

Chinese military warns against continued US operations in South China Sea

By Nick Beams
30 October 2015

The Chinese military has warned that it will take “all necessary” measures in response to continued US naval incursions into what it regards as its territorial waters. This follows Tuesday’s sail-through by the USS Lassen within the 12-nautical-mile limit surrounding two Chinese-constructed islands in the South China Sea.

The warning came amid a series of reports that this week’s operation was not a “one-off” but the start of an ongoing program in which the US will continue military operations in the region under the bogus banner of “freedom of navigation.”

Chinese defence ministry spokesman Colonel Yang Yujun declared: “We would urge the US not to continue down the wrong path. But if the US side does continue, we will take all necessary measures according to need.” He emphasised that China’s determination to defend its national sovereignty and security interests was “rock solid.”

The US operations have nothing to do with ensuring the free flow of commerce, which China has no interest in preventing, but are aimed at placing pressure on Chinese defence facilities, particularly those located on the southern island of Hainan.

Having conducted its initial foray to challenge China, the US is looking for international support, both diplomatically and through the participation of other countries in its military operations. So far that support has been rather limited.

The German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is in China, said it was important that sea trade routes should remain open. But she did not offer direct support for the US actions. The purpose of her two-day visit is to promote economic ties, and included the signing of a deal with China to buy 130 aircraft manufactured by the European-based Airbus group,

“The territorial dispute in the South China Sea is a serious conflict. I am always a bit surprised why in this case multinational courts should not be an option for a solution,” Merkel said in a speech in Beijing.

The response from Japan was less than the US would have desired. According to a report in the *Diplomat*, two Japanese officials, chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga and defence minister Gen Nakatani, “declined to either support or criticise” the so-called freedom of navigation operation.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe did offer support later, saying the US action was in accordance with international law and Japan would “cooperate with the international community, including the United States, our ally.”

At this point that cooperation does not appear to include direct sea patrols by Japan. Such an action would enormously inflame the situation under conditions where one of the central planks of the Chinese nationalism promoted by the Beijing regime is hostility to Japan over its wartime role and conflicts over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea.

The director of defence policy at Japan’s Ministry of Defence, Koji Kano, told the *Diplomat* that from “the viewpoint of pure military affairs, what we can really do [in the South China Sea] is very modest.”

The US could well apply pressure in the longer term for that to change, however, because of the support it has given Japan in its territorial dispute with China over the Senkakus.

The British foreign ministry has been conspicuous by its silence on the issue. There are no statements posted on its web site, and there appear to be no comments from Prime Minister David Cameron or any other leading members of the government. Earlier this

month, Britain hosted a four-day state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping, during which major business deals were signed.

The British government and financial interests based in the City of London are striving to become a centre for Chinese finance following the decision last March to take part in China's Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. The decision was taken against opposition from the US, prompting criticism from the Obama administration of Britain's "constant accommodation" to China.

The absence of direct involvement by other major powers in the US operations means that the screws will be turned on Australia to take part.

Lowy Institute defence analyst Euan Graham told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that Australia would face pressure from the US to join the military patrols.

"This is actually going to usher in several weeks, if not longer, of continuous US air and surface presence around the islands, in which some of the allies might eventually be requested to take part," he said.

Australian National Security College professor Leszek Busynski supported this view. "It won't go away; it will simply continue ... there will be much more pressure upon Australia to get involved on the US side," he said.

Responding to an assessment of the strategic situation and reports, most notably in the Murdoch-owned *Wall Street Journal*, that Australian military planners had prepared for the possibility of a sail-through operation, a senior officer in China's People's Liberation Army warned Australia not to get involved.

Senior Colonel Li Jie said such operations could "only bring trouble." He said if the US continued its operations the possibility of a skirmish "could not be excluded."

"They infringed on China's sovereignty and went against China's maritime interests," Li said. "We will take strong measures to resolve this. It is not in Australia's interests to become involved."

A report published in yesterday's *Guardian* said while the confrontation was one of the "least noticed" global flashpoints between two of the world's major powers, it was one of the more important. "Neither side wants an outright conflict. But neither will give way,"

it noted.

The danger of a war between the two nuclear-armed powers arises from the logic of the situation itself, whatever the efforts, at least at this point, to avoid it.

For the US, what is at stake is its drive to assert its global hegemony. In economic decline and facing growing challenges from its rivals, it is seeking to use its military might to maintain its global position—in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Ukraine and in the Asia-Pacific, where the economic rise of China threatens to disrupt its post-war dominance of the region.

If the US backs down to Beijing, that would signify the virtual end of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," through which Washington is attempting to construct an anti-China alliance as it seeks to reduce China to a semi-colonial status.

On the other hand, the Chinese regime regards the issue as central to maintaining its rule. Having abandoned any claim to be establishing socialism or promoting social equality, the reactionary Beijing oligarchy has staked its continued existence on the promotion of China's economic rise, accompanied by an ever-more strident nationalism. It too is placed in a position where it cannot back down.

Both sides, however, believe that increased military pressure can force the other to retreat. Herein lies the potential for an armed clash, with the growing danger that it could lead to all-out war.

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