

US admiral holds “frank” talks in Beijing over South China Sea

By Peter Symonds
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The confrontation between the US and China in the South China Sea has intensified after last week’s ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague against Beijing’s longstanding maritime claims in the strategic waters.

Admiral John Richardson, chief of US naval operations, met with his Chinese counterpart Admiral Wu Shengli in Beijing on Monday and told the media that talks were “frank and honest.” While discussing cooperation and collaboration, he stressed that “on the other hand we didn’t dodge any of the more contentious issues regarding dispositions in the South China Sea” and the court ruling.

In comments to the *Financial Times*, Richardson reiterated: “We would expect that [China and the Philippines] would abide by the ruling... the ruling gives all claimants to the South China Sea disputes a lot of reasons to stop and think.”

The appearance of even-handedness and support for the rule of international law is completely at odds with US actions. The US supported and assisted the Philippines in presenting its case to the arbitration court, yet Washington has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Since last October, US warships have deliberately intruded on three separate occasions within the 12-nautical-mile limit around Chinese islets in the South China Sea.

In the wake of the ruling in The Hague, Washington is mustering support throughout the region as it prepares to step up its military provocations in the South China Sea. Currently, US Vice President Joseph Biden is in Australia pushing for its military involvement in so-called “freedom of navigation” operations to challenge Chinese claims.

After talks with Richardson, China’s state-run

Xinhua news agency reported Admiral Wu as saying: “We will never stop our construction on the Nansha [Spratly] Islands halfway. The Nansha Islands are China’s inherent territory, and our necessary construction on the islands is reasonable, justified and lawful.”

Another senior Chinese admiral, Sun Jianguo, warned against further US “freedom of navigation” operations at a separate closed-door meeting. As reported by Reuters, Sun declared that China was the biggest beneficiary of freedom of navigation. “But China consistently opposes so-called military freedom of navigation which brings with it a military threat and which challenges and disrespects the international law of the sea. This kind of military navigation... could even play out in a disastrous way.”

China’s ambassador to London, Liu Xiaoming, was scathing of the arbitration court ruling, saying: “There is a big question about US behaviour in all of this... I think the arbitration case is politically motivated. On the one hand they send their warships and airplanes to challenge China’s sovereignty and on the other they think this might be a good case ... to try to humiliate China diplomatically, to damage China’s image and also give them a legal basis with which to challenge China.”

While pointing to the cynicism and hypocrisy of US actions, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime is playing directly into Washington’s hands by resorting to its own reckless military measures that only heighten the danger of conflict. The CCP, which represents the interests of a thin layer of super-rich oligarchs, is organically incapable of making any appeal to the working class, in China or internationally—the only social force able to halt the intensifying drive to war.

Xinhua reported that the Chinese air force has begun

air patrols over the South China Sea. Air force spokesman Shen Jinke said a “combat air patrol” took place “recently” involving bombers, fighters, “scouts” and tankers, and that such operations would become “regular practice.” Pictures were released of H-6 strategic bombers flying near the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

The American and international press highlighted the air patrol, as well as a new round of Chinese naval exercises close to China’s Hainan Island, but deliberately downplayed the activities of the US military, which routinely sends warships and warplanes into sensitive areas. The aircraft carrier, the USS Ronald Reagan, along with its full strike force of cruisers and destroyers, is currently in the South China Sea. Last weekend it hosted a group of senior Cambodian officials and military officers as part of Washington’s broader campaign to strengthen military ties throughout the region.

For the past five years, the Obama administration has exploited the territorial disputes in the South China Sea to drive a wedge between China and rival claimants, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam. This confrontational tactic is part of the broader US “pivot to Asia” aimed at undermining Chinese influence and preparing for war.

Newly-installed Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has raised concerns in Washington by taking what appeared to be a more equivocal stance toward Beijing than his predecessor and offering bilateral talks over territorial disputes. Philippine foreign secretary Perfecto Yasay yesterday effectively ruled out negotiations with China, after an informal meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi during last weekend’s summit of European and Asian leaders in Mongolia.

Yasay said he told Wang that China’s condition that negotiations should proceed “outside, or in disregard of” The Hague ruling was “not consistent with our constitution and our national interest.” He said the Chinese foreign minister had warned that the two countries “might be headed for a confrontation” if the Philippines insisted on discussions based on the ruling.

Over the past six months, the US has rapidly implemented its military basing agreement with the Philippines, known as the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The American

military now has access to five “agreed locations,” including four airfields and the Philippine army’s largest training camp. Two of the air bases are directly adjacent to the South China Sea. Duterte has already declared that he will honour Philippine commitments under EDCA.

A meeting of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers next week in Laos is likely to become the next diplomatic battleground in the South China Sea disputes. AFP reported last week that Laos and Cambodia, both of which are aligned with Beijing, had combined to block an ASEAN statement on the decision in The Hague.

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