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War danger grows following new US provocation in South China Sea

By James Cogan

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On Tuesday, in an open military provocation, the Obama administration authorised the US Navy to send a guided-missile destroyer into the 12-nautical-mile territorial zone surrounding Chinese-held Fiery Cross Reef, located in the Spratly Island chain in the South China Sea. The operation was carried out on the fraudulent pretext of “freedom of navigation”—that is, the assertion by US imperialism that it has the right to send its military forces anywhere it chooses, at any time, in Chinese-claimed waters.

Yesterday’s action achieved its real aim of ratcheting up military tensions in the Asia-Pacific. The Chinese military responded by scrambling at least two J-11 fighter jets. Chinese pilots reportedly issued warnings to the American destroyer, the USS William P. Lawrence, to leave Chinese territory or face engagement. The Chinese Navy dispatched three warships, but there have been no reports that the rival vessels came into contact.

These developments represent a sharp escalation. The US Navy carried out a “freedom of navigation” mission last October in Chinese-claimed waters around Subi Reef in the South China Sea and a second operation in January, near Triton Island in the Paracel Island chain. On those occasions, China did not react militarily but issued strongly-worded diplomatic protests. The response to the intrusion near Fiery Cross Reef indicates that, from this point on, US provocations will be engaged by Chinese forces, posing the danger of a military clash.

Fiery Cross Reef is one of the most sensitive of all the disputed territories. It has been held by China since 1988, but is still claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan. Tensions have grown since 2011 as a result of the US “pivot to Asia” and Washington’s development of closer military ties with Vietnam and the Philippines.

In 2014, China deployed several hundred troops to the reef and initiated a major project to reclaim land from the sea and turn it into a small artificial island. It has built a port and a 3,300-metre airfield—the most southern airfield controlled by Beijing. In January 2016, civilian airliners successfully landed on the reef and it is now regularly used by Chinese military aircraft.

The message from Washington sent by yesterday’s operation is clear. US imperialism will continue to stoke up long-standing, competing claims over territory in the South China Sea to militarily encircle and destabilise the Chinese regime. The objective of the US ruling elite is not only to assert military dominance in Asia, but to intimidate Beijing into pulling back from its ambitions to exert greater global influence and compel it to make sweeping concessions to American demands on trade and access to Chinese markets. If Beijing nevertheless continues to assert the regional and global interests of the Chinese business oligarchs it represents, it will face war.

The timing of the “freedom of navigation” operation indicates that the message was intended as much for the allies and “strategic partners” of the United States as it was for the Chinese regime.

It could be only a matter of days before the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague brings down its ruling on a US-backed Philippines legal challenge to aspects of China’s claims in the South China Sea. The court, stacked with the legal appointees of the imperialist powers, is expected to declare Chinese occupation of certain islets and reefs “illegal” under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Such a finding will be used by the American government to justify even more aggressive military operations, most of which will be launched from the new bases to which it has access in the Philippines. Short-range A-10 assault aircraft are operating from airfields directly adjacent the South China Sea and warships can be dispatched from various Philippine ports.

The USS William P. Lawrence entered Chinese-held waters just hours after Rodrigo Duterte, the fascistic mayor of Davao City, claimed victory in Monday’s presidential election in the Philippines. Throughout the campaign, Duterte wavered between militarist rhetoric over the disputed territories and conciliatory offers to Beijing for bilateral negotiations and closer economic ties. The US operation is a signal that, by the time he is sworn in on June 30, Duterte’s administration will face a fait accompli. The Philippines will be on the front line of a build-up toward open confrontation.

The freedom of navigation mission also coincides with the beginning of a volatile and unpredictable election in Australia, one of the most critical allies and military partners of the United States in its “pivot to Asia.” The clear aim of the Australian political and media establishment has been to conduct the election with as little reference to the dangers of war as possible. Instead, the issue is being pushed into the limelight and the rival parties pressured to publicly reaffirm their full backing of Washington.

Defence Minister Marise Payne, representing the Liberal-National Coalition government, immediately asserted that Australia “strongly supports” the US actions. The opposition Labor Party, which aligned Australia with the “pivot” in 2011 when it was in government, and is on record as advocating that Australian warships carry out independent provocations against China, is now under pressure to do likewise.

US President Obama will seek to enlist Vietnam behind stepped-up military operations against Beijing during his state visit to the country on May 21. This will be followed by top level talks in Japan on May 26–27 with the heads of the six other G7 nations—Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy and Canada—as well as the head of the European Union. To the fury of China, the communique issued by the G7 foreign ministers’ summit in April for the first time declared the G7’s “opposition” to any actions that raised “tensions” in the South and East China seas. The statement of Washington’s NATO and Japanese allies was not a reference to the US provocations, but to China’s reaction.

The deployment of jet fighters against a US warship indicates that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime concluded it would escalate its own reactionary preparations for a military confrontation with the war machine of the US and its allies. It is seeking to defend the interests of the corrupt oligarchy that developed in China as Mao Zedong and his political heirs restored capitalist property relations from the 1970s. The actions of the CCP regime are diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class—above all the multi-million strong Chinese working class which, if war breaks out, would face the nightmarish prospect of US nuclear strikes.

The Chinese Defense ministry has announced that Beijing is going to further intensify tensions. It declared yesterday that the American actions “proved” that the construction of military infrastructure and deployment of forces in the South China Sea was “totally justified and very necessary.” China, it asserted, will increase its naval and air operations in the region and expand its placement of “various defense capacities.”

While the regime deploys its military in an ever-more fraught situation, the Chinese state-controlled media is attempting to generate nationalist fervor over the question of the disputed territory. The aim is both to divert steadily rising social tensions over inequality and economic slump into anti-American and anti-Japanese chauvinism, and to drown out any expression of alarm within the Chinese population over the implications of a war.

In every country—from the US and China to Japan, Australia, the Philippines and Vietnam—a catastrophic conflict is being prepared behind the backs of the working class and youth. This stark reality adds ever greater urgency to the fight to build a new international anti-war movement of the working class on the foundation of socialist and internationalist principles.