

US to base spy planes in Singapore

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Singapore has boosted its military engagement in the US military build-up in the Asia Pacific against China by giving the green light to the Pentagon to operate P8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft from its territory.

The first deployment of the American spy plane, from December 7 to 14, was officially welcomed in a joint statement by US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter and Singaporean Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen, released after their meeting in Washington on Monday.

A US official told Reuters that further deployments in Singapore could be expected. The US already operates the navy aircraft from air bases in Japan and the Philippines, as well as from Malaysia.

The announcement will only further heighten tensions with China after a relentless campaign by Washington and its allies over the past year condemning Chinese reclamation activities in the South China Sea. Unlike Malaysia and the Philippines, Singapore has no rival territorial claims with Beijing.

In a contrived propaganda exercise in May, the US provocatively flew a P8 spy plane, accompanied by a CNN news crew, close to three Chinese-administrated islets in the South China Sea. CNN correspondent Jim Sciutto gave a breathless account of the Chinese warnings to the plane and declared “China’s enormous land grab” was “alarming.”

In October, the Obama administration authorised an even more reckless action—sending the USS Lassen, a guided missile destroyer, inside the 12-nautical mile territorial limit surrounding one of China’s islets and risking an armed clash. Last month, the Pentagon flew B-52 strategic bombers close to Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea.

The Chinese foreign ministry responded to the US-Singapore announcement by pointing to the hypocrisy of Washington’s criticisms of Chinese activities. Spokeswoman Hua Chunying declared: “I think this kind of increase in military deployment by the United

States and pushing regional militarisation does not accord with the long-term interests of the countries in this region.”

The Obama administration has been very vocal in denouncing China’s building of ports and airfields on islets under its control as the “militarisation” of the region. In reality, as part of its “pivot to Asia,” the US plans to shift 60 percent of its naval and air force assets to the Indo-Pacific by 2020. It is strengthening military ties and concluding basing arrangements with allies and strategic partners throughout the region.

The Pentagon already has a basing agreement to station four littoral combat ships in Singapore. Two are already positioned there, with the third due to arrive next year and the fourth in 2017. These advanced warships are specifically designed to operate in shallow waters such as those found in the South China Sea.

The joint statement released on Monday noted that the US and Singapore had signed an enhanced defence cooperation agreement covering broad areas of military collaboration. It focussed on two areas in particular, “maritime security” and “cyber defence,” in which the US has made accusations against China. Defence Minister Ng specifically welcomed Carter’s maritime security initiative, foreshadowed in May, that will provide up to \$425 million for “maritime capacity-building”—that is bolstering the naval capabilities—of South East Asian countries.

Far from opposing the militarisation of the Asia Pacific, the US is fuelling an arms race throughout the region that only heightens the danger of conflict. Over the past five years, the military build-up has included:

* In 2011, the US signed a basing agreement with Australia to “rotate” up to 2,500 Marines, along with naval and air support, through the northern city of Darwin. Subsequent US-Australia ministerial talks expanded US military access to bases in northern and western Australia. The country already hosted vital US

communications and spy bases such as Pine Gap in central Australia.

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* Washington signed an enhanced defence cooperation agreement with the Philippines last year which, when implemented, will provide virtually unfettered access to military bases in its former colony. Encouraged by the US, President Benigno Aquino has been in the forefront of aggressively pursuing Philippine maritime claims against China. When in Manila last month, President Barack Obama announced that the US would transfer another two warships to the Philippines and provide additional military aid.

* The US is engaged in restructuring its military forces in Japan, which are concentrated in Okinawa, where it is constructing a new Marine base, despite widespread local opposition. It is also shifting some Marines from Okinawa to Guam where US bases are undergoing a substantial expansion. At Washington's urging, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is expanding the country's military, loosening constitutional constraints on Japan's involvement in US-led wars and adopting a confrontation stance toward China over disputed islets in the East China Sea.

* In June, Defence Secretary Carter signed a new 10-year defence framework with India and specifically singled out India's "Act East" policy for praise. The policy has underpinned India's economic drive into South East Asia and its projection of naval forces into the South China Sea. India has already provoked criticism from China over deals with Vietnam to conduct energy exploration in disputed waters. During the same Asian trip, Carter signed a joint military statement in Hanoi and promised further aid to enable Vietnam to buy US patrol boats. Along with the Philippines, Vietnam has been among the most aggressive in asserting its maritime claims against China.

While Washington denies Beijing's accusations that the US is militarily encircling China, there is no country in the Indo-Pacific with which the United States is not strengthening defence ties. The US decision to station P8 spy planes in Singapore only raises the political temperature in the dangerous flashpoint of the South China Sea.

Increasingly war is being openly discussed in the establishment media. A comment on the *Foreign Policy* web site yesterday highlighted the provocative character of the spy flight in May highlighted by CNN and asked: "Could American spooks provoke war with Beijing?" It concluded that Washington was playing with fire and should wind back such operations. The agreement reached between Singapore and the US this week makes clear that Washington is intent on doing precisely the opposite.



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