

US Pacific Fleet commander threatens China over South China Sea

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In an aggressive speech directed against China, US Pacific Fleet commander Admiral Scott Swift yesterday signalled that Washington intended to challenge Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea under the pretext of "freedom of the seas." His remarks are part of an escalating US campaign directed against Chinese land reclamation on reefs under Beijing's administration.

Swift's speech came just a day after the Obama administration finalised the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP)—a trade and investment bloc aimed at strengthening US economic dominance in Asia and undermining China's economic clout. The TPP is the economic arm of Obama's "pivot to Asia" which is aimed at subordinating China to US interests through every means, including military force.

Swift made no mention of the TPP, but US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter underscored its strategic importance in April when he bluntly stated that the TPP was "as important to me as another aircraft carrier." Washington will exploit closer economic alignments to secure stronger strategic ties.

The fact that Swift used the Sydney Pacific 2015 Maritime conference as a platform underlines the extent to which Australia, a military ally and a TPP partner, is deeply integrated into the "pivot" and the US military build-up against China.

Swift's criticisms were unmistakably aimed against China, although he did not name it. "Some nations in this region," he declared, "continue to impose superfluous warnings and restrictions on freedom of the seas in their exclusive economic zones and claim territorial water rights that are inconsistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea [UNCLOS]. This trend is particularly egregious in contested waters."

Swift's comments, which reflect what is now

standard propaganda from Washington, are completely hypocritical. While accusing China of breaching UNCLOS, the US has not ratified the convention that it claims to be upholding. Moreover, up until 2010, when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the US had "a national interest" in ensuring "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea, Washington largely ignored territorial disputes in these strategic waters.

Over the past five years, the Obama administration has exploited the issue to drive a wedge between China and its South East Asian neighbours. It claims to be neutral on the rival maritime claims but has encouraged Vietnam and the Philippines, in particular, to take a more aggressive stance against China.

In what amounted to a threat to China, Swift declared that there should be no doubt that "the United States Pacific Fleet remains as committed to freedom of the seas as ever ... Put simply, we will continue to exercise freedom of the seas for all nations, because we know from painful past experience, to shirk this responsibility and obligation, puts much more at risk than any one nation's maritime interests."

Swift said that in recent weeks, Indo-Pacific security issues, including rising tensions in the South China Sea, had been front and centre in talks with Pentagon and State Department officials.

What is under consideration was outlined in a *Foreign Policy* article last week entitled, "In South China Sea, a tougher US stance," which reported that the US was "poised to send naval ships and aircraft to the South China Sea in a challenge to Beijing's territorial claims to its rapidly-built artificial islands."

The US navy routinely sends ships and planes to monitor Chinese-administered islets in the South China Sea, but to date has not intruded into the 12-nautical

mile territorial zone around the outcrops. “A final decision has not been made,” the article stated. “But the Obama administration is heavily leaning toward using a show of military might ... The timing and details of the patrols ... are still being worked out, Obama administration and Pentagon officials said.”

A Defence Department official told *Foreign Policy*: “It’s not a question of if, but when.”

Such an operation, involving a direct confrontation between the US and Chinese militaries, is reckless and provocative. Washington is preparing to deliberately risk a clash that could quickly escalate into a disastrous conflict between the nuclear-armed powers.

Foreign Policy explained: “The move toward a somewhat more muscular stance follows talks between Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Barack Obama in Washington last month, which fell far short of a breakthrough over how territorial disputes should be settled in the strategic South China Sea.”

At his joint press conference with Obama, Xi declared that China did not intend to “pursue militarisation” in the South China Sea but he insisted on reasserting his country’s territorial claims. Obama’s determination to heighten tensions with China in that sea, even as the US standoff with Russia over Syria escalates, makes clear that US imperialism will stop at nothing to maintain its global dominance, even if that means plunging the world into war.



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