

Chinese fears about Trump and the South China Sea

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A report released last Friday by an influential Chinese think tank, the National Institute for South China Sea Studies (NISCSS), provides details of the US military build-up in Asia under President Barack Obama and also a glimpse of the nervousness in Chinese ruling circles over the Donald Trump presidency.

The Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" has transformed the South China Sea into a dangerous geopolitical flashpoint by deliberately inflaming longstanding territorial disputes between China and its South East Asian neighbours. The US has seized on China's land reclamation activities on islets under its control to ramp up military provocations, including three "freedom of navigation" operations within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit claimed by China around its land features.

In releasing the report, NISCSS director Wu Shicun admitted that his institute "like everyone else" assumed that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would win the US presidency. As quoted by the *South China Morning Post*, Wu said the US would likely expand its military presence in the region under Trump.

"There will not be a reversal in the Asia-Pacific policy, but the strategic rivalry between China and the US is likely to continue over the South China Sea," Wu predicted. He warned that Trump's plan to increase the size of the US naval fleet from 272 to 350 warships could lead to a greater US military deployment in the Asia Pacific and "break the delicate balance" in the region.

According to the *South China Morning Post*, the NISCSS's "Report on the military presence of the United States of America in the Asia-Pacific region" is the first attempt by a Chinese academic institution to document US military spending and deployment in Asia from publicly available data. The NISCSS is

based on China's Hainan Island, which is directly adjacent to the South China Sea and hosts key Chinese naval bases, including nuclear submarine facilities.

An abstract of the NISCSS report posted on its web site outlines what Wu declared was the "unprecedented" increase in US military deployments in the region under Obama. By 2020, the Pentagon will have stationed 60 percent of its air and naval assets in the Asia Pacific, including its most advanced weapons systems.

"In view of the great strategic value of the Asia-Pacific region and the Indian Ocean to the United States, the US military established seven military base groups in these regions, accounting for 50 percent of all of its overseas military bases, among which are 122 in Japan and 83 in South Korea," the report states. By 2015, the Pentagon had 368,000 military personnel in the Asia Pacific, including 97,000 stationed to the west of the International Date Line.

The report highlights a vast expansion of US surveillance operations, directed particularly against China, via advanced reconnaissance aircraft, aerial drones, electronic surveillance ships, nuclear submarines and reconnaissance satellites. "China has become the No.1 targeted country of the US close reconnaissance in terms of frequency, scope and means," it states. "According to statistics available, the US made more than 260 sorties of close reconnaissance against China in 2009 and the number in 2014 was more than 1,200."

The report notes the "obvious increase" in operations by US vessels and aircraft in the South China Sea during 2015 to more than 700 patrols. This "not only threatened China's national security, damaged China's relevant maritime rights and interests and undermined Sino-US strategic mutual trust, but is also very likely to

lead to accidental collisions at sea or in the air.”

The report also points to the expanding US build-up with military allies and partners in Asia. This included: the stationing of an advanced aircraft carrier in Japan; the deployment of the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea; the forging of an extensive basing arrangement with the Philippines; access for US Marines, aircraft and warships to Australian bases; greater access to Singapore’s naval and air bases; and enhanced military relations with Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand.

China is in no doubt as to the purpose of US military activities in the South China Sea. Along with untrammelled “freedom of navigation,” the reported explains that Washington aimed to “consolidate its alliance and partnership system... to pursue absolute superiority in maritime military capacity and to dominate rule-making in the region.”

The NISCSS report was obviously written from the standpoint of China’s strategic interests. Beijing has responded to the US build-up in Asia over the past five years by accelerating its own expansion, including the establishment of facilities on its South China Sea islets that could, in the future, be used for military purposes. The militaristic reaction of the Chinese regime, which represents the interests of a super-rich oligarchy, only heightens the danger of war between nuclear-armed powers.

The NISCSS report, however, underscores the scale of the US military expansion in the Asia Pacific. British strategic analyst Alex Neill, based in Singapore, told the *Financial Times*: “I think it is fair to say that the US has increased the pace and intensity of surveillance flights all along China’s periphery, and that has been commensurate with China’s military modernisation.”

Neill does not of course consider what would happen if China took “commensurate” steps and conducted hundreds of military surveillance flights along the US East and West coasts, as well as around Hawaii. To ask the question is to answer it: the reaction would be explosive in the US political, military and media establishment.

The installation of the extreme right-wing Trump as US president will only heighten the danger of war in the Asia Pacific. Trump has already foreshadowed a trade war with China as part of his “Make America Great Again” nationalist agenda. In its historic decline,

however, US imperialism no longer has the economic clout to advance its global dominance and has increasingly resorted to military threats, provocations and war to assert its interests.

Reflecting the fears in Chinese ruling circles, NISCSS president Wu declared last Friday: “What I am most worried about is that there will be a new arms race in the Asia-Pacific due to the tension in the East and South China seas.” As Wu is no doubt well aware, an escalating arms race, which is already well underway in the Asia-Pacific, is the prelude to conflict and war.



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