

US seeks to intimidate Beijing in the South China Sea

James Cogan
19 September 2019

Military tensions over the territorial disputes in the South China Sea are being deliberately inflamed by the United States, amid an escalating trade war and broader geostrategic rivalries with China. Over the past weeks, it has twice deployed a warship on a “freedom of navigation operation” (FONOP) within Chinese-claimed waters, while encouraging regional allies and “partners” to step up their own actions against Beijing.

On September 13, the US Navy sent the destroyer USS Wayne E. Meyer on a FONOP into the waters surrounding the Chinese-held Paracel Islands, a group of 30 small islands to the east of Vietnam and south of Hainan Island—the location of the main Chinese naval base for its nuclear submarine fleet. China has held the entire group since 1974, but Vietnam continues to claim sovereignty, as does Taiwan.

On August 28, the same vessel, the Wayne E. Meyer, was sent into the 12-mile exclusion zone around Fiery Reef and Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands group. The Spratly Islands are located in the centre of the South China Sea, and its islets and reefs are the subject of competing claims by China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and Taiwan.

Since 2011, when the US initiated its “pivot to Asia” and a massive military build-up against China, Beijing has carried out extensive development of its main islands in both the Spratlys and Paracels. It has expanded ports and airstrips, installed radar and other early warning systems and, it appears from satellite images, deployed anti-aircraft and anti-shipping missile batteries.

China issued diplomatic protests over the latest FONOP in the Paracels. According to the Chinese Defence ministry, its air force and navy warned the American ship to cease “trespassing” immediately. A statement by the Chinese armed forces declared that the

incursion had proven “the US side’s complete lack of sincerity in maintaining global peace as well as regional security and stability.”

A US Navy spokesperson stated that the operation was intended to demonstrate that Washington rejects China’s territorial claims in the Paracel Islands, asserting that Beijing has attempted to claim more “internal waters, territorial sea, exclusive economic zone and continental shelf than it is entitled under international law.”

The United States, its spokesperson omitted to mention, refuses to sign the United Nations’ Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It would react aggressively if any country’s military entered the 12-mile exclusion zone around the strategic US islands in the Pacific Ocean—which lie thousands of kilometres from the mainland US—that it claims as territory.

The Trump administration nevertheless appears intent on exploiting the South China Sea disputes to ramp up tensions with Beijing. It is actively cajoling various allies to take part in future FONOPs, despite the risk that an accident or miscalculation by any of the military forces involved could trigger open conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

Prior to making the incursion into the Paracels, the Wayne E. Meyer took part in the first-ever joint naval exercise between the United States and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). While relatively small scale, compared with exercises the US conducts regularly with regional allies such as South Korea, Japan and Australia, its significance would not have been lost in Beijing. The countries that actively participated are those that Washington is actively seeking to enlist in its aggressive anti-China stance, including challenges to its territorial claims.

Thailand hosted the exercise, which began on September 2 and took place in the Gulf of Thailand, on the western side of the Indochinese peninsula from the South China Sea. Joining with the US, it involved warships from Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei, along with command and logistics participants from the other five ASEAN states—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia and Indonesia.

A Thai Navy spokesperson told the media ahead of the exercise that it had “nothing to do with China.” However, citing unnamed analysts, Voice of America noted: “But by cutting the waters between southern Vietnam and the Malacca Strait, a critical chokepoint for international trade between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, they will be sending Beijing a clear message that ASEAN can partner with whomever it pleases.”

Following the launch of the US “pivot,” the Philippines agreed to the re-stationing of US military assets in the archipelago.

In November 2017, the US and Vietnam issued a joint statement pledging far closer military cooperation during a state visit by President Donald Trump. This was followed by the first port visit to Vietnam by a US aircraft carrier, the Carl Vinson, in March 2018.

Vietnam is emerging as a key “partner” in Washington’s strategy to prevent China from challenging American hegemony over the vast Indo-Pacific region. With the backing of the Trump administration, Hanoi has embarked on ambitious projects to extract oil and gas from blocks in the South China Sea close to its coast that are also claimed by China.

Beijing has retaliated by deploying “research” and “exploration” vessels, accompanied by armed coastguard ships, to pressure Vietnam into pulling back from unilateral development of resources in the disputed areas. In 2018, Hanoi did cancel an exploration operation under Chinese pressure.

Over recent months, however, Vietnam has bellicosely defied the deployment of Chinese ships near exploration that is being conducted as a joint venture between Vietnamese companies and Russian energy giant Rosneft. The Trump administration has vocally weighed into the issue, declaring its support for and “commitment” to assisting Vietnam.

Negotiations are almost certainly underway over the

possibility of basing American warships in Vietnam—or allowing them to “rotate” from Vietnamese ports for lengthy periods of time each year.

Singapore would be the model. In 2015, the city state, strategically located on the Strait of Malacca, the busiest sea passage in the world, agreed to base up to four American littoral combat ships (LCS). The small, fast warships are specifically designed to operate in shallow waters along coastlines and around islands and reefs.

This month, the US Navy announced that the first of its LCS’s has now been armed with the Norwegian-designed, anti-shiping “Naval Strike Missile.” The missile has a range of 100 nautical miles and is more accurate and deadly than the Harpoon missiles used by the American military.

While the Navy refused to disclose where the ship would be deployed, Timothy Heath, a RAND corporation analyst, told Fox News: “I expect more LCS-type ships to operate in the South China Sea... ASEAN countries should benefit in particular from a stronger US military presence, as China is likely to respond in part by operating more cautiously.”

As well as forging closer ties with ASEAN, Washington is pushing its regional allies and partners to step up their own confrontational policies toward Beijing, including actively participating in the US naval provocations in the South China Sea. Australian involvement will undoubtedly be an agenda item during the state visit to the US this weekend by Prime Minister Scott Morrison.



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