

# US condemns Chinese missiles in the South China Sea

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Tensions between Washington and Beijing over the South China Sea rose again yesterday after a Fox News report that the Chinese military had apparently placed advanced HQ-9 surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island, in the Paracel group of islands. The claim, which was quickly taken up by the American and international media, accused Chinese leaders of “increasingly ‘militarising’ its islands in the South China Sea.”

An unnamed US official told the *New York Times* that the Pentagon had evidence of HQ-9 missile batteries on the island—a claim also made by Taiwan’s defence ministry. While not confirming the presence of the missiles, the Chinese Ministry of Defence noted that its navy and air force had kept forces in the Paracels “for many years.”

At a press conference yesterday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said he had only just heard about the news reports, but insisted that China’s “limited and necessary self-defence facilities” on its islands in the South China Sea were consistent with international law. He pointedly remarked that “non-militarisation is certainly in the interests of all parties, but non-militarisation should not be just about one single country.”

Starting last October, the US has been directly challenging Chinese maritime claims in the region by sending warships and military aircraft within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-administered islets. On January 30, the destroyer, the USS Curtis Wilbur, intruded into water surrounding Triton Island in the Paracels.

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday again demanded that there should be “no militarisation” of the South China Sea, adding: “But there is every evidence, every day that there has been an increase in

militarisation of one kind or another. It is of serious concern.” He said he expected that “over the next days we will have a further serious conversation [with the Chinese] about this.”

Over the past five years, the Obama administration has deliberately transformed the longstanding maritime disputes in the region into a dangerous global flashpoint. Washington has exploited the tensions to forge closer military ties with countries in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and justify its own military build-up as part of the “pivot to Asia” against China.

Speaking on Tuesday after a two-day US-ASEAN summit in California, President Barack Obama called for “tangible steps in the South China Sea to lower tensions.” He repeated US demands for “a halt to further reclamation, new construction and militarisation.” Foreshadowing further military challenges to Chinese territorial claims, Obama declared the US would “continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, and we will support the right of all countries to do the same.”

The response of the Chinese leadership to the US “pivot,” on the one hand, has been to try to appease Washington and, on the other, to engage in a dangerous arms race, which can only end in catastrophe for the working class in China and internationally. However, the chief responsibility for this drive to war lies with US imperialism. It is recklessly using its military might to maintain its dominance in Asia and around the world.

Last month, the Washington-based think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), released a detailed and lengthy report commissioned by the Defence Department that could only be described as a blueprint for war against China. It complained about

Beijing's increased "tolerance of risk" in the face of Washington's confrontational "pivot"—in other words, China's refusal to buckle to US demands. The report called for a huge military expansion in Asia, not only by the United States, but all its allies and strategic partners.

Whether or not the missile claims are true, the Fox News story itself has the character of a provocation concocted within sections of the US defence and intelligence establishment that have been critical of the Obama administration for not being aggressive enough in asserting its military power. The report is based on two high-resolution satellite photographs of Woody Island supplied by the Israeli-based company ImageSat, which bills itself as a commercial provider to "governments and their defence forces for national security and intelligence purposes."

Admiral Harry Harris, chief of the US Pacific Command, declared that China's placement of missile batteries in the Paracels, if verified, would not surprise him, but "concerns me greatly." He warned: "We will conduct more, and more complex, freedom of navigation operations as time goes on in the South China Sea. We have no intention of stopping."

Harris, who denounced China last year for building a "Great Wall of Sand" in the South China Sea, has been pressing the White House for tougher action. Last May, a CNN news crew was allowed to join a P8-A Poseidon surveillance flight over Chinese-administered islets in the Spratly group to provide breathless footage highlighting China's land reclamation activities.

Much of the media coverage of the latest missile revelations is just as exaggerated and deliberately misleading. The Paracels and the Spratlys are conflated; images of Chinese missiles are shown alongside photographs of land reclamation in the Spratlys; and the history of the disputes in the South China Sea is either ignored or distorted.

Unlike the Spratlys, where it is a relative newcomer, China has occupied Woody Island since 1956—that is, for 60 years—and controlled all of the Paracels since 1974, when it seized the remaining islands in the group from South Vietnam. At the time, North Vietnam recognised Chinese sovereignty of the Paracels, a claim that Vietnam has disputed since 1982, following its war with China in 1979.

Woody Island is the largest of the Paracels and has

been used by China as an administrative centre. As CSIS analyst Mira Rapp-Hooper has acknowledged, while President Xi Jinping gave an undertaking to Obama not to militarise the Spratlys, he gave no commitment on the Paracels. Indeed, the Chinese military has long maintained a small garrison on Woody Island and has flown fighter jets to its airstrip. Rapp-Hooper pointed out that China has sent air-defence missiles to the Paracels in the past.

Woody Island, one of northernmost of the Paracel group, is barely more than 300 kilometres from key Chinese naval bases on Hainan Island, which is just off the Chinese mainland. Its proximity highlights the real purpose of the Pentagon's "freedom of navigation" operations, which is to maintain its "right" to place US warships virtually anywhere outside the immediate 12-nautical-mile limit off the Chinese coastline.

Such operations are in line with the Pentagon's AirSea Battle plans for war against China, which envisage massive air and missile attacks launched from bases, submarines and aircraft carriers in the western Pacific to destroy China's military, industrial and communications infrastructure. Such a blitzkrieg would be supplemented by a naval blockade focussed on "choke points" in South East Asia, leading into the South China Sea, in order to cut off vital Chinese imports of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.



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