

US prepares to challenge China in the South China Sea

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A front-page article in today's *Australian* confirms the advanced preparations being made in Washington for a provocative confrontation with China in the South China Sea. Entitled "US showdown with Beijing looms over Chinese military build-up," it declares that "momentum is building strongly in Washington" to fly warplanes or send warships within the 12-mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-held islets and reefs.

For months, US officials have condemned China's land reclamation activity on disputed islets in the South China Sea. In late March, Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, denounced China's actions as the construction of "a great wall of sand" that threatened to bring strategic waters and shipping routes under its control.

Last week, the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter instructed the Pentagon to draw up plans to directly challenge China's territorial claims by sending military ships or aircraft within the 12-mile limit. Such an utterly reckless move could provoke a conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers.

The *Australian* article, based on sources in both Washington and Canberra, points out that the *Wall Street Journal* article was leaked by US Pacific Command (PACOM) "which was extremely concerned about Beijing's actions in the South China Sea." The leak was clearly aimed at putting pressure on the Obama administration, which if it "did not undertake a freedom of navigation action... will be seen to have backed away from asserting America's core traditional position."

Former senior National Security Council official Mike Green told the *Australian* he believed the Obama administration had "firmed up recently" on the South

China Sea. "There is now a consensus that something has to be done. They haven't yet decided from the menu of options," he said.

According to the *Australian*, a US operation would likely occur after Defence Secretary Carter addresses the Shangri-La Defence Dialogue in Singapore at the end of the month and before Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Washington in September. The article noted that the Australian government "would be almost certain to provide diplomatic support," even though it "would inevitably provoke new tensions in Canberra's relations with Beijing."

US propaganda over China's activities in the South China Sea is being ramped up. At a conference in Jakarta yesterday, US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken accused Beijing of provoking instability and tensions in the region by making "sovereign land out of sandcastles and redraw[ing] maritime boundaries."

Such statements are completely hypocritical. Having ignored the festering maritime disputes in the South China Sea for decades, the US has deliberately stoked up tensions as part of its "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining China and encircling it militarily. While formally claiming to be neutral in the disputes, Washington has encouraged South East Asian countries to more aggressively advance their claims. For all the hue and cry about China's activities, the US is completely silent about land reclamation and construction being carried out by the Philippines and Vietnam.

Moreover, any intrusion into waters or airspace claimed by China, on the pretext of protecting "freedom of navigation," implicitly denies China's sovereignty over the shoals and reefs that it currently administers. One only has to consider Washington's

response to any attempt by China to assert its “right” to “freedom of navigation” in waters off the coast of California to understand the provocative character of the US plan.

The media is playing its part. In a featured exclusive, CNN sent a news team yesterday to accompany a US P8-A Poseidon surveillance aircraft on a reconnaissance mission near Chinese-controlled islets. The report makes clear that such operations routinely take place and provoke Chinese warnings—eight in this case—even without entering the 12-mile limit. The article claimed that “China’s alarming creation of entirely new territory in the South China Sea” was part of “a broader military push that some fear is intended to challenge US dominance in the region.”

Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal* on Tuesday, Admiral Michelle Howard, vice chief of naval operations, declared that it was time for China to explain its land reclamation activities. In Singapore for a defence exhibition, she encouraged the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to take action against China. “If the ASEAN nations want to get together and do something to demonstrate their united purpose, we’ll be supportive of that,” Howard said.

Washington has been strengthening its alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the region. This week, military commanders from Japan, Australia, the Philippines and 20 other mostly Asia-Pacific countries were in Hawaii for the PACOM Amphibious Leaders Symposium to improve the cooperation and integration. All of them participated in a war game involving an amphibious landing by boat and helicopter to destroy a fictitious military training camp.

The event was clearly directed against China. Visiting officers and officials were given a ride on an Osprey tilt rotor aircraft and a tour of the amphibious assault ship, the USS Essex, and other naval vessels. “I don’t think China can match the complexity,” Martin Sebastian, head of the Maritime Institute of Malaysia, commented to Reuters.

The USS Essex is part of a three-ship Amphibious Ready Group and Marine Expeditionary Unit that is about to be deployed to the Western Pacific and the Middle East. Details of its mission have not been released, but the official announcement declared: “[T]he Essex ARG/MEU serves as a sea-based, expeditionary crisis response force capable of

conducting amphibious missions across the full range of military operations.”

Other US naval forces are being concentrated in the Western Pacific, with two American aircraft strike groups currently in the area. The USS Carl Vinson, which was in the Middle East and is heading home, last week engaged in joint exercises with the Malaysian military in the South China Sea. The USS George Washington, which is also due to return to the US, is taking part in exercises in the Western Pacific.

Given the political and military build-up, a US military challenge to China in the South China Sea is likely sooner rather than later. Such an operation poses the real danger, whether deliberately or by miscalculation, of provoking an escalating conflict that neither side is able to control.



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