

War dangers in South China Sea continue to rise

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On June 16, the Chinese foreign ministry announced that China will soon complete the “reclamation” of land it is carrying out around reefs and islets in the South China Sea and “start the building of facilities” on them. The announcement, made in defiance of the demands by Washington that Beijing ends both reclamation and construction, underscores that the danger of war in Asia is not abating.

A short press release issued by the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission indicated that China intends to build navigational lighthouses, wireless base stations, weather monitoring equipment and facilities to supply and shelter fishing and search and rescue ships. It did not name the islands where construction would take place but the US has paid particular attention to reclamation being undertaken around Fiery Cross Reef—a speck of Chinese-occupied territory in the Spratly Islands, in the South China Sea, which is also claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan.

Images suggest Fiery Cross Reef has been expanded by some 230 hectares over the past 18 months and that an airfield has been built. Land has also been added to the seven other Chinese-held islets and reefs in the Spratlys.

High level talks took place in Washington on June 11 between top officials from the US and China, ostensibly to bring about an easing of tensions. Both sides, however, restated their mutually antagonistic positions. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter repeated Washington’s demands for reclamation and construction to cease. Chinese General Fan Changlong, the vice chairman of China’s Central Military Commission, raised China’s demand that the US reduce its military activities in the disputed areas and not seek to interfere in internal Chinese affairs.

An “Exchange and Dialogue Mechanism Framework Agreement” was signed between the US and Chinese militaries, including a section on how to manage potential incidents involving aircraft. The agreement had a somewhat meaningless character under conditions in which the US has openly threatened to repudiate China’s territorial claims by sending its armed forces within the 12-mile exclusive zone surrounding the reefs and islands in the South China Sea.

The Obama administration has attempted to portray China’s reclamation and construction as a sinister and threatening challenge to “freedom of navigation.” In reality, they are a belated reaction to the activities of other claimants over the disputed territories and a response to the US military build-up in the region as part of the “pivot” to Asia.

Since the 1980s, Vietnam has constructed numerous facilities and reclaimed land on the 28 islets and reefs that it occupies in the Spratlys, including lighthouses, airstrips, ports and troop barracks. The Philippines has done the same on the 10 islands and reefs it holds. Malaysia, which occupies seven islands and reefs, has an airfield on the largest and stations troops on all them.

While the US refuses to sign the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it has backed the legal action initiated in 2013 by the Philippines to challenge China’s claims in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. In December 2014, Washington, while posturing as “neutral” in the territorial disputes, issued a State Department report asserting that China’s claims were contrary to international law—laws which the US does not recognise.

China has stated that it will not accept any UN court

ruling against its claims and its activities in the South China Sea are at least in part motivated by concerns that the Philippines, backed by the US, could seek to exploit a decision in Manila's favour to occupy the disputed territories.

The construction of airfields and docking facilities on islands and reefs is also a response to the tactics that the US would employ in a war against China. In the event of conflict, American strategists, as part of their openly discussed "AirSea Battle" plans, advocate the imposition of a naval blockade that prevents Chinese shipping passing through the key sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans into the South China Sea. If China's access to oil and other resources from the Middle East and Africa was cut off, its economy would collapse.

US military planning exposes the real content of Washington's rhetoric over "freedom of navigation." It is another example of the Orwellian language used by American imperialism. It simply means that Washington will not accept any challenge—whether from Chinese naval and air force operations or defensive facilities on tiny islands and reefs—to the ability of the US military to operate unhindered in strategic areas close to China where it could shut down the country's sea trade.

Various military deployments are taking place or being prepared in Asia that would be viewed in China as preparations for a potential "freedom of navigation" provocation by either the US or one of its allies in the anti-China "pivot." A confrontation over such an incident could rapidly trigger open conflict, which could escalate into the use of nuclear weapons.

The Indian Navy deployed four warships to the Malaysian port of Kuantan this week. They will conduct training with Malaysian vessels in the vicinity of the disputed Spratly Islands.

Next week, the Philippines military will carry out separate training exercises with both US and Japanese forces near Palawan Island in the South China Sea. Both the operations will involve surveillance aircraft—which Washington specifically threatened to use to fly into the exclusive zone around Chinese-held territory.

A Vietnamese nationalist businessman intends to send a tourist ship into the Spratly Islands on June 22, "to arouse national pride and citizen consciousness of

the sacred sovereignty of the country." Vietnamese military vessels will more than likely shadow its movements. The Vietnamese media has highlighted allegations by fishermen that their boats have been attacked this month by Chinese vessels near the Paracel Islands.

The operations that China will be following most closely, however, is the massive Talisman Sabre exercise that will take place in July in northern Australia involving the US and Australian militaries, along with contingents from New Zealand and Japan. The George Washington aircraft carrier battlegroup arrived in Brisbane this week ahead of the exercise. In total, some 33,000 troops, 21 ships and submarines and over 200 aircraft will carry out what amounts to a rehearsal for a military confrontation with China in the South China Sea by a joint US-Australian task force.



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