

US warplanes sent near disputed South China Sea reef

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The US is continuing to escalate the confrontation with China over the South China Sea, with a military foray last week by six military aircraft near the Scarborough Shoal. The reef, which is claimed by both China and the Philippines, has effectively been under Chinese control since a tense standoff between the two countries in 2012.

In a statement released last Friday, the US Pacific Command announced that four A-10C Thunderbolt II warplanes and two Sikorsky HH-60 helicopters had flown in “international airspace” in the vicinity of the atoll. The use of American ground attack aircraft and special forces helicopters is a menacing threat designed to underscore Washington’s ability to mount operations against Chinese-claimed islets in the South China Sea.

The Pentagon justified its provocative operation, using what is now a catch-all pretext for its military build-up around the South China Sea: freedom of navigation and overflight. “Our job is to ensure air and sea domains remain open in accordance with international law... International economics depends on it—free trade depends on our ability to move goods,” Colonel Larry Card, the air contingent commander, said.

In reality, China has a vested interest in ensuring the sea lanes, on which it depends to import energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa, remain open. Washington, on the other hand, is determined to ensure its military dominance in the South China Sea as part of the Pentagon’s strategy for war against China, which includes a naval blockade to strangle the Chinese economy.

The Chinese defence ministry issued a blunt warning that its armed forces would “take all necessary measures to safeguard national sovereignty and security.” The statement added: “The US is pushing

militarisation of the South China Sea in the name of ‘freedom of navigation’. China is concerned about and opposed to such actions which threaten the sovereignty and security of countries around the South China Sea.”

Foreign ministry spokesman Hua Chunying pointedly asked: “The United States has repeatedly questioned China’s intentions [in the South China Sea], but will the US explain its real motive in stoking tensions and increasing military presence in the area?”

The US has twice directly challenged China’s maritime claims by sending a destroyer within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit of Chinese-controlled islets last October and again in January. It has escalated its military presence in the region, most recently sending the aircraft carrier, the USS John C Stennis and its strike group into the South China Sea as part of the annual joint Balikatan exercises with the Philippine military.

The Balikatan exercises, which ended on April 15, included a simulation exercise involving the retaking of an island in the South China Sea that had been seized by an unnamed country, as well as a practice amphibious landing.

The Pentagon also used the war games to quickly implement the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed with the Philippines in 2014 and declared constitutional in January. The US has gained access to five Philippine military bases, including two airfields directly adjacent to the South China Sea.

US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter visited the Philippines to observe the Balikatan exercises and strengthen military ties with Manila. The American war planes involved in last week’s operation near the Scarborough Shoal are part of the military force that remained in the Philippines after the war games,

stationed at the Clark Air Field—not one of the five nominated bases under EDCA. The huge Clark air base was used heavily by the US Air Force during the Vietnam War for its criminal bombing campaigns.

As part of its “pivot to Asia” against China over the past five years, the Obama administration has encouraged the Philippines to more aggressively assert its territorial claims against China. Washington has been closely involved in backing and assisting Manila to mount a legal challenge to China under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). A ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague is due in coming weeks.

While demanding that China abide by the outcome, the US is contemptuous of international law. It has not ratified UNCLOS and has mounted its so-called freedom of navigation operations within Chinese-claimed waters before a judgment has been released. Washington will ratchet up its operations against Beijing in the South China Sea regardless of the court findings.

China has reacted to the “pivot” with its own military build-up and the whipping up of Chinese nationalism. This only serves to divide the international working class, the only social force capable of preventing the slide into war. Just days before Carter arrived in the Philippines, the right-wing *Washington Free Beacon* reported that China had test-fired a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile able to hit any target in the United States. The Chinese military issued a brief statement neither confirming nor denying the test, but insisting on China’s right to carry out such a launch.

Beijing’s response to the US military build-up and provocations is reactionary and plays into Washington’s hands. The US, which is expanding its already huge military presence in Asia, cynically seizes on any incident as the pretext for accusing Beijing of “militarisation” and “expansionism” in the South China Sea. Last week, the US State Department criticised China’s use of a military transport aircraft to airlift injured workers from Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly island group.

As the tribunal ruling in The Hague looms, China, which has refused to recognise the court’s jurisdiction, is attempting to garner diplomatic support. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced a four-point

consensus with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos on Saturday over the South China Sea, upholding Beijing’s stance that the maritime disputes should be resolved bilaterally and without outside interference.

For its part, Washington is mounting a propaganda campaign suggesting that China will declare an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) and extend its land reclamation activities to the Scarborough Shoal following the court ruling. All of this points to preparations for far more aggressive US provocations, for which last week’s air operation over the South China Sea could be a dress rehearsal.



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