

Two US aircraft carriers in war games in western Pacific

Peter Symonds
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In a provocative move directed against China, the US Navy dispatched two huge nuclear-powered aircraft carriers—the USS John C. Stennis and the USS Ronald Reagan—to engage in three days of military exercises in the Philippine Sea—adjacent to, but not in, the South China Sea. The vessels and their accompanying strike groups of cruisers and destroyers carry 12,000 sailors and 140 military aircraft.

The war games, which finished yesterday, involved long-range strikes as well as sea surveillance, air defence drills and defensive air combat training. Rear Admiral John Alexander, commander of the USS Reagan carrier strike group, boasted: “No other navy can concentrate this much combat power in one sea ... It was truly impressive.” While the navy neither confirms nor denies the presence of nuclear weapons, both aircraft carriers are capable of carrying them.

This massive show of force took place as the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague is due to rule in coming weeks on a US-backed challenge by the Philippines to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. The judgment, which is expected to favour the Philippines, will become the starting point for Washington to ramp up its aggressive campaign against so-called Chinese “expansionism” and “bullying” of its neighbours.

An unnamed American official told the *New York Times* the message of the exercises was unmistakable and the timing was deliberate. Admiral John Richardson, chief of naval operations, told a Center for a New American Security (CNAS) conference yesterday that the war games provided “a terrific opportunity for us just to do some high-end war-fighting and training.”

Richardson declared that the rare exercises, involving two carriers, aimed at signalling the US

commitment to its regional allies. Then, in a thinly-veiled warning to China, he added: “For anyone who wants to destabilise the region, we hope that there is a deterrence message there as well.” The exercises followed last week’s “Malabar” war games in the same waters involving the US, Japanese and Indian navies—again to practice “complex, high-end war-fighting.”

While Washington routinely accuses Beijing of “expansionism,” the US has deliberately stoked up tensions over the South China Sea disputes during the past five years as a means of driving a wedge between China and its South East Asian neighbours—particularly the Philippines and Vietnam. The US focus on the South China Sea is part of its broader “pivot to Asia” and military build-up throughout the Asia Pacific to subordinate China and ensure continued American hegemony in the region.

The US has mounted an increasingly strident campaign over the past year against China’s land reclamation activities and “militarisation” in the South China Sea. The US Navy has dispatched destroyers on three occasions within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limits surrounding Chinese-controlled islets—provocations that could result in a military clash, either accidentally or by design.

The Obama administration has declared that the US has “a national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea, highlighting the extensive trade that passes through its waters. In reality, China has never threatened “freedom of navigation” and indeed relies on these sea lanes to import energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.

Washington’s real concern is to ensure “freedom of navigation” for its warships in areas immediately adjacent to the Chinese coastline, including sensitive

naval bases on Hainan Island. The Pentagon's AirSea Battle strategy for war on China envisages a massive air and missile attack on the Chinese mainland, supplemented by a naval blockade to cripple the Chinese economy.

The Pentagon is already preparing to escalate its operations in the South China Sea following The Hague ruling, suggesting that China could declare an Air Defence Identification Zone over the area or begin land reclamation activities in the Scarborough Shoal, which is also claimed by the Philippines. Beijing has declared that it does not recognise the court's jurisdiction and will not abide by its ruling.

Speaking yesterday on a panel discussing the next moves after The Hague ruling, Andrew Shearer, an analyst with the Center for Strategy and International Studies (CSIS), declared that "the current carrier deployment is a good step" but was not enough. He suggested that the US military must shift into "deterrence mode" for the next six months to block any moves by China. Fellow panelist Amy Searight declared there was "no easy solution" if China started reclaiming the Scarborough Shoal.

The CSIS has been the preeminent think tank of the US "pivot," working closely with the Pentagon and the Obama administration on the military build-up and strategy in Asia. In March, two CSIS analysts published "a Scarborough Contingency Plan" that involved close collaboration with the Philippines and a public warning to China that the US would intervene if Philippine ships or aircraft came under attack. The plan's final step involved sending Philippine warships to physically block Chinese dredging operations, with US navy assets "in position over the horizon to signal that they would be prepared to intervene."

Under Washington's Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines, completed earlier this year, the US military has access to five Philippine bases, including an airfield directly adjacent to the South China Sea. In April, the US and the Philippine militaries held their annual Balikatan exercises, which involved the USS Stennis carrier strike group and focussed on operations in the South China Sea. Last week, the US navy sent four sophisticated Growler electronic attack aircraft and 120 support personnel to the Clark Air Base in the Philippines to patrol airspace and sea lanes in the

region.

Speaking at yesterday's CNAS conference, Admiral Richardson, chief of naval operations, boasted that the US navy was expending "a lot of intellectual energy" in determining ways to counter and disrupt Chinese activities in the region—from China's land reclamation to its Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) weapons designed to keep US forces out of waters immediately adjacent to its mainland. "We've got a lot of studies going on right now, [and] by the July-August timeframe, we are going to have a lot of exciting ideas," he said.

If Richardson's comments are any indication, the Pentagon is preparing a series of reckless provocations that go well beyond the "freedom of navigation" operations that have already taken place. The result will be a further heightening of the risk that a small incident, whether deliberate or not, could escalate into conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers.



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