

US officials accuse China of building missile bases in South China Sea

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Speaking on the condition of anonymity, two US officials told Reuters yesterday that China has nearly finished erecting almost two dozen structures on artificial islands in the South China Sea that appear likely to house long-range surface-to-air missiles.

In what appears to be an attempt to escalate the tensions between the US and China, the Reuters report, which was republished internationally, declared that China's actions were "an early test of US President Donald Trump."

The reported remarks were both unsubstantiated and self-contradictory, however. The officials did not give a time line on when they believed China would deploy missiles on the islands.

The officials were cited as saying that building concrete structures with retractable roofs on Subi, Mischief and Fiery Cross reefs, part of the Spratly Islands chain, where China has built military-length airstrips, threatened to trigger a military escalation.

"It is not like the Chinese to build anything in the South China Sea just to build it, and these structures resemble others that house SAM [surface-to-air missile] batteries, so the logical conclusion is that's what they are for," an unnamed US intelligence official said.

Yet the intelligence official conceded that the structures did not pose a significant military threat to US forces in the region, given their visibility and vulnerability. Building them appeared to be more of a political test of how the Trump administration would respond, he said.

Beijing's response to the claim was muted. It appealed to the US and other countries to seek a peaceful resolution of territorial disputes in the South China Sea. At the same time, it asserted China's right to construct facilities, including for military purposes, on the territories it controls in the sea.

At a press conference yesterday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said: "I want to reiterate that China building facilities, including deploying necessary and appropriate national defence installations in its own territory, is exercising our sovereign right recognised by international law."

He declared that China was working with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to resolve the rival claims in the South China Sea. "We hope that non-regional countries can truly respect the efforts made by regional countries and do more for regional peace and stability," he said in a clear reference to the US and its allies.

Even before it was inaugurated, as part of its "America First" foreign policy, the Trump administration signaled its intent to ramp up Washington's aggressive drive to combat China's rising influence, criticising the Obama administration's confrontational military, strategic and economic "pivot to Asia" as inadequate.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has specifically spoken of the US needing the capacity to block China's access to the islands it controls in the South China Sea.

Tillerson told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee last month that China's building of islands and putting military assets on them was "akin to Russia's taking Crimea" from Ukraine. In his written responses to follow-up questions, he said that in the event of an unspecified "contingency," the US and its allies "must be capable of limiting China's access to and use of" those islands to pose a threat.

Last Saturday, just days before the latest claims, the Pentagon announced what amounts to a show of force. In defiance of Chinese warnings not to increase tensions, it sent an aircraft carrier and a destroyer, designated by the navy as Carrier Strike Group 1,

supposedly for routine patrols in the strategic waterway.

As if to highlight the risk that such operations could trigger clashes, Beijing's Xinhua news agency reported that a day later China deployed warships to hold "counter-attack" exercises in the South China Sea. The Changsha and Haikou, missile destroyers from the Chinese Navy's South China fleet, reportedly practised shooting at simulated enemy destroyers in drills that also included units of the Beihai and East China fleets, along with navy aircraft.

The US claims are not new. In fact, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Pentagon-linked think tank in Washington, said in a December report that China apparently had already installed weapons, including anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems, on all seven of the islands it has built in the South China Sea. The timing of the Reuters report, combined with the visits of the aircraft carrier group and other US warships in recent days, seems calculated to send a threatening message to the Beijing regime.

As always, the US accusations against Beijing hypocritically depict Washington as seeking peaceful outcomes. A Pentagon spokesman said the United States remained committed to "non-militarisation in the South China Sea" and urged all claimants to the sea's islands to take actions consistent with international law.

In reality, the US has repeatedly cut across attempts by Beijing to resolve its territorial disputes in the South China Sea with other claimants—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. As part of the US "pivot" to Asia, Hillary Clinton, then Obama's secretary of state, declared that the US had an overriding national interest in ensuring "freedom of navigation" in the sea, on which China depends heavily as a route for its imports and exports.

The latest US actions may again be seeking to disrupt negotiations between China and ASEAN over the long-running territorial disputes. At the end of an ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting on Tuesday, Philippine Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay, whose country currently chairs ASEAN, said his country was confident that ASEAN countries would work out a framework for a code of conduct in the South China Sea by June or July.

A Xinhua commentary yesterday hailed this "probability of agreement" as "a positive sign" that

"the two sides are back on track over the issue, sending out a signal to outside meddlers that they can stop making waves."

Under Obama, the US orchestrated a legal challenge in an international arbitration tribunal in The Hague by the former Philippine government of President Benigno Aquino III to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. However, President Rodrigo Duterte's current administration in Manila backed away from trying to enforce that ruling and has instead sought to balance between the US and China.

As part of that precarious balancing act, after the ASEAN meeting Philippine Foreign Secretary Yasay also said the foreign ministers had "noticed, very unsettlingly, that China has installed weapons systems in these facilities." He urged dialogue to stop an escalation of "recent developments."

These remarks are an indication of the unease and turmoil throughout the Asia-Pacific region over the danger of a military conflict between the US and China, two nuclear-armed powers. Beijing's attempts to counter the Trump administration's aggressive measures by its own military build-up are only intensifying the risks of a catastrophic war.



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