

US-China tensions rise amid major naval exercises

Peter Symonds
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American, Japanese and Indian warships are currently engaged in week-long “Malabar” war games in the western Pacific, described by the US Navy as “complex, high-end, war-fighting exercises” designed to increase the ability of the three navies to operate together. The target is clearly China, which has its own naval vessels shadowing the operations.

The Pentagon has committed the USS John C. Stennis and the vessel’s entire carrier strike group, comprising four other surface ships and a Los Angeles-class nuclear attack submarine, to the exercise. India has sent two stealth frigates, a guided-missile corvette and a fleet-support ship, while Japan has sent its huge helicopter carrier—in effect, an aircraft carrier under another name.

Washington has mounted an increasingly strident propaganda campaign since early 2015, condemning China’s land reclamation activities in the South China Sea as “expansionist” and “militaristic.” In reality, the US has recklessly exploited longstanding territorial disputes to try to drive a wedge between China and its South East Asian neighbours, especially the Philippines and Vietnam. The US Navy has on three occasions dispatched destroyers within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit around Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea.

Sharp divisions over the issue within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) were on display this week during an ASEAN meeting in China. The gathering adopted a joint statement voicing “serious concern” over rising tensions in the South China Sea. While not naming China or going beyond previous statements, it was something of a diplomatic embarrassment to Beijing on its home soil. Hours later, ASEAN retracted the statement. Undoubtedly, countries more closely aligned with China had second

thoughts.

The Malabar exercises are taking place in the Philippine Sea—that is, in waters to the east of the Philippines, rather than in the South China Sea itself. Nevertheless, the presence of a large fleet of warships within striking distance of the Chinese mainland is provocative.

A Chinese navy surveillance vessel has been tracking the USS Stennis during the exercise, according to the US navy. Japanese officials claimed that a separate Chinese intelligence gathering ship yesterday sailed into Japanese territorial waters near Kuchinoerabu Island and issued a complaint to the Chinese embassy in Tokyo. Last Thursday, a Chinese frigate sailed within the 24-nautical mile zone around disputed islands in the East China Sea, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China.

Malabar began as a bilateral naval war game involving the US and India in 1992 but has expanded since 2014 to include Japan as a permanent partner. Last July, US Assistant Defence Secretary Robert Scher suggested that other countries, particularly Australia, become involved on a regular basis. The current exercise is one of the largest ever and involves anti-submarine warfare, air-defence drills and search-and-rescue operations.

The expansion of military exercises like Malabar is part and parcel of the US “pivot to Asia” and military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region in preparation for war with China. Over the past five years, Washington has sought to consolidate a network of military alliances and strategic partnerships, as well as basing arrangements, such as those in Australia and the Philippines, to effectively encircle China.

Naval power is central to the Pentagon’s AirSea Battle strategy for war with China. These plans involve

a massive air and missile assault on the Chinese mainland from bases, ships and submarines in the western Pacific, supplemented by a naval blockade aimed at strangling the Chinese economy. Washington regards India, as well as Japan and Australia, as central to these war preparations.

The broader strategic implications of the Malabar exercises were outlined in a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled “US, India, Japan begin to shape new order on Asia’s high seas.” It noted that “the US has been working to deepen strategic ties with India and to encourage New Delhi to play a more active role, not just in the Indian Ocean, but also in the Pacific, as China’s rise shifts the regional balance of power.”

The three countries have already begun a trilateral ministerial dialogue, with their foreign ministers meeting last year. Unlike Japan, India is not a formal US military ally. However, in Washington last week, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi signalled India’s close integration into US war preparations. A joint statement by Modi and Obama foreshadowed increased military cooperation across the Indo-Pacific region in all “domains ... land, maritime, air, space and cyber.”

While consolidating alliances and partnerships throughout Asia, the US is also engaged in a massive build-up and restructuring of its military presence in the region. An article published yesterday by Stratfor, a think tank closely aligned to the US military and intelligence establishment, highlighted plans by the US navy to increasingly integrate its 3rd Fleet with its 7th Fleet, which is based in Japan.

Until now, the 3rd Fleet has primarily been focussed on the eastern and northern Pacific but is increasingly being deployed to the western Pacific—that is, areas adjacent to the Chinese mainland. The USS Stennis and its strike group, while nominally under the command of the 3rd Fleet, is completing six months of operations deep inside the western Pacific. In April, a Surface Action Group, comprising three destroyers, from the 3rd Fleet began a seven-month deployment in the same broad region.

After making clear that the naval restructuring was aimed against Beijing, Stratfor concluded: “As the US and other navies across Asia increase their patrols during a period rife with maritime disputes, Washington seems convinced that for its patrols to have the desired effect, they must be backed by the

combined might of the US fleets in the Pacific.”

What is involved is nothing less than the preparations for war. The two fleets account for more than two thirds of the US combat vessels and include approximately 200 ships and 1,200 aircraft. Moreover, tensions over territorial disputes in the South China Sea are set to escalate in the coming weeks, as the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague is due to hand down its ruling on a US-backed Philippine legal challenge to Chinese claims.



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