

US launches South China Sea military provocation against China

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The United States has launched a reckless military provocation against China by sending a naval vessel within the 12-nautical mile limit surrounding islands claimed by China in the South China Sea.

Early today, local time, the guided missile destroyer USS Lassen entered the exclusion zone around the Chinese-occupied and claimed Subi and Mischief reefs in the Spratly archipelago. China has reclaimed land from the sea and constructed facilities on the reefs. The USS Lassen was accompanied by a P-8A surveillance plane and a P-3 surveillance aircraft. According to US sources, China was not informed and no incident occurred.

The brazen and aggressive character of the operation is underscored by the fact that it has been undertaken in the total absence of military activity against the US by China. Rather, it assumes the form of a pre-emptive strike aimed at humiliating the Chinese regime and placing it in a situation where it either confronts the US navy or bows down to Washington's repudiation of China's decades-old territorial claims in the strategic South China Sea. Not coincidentally, the operation was announced just as a major meeting of the ruling Chinese Communist Party central committee was convening to consider economic policy over the next five years.

According to an unnamed US defense department official, who provided a briefing on the operation, the deployment of the USS Lassen is not a one-off, but the start of a series of provocations.

The US actions vastly raise the threat of a military clash with China and the danger of a war between nuclear-armed states that would draw in every country in the region and beyond. A senior Chinese naval officer declared earlier this month that any forces violating Chinese sovereignty would be met with a "head on blow." On October 9, the Chinese foreign ministry warned that China would "never allow any country to violate China's territorial waters and airspace in the Spratly Islands in the name of protecting freedom of navigation and overflight."

The US incursion into the region is the outcome of a

sustained campaign by the American military under the bogus banner of "freedom of navigation," accompanied by lies that Washington is upholding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The utter hypocrisy of this assertion is laid bare by the fact that the US does not even recognise UNCLOS.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest refused to answer specific questions on the navy's actions. He said they would be dealt with by the Pentagon, adding that the US had made clear to China the importance of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

"There are billions of dollars of commerce flowing through that region of the world. Ensuring that free flow of commerce ... is critical to the global economy," he said.

Earnest's remarks are on a par with the "Big Lie" claims of "weapons of mass destruction" used to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the "humanitarian" concerns invoked by the US to instigate the 2011 overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya.

The assertion that Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea and the reclamation projects of the recent period are a threat to the flow of commerce is completely absurd. China can have no possible interest in hampering the free flow of goods in the region, because it is the life-blood on which its economy depends.

The US provocation is motivated by imperialist calculations that the very economic growth of China over the past three decades is now the most significant threat to Washington's global hegemony. The US ruling elite is unable to offer any way forward economically—its own economy increasingly resembles a giant casino in which speculation and financial parasitism are the dominant forms of profit accumulation, rather than productive activity. Washington is determined to use its overwhelming military might to try to retain global dominance.

A graphic expression of the forces driving US actions was contained in a recent tweet by US Republican Party presidential candidate Ben Carson. It featured a photograph of a US aircraft carrier accompanied by the caption, "This is

How to Compete with China.”

The real reason for the operation is not to defend freedom of the seas and air space but to assert the unfettered right of the US to organise and prepare military operations against key Chinese defence and military establishments on the mainland and on the southern Hainan Island.

Furthermore, there is a wider political agenda. Recalling the gunboat diplomacy of the nineteenth century, including the Opium Wars of British imperialism and the Black Boats of US Admiral Perry that “opened up” Japan, the long-term strategy of US imperialism is to once again reduce China to a semi-colonial status.

The operation is also intended to demonstrate to countries within the South East Asian region that whatever their economic ties with China, the US is determined to exercise its military might to maintain its dominance throughout the Asia-Pacific and more broadly.

Coming in the immediate aftermath of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Britain, where he was given the “reddest of red carpet treatment” by the Cameron government and the British state, the operation is aimed at sending a clear message to other imperialist powers that opposition to US objectives will be thwarted, if necessary through military means.

After months of pressure from the military, the Obama administration set the operation in motion following Xi’s visit to the US last month. During his private discussions with Obama and publicly, Xi continued to insist on China’s claims in the region and its right to undertake constructions on islands and reefs—a practice carried out by other claimants to disputed territories, including the Philippines and Vietnam. At the same time, he declared that Chinese construction in the region did “not target or impact any country and China does not intend to pursue militarisation.”

The official Chinese position is that where military facilities are installed they are necessary for defence purposes. This is under conditions where the US navy and air force conduct daily military activities in the region and the US military’s Air/Sea Battle Plan envisages utilising its ability to operate in the South China Sea to launch a massive attack on the Chinese mainland.

Failing to secure a backdown by Xi, Obama stated at a joint news conference that the United States would “continue to sail, fly and operate anywhere that international law allows.” According to a report in the *Nikkei Asian Review*, immediately after the meeting “an incensed Obama ordered a close aide to contact Harry Harris, head of the US Pacific Command” and “authorised the US Navy to move ahead with an operation in the South China Sea,” for which the navy had been pressing since June at least.

Viewed within a longer-term context, the South China Sea

provocation follows the pattern which US militarism has pursued over the past 25 years. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US recognised that in order to maintain its position of global hegemony it would need to conquer and recolonise vast areas of the world that had been closed off to it by the Russian and Chinese revolutions.

Washington’s militarist drive has produced one disaster after another, to which it has responded by the launching of further wars and regime-change operations. Amid the growing debacle of its Middle East policy, US imperialism has responded by setting out on the road toward a war with China.

This madness is not the product of the deranged psyche of individual imperialist politicians. Rather, imperialist geopolitics is an expression of the insanity of the world capitalist system, arising from the ever-deepening contradiction between the development of a global economy and the division of the world into rival nation-states and great powers.

The response of the Beijing regime to Washington’s threats is deeply reactionary. It has sought to answer US imperialism with counter-threats, a military build-up and the promotion of Chinese nationalism. As the representative of the Chinese bourgeois oligarchy, it is hostile to any effort to unify and mobilise the working class against the dangers of war.

Regardless of how the present events in the South China Sea unfold immediately, they indubitably signify another step on the road to World War III. The working class and youth must respond through the development of a global anti-war movement, grounded on the perspective of international socialism.



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