US-China underwater rivalry in South China Sea

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The US has justified its confrontational stance against Beijing in the South China Sea as protecting vital shipping lanes and containing Chinese alleged "expansionism." But Washington's real objective is military superiority in these strategic waters as part of its preparations for war against China. Beijing has responded with its own reactionary military measures that only heighten the danger of a conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

An article on the BBC website on July 11 entitled "The submarines and rivalries underneath the South China Sea" highlighted a crucial and little-discussed aspect of the contest for naval supremacy. While submarines play an important part in conventional warfare, the preoccupation of both China and the United States is their role in a nuclear war.

Beijing has become increasingly worried that its relatively small nuclear arsenal could be wiped out in a US first strike, leaving it without a credible means for retaliating. The US has committed to spending $1 trillion over the next three decades to modernise its nuclear weapons and means of delivery. It is also building an anti-ballistic missile system in Asia and Europe which is aimed at further undermining the ability of China and Russia to strike back after an American nuclear attack.

The BBC article explained that "a critical element to China's motivations for island-building lies beneath the surface of the sea. Mounting concern within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) over the vulnerability of its land-based nuclear deterrent and the ability to deliver a retaliatory second strike has prompted China to place some of its nuclear warheads on board submarines."

Two years ago the Chinese navy began deploying nuclear submarines armed with nuclear missiles into the South China Sea. The *Guardian* reported in May that it is poised to send nuclear- armed submarines into the Pacific Ocean for the first time.

The crucial question for Chinese military strategists is how the submarines can evade detention by American military reconnaissance which would render them vulnerable to attack in the event of a conflict. China's nuclear submarines are mainly stationed at the Yulin naval base on the southern tip of Hainan Island, which is directly adjacent to the South China Sea.

An article in the *South China Morning Post* on Saturday explained: "The East China Sea has only a few, narrow underwater channels which means its submarines can easily be monitored. But the South China Sea features underground submarine facilities [at the Yulin base] with tunnel access, shielding Chinese submarines that enter the South China Sea from the prying eyes of US reconnaissance satellites."

Analyst Ashley Townshend, from the US Studies Centre at Sydney University, told the *Post*: "If China can use its military installations in the South China Sea to defend its submarines from air, sea, underwater, and outer space threats—a very big if—it may succeed in turning [the waters] into a bastion for its nuclear-armed submarines."

Another article in the *South China Morning Post* on July 8 cited the comments of analyst Collin Koh Swee Lean at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. He reflected concerns in Washington that China's newly-built deep water port on Fiery Cross Reef in the South China Sea could be used to extend the reach of Chinese submarines.

"We can see the PLAN [PLA Navy] subs having 'longer legs' in operating for more sustained periods in the South China Sea without the need to frequently return to their home bases in Hainan or the mainland

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coast," Koh said. "PLAN subs can operate more regularly with the facilities in the South China Sea, such as Fiery Cross, and they will be in a better position to monitor US naval movements. Such 'cat-and-mouse' tracking and counter-tracking operations could be reminiscent of what happened between American and Soviet naval forces."

The Pentagon, however, is determined to maintain military supremacy over China in every sphere, particularly in nuclear warfare. Thus the US focus on "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea has a sinister underlying objective—to maintain the ability of the US navy to be able to track and, in the event of nuclear war, destroy China's submarines before they can unleash a retaliatory strike.

The *Post* article on July 8 explained: "It is an open secret that the US has been sending submarines and spy planes to the South China Sea since early 2000, when it realised Beijing was starting to build the submarine base. The collision between a PLA fighter jet and a US EP-3 spy plane off the coast of Hainan in April 2001 that killed a Chinese pilot was the most serious incident to date in the two countries' anti-submarine warfare contest."

Head of US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris told a congressional committee in February that he did not have enough submarines, even though the US Navy plans to concentrate 60 percent of its warships in the Asia Pacific by 2020. Focussing on the South China Sea, he declared that China was militarising its islets. "You'd have to believe in a flat earth to believe otherwise," he said.

Harris argued that more submarines were the best means for countering Chinese naval forces. "Submarines are the original stealth platform," he said, "They clearly give us an asymmetric advantage. Our asymmetry in terms of warfare because of submarines is significant. In the modernising sense, we need to maintain that asymmetric advantage."

US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter revealed in April that the US Navy was developing submarine drones and hinted at their potential use against China in the South China Sea. The Pentagon was investing in "new undersea drones in multiple sizes and diverse payloads that can, importantly, operate in shallow water, where manned submarines cannot," he said.

US Naval War College analyst Toshi Yoshihara told the *Post* this month: "[The drones] inject a degree of uncertainty into the minds of Chinese defence planners about the ability of the US Navy to quietly track, and therefore kill, Chinese subs in shallow parts of the South China Sea or in waters close to Chinese waters."

Beijing's engagement in this escalating arms race with US imperialism in the Asia Pacific underscores the complete political bankruptcy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. Representing the interests of China's super-rich oligarchy, the CCP is organically incapable of making any appeal to the Chinese and international working class—the only social force capable of halting the drive to war.

Instead, the CCP leadership is on the one hand seeking an accommodation with Washington while on the other boosting its military capacity—including to wipe out millions of American workers in a nuclear retaliation—that increases the danger of war. The acute tensions in the South China Sea, for which the Obama administration is primarily responsible, have greatly heightened the danger that an incident such as the April 2001 aerial collision will not be resolved diplomatically but will lead to conflict between two nuclear-armed powers.

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