then called on China to reduce tensions in the region.

The move proposed by Washington is a dangerous escalation of an already perilous situation. The *Wall Street Journal* published a comment by Andrew Browne entitled "US Gambit Risks Conflict With China" which stated that "the US is contemplating an option fraught with danger: limited, but direct, military action."

Washington has already established a precedent for a direct military challenge of Chinese claims. In November 2013, the US flew two B-52 bombers over a portion of the

East China Sea where Beijing had just declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).

Should Washington go through with its proposal to transit China's claimed territories in the South China Sea, it would be markedly more reckless than its action over the ADIZ in 2013. It would be flying or sailing into territory that is claimed and currently occupied by Chinese gunboats and military forces. These forces will be compelled to either ignore the US incursion, or follow established protocol and interdict the US forces.

Such a confrontation has already nearly occurred in the waters immediately outside the 12-nautical mile radius of the reclaimed land. On May 11, the USS Fort Worth, a Freedom-class littoral combat ship on a "freedom of navigation" patrol, was closely followed by the Yancheng, a Chinese navy Type 054A guided-missile frigate. The USS Fort Worth radioed the Yancheng to claim that it was in international waters.

If a confrontation had occurred within the territorial waters of the islands claimed by China and the Chinese forces had not backed down, there would have been military showdown between two heavily armed gunboats. Such a clash could all too easily spark a far wider war between two nuclear-armed powers, with terrible global consequences. This is what Washington is playing with as it continues to deliberately provoke and antagonize Beijing.

Hua Chunying, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, responded to Washington's intended deployment. She stated: "The Chinese side advocates the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, yet the freedom definitely does not mean that foreign military vessels and aircrafts can enter one country's territorial waters and airspace at will. China will stay firm in safeguarding territorial sovereignty. We urge parties concerned to be discreet in words and actions, avoid taking any risky and provocative actions and safeguard regional peace and stability."

Washington continues to make preparations for war with China. In the last two weeks of April, the US and the Philippines staged their largest joint military exercises in 15 years. The Balikatan exercises involved 11,600 troops who staged live fire drills and trained for amphibious assaults on South China Sea islands.

For the first time, the drills included the defense of the Philippines' main island of Luzon from foreign invasion. The scenario was officially described by the US military as: "On March 22, the Mutual Defense Treaty was invoked and a US Joint Task Force was formed to restore

the territorial integrity of the Philippines. The US Joint Task Force aggregated forces in Palawan, conducted Maritime Pre-positioned Force operations, and embarked a combined landing force."

Washington is looking to base—using the euphemism "pre-position"—US forces throughout the Philippines under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), a deal signed a year ago. The Philippine Supreme Court is still holding hearings on the deal. The White House is leaning heavily on Manila to get the EDCA past the court. The Balikatan exercises were a means of ratcheting up political pressure, making the claim that the US will "rescue" the Philippines from a supposed Chinese invasion, provided it is allowed to "pre-position" its forces.

In the past, the Balikatan exercises have been launched with disclaimers that they are not targeting any particular country. While official press releases still included this disclaimer, the 2015 exercises opened with a talk by General Pio Catapang, chair of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, who presented evidence of Chinese reclamation activity in the South China Sea and the military threat that he claimed this constituted to the Philippines.

This week, the Philippines is staging its first-ever joint military exercises with Japan. Two Japanese destroyers and a Philippine battleship will conduct war games in the South China Sea. These exercises build upon the recently signed military deal between Washington and Tokyo, which more closely integrates Japan into Washington's war drive against China. Japan has stated that in order to re-supply US ships engaged in combat in the South China Sea, it would need to station and refuel its jets on Philippine military bases.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact