

US warship carries out “freedom of navigation” exercise in Chinese-claimed waters

James Cogan
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For the first time since the inauguration of Donald Trump, a US warship yesterday violated the 12-mile exclusion zone around Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea. USS Dewey, a guided-missile destroyer, entered waters around Chinese-occupied Mischief Reef. In another first, the Dewey did not simply pass through but lingered and carried out an “operational maneuver”—a rehearsal of a man-overboard rescue—to emphasise Washington’s categorical rejection of Beijing’s assertions of sovereignty.

The Chinese navy dispatched two frigates to instruct the American ship to leave the area. China’s foreign ministry issued a sharp condemnation of US actions, stating that they “undermined China’s sovereignty and security,” and warning they risk causing “unexpected air and sea accidents.”

Four so-called “freedom of navigation operations,” or FONOPs, were carried out by the US Navy under the Obama administration, as part of its broader “pivot” and military build-up in Asia to push back against growing Chinese strategic and economic influence in the region. The last, however, was in October 2016 and it was derided in US military circles. The warship skirted the edge of the 12-mile zone around Triton and Woody Islands, in the Paracel Island chain, so it did not technically violate Chinese sovereignty claims.

According to the *New York Times*, at least three requests by the navy have been made under Trump for the authority to conduct an operation, but all were denied. This was despite the bellicose statement by now Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, during his January congressional confirmation hearing, that Chinese “access to those islands [in the South China Sea] ... is

not going to be allowed.”

Yesterday’s operation is a signal to Beijing, the Asian region and to the world that the brief hiatus in US provocations is over. The context of the FONOP at Mischief Reef underscores that the Trump administration is just as prepared as Obama’s to risk a military confrontation with China, and that it will be escalating actions that could result in open conflict.

Firstly, the choice of Mischief Reef for the operation was clearly intended as a warning to the government of President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines that his efforts to lessen tensions with China over territorial disputes are not acceptable to Washington.

The reef is also claimed by the Philippines. It figured prominently in the July 2016 decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague on a US-backed Philippines’ initiated challenge to China’s occupation of territory in the South China Sea. The court ruled that Mischief Reef was “part of the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of the Philippines” and that China’s occupation was a violation of its “sovereign rights.”

Mischief Reef is part of the Spratly Island chain, which lies above vast natural gas reserves. China occupied it and erected permanent installations in 1996. In 2015, as tensions with the Obama administration increased, the Chinese military began artificially expanding the tiny crop of coral. By mid-2016, it had constructed a harbor and a 2.6 kilometre long airstrip on the reclaimed land, capable of landing commercial airliners, as well as jet fighters. Satellite photos later in the year suggest that the Chinese military had deployed an anti-aircraft missile battery and anti-missile systems.

Duterte, who took office just weeks before the Hague

ruling, has not sought to assert the Philippines' claims. Instead he has made overtures to China in the hope of attracting greater investment and closer economic ties, and pursued strategic and military relations with Russia.

Washington and US-aligned factions of the Philippines' establishment are now aggressively seeking to reverse his orientation. The FONOP took place barely 36 hours after Duterte was forced to cancel talks in Russia and rush back to Manila after his administration pressured him into declaring martial law over the entire southern island of Mindanao.

The pro-US Philippines' military is coming to the centre of political life. With the signal that Washington is going to step up its confrontation of China, a shift in Manila's stance on its claims in the South China Sea may well follow.

The FONOP is no less a message to the dozens of countries that have expressed interest in China's ambitious "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) plans to economically integrate the Eurasian landmass. It is a pointed message that US imperialism, backed by key allies such as Japan, Australia and India, will never permit some type of peaceful rise of China to regional, let alone global, dominance.

Just weeks after the massive OBOR summit in Beijing, at which China lauded the signing of hundreds of agreements and contracts with a range of East European, Middle Eastern, Central Asian and East Asian countries, the Chinese military had to dispatch two frigates to uphold its territorial claims in the South China Sea from a US challenge.

The future of Chinese capitalism is not pre-eminence within a set of new international economic relations, but the prospect of a catastrophic conflict provoked by the US to try and maintain its waning global hegemony.

Perhaps most ominously, the decision by the Trump administration to authorise a FONOP in the South China Sea coincides with a massive build-up of American military assets in and near the Korean peninsula.

For weeks, the White House has been asserting that it is giving Beijing and President Xi Jinping time to pressure North Korea, China's nominal ally, into unilaterally announcing it is ending its nuclear and missile weapons' programs. The explicit threat that has been publicly conveyed to China is that if it does not do

so, the US military will attack North Korea.

This week, prominent US strategic analyst George Friedman advised business figures that war is "imminent" due to China's failure, or inability, to convince the Pyongyang regime and its figurehead Kim Jong-un to capitulate. The pretext is being systematically prepared by Washington—removing the danger purportedly posed by "weapons of mass destruction"—to justify a pre-emptive attack on North Korea.

The real aim of war with North Korea, however, would be to profoundly weaken China's strategic position and destabilise it politically. For decades, Beijing has propped up North Korea because it functions as a buffer between China, and US-aligned South Korea. The destruction of the North Korean regime, and the occupation of the North by the forces of the South, would be taken as evidence internationally that China is incapable of even defending a nominal ally on its own borders, let alone defending its territorial claims in the South China Sea from the military might of the US.



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