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# China protests ‘provocation’ after US sends two warships near South China Sea islands

Wednesday 27 June 2018, by [KOH Collin](#), [LU Zhenhua](#), [Reuters](#), [XIN Zhou](#) (Date first published: 27 May 2018).

**The US officials said the Higgins guided-missile destroyer and the Antietam, a guided-missile cruiser, came within 12 nautical miles of the Paracel Islands, and China said it has responded to the ‘provocation’.**

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In a statement, the Chinese ministry said it has sent ships and aircraft to warn the US vessels and order them to leave, after it spotted their entrance into Chinese waters.

Two US Navy warships sailed near South China Sea islands claimed by China on Sunday, two US officials said, in a move likely to anger Beijing as US President Donald Trump seeks its continued cooperation on North Korea.

The US officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the Higgins guided-missile destroyer and the Antietam, a guided-missile cruiser, came within 12 nautical miles of the Paracel Islands, among a string of islets, reefs and shoals over which China has territorial disputes with its neighbours.

The US military vessels carried out manoeuvring operations near Tree, Lincoln, Triton and Woody islands in the Paracels, one of the officials said.

The Chinese defence ministry said the move has “undermined the strategic trust between the two countries’ military forces” but China has “unswerving” determination to safeguard its sovereignty and national security.

China’s foreign ministry also issued a statement, condemning the US.

“We express strong dissatisfaction and resolute opposition to the U.S. side’s actions, and we strongly urge the U.S. to immediately stop such provocative actions that infringe upon China’s sovereignty and threaten China’s security,” the foreign ministry said in a statement.

The sailing moves come days after US withdrew an invitation to China to attend a major US-hosted naval drill.

The Rim of the Pacific exercise, known as RIMPAC and previously attended by China, was billed as the world’s largest international maritime exercise and held every two years in Hawaii in June and July.

RIMPAC enabled the armed forces of the world's two largest economies to directly engage with each other.

It was viewed by both countries as a way to ease tensions and reduce the risk of miscalculation should they meet under less friendly circumstances.

The Pentagon said the withdrawal of the invitation was in response to what it sees as Beijing's militarisation of islands in the disputed South China Sea, a strategic waterway claimed in large part by Beijing.

China's Defence Ministry said the United States had "ignored the facts and hyped up the so-called 'militarisation' of the South China Sea", using it as an excuse to uninvite China.

China's island-building programme in the South China Sea has sparked concern around the region and in Washington about Chinese intentions.

Last weekend China's air force landed bombers on islands in the sea as part of a training exercise, triggering concern from Vietnam and the Philippines.

The ministry reiterated that its building of defence facilities was to protect the country's sovereignty and legitimate rights, and had nothing to do with militarisation.

**Zhou Xin**, Reuters

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<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2148002/us-warships-sail-near-south-china-sea-islands-move>

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## **China angers US after landing warplanes, including H-6K bomber, on South China Sea reef**

### **Pentagon condemns military activity as 'raising tensions and destabilising the region'**

A Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force strategic bomber landed for the first time on an island reef in the South China Sea, something the US Department of Defence said "serves to raise tensions and destabilise the region".

A spokesman for the Pentagon, Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Logan, called the exercise an act of "China's continued militarisation of disputed features in the South China Sea".

The Chinese air force said in a statement on its website that several bombers, including the H-6K, its most advanced, had conducted take-off and landing training on an island reef, though it did not specify which one.

Hong Kong-based military observer Song Zhongping said the aircraft landed on Woody Island - or Yongxing in Mandarin - the largest of the Paracel group and southernmost of the islands claimed by Beijing in the disputed waterway.

The aim of the exercise was to strengthen China's military presence in the region, after the US air

force flew B-52 bombers there during a so-called routine training mission in April, which Beijing described as “provocative move”, Song said.

The air force said the latest exercise had elevated its abilities of “reaching its full territory, assaulting in full time and space, and striking in full scope”.

Military expert Wang Minliang was quoted in the statement as saying the bombers’ training mission was necessary “to enhance the real combat ability against all kinds of security threats in the sea”.

Song, who works as a military commentator for Phoenix TV, said the next mission for the long-range H-6K strategic bomber, which is reported to have a combat range of up to 3,500km, might be to land on China’s furthest outlying artificial islands.

“To boost China’s military presence and give the PLA better control in the region, it’s possible the H-6K will fly further in the future, to the airstrips on Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief reefs [in the Spratly Islands],” he said.

Each of the three reefs features an airstrip, high-frequency radar and other monitoring equipment, and lighthouses.

