

US admiral threatens Beijing over South China Sea

By James Cogan
2 April 2015

Admiral Harry Harris, the commander of the US Pacific Command, used a speech on March 31 to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in Canberra to once again issue US threats of “confrontation” over China’s construction of facilities on islands and reefs in the South China Sea.

Harris painted China’s activities in the most sinister and destructive light. Beijing was, he said, “building artificial land by pumping sand on to live coral reefs—some of them submerged—and paving them over with concrete.” He asserted that China reclaimed from the sea an area comparable to a 4.5 square kilometre Australian national park.

Harris flatly rejected China’s assertions of sovereignty over large areas of the South China Sea, dismissing its “nine-dash line claim” as “inconsistent with international law.” He declared that “the scope and pace of building man-made islands raise serious questions about China’s intentions.”

In a thinly-veiled threat to Beijing, Harris stressed the US commitment to what was initially labelled the “pivot” to Asia by President Obama. Now referred to as the “rebalance,” it involves the concentration of 60 percent of US air and naval power in the Asia-Pacific. The admiral highlighted the “rotation” of US marines, aircraft and ships to Australia, and the close integration of the Australian military into US operations.

“By maintaining a capable and credible forward presence in the region,” Harris stated, “we’re able to improve our ability to maintain security and stability. And if any crisis does break out, we’re better positioned to quickly respond.”

Harris’s comments were somewhat sensationally reported in sections of the Australian media. Michael Wesley, from the Asia Pacific School at the Australian National University, told Fairfax Media it was a

“dangerous escalation” in US-China tensions. In fact, the remarks were entirely in tune with a consistent drumbeat of accusations against China since the start of the year.

Prominent figures in the US political, intelligence and military establishment are trying to make China’s alleged activities in the South China Sea a major issue of geopolitical tension. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, senators such as Republican John McCain and Democrat Jack Reed, and top admirals and generals have made sweeping claims. They accuse China of building airfields and anti-ship and anti-air missile bases that would be used to deny the US Navy access to the area and exert Chinese military control over some of the most important sea lanes in the world.

On March 19, McCain, Reed and the other Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee leaders, Bob Corker and Bob Menendez, sent a joint letter to the Obama administration demanding that it inform the Senate what “specific actions the United States can take to slow down or stop China’s reclamation activities.” The senators alleged that Chinese construction in the South China Sea was “a direct challenge, not only to the interests of the United States and the region, but to the entire international community.”

They wrote: “While other states have been built on existing land masses, China is changing the size, structure and physical attributes of land features themselves... This is a qualitative change that appears designed to alter the status quo in the South China Sea.”

The senators sent their letter amid the dismay in Washington over the fact that Britain, followed by Germany, France and Italy, ignored US objections and

joined the Chinese-initiated Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Within a matter of days, the European powers undermined years of efforts by Washington to pressure countries in the region to distance themselves diplomatically, economically and strategically from China. Virtually every state in Asia, including key US allies such as Australia, Taiwan and South Korea, rushed to join the AIIB before the deadline for founding member rights expired on March 31.

The April 1 WSWS perspective noted that the intervention by the European imperialist powers to assert their own interests in closer relations with China underscored the tremendous decline in the world economic position of the United States. Compared with the vast investment and trade opportunities opening up in China and Asia as a whole, Washington has little to offer.

The perspective warned that American imperialism would respond by “increasing its military provocations, threatening to plunge the world once again into war.”

That process is at work in the South China Sea. The territorial disputes between China and states such as the Philippines and Vietnam are flashpoints that Washington can seek to inflame in order to destabilise the entire region.

On March 26, the Philippines government announced it was retaliating against China’s construction activities by resuming its own building of facilities on reefs in the Spratly Islands, which are claimed by both countries. Washington’s role in Manila’s decision is not known. Until last week, however, the Philippines had suspended its construction activity until the conclusion of a case it took to the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in The Hague, to assert its sovereignty claims at China’s expense. No ruling is expected before early 2016. Regardless of the outcome, China has rejected the court’s jurisdiction and refused to participate.

On previous occasions, Filipino efforts to erect structures on disputed territories or intercept Chinese fishing vessels led to tense standoffs between the Chinese and Filipino navies. An incident could rapidly flare into war against China by the US, which has given the Philippines security guarantees. Such a war would draw in Australia and Japan.

Various air force activities in the disputed areas could

trigger conflict. In February, Filipino sources revealed that the US Navy flew a Poseidon surveillance plane from a base in the western Philippines over the Spratly Islands, risking attempts by Chinese jets to intercept it.

On March 31, China announced that, for the first time, it flew several jet fighters through the Basi Channel, which is part of the ocean separating the Philippines and Taiwan. The official Chinese news agency Xinhua boasted: “This is the first time that the PLA Air Force conducted such drills in an airspace far offshore from Chinese coastlines.” The purpose of the drill, it claimed, was to “level up the PLA Air Force’s mobility and combativeness.”

While there were no reports that Taiwan or the Philippines sought to intercept the Chinese aircraft, such encounters are virtually inevitable if China begins to regularly send military flights into such sensitive areas.

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