

China accuses US of using undersea drone to spy

Peter Symonds
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The Chinese defence ministry issued a statement on Saturday confirming that it would return a US undersea drone seized by its navy in the South China Sea on Thursday. Spokesman Yang Yujun said that the two countries had been communicating about the process but expressed his regret that “the US has unilaterally hyped up the issue.”

The Pentagon issued a statement on Friday saying that the unmanned undersea glider had been taken on board a Chinese vessel in international waters about 50 nautical miles northwest of the Subic Bay naval base in the Philippines. It claimed that the drone had been engaged in mapping the ocean floor and collecting oceanographic data, condemned the “illegal” seizure and demanded the drone’s return.

The Chinese statement noted that the US “has been frequently deploying ships and aircraft to conduct close-in surveillance and military surveys in waters facing China. China firmly opposes such acts and demands the US cease such activities. China will stay alert over relevant US activities and will take necessary measures to counter them.”

Spokesman Yang claimed that the Chinese ship insisted that China had been “professional and responsible,” taking the drone to “examine and verify the device in a bid to avoid any harm it might cause to the safety of navigation and personnel.” According to the US navy, the USNS Bowditch, an oceanographic survey vessel, was nearby retrieving another of its gliders and contacted the Chinese vessel to demand the drone’s return.

A retired Chinese rear admiral, Yang Yi, was more strident in his accusations against the US navy declaring that the drone had been operating in waters close to the Scarborough Shoal, a reef effectively controlled by China but also claimed by the

Philippines. He said that it was natural for Chinese sailors to seize the drone and examine it.

Referring to President-elect Donald Trump’s questioning of the One China policy last week, Admiral Yang declared: “If Trump and the American government dare to take actions to challenge the bottom line of China’s policy and core interests, we must drop any expectations about him and give him a bloody nose.”

Yang’s comments indicate that the seizure of the drone might well have been to send a warning to Trump who declared that he would not feel bound by the One China policy unless China made concessions on trade, North Korea and the South China Sea. Under the One China policy which has formally been in place since 1979 and forms the foundation of US-China relations, the US acknowledges Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

Yang’s bellicose comments underline the rising tensions between the United States and China after more than five years of the Obama administration’s confrontational “pivot to Asia” has transformed the South China Sea into a dangerous flashpoint. Trump’s threat to undermine fundamental diplomatic protocols along with election pledges to implement trade war measures against China will only heighten the danger that minor incidents could lead to conflict.

Trump intervened in the dispute on Saturday with contradictory tweets. He first condemned the action, saying: “China steals United States Navy research drone in international waters—rips it out of water and takes it to China in unpresided [sic] act.” Then, rather than join the chorus demanding that Beijing return the glider, Trump in a second tweet declared: “We should tell China that we don’t want the drone they stole back—let them keep it!”

Republican Senator John McCain exploited the incident to press for a more militarist response against China. He compared the seizure of the drone, which he branded as a “gross violation of international law,” to the capture of two US vessels by Iran in its territorial waters in January. “Look, there is no strength on the part of the USA. Everyone is taking advantage of it,” he lamented, adding that “hopefully that will change soon” with a Trump administration.

In its report, the *New York Times* did not dismiss Chinese claims that the drone had been on a spying mission. It cited Wu Shicun, head of China’s National Institute for South China Sea Studies, who declared that the device had more likely been conducting intelligence reconnaissance to detect Chinese submarine routes in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is adjacent to a major Chinese submarine base on Hainan Island.

The article noted that an American naval expert did not disagree with Mr Wu’s notion of what the Americans were probably doing. “Warfare and surveillance in the age of drones has not yet developed an agreed upon set of rules,” said Lyle Goldstein, associate professor at the China Maritime Studies Institute. “This is increasingly a major problem as both China and the US are deploying ever more air and naval drones into the contested waters and airspace of the Western Pacific.”

On several occasions, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter has highlighted the Pentagon’s program to develop and construct undersea drones including for surveillance, countering mines and anti-submarine warfare. In a speech in October outlining what he termed the “third phase” of the “rebalance” to Asia to counter China, Carter referred to increased funding for undersea drones, as part of more than \$40 billion over the next five years to ensure the US has “the most lethal undersea and anti-submarine force in the world.”

In an earlier speech in April, Carter referred to “new undersea drones in multiple sizes and diverse payloads that can, importantly, operate in shallow water, where manned submarines cannot.” Large areas of the South China Sea have shallower waters.

The flare-up of tensions between the US and China over the relatively minor incident is a warning of what is to come after Trump takes office. In an interview on Sunday with Fox News, incoming chief of staff Reince Priebus defended Trump’s remarks the week before

questioning the One China policy. “Look, I don’t think it’s all that provocative, to tell you the truth,” he said, adding: “We’re not suggesting that we’re revisiting One China policy right now.”

The comments by Priebus are deliberately misleading. Whether Trump intends to upend the One China policy now or in the future, or is simply using the threat as a bargaining chip in haggling for concessions from China, the end result is the same. He is putting a question mark over one of the linchpins of global geo-politics, compounding uncertainty throughout the Asia Pacific, and raising the heat with China even before he has taken office.



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