

China warns of war with US in South China Sea

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In the face of mounting American pressure and provocations in the South China Sea, the Chinese government announced yesterday that it had lodged an official complaint over a highly publicised surveillance flight close to Chinese-claimed territory and urged the US to back off.

Washington's extraordinarily reckless actions are threatening to plunge the Asia Pacific and the entire world into conflict. From a media campaign condemning Chinese land reclamation in the South China Sea, the US has moved to military challenges. While last week's reconnaissance flight did not breach China's 12-mile territorial limit, the Pentagon is preparing plans to do just that under the pretext of defending "freedom of navigation."

At a press briefing yesterday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying condemned the flight as "utterly dangerous and irresponsible" and declared it was "highly likely to cause miscalculation and untoward incidents in the waters and airspace."

An editorial in yesterday's *Global Times*, a hawkish state-run tabloid, warned: "If the United States' bottom line is that China has to halt its activities, then a US-China war is inevitable in the South China Sea." The article went on to state that if the US wanted to teach China a lesson by "provoking and humiliating," then "China will have no choice but to engage."

The US has deliberately placed the entire region on a knife edge, posing a real and imminent danger of war. An accident or miscalculation by US or Chinese military aircraft or warships in the South China Sea could set in train a series of actions and reactions that would bring the two nuclear-armed powers to blows.

One has only to consider how the US would react to Chinese aircraft or ships engaged in "freedom of navigation" operations near Hawaii or off the coast of

California to appreciate the sheer hypocrisy of American propaganda over the South China Sea. These waters are not only essential to Chinese trade but are immediately adjacent to key naval bases on Hainan Island in southern China.

The US has further heightened the risk of war by pushing other claimants in the South China Sea, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, to more assertively press their territorial demands against China. It has also encouraged Japan to conduct its own patrols in the region. All of these steps multiply the danger of an incident, not necessarily immediately involving the United States, precipitating a far broader conflict.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino declared yesterday that his country's aircraft "will still fly the routes we fly based on international law." Philippine Air Force spokesman Colonel Enrico Canaya told the media that its planes flew in contested areas, including the route taken last week by the US reconnaissance flight.

Philippine Defence Secretary Voltaire Gazmin said he would ask for a "stronger commitment" from the US for assistance to counter Chinese "bullying" when he meets his American counterpart Ashton Carter this week. What the Philippines is seeking is a public pledge that the US will support it in a war with China similar to the guarantee already provided to Japan in its dispute with China over rocky outcrops in the East China Sea.

The looming confrontation in the South China Sea has been long in preparation. The Obama administration's aggressive stance towards China on every front—diplomatic, economic and military—began in 2009 and was formalised in the "pivot to Asia" in 2011. As part of the "pivot," the US has engaged in a comprehensive build-up and restructuring of its armed

forces in the Indo Pacific, focussed on fighting a war with China.

Throughout Asia, Washington has strengthened its already formidable network of military alliances and partnerships. It has concluded formal basing agreements with Australia, including “rotating” US Marines, warplanes and naval ships through its bases, and with the Philippines, providing virtually unlimited access to that country’s military facilities. The US is repositioning and boosting its forces in Japan and South Korea, has placed warships in Singapore, and is consolidating closer relations with every country on China’s periphery.

Washington has also encouraged closer cooperation between countries it regards as the cornerstones of “the pivot”—Japan, Australia and India. The Australian government has announced that Japanese troops will take part for the first time in the huge biennial Talisman Sabre war games held at locations around Australia and involving up to 30,000 US, Australian and New Zealand troops.

The US is not about to back off its confrontation with China in the South China Sea. To do so would result in a loss of confidence in its strategic commitments among US allies in Asia and around the world. More fundamentally, American imperialism is being driven to increasingly rash military actions as a means of shoring up its hegemony in Asia and internationally.

Washington bitterly resented the decision by Britain in March to ignore its advice and sign up to the China-backed Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The move prompted a rush by other countries to follow suit, undermining the monopoly position of longstanding American-dominated institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. US actions in the South China Sea are, in part, a means of hitting back by underscoring the military vulnerability of China.

There is absolutely nothing progressive about the response of the Chinese regime, which rests on and defends the interests of a tiny layer of super-rich oligarchs. Deeply hostile to the working class, the Beijing bureaucracy is engaged in a frantic arms race that only heightens the danger of a catastrophic war.

The drive to war is being fuelled by the fundamental contradictions of capitalism expressed in the deepening breakdown of the world economy following the 2008

financial crisis. Whatever the immediate outcome of the present standoff in the South China Sea, war is inevitable if the international working class does not disarm the imperialist war-mongers by means of socialist revolution.



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