

US navy prepares third provocation in South China Sea

Peter Symonds
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An unnamed US official told Reuters last Friday the US was planning to carry out a third “freedom of navigation” operation in early April to challenge China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea.

While other American officials disputed that such an exercise was imminent, the leak emerged on the eve of the annual joint Balikatan military exercises in the Philippines. The war games, which run from April 4 to April 15, involve around 8,000 US and Philippine troops, as well as 80 Australian military personnel.

For the past year, Washington has waged an escalating war of words directed against China’s land reclamation activities and alleged “militarisation” in the South China Sea. Last October and again in January, the US Navy sent a destroyer within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around a Chinese-controlled islet, provoking angry warnings from Beijing.

Speaking at a Pentagon press conference in late February, Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, grossly inflated the “threat” posed by Chinese reclamation activities in the South China Sea, falsely claiming it had established “3,000 acres of military bases.” He called for more frequent “freedom of navigation” challenges to China’s claims and urged “like-minded” nations to do the same.

A third naval challenge to Chinese claims in the midst of the Balikatan exercises involving other countries would be particularly provocative. During his meeting with US President Barack Obama last week on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned that Beijing would not accept violations of its sovereignty in the name of “freedom of navigation.”

According to the *Diplomat*, the Balikatan exercises will include “a simulation of the retaking of an island

seized by an unspecified country in the South China Sea, an amphibious landing and the implementation of a joint rapid reaction force.” The focus underscores the shifting role of the Philippine military from one primarily devoted to suppressing internal insurgencies to one aimed at waging a broader war.

This year, the US military has gained access to five Philippine military bases under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed between the two countries in 2014. The Philippine Supreme Court declared EDCA constitutional in January. The bases include those on the islands of Luzon and Palawan, which are adjacent to the South China Sea.

The Balikatan war games will also include joint naval exercises, including maritime law enforcement, surveillance and interdiction exercises. The Philippines has very limited naval and coast guard capacities, most of which have been recently supplied by the US, Australia and Japan. In addition to US warships taking part in the exercises, the US aircraft carrier, the USS John C. Stennis, and its accompanying strike force, are currently in the South China Sea.

Last weekend, three Japanese naval vessels—a submarine and two destroyers—docked in the Philippines in preparation for a separate three-day “training exercise” off the Subic Bay base before heading to Vietnam. A senior Japanese Defence Ministry official told the *Yomiuri Shimbun* the exercise “is aimed at promoting friendly relations [with the Philippines], but it also includes a strong message to keep China in check.”

Significantly, Ashton Carter will be the first US defence secretary to directly observe the Balikatan exercises. He is due to arrive in the Philippines during the war games to watch several activities, including those by US warships at sea. According to the

Diplomat, Carter will visit the Philippine military's Western Command on Palawan, which is central to the US build-up in the Philippines.

As part of its "pivot to Asia" aimed against Beijing, the Obama administration has encouraged the Philippines to aggressively assert its territorial claims in the South China Sea. With Washington's backing and support, Manila has mounted a legal challenge in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague to China's territorial claims. China has refused to recognise the court's jurisdiction over its maritime claims.

China has hit out at the latest Balikatan exercises. A comment in the state-owned Xinhua news agency declared: "The upcoming US-Philippine military exercises cap Manila's recent attempts to involve outsiders in [the] regional row. However, a provocation so fear-mongering and untimely as such is likely to boomerang on the initiators." It called on the US to clarify "the targets of its pivot to Asia strategy" and condemned its "unscrupulous inconsistency between fear-mongering deeds and peace-loving words."

Washington's confrontation with Beijing over the South China Sea has set the stage for a further escalation of tensions when a third "freedom of navigation" operation proceeds. An ominous proposal by the Washington-based think tank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), suggests a joint US-Philippine military operation in order to issue a particularly provocative challenge to the Chinese presence at the Scarborough Shoal.

The Scarborough Shoal, which is claimed by both China and the Philippines, effectively came under Chinese control in 2012 after a series of skirmishes involving fishing and coast guard vessels from the two countries. The CSIS, which has played a central role in Obama's "pivot to Asia," published its "Developing a Scarborough Contingency Plan" on March 30 outlining three steps to halt possible Chinese land reclamation at the disputed reef.

The first would involve intelligence sharing on Chinese activities. The second would be a definitive US declaration to militarily support the Philippines under their alliance "if Philippine troops or ships are attacked at Scarborough Shoal or other areas of the South China Sea." The CSIS suggested that Carter's visit to Manila would be an opportunity to make such a statement. The

third step would be to send Philippine vessels to block the entrance to the shoal. "US Navy assets would need to remain in position over the horizon to signal that they would be prepared to intervene should China attack Philippine forces," it stated.

No Chinese land reclamation activity has been identified in Scarborough Shoal, but undoubtedly other pretexts could be drummed up. The reckless character of US actions is highlighted by the CSIS's calculation that its plan would not end in conflict because China has been "hesitant to risk a military clash, especially with the United States" in the past.

Washington is engaged in a dangerous game of brinkmanship. Whenever and wherever another US "freedom of navigation" operation in the South China Sea takes place, it risks a clash between nuclear-armed powers that could plunge the region and the world into war.



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