

# Spy plane “intercept” highlights US push for South China Sea confrontation

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20 May 2016

According to unsubstantiated claims by the Pentagon, “at least two” Chinese J-11 tactical aircraft carried out an “unsafe” intercept of a United States EP-3 surveillance aircraft as it was conducting a “routine mission in international airspace” over the South China Sea on May 17.

The allegations came amid a series of inflammatory calls by the Pentagon, senior US military commanders and White House officials for a “trigger” for a confrontation with China, supposedly to counter its expanding activities in the sea’s contested territorial waters.

Considerable doubt surrounds the latest US accusations. The Pentagon refused to release photographs of the incident, citing national security concerns. Even the location was unspecified, but was said to be east of China’s Hainan Island and south of Hong Kong.

The claims are nevertheless alarming. A Pentagon official alleged on May 18 that the Chinese jets came within 15 metres of the American aircraft. A military official told the Associated Press news agency that the US pilot was forced to descend about 60 metres to avoid a collision.

No explanation was provided for what the spy plane was doing off the coast of China. EP-3 aircraft are commonly deployed as electronic eavesdroppers, known by the acronym ARIES, or Airborne Reconnaissance Integrated Electronic System. If China flew similar aircraft near the American coast, the US would certainly react in the most threatening manner.

The Pentagon’s description of the Chinese response as “unsafe” itself demonstrates how quickly such an incident could become a flashpoint for a US military attack on China. The accusation implied that China’s planes breached protocols signed with Washington in recent years, ostensibly to prevent military clashes from igniting conflagrations.

The incident came just a week after China, for the first time, scrambled fighter jets as a US guided missile destroyer provocatively sailed within the 12-nautical mile zone around a Chinese-controlled reef in the South China Sea. That reaction by Beijing marked an escalation of US-China tensions, signaling a readiness by China to respond militarily to such US incursions.

US warships have now entered Chinese-claimed waters three times since last October, under the pretence of defending “freedom of navigation” in the strategic sea, which hosts one of the world’s largest trade routes, on which China depends heavily for its imports and exports.

In the lead-up to the May 17 clash, top US generals made bellicose statements accusing China of upsetting regional stability by building facilities on disputed islets. They vowed to step up US operations in the South China Sea, complaining that Beijing was coercively expanding its power, while carefully avoiding a conflict with the US.

Without naming China, General Robert Neller, the commandant of the Marine Corps, told a panel discussion at a Navy League Sea-Air-Space exposition on May 16: “Certain nations kind of take advantage or do things that are short of conflict ... They are very subtle and very calculated.” The US would “exercise our sovereign rights under international law to transit the seas” and “see where that takes us.” Neller added: “Hopefully that creates stability and not instability.”

The US Coast Guard’s top officer, Admiral Paul Zukunft, was more explicit. He said the imminent ruling by the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague on a US-backed Philippines legal challenge to aspects of China’s claims in the South China Sea could serve as a “triggering mechanism.”

The court is expected to declare Chinese occupation of some islets and reefs “illegal” under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As Zukunft’s remarks indicate, the US government will exploit such a finding to

justify even more aggressive military operations, including from bases in the Philippines.

“There will be a few triggering mechanisms over the coming year and one of them will be the rendering of the UN tribunal ... at a point when our relationship with the Philippines is growing ever closer,” Zukunft said.

These comments reflect the axis of an annual Pentagon report to the US Congress on China’s military capacity, released on May 13. This year’s document accused China of adding about 3,200 acres to islets “to use them as persistent civil-military bases to enhance its long-term presence in the South China Sea significantly.”

China’s alleged “coercive tactics,” the report asserted, were designed to walk right up to—but not cross—“the threshold of provoking the United States, its allies and partners, or others in the Asia-Pacific region into open conflict.”

The report declared: “China demonstrated a willingness to tolerate higher levels of tension in the pursuit of its interests, especially in pursuit of its territorial claims in the East and South China Sea.”

More broadly, the Pentagon painted a sensationalised picture of China seeking global power by military means. Paragraph one of the report stated: “Chinese leaders have characterized modernisation of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) as essential to achieving great power status and what Chinese President Xi Jinping calls the ‘China Dream’ of national rejuvenation.... The long-term, comprehensive modernization of the armed forces of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) entered a new phase in 2015 as China unveiled sweeping organisational reforms to overhaul the entire military structure.”

It continued: “These reforms aim to strengthen the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) control over the military, enhance the PLA’s ability to conduct joint operations, and improve its ability to fight short-duration, high-intensity regional conflicts at greater distances from the Chinese mainland.”

The Pentagon report, which was endorsed by the Obama administration, underscores that the US is on a military collision course with China. Introducing the document, Abraham Denmark, deputy assistant secretary of defence for East Asia, alleged China was expanding its capabilities in every field: “China continues to invest in military programs and weapons designed to improve power projection, anti-access area denial and operations in emerging domains such as cyberspace, space and the electromagnetic spectrum.”

In particular, the report noted areas in which China

could start to match the Pentagon’s arsenals within the next decade. China’s navy now possessed “the largest number of vessels in Asia, with more than 300 surface ships, submarines, amphibious ships, and patrol craft” and by 2020 would have “between 69 and 78 submarines.”

China also had “the largest air force in Asia and the third largest in the world, with more than 2,800 total aircraft.” It was “rapidly closing the gap” vis-à-vis Western counterparts “across a broad spectrum of capabilities from aircraft and command-and-control (C2) to jammers, electronic warfare (EW), and datalinks.” China was “the only country other than the United States to have two concurrent stealth fighter programs.”

Beijing responded with angry denials of aggressive intent, while vehemently defending its military expansion. Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman Yang Yujun expressed “strong dissatisfaction” and “firm opposition” to the Pentagon’s report. “Moves such as deepening military reforms and the military buildup are aimed at maintaining sovereignty, security and territorial integrity, and guaranteeing China’s peaceful development.”

In reality, the CCP regime is defending the interests of a corrupt oligarchy that restored capitalism in China on the backs of the super-exploited working class. It is attempting, like the US ruling elite, to drum up patriotic fervor behind a militarist course that threatens workers in China, the US and globally with the danger of catastrophic nuclear war.

*The author also recommends:*

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