

Escalating war games in the South China Sea

Peter Symonds
6 October 2016

Even as Washington ramps up its war plans in Syria and confrontation with Russia, the South China Sea continues to be a dangerous flashpoint, with a flurry of military exercises by the United States and its allies.

Tensions in the South China Sea have dramatically worsened over the past five years as the Obama administration has encouraged countries like the Philippines and Vietnam to take a more aggressive stance in their territorial disputes with China. The stand-off has only escalated in the wake of a ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in July in favour of the US-backed Philippine legal challenge to China's maritime claims.

Washington is now exploiting "freedom of navigation" as the pretext for strengthening military ties with South East Asian countries and pushing its Asian allies to consolidate their own military relations. The South China Sea is critical to the Pentagon's AirSea Battle strategy for war against China, which foreshadows a massive aerial and missile bombardment of the Chinese mainland, supplemented by a naval blockade.

The result is a dangerous intensification of military activity in the South China Sea as indicated by the current war games taking place. These include:

* Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore have begun three weeks of joint military exercises, including in the South China Sea. The activities involving troops, warships and military aircraft are taking place under the umbrella of the Five Powers Defence Arrangement signed in 1971 that commits members to consult if Malaysia or Singapore come under attack.

* Indonesia is currently staging its largest ever air force exercise near its Natuna Islands in the South China Sea. More than 2,000 air force personnel are taking part in the exercises, which involve Russian Sukhoi and F-16 fighter jets. While China

acknowledges Indonesian sovereignty over the Natunas, its maritime claims intersect with Indonesia's exclusive economic zone, resulting in confrontations in June between Chinese fishing vessels and the Indonesian navy.

* Despite rising tensions between Washington and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, the two countries are engaged in joint military exercises involving amphibious landing drills. About 1,400 US Marines and sailors are operating with 500 Philippine military personnel "to prepare to operate better during a natural disaster or conflict." Duterte has declared that the war games will be the last with the United States, but his remarks were softened by the Philippine Defence Department, which declared that it had received no orders regarding the suspension of future exercises with the US.

* Two US warships—the guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain and submarine tender USS Frank Cable—visited Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay on Sunday as part of US efforts to boost military ties with Hanoi. The port call was the first by American naval vessels to the strategic base since relations between the two countries were normalised in 1995. The visit followed the seventh round of joint naval exercises that began last week.

The Chinese response to the US military build-up in the South China Sea and throughout Asia has been on the one hand to boost its own military, while on the other to seek an accommodation with Washington. There is nothing progressive about the actions of the Chinese Communist Party regime, which represents the interests of a super-rich oligarchy, not the working class in China or internationally. All its moves—including the reclamation of islets and reefs in the South China Sea and joint naval exercises last month with Russia—are seized on by the US to justify its military expansion in Asia, and only heighten the

danger of war.

The Pentagon's determination to maintain US dominance in the South China Sea was expressed very directly by retired Admiral Dennis Blair, former commander of US Pacific Command and National Security director.

Speaking on Monday on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program, Blair said: "If the Chinese had their way and the entire South China Sea were their own territory which they could keep the United States and other armed forces from operating [in], it would be absolutely intolerable for the United States and we're not going to allow that to happen."

The US has repeatedly pointed to Chinese reclamation activities in the South China Sea, including the building of docks and runways, as proof that Beijing is militarising its islets to assert its dominance over surrounding waters. Blair, however, was dismissive of the installations' military value saying: "In serious war fighting neutralising it [the facilities], it's probably 10 to 15 minutes worth of work."

Blair made a specific call for Australia to join the US in conducting joint patrols in the South China Sea to "show when they need to they will send their armed forces into international airspace and water." The US navy has already conducted three provocative "freedom of navigation" operations to intrude within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limits claimed by China around its islets.

The admiral also referred to the dangers of war, pointing to "a notable inability for the two of us [the US and China] to understand what's going on on the other side and to find compromises... that's the kind of relationship that can sort of escalate over time." Asked if this meant conflict, he said: "Yes, yeah... misunderstanding and then fear and conflict."

Also interviewed on the program, Professor Graham Allison, from the Harvard Kennedy School, warned: "I would say in general when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power you're in a period... of severe structural stress in which lots of things can go wrong, not because someone wants a war... Who should rule the South China Sea? Xi Jinping thinks China should, and the Americans say no for 70 years we've been there as the predominant power... Now can you imagine that leading to a conflict that then escalates to a war that neither would've chosen? Unfortunately I can."

The Obama administration's "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia, formally announced in 2011, to ensure America's continued dominance in Asia includes a military build-up and planning for just such an eventuality. The Pentagon is already committed to dispatching 60 percent of its overseas naval and air force assets to the Asia Pacific by 2020, including its most advanced weaponry. Last week US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter announced the "third phase" of the military "rebalance," including the development of a new range of weapon systems particularly designed for war against China.

With Washington having created a tense standoff in the South China Sea, any incident or accident, involving China and the US or one of its allies, carries the danger of triggering a chain of events that leads to conflict between two nuclear-armed powers.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact