

US seizes on missile allegations to ramp up threats against China

By Mike Head
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Unsources and unverified United States intelligence reports last week that China had installed short-range missiles on islets in the South China Sea have been exploited by the corporate media and the Trump administration to intensify the US pressure on Beijing amid aggressive American trade war demands and a looming US-North Korean summit.

Despite the lack of any evidence, or confirmation from Beijing, the White House quickly issued threats against China. Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee-Sanders said last Thursday that the United States had “raised concerns” with the Chinese. “We’re well aware of China’s militarisation of the South China Sea,” she said. “There will be near-term and long-term consequences, and we’ll certainly keep you up to date.”

The reports first surfaced on the American business channel CNBC. Citing unnamed “sources with direct knowledge of US intelligence,” it reported that Beijing had installed anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles on three reefs in the Spratly Islands in the past 30 days. It claimed that the anti-ship cruise missiles could strike vessels within 340 nautical miles (630 kilometres) of the reefs, while the surface-to-air missiles could hit aircraft, drones and cruise missiles within 180 nautical miles.

China did not confirm the allegations. Instead, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said on Thursday: “Those who do not intend to be aggressive have no need to be worried or scared.” The next day, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said the deployment of “necessary national defense facilities” to the islands were within China’s rights to safeguard its “sovereignty and security.”

Hua pointed to escalating US military activities near islands that China controls, which have included

provocative “freedom of navigation operations” within the 12-nautical mile territorial zones around them.

China’s island facilities had “nothing to do with militarisation,” she told reporters at her daily press briefing. “The US constantly strengthens its military deployment in the South China Sea ... they should consider the consequence of this. We think the US should reflect on its wrong doing.”

The CNBC allegations followed an April 30 report by Stratfor, a US military-intelligence-linked company, claiming that China had installed “electric warfare” equipment on one of the islets, Mischief Reef, supposedly posing a threat to US and allied aircraft and military operations.

China also flatly denied a report that Chinese troops were targeting American flight crews near a US base in the east African nation of Djibouti using a high-powered laser. The *Wall Street Journal* had called the unverified incidents “a new show of Chinese harassment of the US military at a time of heightened tensions between the nations.”

The Trump administration’s response to the South China Sea allegations is another indication of an increasingly aggressive US push against China, both militarily and economically, following the imposition of tariffs on Chinese imports and the appointment of two prominent anti-China “hawks” to the White House—John Bolton as national security adviser and Peter Navarro as trade adviser.

There has been a recent elevation of alarming accusations against China. Admiral Philip Davidson, nominated to take charge of the US Pacific Command after the retirement of Admiral Harry Harris, told his confirmation hearing last month: “China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States.”

In written testimony to the US Senate Armed Services Committee, Davidson declared: “The PLA [People’s Liberation Army] will be able to use these bases to challenge US presence in the region, and any forces deployed to the islands would easily overwhelm the military forces of any other South China Sea-claimants.”

US ally Australia was quick to join the latest charges against China, despite the lack of verification. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said if the missile reports were correct, the “Australian government would be concerned,” saying: “This would be contrary to China’s stated aspiration that it would not militarise these features.”

Australian Labor Party foreign affairs spokeswoman Senator Penny Wong went further, stating: “We do not support greater militarisation in the region that would seek to undermine the regional power balance, and result in any sort of arms race.” She also accused China of developing intermediate-range missiles, “reportedly capable of striking Guam.”

Three Australian warships last month travelled through the South China Sea and were contacted by the Chinese navy in what Australian navy sources initially described as a routine query about the Australian intentions in the waters. International media reports later inflated this April 15 radio contact into a “Chinese challenge” to the Australian vessels.

Some governments in the region, however, downplayed the missile allegations. On Friday, a spokesman for the Philippines said: “With our recently developed close relationship and friendship with China, we are confident that those missiles are not directed at us.” He added that the country “would explore all diplomatic means to address this issue.”

The Philippines has territorial claims in the Spratly Islands but President Rodrigo Duterte’s administration, which wants Chinese aid and investment, has sought to strike a bilateral agreement with Beijing over the disputed areas.

Washington’s bellicose reaction to the missile reports came as Trump prepared to announce details of a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, a summit that could either lead to a US attempt to turn North Korea against China or to a US military assault on North Korea, which has borders with both China and Russia.

The missile allegations were published on the eve of two days of high-level US-China trade talks in Beijing, which broke up without any resolution. Having already imposed tariffs on Chinese goods, Washington demanded extraordinary concessions that challenge core aspects of China’s economic system, including an end to government support for the “Made in China 2025” program to develop advanced technologies.

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