

Condemnations of Chinese flight in South China Sea

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Tensions in the South China Sea have again flared after a chorus of criticism from Vietnam, the Philippines, the US and Japan directed against the landing of a Chinese civilian aircraft on Fiery Cross Reef, an islet under Chinese control. The latest incident takes place amid a provocative US-led campaign over the past year against China's land reclamation and construction activities in disputed areas of the South China Sea.

The Vietnamese foreign ministry fired off a formal protest to the Chinese embassy calling on Beijing to refrain from landing another aircraft on the reef. Ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh declared that China had "illegally built" an airstrip on the islet and condemned the landing as "a serious infringement of the sovereignty of Vietnam." He went on to claim that China had breached an agreement between the two countries on the resolution of maritime disputes in the region.

Both Vietnam and China claim all of the Spratly Islands, of which Fiery Cross Reef is a part, and accuse each other of "illegally" occupying their national territory. Vietnam currently occupies 29 atolls and reefs in the island group (compared to just 8 by China), has its own airfield on Spratly Island and is also carrying out reclamation and expansion. The two countries also have a long-running dispute over the Paracel Islands that resulted in a physical confrontation between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels when China established an oil rig in 2014 near islands under its control.

China rejected what it described as "the unfounded accusation from the Vietnamese side," insisting that the "test flight to the airport with a civil aircraft [was] in order to test whether or not the facilities on it meet the standards for civil aviation." Chinese foreign ministry

spokesperson Hua Chunying added that the "relevant activity falls completely within China's sovereignty."

The Philippines, which also claims some of the Spratly Islands and has its own airstrip on Thitu Island, also foreshadowed a formal protest to China over the flight. The Japanese foreign minister, Fumio Kishida, weighed in, saying that such acts "don't contribute to the peaceful settlement of the dispute" and should be avoided.

US State Department spokeswoman Pooja Jhunjhunwala called on all claimants to "actively reduce tensions by refraining from unilateral actions that undermine regional stability" and for steps towards "meaningful diplomatic solutions." She repeated the US demand for a halt to all "land reclamation, construction of new facilities and militarisation of the disputed features."

Washington's response is utterly hypocritical. Over the past five years, the Obama administration has systematically inflamed dangerous flashpoints throughout the Indo-Pacific, including in the South China Sea, as part of its "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining China's diplomatic, economic and military position. The US is engaged in a reckless campaign to ensure its dominance in Asia by all means, including war if need be.

The kneejerk response to a Chinese flight in the South China Sea is in marked contrast to the decades during which Washington largely ignored confrontations and indeed clashes in the disputed waters. In mid-2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared for the first time at an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit that the US had a "national interest" in ensuring "freedom of navigation" through the South China Sea, provoking a shocked and angry response from Beijing.

What “freedom of navigation” signifies to the US is the untrammelled “right” to send its warplanes and naval vessels into the strategic region, including close to the Chinese mainland and major military bases. China is heavily dependent on key shipping routes in the South China Sea through which pass its huge imports of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. Imposing an economic blockade of China by seizing control of chokepoints in South East Asia, such as the Malacca Strait, is part of the Pentagon’s strategic plans for war against China.

Over the past year, the South China Sea has become a central focus of US provocations in Asia with repeated condemnations of Chinese “expansionism” and “militarisation” of the disputed waters. The accusations have provided the pretext for forging stronger military ties with countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam, which, far from “seeking to reduce tensions,” have been encouraged to more aggressively challenge Chinese territorial claims.

The US has signed a new basing agreement with the Philippines that gives American forces virtually unfettered access to Philippine military bases including those directly adjacent to the South China Sea.

The Pentagon has also begun mounting “freedom of navigation” operations that directly challenge Chinese territorial claims and threaten to precipitate open conflict. Last October, the USS Lassen, a guided missile destroyer, deliberately intruded within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around two Chinese-controlled islets and later in the month, nuclear-capable B-52 bombers flew close to the same area.

Last month, an American B-52 bomber flew within two nautical miles of Chinese-administered Cuarteron Reef provoking angry protests from Beijing. The Pentagon responded by claiming that the intrusion had been a mistake as “for this mission, there had been no intention of flying within 12 nautical miles.” The Chinese defence ministry branded the action as a “serious military provocation” and warned that it would take “all necessary measures” to protect China’s sovereignty.

The claim that the US breach of the territorial limit was unintentional is hardly reassuring. Clearly the strategic bombers intended to fly close to Chinese-claimed territory to test Beijing’s reactions. Any mistake or miscalculation has the potential to lead to a

clash that could precipitate war between the nuclear-armed powers.

Moreover, by encouraging other claimants in the South China Sea, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, to take a more aggressive stance, the US is unleashing forces over which it has no control. Vietnam’s latest reaction to the test flight of a civilian Chinese aircraft warning against further landings in the contested Spratlys further fuels tensions in what has become one of the most dangerous flashpoints in Asia.



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