

Rhetoric escalates over Chinese missile installation in Paracel Islands

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Accusations in the United States and allied countries against China have steadily increased in rhetoric since Fox News published satellite imagery on February 16, allegedly showing the recent installation of surface-to-air missile systems on Woody Island in the Paracel chain.

US Secretary of State John Kerry effectively accused China of reneging on its pledges not to “militarise” the South China Sea. “Every day there has been an increase in militarisation of one kind or another,” he asserted, declaring the Obama administration and Beijing would have a “further serious conversation about this.”

The entire issue has been inflated and exaggerated for definite political and diplomatic purposes. Woody Island has been under Chinese control and administration since 1956. It is also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan, although North Vietnam and then the unified Vietnam recognised Chinese sovereignty until 1982. Military aircraft have operated from the island’s airstrip for decades and air defence systems have been located on it previously.

Woody Island is just 300 kilometres from a major Chinese naval base at Hainan. It is not part of the Spratly Island group where the US “pivot to Asia” and encouragement of a bellicose stance against China by the Philippines and Vietnam have sparked the most contentious territorial disputes.

The missile deployment has nevertheless been seized upon to falsely assert that the US and its allies face an imminent and dire threat to “freedom of navigation” through the key waterways of the South China Sea, and to demand ever-greater military action against China.

One of the major mouthpieces of the US establishment, the *New York Times*, published an editorial yesterday labeling the missile placement as “the latest in a series of provocative acts that is fueling

regional tensions.” It asserted that the missile batteries “could enable Beijing to restrict international aircraft by declaring an air defense zone over the Paracels.” The *Times* declared it “essential” for the US and its allies to “ensure the free flow of navigation and to continue sending ships and planes across the sea, in accord with international law.”

Marco Rubio, one of the candidates vying to contest the US presidential election for the Republican Party, declared the US should have a permanent carrier presence in the region to “challenge both any air defense zones that they [China] claim and any water rights that they claim ... We cannot live in a world where the Chinese government illegitimately claims that they own and can control the flow of commerce through the most important shipping lane in the world.”

Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani absurdly declared the missile placement to be a “unilateral move by China to change the status quo” that “cannot be overlooked.” Philippines-based analyst Richard Javad Heydarian told *Japan Times*: “Much will depend on how the US and its key allies like Japan would respond in military terms ... Tokyo clearly abhors the potential of Chinese-dominated sea lines of communication in East Asia.”

The *Australian* newspaper, in its rush to denounce China’s “provocative moves,” managed to incorrectly report in its editorial today that Woody Island is claimed by the Philippines. The *Australian*, which is owned, like Fox News, by media billionaire Rupert Murdoch, asserted: “Beijing’s belligerent expansionism in the South China Sea is posing a potential threat to peace and it is only natural that in such circumstances Australia, Japan and the US, with smaller countries similarly worried about China’s intentions, should work together to confront it.”

In the midst of this war propaganda, the US-based strategic web site Stratfor took issue with the claims over Woody Island. Stratfor, which carefully monitors global developments of interest to the US military-intelligence machine, noted: “[T]he media would have us believe that China’s actions were a watershed moment in the militarization of the South China Sea … A more sober assessment shows that what China did is neither surprising nor particularly consequential … Woody Island is already host to more Chinese military equipment than most other islands in the South China Sea. It is relatively well-stocked with transport infrastructure, including an airfield and a small harbour. The island sustains a small civilian population and is the seat of Sansha city … A small garrison has stood in the city since at least 1985.”

The Chinese government has responded to the outpouring of allegations by emphasising the decades-long operations of its military on Woody Island. Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that activities on the island had “nothing to do with militarisation.”

Sections of the Chinese establishment, however, have sought to match US and allied rhetoric with their own calls for military confrontation. The state-run *Global Times*, a mouthpiece of the Chinese regime, editorialised today that the “whole of Chinese society should be cool-minded and be prepared for a long-term competition with the US … If the US military stages a real threat and a military threat is looming, the PLA (People’s Liberation Army) may feel propelled to deploy more powerful weapons.”

The newspaper demanded that the Chinese military engage any intrusions by “outside warships and jet fighters.” China, it asserted, “should let the US know that its every single provocative act will face countermeasures.”

Under the pretext of “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea, the US Navy conducted provocations against China last October and most recently on January 30, near Triton Island in the Paracels. On both occasions, US warships sailed within the 12-nautical-mile exclusion zones around Chinese-administered islands. The decision by China to shift a missile defence system to Woody Island is more than likely a response.

The rhetoric in the US, Japan and Australia is aimed, in the first instance, at justifying an even larger and

more provocative deployment of American, and possibly Australian, warships within the exclusion zones. All the conditions are emerging for a military clash that could trigger a wider war.



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