

Mounting US pressure on China over South China Sea

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Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who is in Washington for three days of talks, met yesterday with US Secretary of State John Kerry amid sharpening tensions over the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula. While playing up the need for dialogue and negotiation, their joint press conference only highlighted the extent of the differences that were undoubtedly expressed far more heatedly behind closed doors.

The stage was set for the visit through a series of articles in the American media implicitly accusing China of “militarising” the South China Sea and bullying its neighbours, thereby putting Foreign Minister Wang on the back foot. All the reports had the character of stories planted by the US military and foreign policy establishment, or sections of it.

Last week, Murdoch’s Fox News claimed, on the basis of satellite photographs obtained from a commercial Israeli-based provider, that the Chinese military had placed surface-to-air batteries on Woody Island in the Paracel Island group. China has occupied Woody Island for 60 years, uses it as its administrative centre in the South China Sea, and has previously based military hardware on it, including fighter aircraft.

The inflated accounts of the “missile threat” posed by China were followed by a report on Monday by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that Beijing was installing what appeared to be a high-frequency radar system in the Spratly Islands that “would significantly bolster China’s ability to monitor surface and air traffic in the South China Sea.” The CSIS is the Washington think tank most closely involved in the US military build-up in the region as part of the Obama administration’s so-called pivot to Asia.

Yesterday, as the talks between Wang and Kerry were

about to begin, Fox News featured another “exclusive.” It cited two unnamed US officials claiming that the Chinese military had deployed Shenyang J-11 and Xian JH-7 fighter jets to Woody Island. This “dramatic escalation,” the article breathlessly declared, came just minutes before Kerry was due to meet Wang. An earlier meeting with US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter at the Pentagon was apparently cancelled without explanation.

While diplomatically phrased, the exchange between Wang and Kerry on the South China Sea clearly pointed to the sharpening tensions. Asked about the Chinese radar systems, Kerry declared the US had always been “very clear” that it was opposed to unilateral steps in reclamation and militarisation in the South China Sea.

While nominally directed at all claimants, Kerry named China in particular as responsible for taking steps that were producing “an escalatory cycle.” Regrettably, he declared, missiles, fighter aircraft, guns, artillery and other equipment had been placed in the South China Sea.

Wang insisted that non-militarisation was not the responsibility of one party alone. He criticised the Philippines, an aggressive promoter of the US “pivot,” for giving up on direct negotiations with China by taking their maritime dispute to the International Arbitral Tribunal. Wang pointed out that China was not the only country introducing missiles and bombers into the South China Sea and called for an end to “close-up reconnaissance operations.”

The last reference is to the Pentagon’s provocative “freedom of navigation” operations that directly challenge Chinese territorial claims. Most recently, the destroyer, the USS Curtis Wilbur, intruded last month into the 12-nautical-mile territorial zone surrounding

Chinese-controlled Triton Island in the Paracels, leading to angry condemnations from Beijing.

In the lead-up to yesterday's talks, Washington and Beijing both signalled there would be no compromise. On Monday, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said the US should keep to its promise of not taking sides in the maritime disputes and stop "hyping up" tensions, especially over China's limited military presence.

"China's deploying necessary, limited defensive facilities on its own territory is not substantially different from the United States defending Hawaii," Hua said. Frequent US military patrols "is the biggest cause of militarisation of the South China Sea," she added. "We hope the United States does not confuse right and wrong on this issue or practice double standards."

US State Department spokeswoman Anna Richey-Allen was just as blunt. She foreshadowed that Kerry "will have a very frank conversation with his Chinese counterpart on this issue" of deploying advanced air defence missiles in the South China Sea. Speaking at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the same day, Kerry declared that "the militarisation of facilities" was not encouraging the resolution of territorial disputes.

Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, was far more strident in his condemnation of China's actions. He told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday that China was boosting its military "to achieve its dream of regional dominance, with growing aspirations of global reach and influence." He added: "China views the South China Sea as a strategic frontline in their quest to dominate East Asia out to the Second Island Chain. I view their thinking as approaching a new 'Great Game'."

In reality, the US "pivot" to Asia involves a huge American military build-up throughout every part of the region, as Harris's testimony outlined in detail. Unfettered access to the South China Sea is viewed by the Pentagon as an essential "frontline" in its preparations for war with China. These plans envisage an air and missile blitzkrieg, destroying China's mainland military bases, communication and infrastructure.

During their press conference, Kerry and Wang also commented on another dangerous flashpoint in the Asia

Pacific—the Korean Peninsula. Both condemned North Korea's latest nuclear test in January and rocket launch this month and indicated that agreement had been reached on a UN resolution to impose tough new sanctions on Pyongyang.

The apparent consensus, however, was preceded by weeks of disagreement as Washington sought to pressure Beijing to cut its economic lifelines to Pyongyang. While acutely concerned that North Korea could trigger a nuclear arms race in Asia, Chinese leaders are equally worried about a precipitous collapse of the unstable regime on China's northern borders.

Beijing has objected in particular to talks between the US and South Korea over the basing of a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system on the Korean Peninsula. At the press conference, Kerry acknowledged China's concern but absurdly declared that the THAAD system was only under discussion because of North Korea's "provocative actions." He added: "If we can get to denuclearisation [of North Korea], there's no need to deploy THAAD."

The US is literally holding a gun to China's head to force Beijing to take tough measures against its ally North Korea. The THAAD system is not defensive, as Kerry claimed, but is part of the anti-ballistic missile armoury being stationed in Asia as part of the Pentagon's plans for war against China. THAAD systems are already in place in Guam and Japan. Washington is now threatening to install another on the Korean Peninsula, close to the Chinese mainland, unless Beijing bows to US demands on North Korea.

Yesterday's meeting was the third between Kerry and Wang in less than a month. Far from lessening tensions between the two countries, the flurry of diplomatic activity indicates Washington's heightened focus on pressuring Beijing to bow to US demands, even as the Pentagon's expansion in Asia continues apace.



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