

Senior Chinese Military Officer Visited Dispute Island

A visit by a high-ranking Chinese officer to the artificial islands underlines their strategic importance



Chinese vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, Fan Changlong, attends the opening ceremony of the National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on March 5. Photo: Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

By Jeremy Page in Beijing and
Gordon Lubold in Washington

China's top military officer led a high-level delegation on a visit to a cluster of Chinese-built artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea in recent days, underlining the strategic importance of the structures at the center of a standoff between Beijing and Washington.

The visit by Gen. Fan Changlong, vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, was first reported by The Wall Street Journal and confirmed later on Friday by China's Defense Ministry.

It appears to be the highest-level official Chinese visit to the islands, whose construction over the last two years has raised concern in the U.S. and Asia that Beijing might use them to enforce its sweeping maritime claims around one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

Confirmation of Gen. Fan's trip came as U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter visited an American aircraft carrier transiting the South China Sea on Friday following a visit to the Philippines— a U.S. treaty ally whose maritime claims overlap with China's in those waters.

The Chinese Defense Ministry issued a statement on its official microblog saying that Gen. Fan recently led senior military and civilian officials on a visit to the islands in the Spratlys archipelago, which China calls the Nansha, to inspect work and greet military personnel and construction workers there.

The statement said the work included weather stations, marine-research facilities and five lighthouses, four of which were operational. It didn't say when exactly the visit took place or whether Gen. Fan had departed. The Pentagon declined to comment.

U.S. officials had said earlier that they believed Gen. Fan flew at the end of last week to an island built on reclaimed land around Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratlys. The U.S. officials wouldn't say how they had concluded the general had visited. The U.S. conducts surveillance of the Pacific region in a variety of ways.

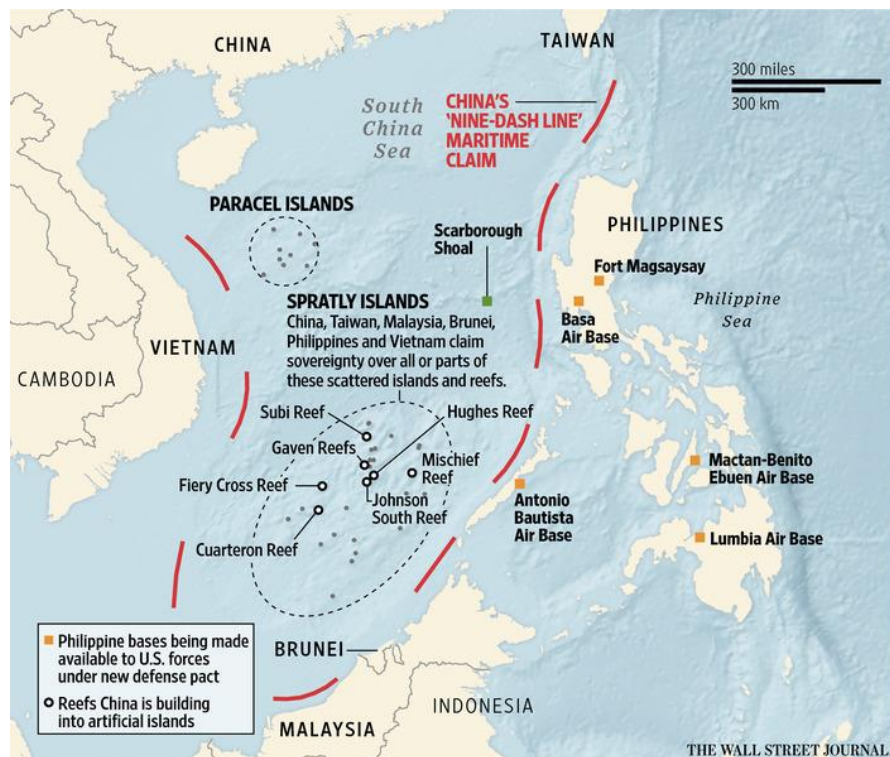
It was unclear how long Gen. Fan stayed on Fiery Cross Reef, which is also claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan, or whether he was still in the area, the U.S. officials said.

The visit coincided with a tour of Asia by Mr. Carter, who scrubbed a planned stop in Beijing amid rising tensions over the South China Sea, although U.S. officials said the trip was postponed due to scheduling issues. Mr. Carter would likely have met Gen. Fan in Beijing had the visit gone ahead.

Mr. Carter announced in the Philippines on Thursday that the U.S. will start stationing warplanes in the country this week and had begun joint patrols of the South China Sea with Philippine forces last month.

On Friday, China's foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said at a regular news conference that the U.S. was militarizing the region and confusing the issues of civilian and military freedom of navigation.

Fiery Cross is one of seven artificial islands that Beijing has built in the Spratlys in the last two years. China says it has sovereignty over all South China Sea islands and adjacent waters, and has pledged not to militarize the artificial islands.



Zhu Feng, a security expert at China's Nanjing University, said he hadn't been aware of Gen. Fan's visit but that such a trip would likely be designed to show support for Chinese personnel working in the Spratlys.

It's also a way that China is trying to show the U.S. and the Philippines we're not easily backing off," he said.

U.S. officials said there have been a series of flights to and from Fiery Cross since Friday. The planes are consistent with the kind that a senior Chinese official would use, including an Airbus 319 and a Bombardier Canadair Regional Jet, or CRJ.

Planes landed and departed last Friday and then again on Sunday, according to U.S. officials. The two officials said they had concluded Gen. Fan was the visitor and that it was possible he was still in the archipelago, although his exact movements were unclear.

Work was completed in the past few months on a 3,110-meter runway on Fiery Cross that is big enough to accommodate jet fighters, civilian jetliners and military transport planes, according to experts who have studied satellite images of the structure.

Chinese civilian airliners landed at Fiery Cross for the first time in January, according to Chinese state media, prompting condemnation from Vietnam and the Philippines.