

Financial Times reports US plans to send warships into waters claimed by China

Our reporter
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The United States Navy is reported to be about to send warships to breach the 12-nautical mile exclusion zone around reclaimed islands constructed by China in the South China Sea, an action which, if carried out, would threaten a direct military confrontation with the Beijing regime.

Reports of the planned US move were carried by the US *Navy Times* and the London-based *Financial Times*. According to the latter's report, "a senior US official" said the warships would "sail inside the 12-nautical mile zones that China claims as territory around some of the islands it has constructed in the Spratly chain. The official, who did not want to be named, said the manoeuvres were expected to start in the next two weeks."

The newspaper reported that US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter had been pressing for such action for some months but had only received final agreement from the White House following Chinese president Xi Jinping's visit to the US last month.

The *Navy Times* report was somewhat less definitive, saying it had been told by three Pentagon officials on background that the Navy was preparing to send a surface ship inside the 12-mile limit, possibly "within days," and was only awaiting final approval.

The official Chinese response at this stage has been somewhat muted. Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying told the *South China Morning Post* that she hoped the US could view the situation in the South China Sea from an "objective and fair perspective" and play a constructive role with China in maintaining stability in the region.

Other sources cited by the newspaper pointed to the possibility of a direct military clash if the US action went ahead.

Shanghai-based naval expert Ni Lexiong said the

Chinese navy "would issue verbal warnings demanding the US vessels leave."

Li Jie, a Beijing naval expert, said China would send warships to intercept the vessels if they ignored the warnings.

The *Post* cited a source "close" to the Chinese military as saying Beijing had more "cost effective" responses. "We could scramble drones to expel the vessels, or simply order the Second Artillery Corps to fire from distance," he said.

However, any military action by China, even in a limited form, would be almost certain to bring a major escalation by the US.

Whatever the exact status of the plan, given the uncertainty over whether the White House has given final approval, the briefings provided to both the *Navy Times* and the *Financial Times* are the outcome of a sustained campaign within military circles for the US to take action against China in the South China Sea under the bogus banner of "freedom of navigation."

Last month in an article entitled "US gears up to Challenge Beijing's 'Great Wall of Sand,'" *Foreign Policy* cited remarks by the leading Republican Party militarist, Senator John McCain, to a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing that the South China Sea "does not belong to China."

Responding to the acknowledgement by Defense Department officials that the US had not yet conducted "freedom of navigation" operations within the 12-mile limit of the reclaimed Chinese islands, McCain said: "The best sign of respecting the freedom of the seas is not to de facto recognize a 12-mile limit." He urged that US naval vessels sail right up to the islands.

The article cited a letter signed by Virginia House of Representatives member Randy Forbes and 28 others sent to Obama and Defense Secretary Ashton Carter

last month saying that US inaction risked legitimizing Chinese activities.

“The longer the United States goes without challenging China’s unfounded claims to sovereignty over these artificial formations—and to territorial waters and exclusive economic rights in the surrounding water—the greater the consequences will be for regional security,” they wrote.

According to the report, “administration officials” were “seriously studying the option of sailing inside the 12-mile limit,” citing an unnamed Pentagon official.

The Australian academic, Rory Medcalf, the head of the National Security College at the Australian National University in Canberra, who has close connections to military and intelligence bodies, is among those urging that the US take action sooner rather than later.

He said there were no “easy or risk-free options” for challenging what he called “China’s passive-aggressive strategy of manufacturing and militarising islands” in the region, the *Financial Times* reported.

“If the US is serious about ensuring that China does not dominate these waters, then the longer it waits, the riskier its freedom-of-navigation activities will become.”

The “freedom of navigation” mantra has nothing to do with protecting sea lanes or the rights of merchant shipping to pass through the region’s vital waterways, which carry more than 30 percent of global trade and which the Chinese have no interest in restricting.

It involves the assertion by the US military of its unfettered right to carry out activities in close proximity to the Chinese mainland and its key military installations as it conducts spying operations, as part of its pivot to Asia, and sets in place the capability for a military attack on the mainland should that be considered necessary. The Chinese equivalent of the US actions would be to conduct naval operations in the seas off San Diego or in the vicinity of Pearl Harbour.

The latest reports of US military activity underscore the significance of the aggressive speech against China delivered at the Sydney Pacific Maritime Conference earlier this week by US Pacific Fleet commander, Admiral Scott Swift.

Without directly naming China, he said that “some nations” in the region “continue to impose superfluous warnings and restrictions on freedom of the seas and in their exclusive economic zones and claim territorial

water rights that are inconsistent with the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea [UNCLOS]. This trend is particularly egregious in contested waters.”

The hypocrisy of his comments was emphasised by the fact that the US does not even recognise UNCLOS which it claims to be defending.

The significance of remarks by newly-installed Australian Defence Minister Marise Payne to the same conference also comes into sharper focus. Payne, who received a glowing endorsement from the US ambassador to Australia upon her appointment to the post last month, said that as a maritime nation, Australia had a direct national interest “in the maintenance of freedom of navigation in areas like the South China Sea.”

It would continue to “strongly oppose the use of intimidation, aggression or coercion to advance any country’s claims or unilaterally alter the status quo.” The US alliance, Payne said, was “fundamental” to Australia’s security and defence planning. These comments were not simply issued pro forma but, in the light of what has emerged since, amounted to an endorsement for any impending US military action.

However events unfold in the South China Sea over the next days, it is clear that the US military has already taken a major step towards a direct military confrontation with China, sharply increasing the risk of war.



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