

Chinese military drills ahead of South China Sea court ruling

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In the lead up to next Tuesday's scheduled ruling by an international court on maritime disputes in the South China Sea, the Chinese military yesterday began a series of naval exercises in the area. While the Chinese defence ministry claimed the drills were routine, Beijing is clearly expressing its determination to defend its territorial claims.

The exercises will run from July 5 to 11—the day before the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague is due to hand down its decision. Details are sketchy, but at least two guided missile destroyers, the *Shenyang* and the *Ningbo*, as well as a frigate, the *Chaozhou*, are reportedly involved. The drills are taking place in a 100,000-square kilometre zone near the Paracel Islands, which are under Chinese administration, in the northern area of the South China Sea.

HIS Jane's Defence Weekly reported yesterday that China is also discussing a joint naval exercise with Russia in the South China Sea during September. Chinese defence spokesman Colonel Wu Qian confirmed on June 30 that consultation for the drill was underway but provided no details. The “Joint Sea” exercise was first conducted in 2012 in the Yellow Sea—well to the north of the South China Sea.

The Chinese military exercises are above all meant as a warning to the US, which has deliberately inflamed territorial disputes in the South China Sea over the past six years as part of its “pivot to Asia.” The Obama administration has transformed the sea into a dangerous flashpoint, alongside a US diplomatic offensive and military build-up throughout the region aimed at subordinating China to American interests.

The US navy has carried out three provocative “freedom of navigation” operations since last October, deliberately intruding within the 12-nautical-mile

territorial limit around Chinese-controlled islets. In June, the US conducted two major naval war games in areas close to the South China Sea. The most recent was a massive show of force, involving two aircraft carriers, together with their strike groups, practicing what was described as “high-end war fighting.”

The Obama administration has also been instrumental in encouraging the Philippines, in particular, to more aggressively press its maritime claims against China. Washington has provided crucial behind-the-scenes political and legal support to Manila to mount its legal challenge in The Hague. While it demands China abides by “international law,” the US has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), under which the Philippine case has been brought.

However, while the US actions clearly threaten China's interests, Beijing's response to the US “pivot” is reckless and reactionary. Utterly incapable of making any appeal to the working class, either in China or internationally, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, which represents a tiny ultra-rich oligarchy, is engaged in an arms race, while at the same time seeking to reach an accommodation with the US.

An editorial in yesterday's state-owned *Global Times* spelled out the attitude of the most hawkish sections of the CCP bureaucracy and the military. After blaming Washington for rising tensions in the South China Sea, the newspaper declared that if the US deployed “more military forces to the South China Sea, which are a direct threat to China's national security, China's military exercises could be regarded as a countermeasure.”

The editorial stated that while China sought to resolve the maritime disputes through talks, “it must be prepared for any military confrontation.” The newspaper advised: “China should speed up its military

capabilities of strategic deterrence. Even though China cannot keep up with the US militarily, it should be able to let the US pay a cost it cannot stand if it intervenes in the South China Sea dispute by force.”

Such bellicose statements play directly into the hands of Washington and heighten the risk of a military clash that would escalate into a wider war involving nuclear-armed powers. The US is not about to allow China to inflict “a cost it cannot stand,” as that could damage Washington’s alliances in Asia and internationally, and is preparing accordingly. By 2020, the Pentagon plans to base 60 percent of US naval and air assets in the Indo-Pacific region.

When asked about the editorial, the Chinese foreign ministry played down the threat of conflict. Spokesman Hong Lei told the media: “China will work with ASEAN [Association of South East Asian Nations] countries to safeguard the peace and stability of the South China Sea.” He made clear, however, that Beijing, which has refused to take part in court proceedings in The Hague, would not abide by any ruling that challenged Chinese territorial claims.

In recent weeks, China has mounted its own campaign to garner international support for its stance before the court decision. Despite Beijing’s claims to have the support of up to 60 countries, it appears only a relative handful has publicly backed China. Beijing has rejected US charges that China’s land reclamation and limited military activities in the South China Sea are “expansionist” or “aggressive.”

In reality, US military actions in the South China Sea directly threaten China, which is heavily dependent on the sea’s shipping lanes to import energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. The Pentagon’s strategy for war with China, known as AirSea Battle, envisages a massive air and missile attack on the Chinese mainland, supplemented by a naval blockade to cripple the Chinese economy.

The Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” has dramatically raised tensions throughout the region. The heightened danger of a military clash involving China and the US or its various allies and strategic partners has been underscored by two recent incidents.

On Monday, China issued a statement accusing two Japanese F-15 fighters of “lighting up” Chinese military aircraft with their fire control radar—that is, preparing to fire air-to-air missiles. Japan denied the

accusation. The incident took place on June 17 over the East China Sea, where the two countries are in dispute over small rocky outcrops known as the Senkakus in Japan and the Diaoyu Islands in China.

Last Friday, a Taiwanese patrol boat fired an anti-ship missile from inside a military base. The missile hit a local fishing boat about 40 nautical miles away, off the Penghu islands in the Taiwan Strait, killing its captain. Taiwanese authorities blamed an unsupervised petty officer for not following procedure, but China called for an explanation. The *South China Morning Post* commented: “The biggest worry about such incidents is that they can get out of control and lead to armed conflict.”



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