

US navy carries out provocative operation in South China Sea

Peter Symonds
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The US navy conducted another confrontational operation in the South China Sea on Saturday, sending the destroyer, the USS Curtis Wilbur, within the 12-nautical-mile territorial zone surrounding Chinese-administered Triton Island in the Paracel island group. A US defence official told the *Wall Street Journal* that the operation lasted for about three hours and no Chinese vessel was sighted, but declined to provide further details.

Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davies declared: “This operation challenged attempts by the three claimants—China, Taiwan and Vietnam—to restrict navigation rights and freedoms.” The implication that the US is adopting an even-handed approach to territorial claims in the South China Sea is absurd. The so-called “freedom of navigation” operations (FONOPS) are targeted against Chinese-administered islets, as last October’s intrusion by the USS Lassen into waters surrounding Subi Reef made clear.

Washington’s actions are deliberately provocative and reckless, raising the danger of a military confrontation. The latest exercise is a further escalation, extending the US challenge from the Spratly Islands, where Subi Reef is located, to the Paracels which are closer to the Chinese mainland and have been controlled by China for more than four decades.

Moreover, unlike Subi Reef which was originally submerged at high tide, Triton is an island and formally generates a 12-nautical-mile territorial limit under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The USS Curtis Wilbur did not notify Chinese authorities and claimed the right of “innocent passage” to give its action a veneer of legality. In reality, the US has never ratified UNCLOS and acts with scant regard for international law.

The Chinese state-owned Xinhua news agency

denounced the latest US naval operation as a “deliberate provocation” and accused Washington of bad faith, given that it came just days after US Secretary of State John Kerry’s visit to Beijing.

Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Yang Yujun said: “The move on the US side is very unprofessional and irresponsible for the safety of the troops of both sides, and may cause extremely dangerous consequences.” He warned: “The Chinese armed forces will take whatever measures necessary to safeguard China’s sovereignty and security, no matter what provocations the US side may take.”

The Chinese government is under growing pressure to respond to the US intrusions with more than mere warnings. The *South China Morning Post* cited the comments of retired Chinese Colonel Yue Gang, who warned: “There will probably be more [US] provocation if Beijing does not step up. Public sentiment in China will rise and it will become difficult for the Chinese government to handle.”

Yue represents hard-line elements of the Chinese military and state apparatus who fear that US actions will undermine the country’s security and the regime’s ability to promote itself as the nation’s defender. The government has increasingly resorted to whipping up Chinese nationalism to divert rising social tensions.

Speaking at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington last Wednesday, Admiral Harry Harris, head of the US Pacific Command, made clear that the US would expand its provocations in the South China Sea. “As we continue down the path of freedom of navigation, you will see more of them, and you will see them increasing in complexity and scope in areas of challenge,” he said.

Harris again lashed out at Chinese land reclamation, claiming: “They [China] will control the South China

Sea against all the militaries out there with the exception of the US military in all scenarios short of war.” He suggested Chinese-administered islets were now “capable of supporting significant military forces” which could threaten shipping lanes.

China, however, would be one of the worst affected countries if shipping were disrupted, given its heavy reliance on imports from Africa and the Middle East via South East Asia.

China’s land reclamation activities over the past two years have been a response to the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which has involved an extensive military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific since 2011. Washington has deliberately inflamed tensions in the South China Sea, encouraging rival territorial claimants, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, to more aggressively confront China.

The US will no doubt seek to contrast China’s reaction to the latest “freedom of navigation” operation with that of Vietnam. Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh declared that his country respected the “innocent passage” of ships through territorial waters. Vietnam, of course, does not control Triton Island, nor is it the target of the US military build-up in Asia.

While the US constantly refers to the danger to vital shipping lanes, its real concern is its ability to mount large naval and air operations in waters off the Chinese mainland unchallenged. The Pentagon’s AirSea Battle strategy for war with China envisages a massive bombardment of Chinese military, communications and industrial assets from bases and ships off the Chinese coast.

The CSIS this month released an extensive study, sponsored by the US Defence Department, calling for a major escalation of the “pivot” through the stationing of advanced American weaponry in Asia, the expansion of US bases, and the strengthening of military alliances and partnerships throughout the region.

Admiral Harris boasted during his CSIS presentation that “everything that is new and cool is going to the Pacific.” He cited F-35 attack aircraft, a second Ford-class aircraft carrier, V-22 Ospreys and P-8A Poseidon surveillance planes as examples. He also stressed: “We have allies, friends and partners where China does not.” He pointed in particular to Australia, Japan, Singapore and the Philippines, where work was being done to

“improve operational relationships.”

Significantly, Australian Defence Minister Marise Payne immediately backed the USS Curtis Wilbur’s intrusion into Chinese-claimed waters. “It is important to recognise that all states have a right under international law to freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight, including in the South China Sea. Australia strongly supports these rights,” she said.

Payne declared that Australia had “a legitimate interest” because 60 percent of Australian exports passed through the South China Sea. She glossed over the fact that the largest share goes to China, which has no interest in disrupting trade. Fairfax Media reported that Australia was given advance warning of the US naval operation on Saturday, amid mounting pressure on the Australian government from Washington, the Murdoch media in Australia and the opposition Labor Party to carry out its own challenge to Chinese territorial claims.

The *Australian* last week reported that discussions over such operations are already underway within the Australian government and military following Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s trip to Washington and meeting with President Barack Obama last month. On the return leg, Turnbull also met with Admiral Harris in Hawaii. The US is keen for an Australian “freedom of navigation” intrusion into Chinese-claimed territory to give a veneer of international legitimacy to its provocative actions.

Repeated US military interventions, by sea or air, only heighten the pressure on the Chinese regime to respond in kind, further escalating tensions and the danger of war.



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