

# US conducts show of force in South China Sea

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Defying warnings from Beijing not to escalate tensions in the South China Sea, the Trump administration last Saturday said a United States aircraft carrier strike group had begun “routine” patrols in the strategic waterway.

According to a US Navy statement, the guided-missile destroyer USS Wayne E. Meyer is joining the 97,000-ton Carl Vinson along with aircraft from Carrier Air Wing for the operations. The Carl Vinson carries a flight group of more than 60 aircraft, including F/A-18 jet fighters, as well as a crew of 7,500.

This is not the first such mission. The Obama administration also ordered US aircraft carrier operations in the South China Sea as part of its “pivot to Asia” to confront China’s rising influence. Almost a year ago, the USS John C. Stennis led another “routine” cruise through the area.

However, in the context of the Trump administration’s belligerent “America First” foreign policy and previous declarations that it will block China’s access to the islets it controls in the sea, the operation appears to be a provocative show of force.

Just three days earlier, last Wednesday, China’s Foreign Ministry warned Washington against challenging its claimed territories, saying it heard about the planned deployment of the Carl Vinson just days before it happened. China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said China “firmly opposes any country’s attempt to undermine China’s sovereignty and security in the name of the freedom of navigation and overflight.”

It is not clear whether the ships and aircraft, designated by the navy Carrier Strike Group 1, will enter the 12-nautical mile territorial zones around Chinese-held territories in supposed “freedom of navigation” challenges to China—three of which were conducted under the Obama administration.

United Press International reported that the Carl

Vinson strike group was “expected to sail near China’s artificial islands in the disputed Spratly Islands, and possibly the Paracel Islands, where China has been building a military presence.” The US last conducted a “freedom of navigation” exercise in the South China Sea in October, when the guided-missile destroyer USS Decatur passed through the Paracel Islands and waters that Beijing claims as its own.

The strike group’s commander, Rear Admiral James Kilby, said weeks of training in the Pacific had improved the group’s effectiveness and readiness. “We are looking forward to demonstrating those capabilities while building upon existing strong relationships with our allies, partners and friends in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region,” the US Navy News Service quoted him as saying.

The Carl Vinson’s visit is the third by a high-profile US Navy vessel this month. Last week, the littoral combat ship USS Coronado, which is currently based in Singapore, conducted what the navy called training operations in the South China Sea. Last week also, the attack submarine USS Louisville arrived at the Subic Bay base in the Philippines. The navy said its presence “demonstrates the US Navy’s commitment to regional stability and maritime security in the US 7th Fleet area of operations,” which includes the South China Sea.

The Carl Vinson, which first operated in the South China Sea in 1983, was last dispatched to the Western Pacific in 2015, under Obama, to conduct exercises with the Malaysian navy and air force. The giant carrier has reportedly been deployed 16 times in the South China Sea in its 35-year history. But this operation is being mounted amid a sharp escalation in US trade war and military threats against China since the inauguration of Trump as president.

Even before he took office, Donald Trump last year made an unprecedented phone call to the president of Taiwan, which China regards as a breakaway province,

and called into question the One China policy to which the US has adhered since 1979.

Earlier this month, Trump seemingly dropped his threat to repudiate the One China policy and then conducted what was described as a “conciliatory” phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping. In a similar vein last Friday, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who previously declared the US would block China’s access to its South China Sea islets, held his first meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

After the conversation, on the sidelines of a Group of 20 foreign ministers’ meeting, Wang was quoted as saying that the “important consensus” reached between Trump and Xi on Taiwan had set the stage for better relations. “China and the United States are jointly responsible for maintaining world stability and promoting global prosperity,” Wang said. “The common interests of both sides are far greater than differences.”

At the same time, however, Tillerson ratcheted up the pressure on Beijing to move against its ally, North Korea, which earlier this month tested an intermediate-range ballistic missile. Mark Toner, a State Department spokesman, insisted that: “Tillerson also highlighted the increasing threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes and urged China to use all available tools to moderate North Korea’s destabilising behaviour.”

Last Saturday, Beijing seemed to take a step toward meeting that demand by saying it would suspend all imports of coal from North Korea for the rest of the year, in accordance with United Nations sanctions over Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile program. This would substantially cripple North Korea’s economy, which reportedly obtained \$US1 billion in 2015 from coal exports to China.

Just as China announced its coal ban, however, Washington publicly unveiled the mission by the Carrier Strike Group 1. Beijing’s response to this operation is not yet clear, but the strident state-controlled *Global Times* declared: “By sending the Carl Vinson to the South China Sea, it appears that the US wants to create provocations and drive a wedge between China and relevant countries. This may trigger frictions or even military clashes between China and the US.”

There is no doubt that this latest US operation

heightens the danger of clashes that could lead to war. Before the Carl Vinson arrived, China’s navy had just completed a week-long exercise in the South China Sea. The “scheduled” manoeuvres by three Chinese warships, including a destroyer, had entailed sudden attack drills.

For a quarter century, US imperialism has sought to counter its declining world economic position by exploiting its unchallenged global military dominance, increasingly taking aim at China’s growing economic and military power and Russia’s still-considerable military strength. While Trump’s opponents within the US ruling class insist that its foreign policy must first target Russia, Trump is intent on focusing on China. There is a real danger of a military conflict propelled by this ferocious infighting, in a bid to use war as a means of diverting the rising popular opposition to Trump.

The Beijing regime’s response to the US aggression—its own military buildup in the South China Sea, alternating with appeals for an oligarchic global partnership with US imperialism—cannot answer the bellicose drive by the Trump administration to “make American great again” by asserting US hegemony over the Pacific and Eurasia. On the contrary, Beijing’s own resort to Chinese nationalism only pits Chinese workers against their fellow workers in America and internationally.



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