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US prepares new military provocations in South China Sea

By Peter Symonds

23 May 2015

Just days after a CNN news crew joined a P8-A Poseidon surveillance aircraft over a Chinese-administered islet in the South China Sea, it is clear the flight was a calculated provocation aimed at ramping up pressure on China. American officials immediately exploited the reportage to underline Washington's determination to challenge Chinese territorial claims in these key strategic waters, regardless of the consequences.



A Navy P-8 Poseidon aircraft

US surveillance flights, along with naval patrols, have become routine since January when Washington initiated its scare campaign over Chinese reclamation activities in the South China

Sea. But the presence of a news team for the first time on Wednesday, providing breathless coverage of the flight, along with the unprecedented release of video footage, focussed public attention in the US and internationally on the issue.

Just like the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the media is once again being “embedded” as the propaganda arm of the military as the US prepares for war with China. CNN made no pretence of independent reporting, painting China as the villain engaged in “a massive military build-up” on the islets—an early warning radar station on Fiery Cross Reef—and dramatically highlighting warnings from a Chinese radio operator appealing for the aircraft to “please go away... to avoid misunderstanding.”

Responding to the CNN report, Pentagon spokesman Colonel Steve Warren not only declared that the present “routine flights” would continue, but could in the future breach the 12-mile territorial limit around Chinese islets and reefs. While the Poseidon aircraft had not done so on Wednesday, he said, “that would be the next step.”

“We don’t recognise those islands as anything other than international space,” Warren remarked. “For us to fly through that, we wouldn’t see that as a change in the way we do business.” He acknowledged, however, that the US had not flown over Chinese claimed territory in the South China Sea in the past 20 years.

Warren’s comments confirm media reports over the past fortnight that US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter has instructed the Pentagon to draw up options to fly American aircraft or send warships within the 12-mile limit. As Washington is well aware, such reckless actions have the potential to provoke conflict.

The CNN report featured the comments of former CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell who warned “there’s a real risk, when you have this kind of confrontation, for something bad happening.” Asked about the danger of war between the US and China, he declared that while it was “not in their interests, [and] not in our interests,” nevertheless “absolutely, it’s a risk.”

In what can only be interpreted as a military threat to Beijing, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Russel told a press briefing on Thursday that the reconnaissance flight was “entirely appropriate” and the US would “continue to fully exercise” its right to operate in international waters and airspace. “Nobody in their right mind is going to try to stop the US navy from operating—that would not be a good bet,” he said.

The hypocrisy and cynicism involved is staggering. The US only began to assert its “right” to “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea in 2010, as the Obama administration prepared to unveil its “pivot to Asia” aimed at undermining China and encircling it militarily. Washington’s intervention into long-running and complex territorial disputes has transformed the region into a dangerous flashpoint.

While berating China for its land reclamation, the US remains silent about similar activities by South East Asian countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines on islets and reefs under their

administration. No one in Washington is suggesting that the Pentagon is about to challenge the 12-mile limit around disputed territory controlled by Manila and Hanoi.

Indeed, one of the main US aims has been to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours and to establish closer military ties throughout South East Asia. Washington has encouraged both the Philippines and Vietnam to more aggressively assert their territorial claims in the South China Sea against China.

Last year the US and the Philippines signed an Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement that will provide American forces with virtually unlimited access to military bases in its former colony. Indeed, relations are already close, demonstrated by the fact that on Wednesday the Poseidon aircraft flew out from Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

The decision to ask the CNN news team to accompany the flight is part of carefully choreographed preparations for war with China. It came days after US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Beijing to insist China back off its land reclamation, and just prior to the appearance of Defence Secretary Ashton Carter at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore next weekend where he is likely to confront Chinese military officials.

Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) analyst Mira Rapp Hooper explained this week: “What you’re seeing by the US is a calculated, transparent effort to reveal the situation in all its details and potential dangers.”

The CSIS is heavily involved with the US military in implementing the “pivot to Asia.” Not accidentally, as the Obama administration escalated tensions with China this year over the South China Sea, the think tank established the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) headed by Hooper. Following the CNN report, using its own close Pentagon ties, the AMTI website released its own exclusive video of US surveillance flights.

There is no doubt Washington intends to continue its provocative actions. When China announced an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November 2013, the US immediately challenged the zone by flying nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into the area unannounced. US plans to fly military aircraft within the 12-mile limit around the Chinese islets are far more reckless. Beijing regards the South China Sea, which is adjacent to major Chinese mainland naval bases, as critical to its strategic interests.

Reacting to the CNN flight, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei declared: “Such action is likely to cause an accident, it is very irresponsible and dangerous and detrimental to regional peace and stability. We express our strong dissatisfaction, we urge the US to strictly abide by international law and international rules and refrain from taking any risky and provocative actions.” He warned that China would closely monitor the situation and “take the necessary and appropriate measures” to secure its islands and reefs in the South China Sea.

US imperialism’s overriding aim is not to secure “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. Rather the South China Sea has become the pretext for a show of force intended to bully

Beijing into accepting US hegemony in Asia. For this, Washington is preparing for, and willing to risk, war.