

# Washington's hypocritical denunciations of Chinese "land reclamation" in the South China Sea

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14 July 2015

A central component of the US-led provocations against China this year has been the Obama administration's claims that Beijing's "land reclamation" activities in the South China Sea constitute a threat to "freedom of navigation" and "security and stability" in the region.

In May, it was revealed that the US and Australia were considering deploying military aircraft and warships within the 12-nautical mile exclusion zone around territory claimed by China, on the pretext of defending navigational freedom. Such a provocation would directly pose the threat of a broader conflict.

The corporate press in the US, Australia, the Philippines and elsewhere has faithfully parroted Washington's line, depicting China as an expansionist aggressor bullying its smaller neighbours. Certain claims about the South China Sea are taken as given—that China is the only country developing militarised outposts in the region, that its territorial claims are uniquely expansive and that its "land reclamation" activities are unparalleled.

All these allegations, which are aimed at legitimising the massive US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, are either false or grossly distorted.

In fact, the claims of Taiwan, which cover the bulk of the South China Sea, are virtually identical to those made by China. Vietnam's claims approach the western shore of the Philippines, and to the north, extend almost to Hainan Island, off the coast of China.

Speaking in the rarefied circles of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in May, David Shear, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, acknowledged the real situation.

Shear briefly outlined longstanding disputes between

China, Taiwan and Vietnam over the Paracel Islands, between China, Taiwan and the Philippines over the Scarborough Reef, and between Vietnam, Malaysia, China, the Philippines and Taiwan in the Spratly Islands.

Shear noted: "Over the past two decades, all of the territorial claimants, other than Brunei, have developed outposts in the South China Sea, which they use to project civilian or maritime presence into surrounding waters..."

Shear provided a tally of some of the facilities. "In the Spratly islands, Vietnam has 48 outposts; the Philippines, 8; China, 8; Malaysia, 5, and Taiwan, 1," he said. "All of these same claimants have also engaged in construction activity of differing scope and degree. The types of outpost upgrades vary across claimants but broadly are comprised of land reclamation, building construction and extension, and defense emplacements."

The largest natural island in the Spratly group, Itu Aba, or Taiping Island, is controlled by Taiwan. Formerly used by Japan as a submarine base in World War II, the island features the largest airstrip in the Spratlys. Thitu, the second largest island, is occupied by Philippine military forces, with a handful of civilians subsidised by the government to live there.

The other natural features in the Spratly group are occupied by the Philippines and Vietnam, with Malaysia possessing one. China does not possess any of the natural islands, a precipitating factor in its "land reclamation" activities on reefs and rocky outcrops under its control.

Apart from China, all the other main claimants—Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan and

Malaysia—already have constructed airstrips on islets under their control in the Spratlys.

China controls the Paracel islands, a smaller collection of islands, reefs, and banks, which are also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan. Chinese control of the islands goes back to the aftermath of the 1949 Chinese revolution and a series of conflicts with Vietnam in the 1970s. The largest of the islands, Woody Island, which includes a dock and an airstrip, is also used by Chinese fishermen.

The Scarborough shoal, a collection of uninhabited sandbanks and rocks claimed by China, Taiwan and the Philippines, has been the scene of tense standoffs. In 2012, the Philippine navy apprehended eight Chinese fishing boats in the area. China responded by effectively establishing its control over the area.

Shear, while noting that Vietnam undertook the largest land reclamation activities between 2009 and 2014, sought to present China's activities as a unique threat. His argument sought to obscure two fundamental realities. The first is that the total outposts of other claimants in the region cover a far broader expanse of the South China Sea as this map [1] demonstrates.

Secondly, the scope of Vietnamese land reclamation alone is, in many instances, comparable to that undertaken by China. Based on analysis of satellite images, Taiwanese officials claimed last September that Vietnamese artificial land creation in one area of the Spratlys spanned some "11 football fields."

The feverish response to Chinese construction has not been matched by any comparable US reaction to Vietnam's activities. The US-based think-tank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), shared images with reporters taken in 2010 and 2015. According to CSIS representative Mira Rapp-Hopper, they showed the development of new military installations on Vietnamese-controlled outposts, along with "the construction of a significant new area that was formerly under water" and "land reclamation to add acreage to an existing island."

At the beginning of June, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter met with Vietnamese Defence Minister Phung Quang Thanh in Hanoi. Carter claimed that the two discussed a proposal to halt all reclamation activity, but again presented China's actions as undermining "regional security." Thanh absurdly

claimed that Vietnam's activities sought to prevent wave erosion. He and Carter signed a "Joint Vision Statement" for talks on closer military cooperation. Carter pledged US assistance for the construction of a military site to train Vietnamese troops to participate in UN "peacekeeping" operations, along with \$18 million to help Vietnam buy US navy patrol boats.

Shear pointed to the real reasons for the US hostility to China's land reclamation, stating: "China's actions are not viewed solely in the context of territorial and maritime disputes; they are viewed as indicators of China's long-term strategic intentions." The US pivot to Asia, an all-sided military, diplomatic and economic campaign against China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region, underlines Washington's attempts to stoke up longstanding territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

The resource-rich sea is also of considerable geopolitical importance. At its north is Hainan Island, which houses a critical Chinese submarine base. At its south are the key shipping lanes, and the straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda, through which the bulk of Chinese trade passes. Control of these sea routes have been identified in US military strategists as critical for a US economic blockade of China.

As the US escalates its preparations for war against China, it will continue to inflame tensions in the South China Sea.

Note:

[1] The map was produced by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative which is connected to the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a leading think tank for the US "pivot to Asia" against China.



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