

US navy planning provocative “patrols” in South China Sea

Nick Beams
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Further evidence that the United States is planning a major escalation of military activity in the South China Sea, which could provoke a direct confrontation with Beijing, has emerged in an article published in the *New York Times*.

Confirming a report published by the *Financial Times* last week, which said that the US intended to breach the 12-mile nautical limit around islands and reclaimed facilities which China claims as its territory, the article said the US had been briefing its allies in Asia on its plans. The report coincided with this week’s AUSMIN discussions in Boston between the foreign and defence ministers of the US and Australia.

According to the *New York Times*, which regularly functions as a conduit for US policy decisions, officials had told it that so-called “freedom of navigation” patrols by the US navy “would come within 12 nautical miles of at least one of the islands” and are “intended to challenge China’s efforts to claim large parts of the strategic waterway by enlarging rocks and submerged reefs into islands big enough for military airstrips, radar equipment and lodging for soldiers.”

It said the senior adviser on China at the National Security Council, Daniel Kritenbrink, had told a meeting of US analysts of the region at a meeting in Washington that “the White House had decided to proceed with the patrols.”

The apparent decision by the White House to go ahead follows a steady drum beat from sections of the military establishment, extending back over several months, that failure by the US to directly challenge China would mean *de facto* acceptance of its island reclamation program and associated territorial claims.

Earlier this month, the US Pacific Fleet commander, Admiral Scott Swift, delivered an aggressive speech at a conference in Sydney in which he denounced “some

nations”—meaning China—that continued to impose “restrictions on freedom of the seas in their exclusive economic zones.”

The “freedom of the seas” mantra, under which the US operation is being conducted, is completely bogus. What the US is asserting is its unfettered right to conduct military operations directed against China and within its vital waterways, as part of its “pivot to Asia.”

The plan has been under discussion in the Obama administration for several months but had not been given final approval by the White House until after last month’s visit by Chinese president Xi Jinping to Washington. Unable to secure any back down from Xi during the discussions, it appears that the White House has decided to give the go ahead.

The *New York Times* report said officials in the Philippines, one of the countries in the region encouraged by the US to stoke up its claims against China over disputed islands, had been told of the planned patrols and the chairman of the national defence and security committee, Senator Antonio Trillanes, welcomed the decision.

The response from Beijing indicates that should the US go ahead a direct military conflict could result.

In a statement issued last Friday, the Chinese foreign ministry said: “There is no way for us to condone infringement of China’s territorial sea and airspace by any country under the pretext of maintaining the freedom of navigation and overflight.”

If the US does go ahead with its patrols, sections of the Chinese military will undoubtedly press for a response on the grounds that acceptance of what it regards as incursions into its territory would place in jeopardy the defence of the mainland. Any back down would only bring further American military escalation.

Discussions at the AUSMIN meeting, still going

ahead as of this writing, will centre on the US plans and the role to be played by Australia as part of its involvement in the increased US military build-up against China.

According to a report published in the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, closer cooperation between the US and Australian navies will “open the possibility of Australia being directly involved in patrols in the South China Sea.”

The report cited a US defence official “close to the talks” who said that “certainly the South China Sea will be a focus” in proposals being discussed by the two navies.

The official said that whenever a US warship sailed within the so-called nine-dash line, covering areas of the South China Sea, initially claimed in 1947 by the government of Chiang Kai Shek and continued under the current regime, it was challenging China’s right to limit freedom of navigation.

“Doing it on one of those reclaimed features is one of a variety of options we’re looking at,” he said. While it was being considered, he declined to say when and how it might be done, but added: “We’ve made known our intention to fly, sail or operate wherever international law allows and we are going to do that and we view that as one way of ensuring protection [of] freedom of navigation.”

The invocation of “international law” is as hypocritical as the US claim that it is protecting “freedom of navigation.” The US says it is acting in line with the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) but does not officially recognise it.

Longer-term plans include the provision of greater infrastructure facilities at Australian ports to allow increased visits by US warships and submarines. Under the pivot to Asia, the US aims to have 60 percent of its naval and air force capacity deployed in the Pacific region by the start of the next decade.

Speaking to the *Australian*, the Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop emphasised the importance of the recently concluded Trans Pacific Partnership—the economic component of the Obama administration’s pivot to Asia, or “rebalance” as it is now officially designated.

“The TPP is the economic manifestation of the rebalance and what that will mean for the region,” she said.

The TPP is being touted as a free trade deal. In fact it is nothing of the sort. It specifically excludes China, the world’s second largest economy, and is aimed at seeking to draw South East Asian countries into the US economic orbit and away from China, as pressure is stepped up on the military front.



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