“In the future, the air force will conduct regular landings on Woody and the man-made islands, although they are not yet developed enough to be permanent military bases,” Song said.

*People’s Daily*, the Chinese Communist Party’s official newspaper, on Friday posted a video on its Twitter account of the H-6K bomber’s training programmes.

Bonnie Glaser, a China security expert at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, agreed that the location of the H-6K landing was Woody Island, which is also home to the administrative headquarters of the Sansha city government.

Beijing established Sansha, a prefecture-level city in Hainan province, in 2012 to administer the Paracel, Spratly and Zhongsha island groups, and their surrounding waters.

“I believe this is the first time a bomber has landed in the South China Sea,” Glaser said. “No doubt the H-6K will soon land on an island in Spratly, as the hangers there are built to accommodate bombers.”

Earlier this month, the White House said it was prepared to take measures against the militarisation of the South China Sea, after Beijing reportedly installed new missiles on outposts in the Spratlys - known as Nansha in Mandarin - that are also claimed by Vietnam and the Philippines.

“We’re well aware of China’s militarisation of the South China Sea. We’ve raised concerns directly with the Chinese about this, and there will be near-term and long-term consequences,” White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said.

US network CNBC reported that the Chinese military had installed anti-ship and air-to-air defences on the islands, citing sources close to US intelligence.

China’s foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying refused to confirm or deny the deployment.

“China’s peaceful construction in the Spratly archipelago, including the deployment of necessary national defence facilities, is aimed at protecting China’s sovereignty and security,” she said. “Those who don’t intend to violate [this sovereignty] have no reason to worry.”

The US Navy itself frequently sends warships and aircraft carriers to patrol the area.

“China has to realise that they’ve benefited from the free navigation of the sea, and the US Navy has been the guarantor of that,” Pentagon spokeswoman Dana White said. “We will continue to do our operations.”

**Zhenhua Lu**, US correspondent

*Additional reporting by Minnie Chan*

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<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2146870/chinas-air-force-says-its-h-6k-strategic-bomber-took>

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: beijing rebuked over reef landings.

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## **China ‘installs cruise missiles on South China Sea outposts’**

**Weapons have been deployed in the disputed Spratly Islands, according to a TV report, citing US intelligence**

The move, if confirmed, would mark the first Chinese missile deployments in the Spratly Islands where several of its Asian neighbours, including Vietnam and Taiwan, have rival claims.

CNBC quoted unnamed sources with direct knowledge of American intelligence reports as saying that US assessments indicated the missiles were moved to Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef within the past 30 days.

The US Defence Department, which opposes China’s installation of military facilities on outposts it has built up in the South China Sea, refused to comment.

China’s defence ministry also did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Beijing has made no mention of any missile deployments, but says its military facilities in the Spratlys are purely defensive, and that it can do what it likes on its own territory.

Greg Poling, a South China Sea expert at Washington’s Centre for Strategic and International Studies, said deploying missiles on the outposts would be significant.

“These would be the first missiles in the Spratlys, either surface-to-air, or anti-ship,” he said.

He added that such deployments were expected as China built missile shelters on the reefs last year and had already deployed similar missile systems on Woody Island further to the north.

Poling said it would be a major step on China’s road to dominating the South China Sea, a key global trade route.

“Before this, if you were one of the other claimants ... you knew that China was monitoring your every move. Now you will know that you’re operating inside Chinese missile range. That’s a pretty strong, if implicit, threat,” he said.

CNBC said the YJ-12B anti-ship cruise missiles allowed China to strike vessels within 295 nautical miles. It said the HQ-9B long-range surface-to-air missiles could target aircraft, drones and cruise missiles within 160 nautical miles.

US Admiral Philip Davidson, nominated to head US Pacific Command, said last month China’s “forward operating bases” in the South China Sea appeared complete.

“The only thing lacking are the deployed forces,” he said. Once these were added, “China will be able to extend its influence thousands of miles to the south and project power deep into Oceania”.

Davidson said China could use the bases to challenge the US regional presence and “would easily overwhelm the military forces of any other South China Sea claimants”.

“China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States,” he said.

Beijing explores energy-rich area of South China Sea where ‘flammable ice’ – a potential new gas source – is found

Beijing’s deployment of HQ-9B and YJ-12B missiles is aimed at boosting its air and maritime defences in the region as the US steps up freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and patrols there, according to Song Zhongping, a former member of the PLA’s Second Artillery Corps.

“The US FONOPs are challenging China’s sovereignty and its historical domination in the region ... so Beijing faces two major threats – from the sea and from the air,” said Song, who is now a military commentator for Phoenix Television in Hong Kong.

