

Vietnam bases long-range rocket launchers in South China Sea

By Peter Symonds
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Reuters revealed yesterday that Vietnam has in recent months secretly fortified several of its islands in the Spratly group in the South China Sea with mobile long-range rocket launchers. While the launchers are reportedly yet to be armed, it would take only days to make them operational with rockets capable of striking Chinese-held islets.

Hanoi's move is certain to further accelerate the arms race that is already underway and to heighten the risk that an incident or provocation could lead to military conflict. That danger has escalated in the wake of the ruling last month by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in favour of a US-backed case brought by the Philippines to challenge China's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

The Reuters report based on multiple diplomatic and military sources stated that Vietnam has shipped the launchers to five of its Spratly islands and carefully hidden them from aerial surveillance. The launchers are believed to be part of Vietnam's EXTRA rocket artillery system purchased recently from Israel.

According to Reuters, the EXTRA system uses targeting drones, is highly accurate up to 150 kilometres and can deliver a 150 kilogram warhead that can hit ships and land targets. Chinese installations on Subi, Fiery Cross and Mischief Reef would be well within the range of Vietnamese rockets.

Siemon Wezeman, a researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Institute, told the news agency: "When Vietnam acquired the EXTRA system, it was always thought that it would be deployed on the Spratlys... it is the perfect weapon for that."

Vietnam has denied the report but at the same time justified such measures. "It is within our legitimate right to self-defence to move any of our weapons to any area at any time within our sovereign territory,"

Deputy Defence Minister Senior Lieutenant-General Nyugen Chi Vinh told Reuters.

Washington's response has been very muted. US State Department spokeswoman Elizabeth Trudeau acknowledged that Washington was aware of the reports, adding pro-forma that the US "calls on all South China Sea claimants to avoid actions that build tensions" and "intensify efforts that find peaceful, diplomatic solutions to disputes."

Such remarks are utterly cynical. The Obama administration and its confrontational "pivot to Asia" against China bears central responsibility for transforming the South China Sea into a dangerous international flashpoint. Having declared in 2010 that it has "a national interest" in the South China Sea, Washington has actively encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam to more aggressively press their claims against China.

Obama conducted a three-day official visit to Vietnam in May during which he announced the full lifting of a four-decade-old arms embargo which was described in the media as a decisive step towards the "normalisation" of relations between the two countries. Hanoi undoubtedly informed Washington in advance of its decision to deploy the rocket launchers.

The US reaction to the Vietnamese rocket launchers is in marked contrast to its response to every step taken by China that can be construed as "militarisation." The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the think tank that has been central to Obama's "pivot to Asia," has just released satellite photographs of what it claims are reinforced hangars for military aircraft on Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief Reefs built since The Hague ruling.

While the CSIS acknowledged that apart from a brief visit by a military transport earlier this year, "there is

no evidence that Beijing has deployed military aircraft to these outposts.” That has not stopped the CSIS from doctoring its photographs to show the outlines of various Chinese warplanes parked in the hangers, or from declaring that their deployment was now likely.

The release of the photographs on Monday coincided with a visit to China by the commander of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Scott Swift, who took the opportunity to again publicly criticise Beijing for destabilising the South China Sea.

Speaking on Tuesday, Swift referred to the hangers, saying: “What doesn’t reduce tensions are these reports of this continued militarisation of the islands, if that is indeed the case.” He acknowledged that it was not clear if the hangers would be used for military aircraft, but added: “That increases the angst and the uncertainty—that lack of transparency—that is generally destabilising.”

Washington and its allies have repeatedly called for greater “transparency” on the part of China—a standard that is not applied to increased US activities in the South China Sea and neighbouring countries. The US has not only boosted its naval presence but also secured and begun to implement a new military basing agreement with the Philippines as well as strengthening military ties with Vietnam and other South East Asian countries.

Swift also criticised the announcement by China and Russia to hold joint naval exercises next month in the South China Sea, declaring that the choice of location was not conducive “to increasing the stability within the region.” Over the past year, the US Navy has been involved in multiple joint war games in or near the South China Sea.

The Pentagon has also carried out three provocative “freedom of navigation” operations by sending a destroyer within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea. Swift foreshadowed further naval provocations in the wake of The Hague decision, saying that he was confident that US warships could continue to sail close to China’s islands.

Swift warned Beijing again against declaring an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea which he declared would be “very destabilising from a military perspective.” When China announced an ADIZ over the East China Sea in

November 2013, the US immediately dispatched B-52 bombers into the area to make clear that the US had no intention of abiding by China’s declaration.

The Pentagon’s determination to maintain its military presence in waters and in the skies immediately adjacent to the Chinese mainland is just part of the US military build-up taking place throughout the Asia-Pacific in preparation for a potential war with China. Its AirSea Battle strategy envisages a massive aerial and missile attack on Chinese military and civilian facilities, supplemented by a naval blockade of the mainland, to cripple the Chinese economy.

Swift made his comments while visiting the northern Chinese port of Qingdao, supposedly as part of US efforts to build trust and understanding between the navies of the two countries. It coincided with a visit by a US guided-missile destroyer, USS Benfold, to the same port—the first such visit by an American warship since The Hague ruling.

Swift’s remarks simply underscore the fact that Washington has no intention of building better military relations and intends to intensify its confrontation with Beijing in the wake of legal decision through every means. The US aims at nothing less than the subordination of China to American economic and strategic interests, even if that risks a disastrous war.

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