

# South China Sea becomes more militarised

Geoff Dyer in Washington

**1) The South China Sea is becoming increasingly militarised.** In recent years, China has built five artificial islands in the South China Sea and is constructing at least three airfields that could handle military aircraft. In response to the Chinese military presence, the USS Lassen, an Arleigh Burke class destroyer, will sail close to two of those islands. Beijing, in turn, is likely to accuse the US of militarising the region.

**2) It is about control of the seas, not about who owns the islands.** The US is not sending a destroyer near the man-made islands to protest China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea – the US insists it is neutral about the territorial disputes between China and five other countries. Instead, the US is trying to show that artificial islands do not give China control over the surrounding seas. Under international law, countries have jurisdiction over 12 nautical miles around genuine islands but not around man-made features.

**3) That means the details are important.** The US Navy is sending the destroyer to Subi and Mischief reefs for a good reason – according to experts in the US, both artificial islands are completely man-made. Fiery Cross reef, another of the new islands where China is building a military-capable airfield, did originally have some rocks above water, which could give it a slightly more ambiguous legal status.

**4) There is more to come.** US officials say that the so-called "freedom of navigation operation" is the start of a series of missions in the area. But future operations will also sail close to land features claimed by other countries, including the Philippines and Vietnam, to try to show that the US is not taking sides in the territorial disputes.

**5) China's reaction.** None of that is likely to appease Beijing, which has already reacted angrily to the prospect of US naval missions near its new islands. Analysts think that the biggest risk – a confrontation between US and Chinese vessels – is unlikely at this stage. However, China could use the US move as a pretext to step up its military presence on the islands, putting in place more radar and other communications equipment and giving it greater capacity to monitor activity in the region.

**6) The regional response.** By and large, the rest of the region will welcome the US move. Vietnam and the Philippines have been outraged in recent years by what they see as China's power play in the South China Sea. More recently, Malaysia and even Indonesia have expressed concerns. The big long-term question is whether the US is able to use this anxiety to mobilise a coalition of nations in the region that can balance China's growing power.