China hits back at G7 over South China Sea

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11 June 2015

The Chinese government has hit back at implicit criticisms of its land reclamation in the South China Sea by G7 leaders in Germany last weekend. Beijing reasserted its sovereignty in the Spratly Islands (known as Nansha in China) and branded the summit's joint declaration as "irresponsible." The G7 consists of the United States, Japan, Canada and the major European powers—Britain, France, Germany and Italy.

Over the past month, Washington has deliberately raised political tensions in the region by sending a military reconnaissance aircraft with a CNN news crew close to Chinese-controlled islets. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore late last month, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter demanded that China immediately halt its "unprecedented" land reclamation. He declared that US forces would "fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows"—in effect, giving notice of further military provocations in the region.

The G7 summit declaration echoed the drumbeat from Washington and its allies, asserting "the free and unimpeded lawful use of the world's oceans." It "strongly oppose[d] the use of intimidation, coercion or force, as well as any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo, such as large-scale land reclamation."

While not directly referring to China or the South China Sea, there was no mistaking that the statement was directed against Beijing. Washington rarely refers to the land reclamation activities of other claimants in that sea, including Vietnam and the Philippines.

At a press conference this week, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei responded by declaring: "What the G7 members have said and done are too far from the facts." He said China "strongly urged" the G7 "to respect the facts, discard bias, stop making irresponsible remarks" and focus on contributing to regional peace and stability.

Hong insisted that China's construction work in the Nansha Islands was "within China's sovereignty" and not in breach of international law. While Washington maintains the fiction that it takes no position in relation to the maritime disputes in the South China Sea, it has encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam in particular to more aggressively press their territorial claims against China.

Hong restated Beijing's commitment to freedom of navigation and over-flight, declaring: "It will be the first to come out against any behaviour threatening navigational freedom in these waters." The remark points to the obvious fact that China is heavily reliant on shipping routes in the South China Sea, both for imports of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East, and exports to Europe and Asia.

The Chinese regime is deeply concerned over American military dominance in the region and key "choke points" such as the Malacca Strait, identified by US naval strategists as the locations for an economic blockade of China in the event of war. The Pentagon has made no secret that its war plans include stopping "freedom of navigation" for Chinese shipping.

The Obama administration has inflamed tensions in the South China Sea over the past five years as a means of driving a wedge between China and its South East Asian nations. Its actions are part of the broader "pivot to Asia" aimed at diplomatically isolating Beijing, undermining its economic influence and preparing militarily for war as part of an overall strategy designed to ensure continued US dominance in the Asia Pacific.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, which represents the interests of the tiny ultra-rich oligarchy that has benefitted from capitalist restoration, is organically incapable of making any appeal to the working class in China or internationally, and thus of any progressive response to the growing dangers of war.

The CCP is pursuing a two-track policy—desperately

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seeking to appease Washington, while at the same time engaging in a futile arms race with the US that only intensifies the danger of war. As the Chinese economy slows and social tensions grow, the regime is increasingly resorting to whipping up Chinese nationalism, particularly anti-Japanese chauvinism, which divides Chinese workers from workers in Japan, the US and around the world.

In an attempt at conciliation, a delegation of top Chinese military officials is currently in the United States at the invitation of US Defence Secretary Carter. It is headed by Central Military Commission (CMC) vice-chairman Fan Changlong, who ranks immediately below President Xi Jinping, who chairs the CMC. The South China Sea is expected to be a major focus of the discussion between Fan and Carter when they meet today.

While Chinese officials have largely limited themselves to defending China's land reclamation and territorial claims, sections of the media and political establishment are pushing for a tougher response. An editorial in the hardline state-owned *Global Times* on May 31 insisted that China must press ahead with its land reclamation. "If Beijing backs off due to Washington's threats and some Western countries' protests," it declared, "this will create a horrific precedent, which will embolden US-led forces to set tougher positions against China."

The newspaper continued: "China needs to make broad plans, including countermeasures against more US intrusions. Beijing should be fully prepared, both mentally and physically, for possible military conflicts with the US. China needs to clearly express its unwillingness as well as fearlessness to fight."

Having set course for a confrontation with China, the US has no intention of backing down. Any pull-back by Washington would undermine its determined efforts to forge a network of alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific, directed against China.

More broadly the US, faced with the continued Chinese economic expansion, recognises that time is not on its side—a logic that dictates that American imperialism acts sooner rather than later to ensure Chinese subordination to its interests, greatly heightening the danger of conflict between two nuclear-armed powers.

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