

As COVID-19 spreads through the ranks, Pentagon stages show of force against China

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The US military staged a show of force this week on its Pacific island territory of Guam with the clear aim of threatening China.

Billions of dollars' worth of US warplanes were paraded on the tarmac of Guam's Andersen Air Force Base Monday in what is known as an "elephant walk," a term used during the Vietnam War to describe the slow-moving lines of B-52 bombers waiting for takeoff for airstrikes that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and Cambodians.

Monday's formation included 14 warplanes, including five nuclear-capable B-52 Stratofortress strategic bombers, six KC-135 Stratotanker aerial refuelers, an MH-60S Knighthawk helicopter, and two unmanned aerial vehicles: an Air Force RQ-4 Global Hawk and a Navy MQ-4C Triton.

These operations are meant to prepare pilots for the launching of fully armed warplanes in a mass attack against a common target. In the case of Andersen Air Force Base, located 1,800 miles east of China, the identity of the target is clear.

The Air Force's 36th Wing, which is part of the Indo-Pacific Command, issued a statement declaring that "The Elephant Walk showcases the 36th Wing's readiness and ability to generate combat airpower at a moment's notice to ensure regional stability throughout the Indo-Pacific."

This "showcasing" of the US military's ability to launch a nuclear war against China at "a moment's notice" came amid an increasingly virulent anti-China campaign by the Trump administration aimed at diverting growing social anger over the government's failure to carry out the most basic measures to contain the deadly virus that has now cost 30,000 American lives.

It was also a demonstration of US air power under

conditions in which its carrier strike groups, one of the principal instruments for the projection of US imperialism's military might in Asia and internationally, have been sidelined by the spread of the coronavirus through the close quarters of US Navy ships.

The USS Theodore Roosevelt remains docked in Guam, its crew under quarantine with nearly 600 having tested positive and one of them dying Monday from COVID-19, the second member of the US military killed by the disease. Another five of the ship's sailors have been hospitalized, one of them in intensive care.

The evacuation of the aircraft carrier's crew, with the exception of a skeleton force tending to its nuclear reactors and weapon systems, came after a heated controversy triggered by a demand by the ship's commander, Capt. Brett Crozier, that his crew be taken off the ship and quarantined. After his immediate superiors stonewalled his appeal, Crozier sent a letter to at least 20 senior naval officers in which he stated, "We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die. If we do not act now, we are failing to take care of our most trusted asset—our Sailors."

The letter, which cut across the Trump administration's attempt to minimize the pandemic's impact as well as the Pentagon's determination not to allow the outbreak to interfere with its aggressive worldwide operations, triggered a political firestorm. Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly relieved Crozier of his command—apparently on the direct orders of Trump—and then flew to Guam to address the Theodore Roosevelt's crew, denouncing the Captain as "stupid," "naive" and a traitor, while berating the crew for having staged a demonstration of support for Crozier as he disembarked from the carrier. The tirade was

delivered over the ship's loud speakers, without any direct contact between Modly and the crew. After a recording of it surfaced on social media, Modly himself was compelled to resign.

While the Theodore Roosevelt's crew remains quarantined in Guam, other aircraft carriers are also paralyzed. The USS Ronald Reagan is docked in Yokosuka, Japan because of COVID-19 cases on board. The USS Nimitz, meanwhile, has had its crew quarantined in Washington state after infections there. The close quarters of these ships allow for the rapid spread of the disease.

Amid the sidelining of the US military's carrier strike groups, the Chinese navy sent the Liaoning, its first operational aircraft carrier, together with two guided-missile destroyers, two guided-missile frigates and a supply ship, into waters between Japan's islands of Miyako and Okinawa and Taiwan's east coast.

The US Defense Department announced Wednesday that its total number of COVID-19 cases had surpassed 5,000, more than half of them active-duty members of the military. There are increasing recriminations within the US military over what was known about the deadly virus and the failure—as in US society as a whole—to take measures earlier to protect enlisted personnel from it.

The US military command has signaled that no matter how pervasive the spread of the disease within its ranks, it is prepared to order US troops to fight. "I don't want anyone out there in the world to think that somehow the US military's readiness is significantly degraded. It is not," the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said last week. If needed to defend the interests of US imperialism, it is prepared to send carriers crewed by sick sailors to sea against China. As Milley said of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, "we could get it back out to sea quickly if we had to."

In February, as the coronavirus was spreading throughout the world, including within the US and its military, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper told Congress that the "highest priority remains China, as its government continues to use—and misuse—its diplomatic, economic and military strength to attempt to alter the landscape of power and reshape the world in its favor, often at the expense of others."

This remains Washington's geostrategic priority. The catastrophe wrought by the coronavirus on the US and

the world has not deterred US military aggression in the slightest. Where it can, as in Venezuela and Iran, both blockaded by US sanctions, Washington has sought to employ the disease as a weapon. In the case of China, as the "elephant walk" in Guam demonstrates, the ravages of the disease have only increased the recklessness of US imperialist policy and the threat of world war.



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