

US military cabal organised South China Sea provocation

By Nick Beams
29 October 2015

The official line emanating from the Obama administration on Tuesday's provocative incursion in the South China Sea, in which a guided missile destroyer sailed within the 12-nautical mile limit of an island claimed by China, is that it was a routine operation to assert "freedom of navigation."

However, a report published by Reuters news agency today makes clear the operation was anything but that. As early as mid-May, the Pentagon started considering sending military aircraft and ships into the Spratly island chain in order to challenge China's claims to sovereignty and its island construction program.

The eventual intrusion by the USS *Larsen*, with an aircraft carrier battle group maintaining an over-the-horizon presence, came after a "prolonged US debate over the patrol," appearing to contradict "Washington's insistence that it was simply another routine freedom-of-navigation operation," Reuters reported. The US military had been "ready for months" to carry out patrols but ran into "repeated stalling" from the White House, Reuters said, citing an unnamed US defence official.

The news agency reported that the White House finally agreed in late September, immediately after the visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to the US, in which he maintained that, while it would press its claims, China had "no intention" to militarise the islands.

The picture presented in the Reuters report is one in which a cabal of military figures in the Pentagon and the US Navy formulate strategic objectives and the means for their enforcement, then press the White House for the stamp of approval. In other words, policy objectives are not formulated by the civilian administration but by the upper echelons of the military establishment.

Reuters also pointed to growing dissatisfaction within the military over what it sees as the failure of the Obama administration to respond with sufficient vigour against Russia over the Ukraine and to organise a direct military intervention in Syria. According to a former senior US official, China may have drawn the "wrong lesson" from

these events—the implication being that the military decided it was high time for a show of strength.

A senior Obama administration official told Reuters that the aim of the South China Sea operation was to "advance our strategic objectives in the Pacific region, including on maritime issues."

One of those objectives is to counter what the US calls Anti-Access/Area Denial in the South China Sea—that is, Chinese attempts to make it more difficult for the US to position military forces in crucial areas close to Chinese military establishments, particularly on the southern island of Hainan.

The US moves have nothing to do with ensuring "freedom of navigation" involving commercial activities, which China has no interest in obstructing, but are part of an offensive strategy aimed at restricting Chinese military capabilities. This includes the AirSea Battle plan that envisages a massive attack on the Chinese mainland from US forces in the region.

Having made the initial incursion, the US military is pressing for these operations to be conducted on a regular basis, with its spokesmen in Congress insisting that the Obama administration must do more.

"This cannot be a one-off occurrence," Senator Cory Gardner, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations East Asia Subcommittee, told Bloomberg news agency. "This must continue. It must be regular."

House of Representatives member Randy Forbes, a Republican from Virginia who earlier initiated a letter signed by other members of Congress calling for the breaching of the 12-mile limit, said the Obama administration was coming up short in implementing the "rebalance" to Asia, as China's actions showed.

"Instead of a strategy to prevent these actions, they are in a position where they react," he said of the Obama administration.

Michael Auslin of the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, one of the think tanks most strident in its calls for an attack on Iraq prior to 2003, also emphasised the need for

continuing action.

“If the US just sends in one destroyer, it’s flamboyant and it doesn’t do anything to say the nature of the balance is shifting back in our direction,” he told Bloomberg. “The Americans have been forced into a reactive stance. And it took them a year to figure out what to do in the first place.”

The push for regular military interventions in the South China Sea sets the scene for a major escalation and enormously increases the risk of a clash between the two nuclear-armed powers. This risk is lodged within the political situation confronting each of them.

Faced with the decline of its immediate economic power, the United States is increasingly resorting to the use of military force to maintain its position of global dominance, above all in the vitally important Asia-Pacific economic region, where it regards the growth of China as a direct threat.

On the other side, the Chinese regime, which rules in the interests of a super-rich oligarchy that dominates the Chinese Communist Party, has long ago lost any legitimacy based on the claim to be establishing socialism or social equality. Instead, it buttresses its rule by whipping up nationalism and assertions that it will ensure the economic expansion of China. This means any attempt by the US to regularise its operations will place the Chinese military in a position where it fears that failure to respond will undermine the regime itself.

Retired Rear Admiral Yang Yi, now a researcher at the People’s Liberation Army National University, told the *Washington Post* that if incursions became “a regular thing, military conflict in the region is inevitable and the US would be the one who started it.”

The nationalist *Global Times* newspaper declared in an editorial on Wednesday that China had to “prepare for the worst” and demonstrate that it was “not frightened to fight a war with the US in the region.”

The growing danger of war was indicated in an article by Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, published in the *Australian* today.

“There’s more to the South China Sea dispute than simply naval manoeuvring around submerged reefs. The belated response of the US to China’s physical assertion of control over the region exposes an uncomfortable reality: Washington and Beijing have incompatible strategic interests in the South China Sea,” he wrote.

Jennings said the most likely outcome was not a military conflict “but a harder edged competition that risks leading to a new cold war in Asia.”

Such an assessment underestimates the crucial differences between the former Soviet Union and China and their impact on geo-political relations.

The former USSR was based on an autarkic economic policy. China on the other hand is a vital component of the global economy, functioning as the world’s chief manufacturing centre. Its very growth is a threat to the position of the US, both because of its economic ties with the countries of the region and because of the interests of rival major powers in China such as Britain and Germany.

Britain has already snubbed the US with its decision in March to join the China-backed Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and its pursuit of lucrative financial deals with China in the interests of British finance capital. Germany views China both as a major manufacturing centre for its corporations and as an important market.

Accordingly, the strategic objective of the US is not simply to “contain” China—as was the case of the cold war waged against the former USSR—but to reduce it to a semi-colonial status under US domination.

As part of this objective, it will seek to draw other regional powers, including Australia and Japan, into its push in the South China Sea. At this point their preferred option is most likely to offer support to the US, invoking the bogus claim of “freedom of navigation,” while maintaining a physical distance from the conflict.

But they can expect Washington to step up the pressure for closer involvement, as is already evident in the Murdoch-owned press, which functions as one of the main media outlets for US militarism.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday, under the headline “Australia prepares option of sail-through test to test China,” claimed this option was being considered by Australian military officials and cited Peter Jennings as saying most US regional allies would follow with their own freedom of navigation exercises.

An editorial today in the *Australian* pointed to what it called Beijing’s “confected outrage” over the incursion, indicating the thinking in significant political and military circles that China will back down. Calling for a more aggressive policy, it said that China was simply prepared to wear the opprobrium from US allies in the region—a situation which “should stir the self-preservation instincts of those nations, including Australia, for a more effective defence investment.”

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