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By Ben McGrath
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China launches missiles into South China Sea in response to US provocations

China on Wednesday launched at least two ballistic missiles that it described as “aircraft carrier killers” during naval exercises in the South China Sea. The testing of these missiles is a response to military and other provocative measures carried out in the region by the United States and its allies.

The increasing militarization of the region significantly heightens the danger of a global conflagration, which is ultimately driven by US imperialism.

The Chinese military fired its DF-21D and the DF-26B missiles from Zhejiang Province in the southeast and Qinghai Province in the northwest respectively. Both missiles landed in the South China Sea between Hainan and the disputed Paracel Islands. The US military stated that China fired at least four missiles.

The DF-21D has a range of 1,800 kilometers and is the world’s first anti-ship ballistic missile, according to Beijing. The DF-26B has a longer range of 4,000 kilometers and can carry a nuclear payload. China said it is also capable of striking naval vessels, and could reach the US military base on Guam. It was formally unveiled earlier this month and is an updated variant of a missile first officially displayed at China’s 2015 Victory Day parade marking the end of World War II.

The launches took place a day after Beijing accused the US military of flying a U-2 spy plane over Chinese naval drills in the Bohai Sea, deliberately entering a no-fly zone. China began holding live-fire drills in the sea, located near Beijing, last Monday and plans to continue until September 30.

China's Defense Ministry demanded the US "stop this kind of provocative behavior and take actual steps to safeguard peace and stability in the region." It also warned that such flights could trigger misunderstandings or an "unexpected incident," namely a military exchange.

In response, Washington admitted that it had conducted a U-2 flight in the Indo-Pacific region, but dismissed Beijing's concerns, saying: "Pacific Air Forces personnel will continue to fly and operate anywhere international law allows, at the time and tempo of our choosing."

A source close to the Chinese military told the *South China Morning Post*: "This [the missile launches] is China's response to the potential risks brought by the increasingly frequent incoming US warplanes and military vessels in the South China Sea."

In addition to drills in the South China and Bohai Seas, China is conducting exercises in the Yellow Sea and near the Taiwan Strait. The drills in the South China Sea ran from Monday to today. Those in the Yellow Sea and near Taiwan took place from Saturday to Wednesday.

The US Defense Department hypocritically chastised Beijing in a statement Thursday, saying: "Conducting military exercises over disputed territory in the South China Sea is counterproductive to easing tensions and maintaining stability."

In recent weeks, the US has held its own war games involving two aircraft carriers in the South China Sea, as well as exercises in neighboring waters with India near the Malacca Strait and with Japan and Australia in the Philippine Sea.

In addition, the US is now conducting its biannual Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise near Hawaii alongside nine other nations—the largest naval exercise in the world. It is running from August 17 to 30. China had previously been invited to take part in 2014 and 2016, but had its invitation revoked in 2018 and is again absent this year.



A Chinese warship conducting a live-fire drill in 2015 [Credit: Chinese military]

Washington is also applying additional economic pressure to Beijing. On Wednesday, the Trump administration placed sanctions on 24 Chinese companies, supposedly for their roles in constructing artificial islets in the South China Sea. They have been banned from purchasing American goods. It is the first time Chinese companies have been sanctioned for their involvement in the territorial dispute.

For all its denunciations of supposed Chinese aggression, Washington has for decades sought to enforce its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. This included the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan, brutal wars against Korea and Vietnam, and support for right-wing dictators. Over the past decade, the US has enflamed longstanding but minor territorial disputes and ramped up tensions under the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia." Under the Trump administration, it is now working to further militarily and economically confront China.

This agenda is accelerating as the US ruling class attempts to deflect growing domestic anger over its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the developing economic crisis affecting millions of workers and youth. The Trump administration has accused Beijing of responsibility for the pandemic, with no evidence whatsoever, while pressing China over dangerous flashpoints like Taiwan.

In an interview on August 23, Trump issued a thinly-veiled threat that if Beijing attempted to assert control over Taiwan, Washington would launch an attack on China. "I think it's an inappropriate place to talk about it, but China knows what I'm going to do. China knows," he stated.

Beijing considers Taiwan a renegade province and the US still formally adheres to the "One China" policy that does not recognize Taiwan as an independent country.

Not to be out done, Democratic Party presidential candidate Joe Biden is offering himself as a more belligerent option to Wall Street in dealing with China.

The most recent US military spending bill, which has been passed by both the House and Senate in Congress, contains a clause calling for the navy to conduct port calls in Taiwan with two hospital ships, the USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy.

China has made clear that if a US military vessel stops in Taiwan, it would trigger a military response. As such, the decision to use medical vessels is a dangerous and calculated flirtation with this red line.

Washington's provocations throughout the region risk the outbreak of a disastrous war with China that could quickly spiral into a nuclear conflict. The US is seeking to eliminate an economic competitor and return China to a semi-colonial state.

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