

Sunday London Times

31-5-15

US builds up arms at sea to halt China

Washington is taking a more aggressive stance against Beijing in the Pacific. Michael Sheridan reveals how a future showdown could rapidly escalate

Michael Sheridan, Far East Correspondent

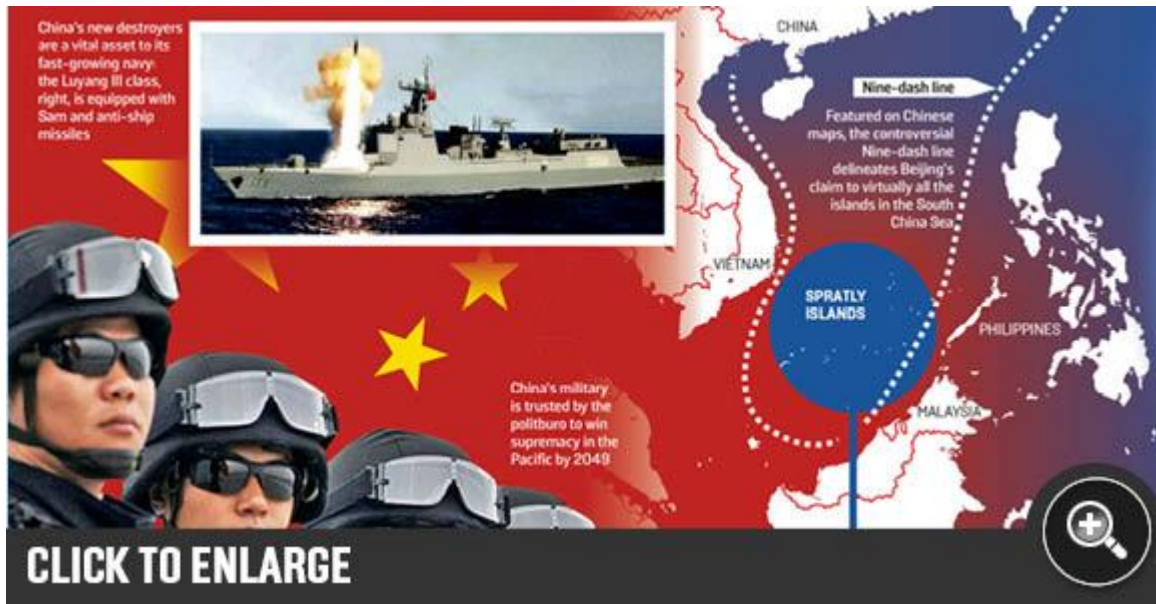
IN THE azure waters of the South China Sea, a Chinese coastguard vessel intercepts a small ship from the Philippines carrying supplies to a platoon of marines on a disputed reef. Ignoring warnings, the ship sails on and is rammed. It makes a distress call.

Overhead, the US navy is watching from a spy plane, a converted Boeing 737 packed with surveillance gear, sending data to American commanders in Japan.

“US navy plane, this is a Chinese military zone!” barks a voice on the radio. “You, go!” The jet continues to circle at 27,000ft, scooping up transmissions from a shoal of Chinese ships around a vast island reclaimed from the sea.

Then it detects something ominous: one of China’s new Luyang III-class destroyers has turned on the fire control radar for its Sam missiles, the latest type, bought from Russia. Urgent messages go out.

In the US naval base at Yokosuka, on the fringe of Tokyo Bay, officers give quick orders. An American frigate sailing near the scene of the standoff turns course. At once the Chinese destroyer targets it with the radar for its new-generation anti-ship missiles.



The Chinese captain thinks he can gamble. After all, he is the unknown national hero who kept his weapons radar trained on a Japanese frigate for more than half an hour and was praised in a secret citation by the politburo as 'a mighty fortress in the oceans'.

This time, however, he faces the US Seventh Fleet, not the ships of pacifist Japan, and American rules of engagement do not roll dice.

Three minutes later, witnesses on the Philippine ship see flashes in the sky and then the outline of the Luyang III ablaze from stem to stern. In Beijing and Washington the phones start ringing.

That imaginary catastrophe is what haunts Ashton Carter, the American defence secretary, and other security chiefs who joined high-ranking Chinese officers in Singapore this weekend for the annual Shangri-La Dialogue.

Carter has taken the helm of a tougher US policy towards Chinese military expansion. His plans are the fruit of a period of private study at Harvard where he quietly collected the views of generals, admirals and policy-makers while he was out of government.

Carter's conclusion, say people close to him, was that America had come perilously close to abandoning the role it has played since 1945 of guardian of the Pacific seas and skies. Now it must strengthen allies and deter foes.

Speaking in Singapore, Carter told China to stop its drive to reclaim land in the South China Sea.

'Turning an underwater rock into an airfield simply does not afford the rights of sovereignty or permit restrictions on international air or maritime transit,' he said. 'There should be an immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation by all claimants.'

A Chinese officer in the audience called his remarks 'groundless and not constructive'.

The Obama administration says Carter is building on the president's 'pivot to Asia', a plan to reforge military partnerships and reassert America's presence 'all the while pretending in public it is not about containing China.'

Washington has fortified its alliance with Japan, supported the Philippines, sent stealth warships to Singapore and agreed to rotate units through Australia. It clearly intends to test China at sea and in the air.

'The United States will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, as we do all around the world,' said Carter as he headed to the Singapore security summit.

That collides head-on with President Xi Jinping's dream of the 'national rejuvenation' of China by 2049, a date enshrined in Communist party documents by which time the nation will have reconquered its just place in the world.

In a little-noticed speech to the party's foreign affairs conference last November, Xi told delegates of 'the protracted nature of the struggle over the international order'.

The immediate flashpoint lies within the controversial boundary of China's 'nine-dash line' claiming the whole South China Sea - waters crossed by vital trade routes, rich in fisheries and full of oil, gas and mineral reserves.

Xi heads a small group controlling a 'low-intensity coercion' campaign of land reclamation, naval might and proud rhetoric. This has brought China to the brink of conflict with its neighbours.

Last week Beijing issued its first defence white paper, which stated that its navy's mission will stretch from coastal waters to the open seas.

The doctrine envisages a triad of military innovations in space, cyberspace and aerial warfare. The aim is to reverse America's technological lead.

Last July China test-launched a missile designed to destroy satellites, according to the Pentagon's 2015 report on the Chinese military.

It has developed ballistic missiles able to hit US aircraft carriers, new stealth fighters and anti-ship weapon systems and upgraded its intercontinental nuclear missiles.

“Chinese leaders in 2014 demonstrated a willingness to tolerate a higher level of regional tension,” the Pentagon report said.