

# What is the BBC doing in the South China Sea?

By Peter Symonds  
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In an article published yesterday, BBC journalist Rupert Wingfield-Hayes gave a hyped-up account of a provocative flight that he had organised near Chinese-administered islets in the South China Sea. The BBC's actions are in line with the escalating US campaign to challenge Chinese territorial claims in the contested waters.

Wingfield-Hayes makes no bones about the purpose of his flight. "Our objective was two-fold," he declared. "To get as close as possible to the new Chinese-controlled islands in order to film construction work going on. And just as important, to see how the Chinese would react."

To justify this confrontational exercise, the BBC journalist insisted, based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), that China has no right to claim a 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around its artificial islands. "In other words, we would be able to fly our aircraft right up to China's new islands without breaking international laws, and China should not interfere with our flight."

In October, the US navy sent its guided missile destroyer, the USS Lassen, within the territorial limit surrounding two Chinese-controlled reefs—a move that threatened to provoke a clash with the Chinese military. Like the BBC, the US claimed to be acting in accordance with international law, even though the US has not ratified UNCLOS.

Wingfield-Hayes carried out the flight in a tiny, single-engine Cessna 206, knowing full well that China would object to the flight. Indeed, his editor told him that the Chinese embassy in London had contacted BBC to warn against visiting any Philippine territory contested by Beijing in the South China Sea.

Moreover, the BBC journalist had to overcome the reluctance of the two Philippine pilots who clearly

understood the provocative and thus potentially dangerous character of what they were being paid to do. As the aircraft approached the first two islands, the captain heeded the warnings from Chinese authorities to turn back.

Only after "hours of negotiation" were the two pilots convinced to take off again and fly within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef and ignore calls by the Chinese navy to change course. Wingfield-Hayes provided breathless commentary on the "lagoon teeming with ships large and small." He declared that "a Chinese fighter jet taking off from here could be over the Philippine coast in as little as eight or nine minutes." Never mind that there were no fighters on the islet.

While the BBC was using a small civilian aircraft, the whole operation is similar to that of a CNN news crew who were invited on board a US navy surveillance flight in May that approached Chinese claimed territory. The CNN report was a propaganda exercise designed to spotlight China's "massive" land reclamation and its "aggressive" actions in the South China Sea.

The purpose was to whip up fears and add to the Pentagon's pressure on the Obama administration for the so-called "freedom of navigation" operation that was eventually carried out by the USS Lassen.

Why the BBC would authorise such a venture and who else within the British foreign policy and military establishment was involved remains unclear. The challenge to Chinese territorial claims is at odds with the public position of the British government. In Beijing in August, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond spoke generally about the need for "freedom of navigation" and a "rules-based solution" to territorial disputes in Asia but avoided openly criticising China.

The most significant aspect of the BBC's reportage

was the inadvertent interception of a radio message from an Australian military aircraft near Mischief Reef. To date, the Australian government has, at least publicly, declined to join the US in its “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea but is under considerable pressure from Washington to do so.

Yet, the BBC recorded the following radio intercept: “China navy, China navy. We are an Australian aircraft exercising international freedom of navigation rights, in international airspace in accordance with the international civil aviation convention, and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Over.” According to Wingfield-Hayes, the message was repeated several times without hearing a Chinese response.

The Australian Defence Department blandly declared that a Royal Australian Air Force P-3 Orion aircraft had been conducting a routine patrol as part of Operation Gateway from November 25 to December 4. Based on its sources, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported Australian surveillance flights have been conducted for years in the South China Sea, but “their tempo has increased in the past 12 to 18 months.”

Apparently the military aircraft did not intrude within the 12-nautical-mile limit around Mischief Reef, but its message was clearly framed as a “freedom of navigation” challenge to the Chinese navy even though there was no reported response.

Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, made the point to the *Sydney Morning Herald* that “nothing is routine in the South China Sea right now because of the heightened state of tension in the region. Even the routine takes on a higher profile.”

Responsibility for these heightened tensions rests squarely with the United States which has intervened in the long-running territorial disputes in the South China Sea as a means of driving a wedge between China and its neighbours. Washington’s determination to confront Beijing over this issue is part of its broader “pivot to Asia” that is aimed at undermining Chinese influence within the region and asserting US dominance, by military force if necessary.

The Obama administration has been marshalling support from allies and strategic partners throughout the region and using “Chinese expansionism” to justify its own military build-up in the Asia Pacific. As well as

Australia, the Philippines and Vietnam, India and Japan have also taken an aggressive attitude towards Chinese claims. On Saturday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe issued a joint statement in New Delhi declaring “we stand strongly for ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight, and unimpeded maritime commerce” in the South China Sea.

Contrary to previous leaks, three US defence officials informed Reuters on Monday that another naval operation within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-controlled reefs was unlikely this month, but would be carried out in the New Year.

On the same day, Admiral Scott Swift, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, emphasised that China’s reclamation activities would not stop the US navy from continuing its “freedom of navigation” operations. He accused China of creating “so-called military zones” in the South China Sea and subjecting ships and aircraft “to superfluous warnings that threaten routine commercial and military operations.”

As the activities of the BBC’s news crew and the Australian P-3 Orion make clear, it is not so much China needlessly harassing passing aircraft, but rather deliberate attempts to provoke a response that feeds into US propaganda and the further escalation of tensions in what is already an explosive flash point for war.

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