

US-China tensions escalate over South China Sea

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Tensions between the US and China are continuing to escalate after Beijing lodged a formal protest with Washington on Monday over a highly-publicised US military surveillance aircraft flight near Chinese-controlled territory in the South China Sea's Spratly Islands.

An editorial in Wednesday's *Washington Post* continued the drumbeat of US denunciations of China's land reclamation activities in the South China Sea and called for action by the Obama administration. "While it probably cannot be stopped, the project should be fully exposed—and China's attempts to restrict air and sea traffic near its installations decisively rejected," the newspaper declared.

The editorial's language, condemning the "brazenness" of China's territorial claims and its land reclamation as "a dangerous provocation," has become standard fare for the US and its allies. In reality, the stepped-up actions of the US, thousands of kilometres from any American territory, have recklessly inflamed long-festering regional maritime disputes and are posing the danger of war.

Washington's calls for "freedom of navigation" are nothing but a pretext for a military build-up in these strategically sensitive waters and for steadily escalating provocations, such as last week's reconnaissance flight. Defence Secretary Ashton Carter has called for the Pentagon to prepare plans for American military aircraft and/or warships to directly challenge Chinese sovereignty by entering airspace and waters within the 12-mile territorial limit around its islets and reefs in the South China Sea.

The US is clearly aiming to provoke a Chinese response that can be exploited to dramatically escalate the diplomatic and military pressure on Beijing in order to extract major concessions, even if that precipitates an

open clash and conflict between two nuclear-armed powers.

The *Washington Post* editorial encouraged the Obama administration to step up the war of words against China at the annual top-level Shangri-La Dialogue starting Friday in Singapore, where Defence Secretary Carter will undoubtedly use the opportunity to confront senior Chinese officials. The US and China's neighbours, it declared, should "push back against the [Chinese] sandcastles in the Spratlys."

In a similar vein, China's announcement yesterday that it was constructing two lighthouses on reefs in the Spratlys was portrayed in the US and international media as part of China's supposedly menacing build-up in the South China Sea.

Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) spokesman Yang Yujun hit back yesterday against the US, declaring that "outside powers" were trying to "tarnish the Chinese military's reputation and create an atmosphere of exaggerated tension." Referring to China's land reclamation, he said: "There has been a lot of hype surrounding this news. Is it because the South China Sea has shrunk and become more crowded?"

Alluding to the danger of further US military provocations, Yang declared: "We cannot eliminate the possibility that this is to create excuses for the actions that certain countries may be planning to take. This is not a new trick and has been used many times in the past."

Yang was speaking at the launch of China's new Defence White Paper, which lays out, in broad terms, the PLA's strategy and objectives. After painting a fantastic picture of a world in which "peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit have become an irresistible tide of the times," it proceeds to

warn of “new threats from hegemonism, power politics and neo-interventionism.” It continues: “International competition for the redistribution of power, rights and interests is tending to intensify.”

The document explicitly points to China’s concerns about the US military build-up in the region and Japanese remilitarisation: “As the world economic and strategic centre of gravity is shifting ever more rapidly to the Asia Pacific region, the US carries on its ‘rebalancing’ strategy and enhances its military presence and military alliances in this region. Japan is sparing no effort to dodge the post-war mechanism, overhauling its military and security policies.”

The White Paper makes clear that China is turning toward Russia, which is likewise being aggressively confronted by the US and its allies in Eastern Europe. China’s armed forces, the document emphasises, “will further their exchanges and cooperation with the Russian military within the framework of the comprehensive strategic partnership” between the two countries.

The White Paper highlights the mounting tensions in the South China Sea, stating that some of China’s neighbours have taken provocative actions and reinforced their military presence on reefs claimed by China. “Some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China,” it declares.

China’s military build-up, along with its reclamation work in the South China Sea, is aimed at countering US threats to its interests. While Washington denounces China’s land reclamation as a grab for control of the South China Sea, the US actions are directed at securing its own dominance. Since 2010, Washington has exploited the maritime disputes to drive a wedge between Beijing and its neighbours and enhance the US military presence. The US now has basing arrangements with Singapore and the Philippines, directly adjacent to the South China Sea, and is seeking similar arrangements with Vietnam.

It is not China, but the US, that is threatening “freedom of navigation” through the South China Sea. China depends heavily on the key sea lanes through these waters for energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East, as well as for its global exports. A key element of the Pentagon’s strategic planning for

war against China is to impose an economic blockade of the Chinese mainland by severing these shipping routes.

The defence shifts outlined in China’s White Paper are primarily aimed at preventing the US Navy and Air Force from mounting such a blockade. The document calls for a gradual shift from the PLA Navy’s current focus on “offshore waters defence” to include “open seas protection.” The White Paper also foreshadows a change in focus for the PLA Air Force, from territorial air defence to both defence and offence.

The danger of a catastrophic war between China and the US is being increasingly discussed in ruling circles. In comments last Friday, billionaire investor George Soros made an appeal for the US to make a “major concession” to China by allowing the yuan to join the International Monetary Fund’s basket of currencies and binding the two economies together more closely.

“Without it,” Soros said, “there is a real danger that China will align itself with Russia politically and militarily, and then the threat of third world war becomes real, so it is worth trying.” Like all of those who claim that international economic integration will prevent world war, Soros ignores the lessons of history—economic interdependence did not halt the slide into World War I or World War II.

The real driving force behind the eruption of US militarism and the growing dangers of war is the worsening breakdown of world capitalism following the 2008 global financial crisis. The only means for halting this drive to war is the revolutionary overthrow of the bankrupt profit system by the international working class.



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