

US flies nuclear-capable bombers close to Chinese islets

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Ahead of top-level summits in Asia next week, the Obama administration has again ramped up tensions with China over the South China Sea. The Pentagon announced on Thursday that two nuclear-capable B-52 strategic bombers conducted missions close to Chinese-claimed islets on November 8 and 9.

The provocative flights come just two weeks after the guided missile destroyer USS Lassen deliberately intruded within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit of Subi Reef, which is controlled and administered by China. Washington's determination to escalate its military challenges to Beijing's maritime claims greatly heightens the danger of a mistake or miscalculation leading to a clash between the two nuclear-armed powers.

Pentagon spokesman Bill Urban confirmed that the B-52 pilots received two warnings from Chinese ground controllers that were ignored. Urban said the flights had been "in the area" of the disputed Spratly Islands, but the bombers never ventured "within 15 nautical miles of any feature." The account is at odds with the comments of an unnamed American official who told the *Hill* that the bombers made one pass within the 12-nautical mile limit.

Urban insisted that the B-52 bombers engaged in "a routine mission," taking off from and returning to Guam, and "at all times operated in accordance to international law." Washington routinely declares that China's territorial claims in the South China Sea are illegitimate, even though the US has not ratified the relevant international law—the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei told the media yesterday that China respects the rights of foreign ships and aircraft, but "firmly opposes violating international law and undermining China's sovereignty

and security interests under the pretext of navigation and overflight freedom." US warships and military aircraft have in the past patrolled close to the Chinese mainland, including near sensitive military bases such as those on Hainan Island adjacent to the South China Sea.

While the US regularly criticises China's "aggressive" land reclamation in the South China Sea, Beijing's actions follow Washington's mounting intervention into China's territorial disputes with its neighbours. At an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the US had "a national interest" in "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. In an essay, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi responded by accusing Clinton of carrying out "virtually an attack on China."

The South China Sea is just one of a series of flashpoints that the Obama administration has deliberately inflamed as part of its "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at ensuring US hegemony in the region, by war with China if necessary. Over the past five years, Washington has encouraged South East Asian countries, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, to more aggressively press their claims against China. The US has beefed up its own military presence in Asia, secured new basing arrangements with the Philippines and Australia, and boosted its military ties with countries throughout the region.

Last week's B-52 flights were carefully timed on the eve of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Manila, which will culminate in the leaders' meeting on November 18–19. China has pressed the Philippine administration to ensure that the South China Sea is not on the summit's agenda, which is

traditionally confined to trade and economic issues.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest strongly hinted that President Barack Obama intended to press the issue, undermining Chinese President Xi Jinping, who will be attending APEC. Earnest declared that he did not know if the South China Sea would be part of the formal agenda but added it would be “on the minds and lips” of world leaders gathered there. The APEC summit will be followed by ASEAN and East Asia summits in Kuala Lumpur.

Reuters reported that Obama will take part in what the White House described as “an event that showcases US maritime security assistance to the Philippines.” American officials did not elaborate further. The US has provided the Philippine navy with two refurbished coast guard cutters and is helping boost the country’s maritime surveillance. Under a basing agreement signed in April, the US military has virtually unfettered access to Philippine military bases, including those directly adjacent to the South China Sea.

Washington has encouraged and assisted the Philippines to mount a legal case to challenge China’s territorial claims, over which the Permanent Court of Arbitration decided late last month to exercise jurisdiction. This week, Indonesia’s chief security minister Luhut Pandjaitan suggested that his country could follow suit in launching a legal case, even though China does not challenge Indonesian sovereignty over its Natuna islands.

The Obama administration is under pressure from the Pentagon and right-wing Republicans to challenge China’s territorial claims even more aggressively. Senator John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, wrote to US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter on Monday calling for a public clarification of the USS Lassen’s intervention in the South China Sea, to answer criticisms that it engaged in what is known as “innocent passage” and did not actually encroach on China’s territorial claims.

In the fourth Republican presidential debate, candidate Chris Christie denounced Obama’s “weak” and “feckless” foreign policy. Focussing on China, he declared: “They’re building those artificial islands in the South China Sea and the president won’t—up until recently, wouldn’t sail a ship within 12 miles or fly a plane over it. I’ll tell you this, the first thing I’ll do with the Chinese is ... I’ll fly Air Force One over those

islands. They’ll know we mean business.”

Obama is already quietly doing what McCain and Christie are demanding—carrying out deliberately provocative acts designed to force China to back down and ultimately accept American imperialism’s dominance in Asia. This increasingly reckless path threatens to plunge the entire region and the world into war.



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