

# Chinese vessel seizes US undersea drone in South China Sea

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The Pentagon claimed Friday that a Chinese ship had unlawfully seized an American undersea drone operating in the South China Sea and issued a demand for its return. As of this writing, China had yet to respond, but the incident has the potential to rapidly heighten the already tense standoff between the US and China in the strategic waters. The US State Department has issued a formal diplomatic protest to the Chinese government.

Pentagon spokesman Captain Jeff Davis said that the USNS Bowditch, an oceanographic survey vessel, was in the process of recovering two undersea gliders when the Chinese ship, a submarine rescue vessel, approached, lowered a boat over the side and took one of the drones. He said that the Bowditch was operating in international waters about 50 nautical miles northwest of the Subic Bay naval base in the Philippines.

The Pentagon said the unmanned glider, which is about 3 metres long and bright yellow, was mapping the sea floor and collecting data on water temperature, salinity and clarity needed for sonar-based operations. The Bowditch is owned by the Navy but operates under contract by a mainly civilian crew of scientists and mariners.

US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter revealed in April that, as part of the US military build-up in Asia directed against China, the Pentagon was carrying out an extensive research program for the development of “new undersea drones in multiple sizes and diverse payloads that can, importantly, operate in shallow water, where unmanned submarines cannot.” The initial function of sub drones is expected to be surveillance, the *Financial Times* noted, “however naval planners believe there are endless potential uses.”

If confirmed, the seizure of the US undersea glider by

China is the first such incident. It comes in the immediate aftermath of a provocative tirade this week by President-elect Donald Trump calling into question the “One China” policy that is the foundation of US-China relations.

In establishing diplomatic ties with China in 1979, the US acknowledged Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all of China and formally ended diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Earlier this month, Trump took a phone call from the Taiwanese president—the first top-level contact between the two countries since 1979.

China responded angrily, declaring that it has “serious concern” and stressing that Taiwan involved “China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and involves China’s core interests.” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang warned that interfering with or damaging the basis for China-US relations “concerns the peace, stability, development and prosperity of the Asia Pacific and internationally.”

Trump’s remarks indicate that he will intensify the Obama administration’s confrontational “pivot to Asia” on all fronts—diplomatic, economic and military. In the course of the election campaign, he has threatened trade war measures and promised a huge military expansion, particularly of the Navy. His comments have potentially far-reaching consequences not only for relations between the US and China, but for relations more broadly within Asia and around the world.

Beijing’s reaction to Obama’s “pivot” has been to launch a *de facto* arms race with Washington, stir up Chinese nationalism and, in the South China Sea, engage in substantial land reclamation activities. This reactionary response has played into the hands of the most belligerent factions of the American ruling class

and heightened the danger of war. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime does not represent workers, but a tiny layer of ultra-rich oligarchs who have amassed huge fortunes through the process of capitalist restoration.

Beijing tacitly acknowledged on Thursday that it is installing defensive anti-aircraft structures on Chinese islets in the Spratly group in the South China Sea. A Chinese Defence Ministry statement declared that it was “proper and legitimate,” adding: “If someone was at your door of your home, cocky and swaggering, how could it be that you wouldn’t prepare a slingshot?” The US Navy has already conducted three so-called “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea since October 2015, sending heavily armed warships into territorial waters claimed by China.

Speaking in Sydney on Wednesday, Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, declared that the US would not accept “a shared domain to be closed down unilaterally, no matter how many bases are built on artificial features in the South China Sea.” He warned that “we will be ready to confront when we must,” and left no doubt this could entail clashes and even war with China.

The far-reaching consequences of Trump’s threat to tear up the “One China” policy and set a course for trade war and military confrontation with China are already becoming apparent. President Obama, in his press conference Friday, joined Trump in putting a question mark over the foundation of US relations with China.

While the press conference focussed on bogus allegations of “Russian hacking” influencing the US presidential election, in response to a query that noted the claimed seizure by China of a US drone vessel and asked the president to respond to Trump’s questioning of the “One China” policy, Obama declared that he was “somewhere in between,” adding that “all our foreign policy should be subject to fresh eyes.” At the same time, he cautioned that “you want to make sure that you’re doing it in a systematic, deliberate, intentional way.”

Without criticising Trump, Obama warned: “You have to have thought through what the consequences are, because the Chinese will not treat that the way they’ll treat some other issues. They won’t even treat it the way they treat issues around the South China Sea,

where we’ve had a lot of tensions. This goes to the core of how they see themselves. And their reaction on this issue could end up being very significant.” In fact, China has threatened to go to war to prevent Taiwan, which it regards as a renegade province, from declaring independence.

Obama concluded that any move to break with the “One China” policy would require that the United States “think it through” and “have planned for potential reactions that they may engage in.”

Calling the “One China” policy into question affects not only Taiwan. It gives succour to other separatist movements within China, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang, which could lead to a dismemberment of China. Prior to the 1970s, the US State Department and the CIA provided significant support to Tibetan and Uighur separatists as a means of undermining the CCP regime.



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