

US secretary of state denounces China over South China Sea

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In a statement that sets the stage for more aggressive US military action against China in the South China Sea, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared on Monday that Beijing's claims in the strategic waters "are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them."

The Trump administration has been ramping up its provocative actions in the South China Sea with a growing number of "freedom of navigation" intrusions by US warships into waters claimed by China. A week ago, two US aircraft carriers with their associated strike groups entered the sea and conducted "high-end" war games to test their capacity to carry out long distance air and missile strikes.

Pompeo based his attack on China's maritime claims upon the 2016 decision of the Arbitral Tribunal in The Hague, established under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The sweeping and highly political judgement by the tribunal ruled against China in a case nominally conducted by the then Philippine government of President Benigno Aquino.

China refused to accept the jurisdiction of the court or the legitimacy of the case and rejected the decision. Along with Taiwan, it has continued to assert China's historic claims to most of the South China Sea.

The tribunal decision did not extend to the various "features"—reefs, islets and sandbars—in the South China Sea controlled by China and its neighbours. Rather it ruled that these "features" were not sufficient in size to generate a 12-nautical-mile territorial zone or a more extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Pompeo's denunciation of China and its actions reeks of hypocrisy and cynicism. While noting that China was a party to UNCLOS, he omitted to say that the United States itself has not ratified the treaty. In other

words, the US is seeking to hold China to legal standards that it does not recognise itself.

Moreover, the Philippine case to the tribunal was manufactured in Washington, not in Manila. Given that the US had not ratified the UNCLOS treaty and had no territorial claims in the South China Sea—thousands of kilometres from North America—it had no legal standing before the tribunal.

The Obama administration decided to use the Aquino government, which had adopted a pronounced anti-China stance, as its legal proxy. The legal case was drafted by the US law firm, Foley Hoag, which had close ties to the Obama administration. The firm gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to Obama's election campaigns, and Obama appointed a Foley Hoag senior partner as ambassador to Norway.

In accusing China of "bullying" its neighbours, Pompeo accused it of replacing "international law with 'might makes right'," and claimed to be upholding the "rules-based international order." But, as the example of UNCLOS makes clear, it is Washington that makes up the rules, and imposes them on the world to suit its own economic and strategic interests.

US imperialism has a long record of bullying nations to meet its demands and of engaging in illegal wars of aggression in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa. In the case of the South China Sea, it was the Obama administration that initiated the confrontation with China by declaring that it had "a national interest" in securing "freedom of navigation."

The Obama administration's intervention transformed longstanding regional territorial disputes, in which the US had shown little interest previously, into a dangerous flashpoint for international conflict. Far from defending the interests of smaller South East Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Vietnam,

the chief aim was to justify an ever-greater presence in sensitive waters close to the Chinese mainland, as part of a huge US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific under Obama.

China responded by expanding its presence on islets under its control in the South China Sea. While the region is far from the nearest American territory, it is directly adjacent to Chinese military bases in southern China. Beijing is well aware that the Pentagon's plans for a US war against China are premised on being able to launch massive air and missile attacks from warships, submarines and bases close to the Chinese mainland.

The Trump administration has intensified the US confrontation with China diplomatically, economically and militarily. In a press conference yesterday, Trump launched into a sweeping diatribe against Beijing, denouncing it across a range of issues, including "human rights" in Hong Kong, and accusing it of causing the COVID-19 pandemic, stealing American jobs and expanding its military.

Trump used the press conference to accuse the presumptive Democrat presidential candidate, Joe Biden, of being weak on China, but the bellicose anti-China campaign is bipartisan in character. It reflects the determination in the American ruling class to undermine and, ultimately, subjugate China, which is regarded in Washington as the main obstacle to US global hegemony.

While Pompeo's statement is not the first time that the US has cynically exploited the 2016 Hague ruling to condemn China's actions in the South China Sea, it is the first time that Washington has formally adopted the contents of the judgement. In doing so, Pompeo issued what amounted to a threat that the US would take action to block Chinese actions in the South China Sea.

Pompeo declared that "the world"—that is, US imperialism and its allies—"will not allow Beijing to treat the South China Sea as its maritime empire." America, he continued, "will stand with our Southeast Asian allies and partners in protecting their sovereign rights to offshore resources, consistent with their rights and obligations under international law."

What that means in practice was underscored yesterday when a US destroyer, the USS Ralph Johnson, sailed close to Chinese controlled islets in the

Spratly islands. In justifying the latest "freedom of navigation" operation, the US Navy adopted the language of Pompeo, declaring "unlawful and sweeping maritime claims in the South China Sea" posed a serious threat.

The Trump administration's belligerent attacks on China, aimed at creating a wartime atmosphere, are driven by its need to direct the enormous social tensions generated by the COVID-19 pandemic outward against an external enemy. In this increasingly tense situation, the danger is that its provocative military actions will lead to an incident in the South China Sea that escalates out of control into a conflict between nuclear-armed powers.



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