“In order to protect its national interests and its belt and road [trade and infrastructure strategy] Beijing also needs to strengthen its military build-up in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos so that its navy and air force can go further afield.”

Song said having missiles on the artificial islands was part of the Chinese government’s goal of building a strong navy and air force.

“Missile deployments on the Spratly and Paracel Islands will help the Chinese military to better control both the sea and the air in the region,” he added.

## **Reuters**

*Additional reporting by Minnie Chan*

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<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2144456/china-installs-cruise-missiles-south-china-sea-outposts>

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## **How China is quietly increasing its ability to wage war at sea**

### **More intensive naval training is steadily improving the navy's combat readiness, writes Collin Koh.**

Most notably, a large naval deployment was observed on satellite imagery in late March - about 40 vessels including what appeared to be the aircraft carrier Liaoning.

It was followed not far astern by a slightly smaller combat support ship, plus other vessels including submarines and two distinct three-aircraft aerial formations.

Clearly, there should be no dispute among naval observers that the formation in which the fleet sailed amounted to what can be termed a photo and PR exercise.

Some dismissed the manoeuvres as a propaganda exercise designed to flaunt the navy's muscle, but others cautioned this could imply the PLA Navy has intensified its peacetime combat readiness and training.

Neither side is wrong, for both schools of thought encapsulate the meaning of gunboat diplomacy - the limited threat or use of naval force for the attainment of limited political objectives.

Usually some form of photo opportunity is obligatory on major naval exercises and examples are bountiful. Examples include Exercise Malabar in July last year, with all three carriers of the US, Indian and Japanese navies sailing in formation with fighter jets blazing above, plus the Thailand-hosted Asean Multinational Naval Exercise late last year, to name just a few.

The latest huge naval turnout in the South China Sea appears no different. But would it make sense for China to burn expensive fuel, taking so many warships and their crews away from other tasks, only to stage a photo op?

Focusing on the apparent propaganda value of the manoeuvres solely based on the satellite pictures diverts one's attention away from a more pertinent phenomenon. That is, while much focus has been on the Chinese coastguard and fabled maritime militia in the South China Sea and in other East Asian maritime flashpoints involving China, the PLA Navy has been gradually improving its ability to fight in a high-intensity war. There is nothing radically new about this. The navy has been steadily building new ships over the years. Just over the past two years alone, over 40 new vessels were commissioned or launched.

But combat capability does not just emanate from inducting new hardware. Clearly the navy understands the value of honing its combat readiness through intense training. While one could question the various other factors that contribute to combat readiness - for example, command and control protocols - the fact of the matter is that in recent years, corresponding with the rate of naval shipbuilding efforts, there has also been an upswing in the navy's training and exercise regimen.

New hardware allows the fleet to maintain a higher level of readiness compared to using older ships simply because of reduced maintenance requirements. Suffice to say, for now the navy has the luxury of utilising its new-built fleet of vessels to intensify training - more sea time for its crews,

which translates into more familiarity with operating their vessels under varying conditions and getting acquainted with the strengths and weaknesses of their combat systems.

Until laggard maintenance schedules catch up eventually, which nobody can be certain of, one should assume that the navy will remain fixated with building a more proficient fleet capable of undertaking large-scale operations.

Also noteworthy is the growing amount of inter-fleet coordination. This is also nothing new - the PLA Navy South Sea, East Sea and North Sea fleets have mobilised assets to train with each other in the past. What is different this time around and will be in the future is that such inter-fleet exchanges will take place on a larger scale thanks to new ships and equipment available. To add to that, the navy has also been honing its interoperability with both the coastguard and maritime militia.

If one takes seriously the incessant exhortations from Beijing's political elites to "train as you fight", large-scale naval manoeuvres similar to the one observed in late March would plausibly not be a one-off event, but represent a new normal, made possible only as the navy gains new capabilities and its personnel acquire new-found confidence.

That could mean two things for peace and stability for the South China Sea and Southeast Asia.

On the one hand, a more capable PLA Navy might contribute towards the promotion of defence diplomacy. On the other, a more capable and overconfident PLA Navy may serve more as a tool of coercion. A navy is such a flexible instrument for foreign policy that it can well perform either of these tasks. It depends on how the navy's political masters choose to utilise this capability.

The increasing power of China's navy and its enhanced combat readiness should not be kept off everyone's radar. It remains a force with an increasingly large shadow, ready to weigh in at any point of confrontation at sea with Beijing's rivals. While not overexaggerating this threat, we should ignore this growing Chinese naval challenge at our peril.

### **Collin Koh**

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