

US and Chinese warships narrowly avoid collision in South China Sea

By Patrick O'Connor
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A provocative US Navy “freedom of navigation operation” in the South China Sea on Sunday nearly resulted in an outright collision between American and Chinese warships. The incident highlights the escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing, with any misstep or accident in East Asia’s sea and airspace now threatening to trigger a full-scale war between the rival nuclear-armed powers.

The USS Decatur, a guided missile destroyer, sailed through the South China Sea on a ten-hour patrol, deliberately sailing within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-claimed territory, including the Gaven and Johnson Reefs. These are part of the disputed Spratly Islands, different parts of which are occupied by the military forces of China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

A spokesman for the US Pacific Fleet, Nate Christensen, blamed China for the incident. He stated: “At approximately 0830 local time on September 30, a PRC [People’s Republic of China] Luyang destroyer approached USS Decatur in an unsafe and unprofessional manoeuvre in the vicinity of Gaven Reef in the South China Sea. The PRC destroyer conducted a series of increasingly aggressive manoeuvres accompanied by warnings for Decatur to depart the area. The PRC destroyer approached within 45 yards [41 metres] of Decatur’s bow, after which Decatur manoeuvred to prevent a collision.”

Two rival warships approaching one another at a range of just 45 yards is enormously dangerous. According to the *Diplomat*’s Stephen Stashwick, when US warships manoeuvre together in close formation, they rarely have less than 1,000 yards between them. Even when two ships transfer fuel or munitions to one another while underway, the typical distance between them is 50-60 yards.

Hawaii Pacific University professor and former US Navy captain Carl Shuster told CNN that the close encounter between the USS Decatur and the Chinese Luyang would have given each ship’s captain just seconds to react to any change in course. Precise rudder and engine speed corrections would have been required, he explained, with even a slight miscalculation risking collision. “This was very dangerous,” Shuster said. “Captains get very nervous when ships get closer than 1,000 yards.”

Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Wu Qian said the Chinese navy ship conducted an identification and warning process. He stated yesterday: “The US has been repeatedly sending warships to the islands and the adjacent waters in the South China Sea, which has seriously threatened China’s sovereignty and safety. The Chinese military will resolutely perform its defence duties and continue to take all necessary measures to safeguard our sovereignty and the regional peace and stability.”

The latest, and to date most dangerous, so-called US freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea comes six months after the last such publicised operation, when three US warships sailed past the disputed Paracel Islands.

The Trump administration ordered last Sunday’s operation amid heightened tensions between Washington and Beijing. Last month, the US imposed a 10 percent tariff on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods, with the rate to increase to 25 percent in January. The move marked an escalation of the Trump administration’s economic warfare measures that threaten to fracture the world economy into rival trade and currency blocs, as occurred in the 1930s.

As in that period, these tariffs and other measures are now inextricably connected to preparations for military

conflict.

US imperialism is steadily escalating geopolitical and military pressures against China. On September 20, Washington imposed sanctions on a Chinese military unit and its director for purchasing military equipment from a Russian weapons exporter. Beijing responded by cancelling trade talks and a scheduled visit to Washington by Vice-Premier Liu He. Chinese Admiral Shen Jinlong was also recalled from the US, ahead of a scheduled Pentagon meeting with his American counterpart, Chief of Naval Operations John Richardson. In addition, China refused a US Navy request for one of its warships to dock in Hong Kong.

On September 24, the Trump administration announced a \$330 million arms sale to Taiwan, regarded by China as a renegade province, including parts for fighter jets. The following day, the Pentagon ordered nuclear-capable B-52 strategic bombers to fly over both the South China Sea and the similarly contested East China Sea. Chinese officials responded by publicly denouncing “provocative actions of US military aircraft.”

The *New York Times* reported last Sunday that Beijing had “cancelled an important annual security meeting planned for mid-October with Defence Secretary Jim Mattis in Beijing, saying a senior Chinese military officer would not be available to meet him.” The *Times* commented: “The decision to withdraw from the high-level encounter, known as the diplomatic and security dialogue, was the latest sign of bad blood between China and the United States, and capped a week of tit-for-tat actions by both nations as they settled into a newly chilly relationship.”

The day after this report, the Trump administration appeared to attempt to claim that it, rather than Beijing, was responsible for the cancellation. An anonymous defence official told CNBC that the Pentagon had ordered Mattis’s scheduled trip to China to be called off.

What is unfolding emerges out of the highly reckless course unveiled last December by President Donald Trump in his administration’s National Security Strategy, amplified in January by Mattis with the release of the new National Defence Strategy. These documents outlined US imperialism’s active preparations for military confrontation of China and Russia in order to reassert US global hegemony. “Great

power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security,” Mattis declared, before threatening: “If you challenge us, it will be your longest and worst day.”

This week’s near-collision between the USS Decatur and the Chinese Luyang demonstrates that a catastrophic war between American imperialism and its rivals is not some distant possibility. The working class in every country now confronts the danger of a global nuclear conflict as a direct and immediate threat.

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