

WALL STREET JOURNAL
27-10-15

U.S. Navy Tests China Over Sea Claims

U.S. officials say operation was first of several to assert 'freedom of navigation' around the Spratly islands

By Gordon Lubold and Adam Entous

A U.S. Navy patrol off artificial islands in the South China Sea was the strongest challenge yet to Beijing's ambitions to enforce its territorial claims, but the maneuver was carefully calibrated by the White House to try to minimize provocation.

The Obama administration, under mounting pressure to counter China's efforts to alter Asia's geopolitical status quo, sought to make a statement without escalating the conflict. According to U.S. officials, that decision came after months of wrangling among the Pentagon, State Department and the White House over how aggressively to assert "freedom of navigation" around the disputed islands.

Late Monday, the guided-missile destroyer USS Lassen sailed within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef, one of seven rocks and reefs in the Spratly chain on which China has built artificial islands. The U.S. considers the area international waters, and fears China is trying to enforce territorial claims and gain greater control over major shipping lanes.

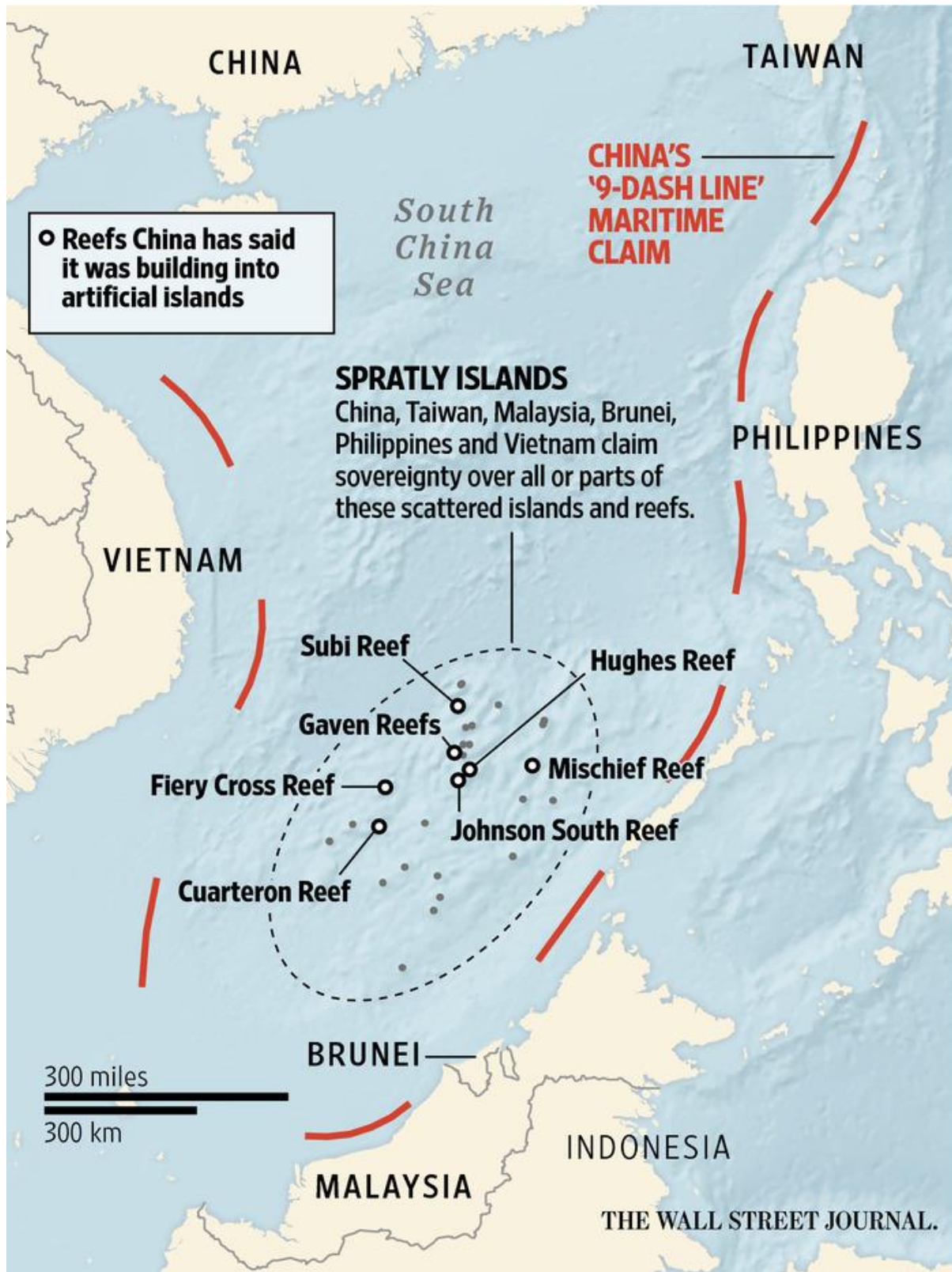
By sending a U.S. warship within 12 nautical miles of one of China's artificial islands, Washington has signaled the start of an open contest for the future of the South China Sea. Andrew Browne explains why the dispute is far more than just a battle over a reef.

Critically, the White House chose to breach the 12-nautical-mile boundary around an artificial island built on a reef that was previously submerged at high tide. Under international law, nations can claim territorial seas of up to 12 nautical miles from their coastline, including natural islands and rocks. They cannot make such claims around reefs submerged at high or low tide, even if they have been turned into islands through land reclamation.

Some officials said a more pointed option, which the White House hasn't exercised, would have been to sail within 12 miles of artificial islands built on what was previously a rock.

"Subi Reef was almost certainly selected because it is a low-tide elevation," said Andrew Erickson, an expert on China's military at the U.S. Naval War College.

China's response was relatively restrained Tuesday: Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged the U.S. not to take "reckless action." Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui summoned the U.S. ambassador to China, Max Baucus, to express that the sail-past was an "extremely irresponsible action," the official Xinhua News Agency said.



Two Chinese warships, including a guided-missile destroyer, followed and issued warnings to the U.S. warship during its patrol, China's defense ministry said.

China says it has indisputable sovereignty over all the South China Sea islands and their adjacent waters and that its artificial islands will be used for civilian functions, such as weather monitoring, as well as military purposes.

Underlining the sensitivities, the White House did not officially confirm or deny Monday's move. White House spokesman Eric Schultz said "the freedom of navigation operations serve to protect the rights, freedoms and lawful uses of the sea and airspace, guaranteed to all nations under international law."

In another hedge, military officials said the patrol also challenged territorial claims by other countries in the region.

When the Chinese started building up the islands around early 2014, the U.S. military and the Obama administration weren't sure how to respond. Adm. Samuel Locklear, who at the time led the U.S. military's Pacific Command, raised concerns about a naval challenge to the Chinese claims, current and former U.S. officials said.

The admiral "didn't want a one-off," a senior U.S. official said. "He wanted a strategy." Adm. Locklear's concern was that the White House would opt for a one-time challenge only.

The tone shifted with a changing of the guard in Washington. When Ash Carter took over as defense secretary in February 2015, he singled out the Spratly Islands as a priority. In May, Adm. Locklear was replaced by Adm. Harry Harris, who was more hawkish on challenging China, current and former officials said.

Before flying to Singapore where he met with the Chinese, Mr. Carter said the U.S. would "fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows," though he offered no specifics.

Current and former officials said White House National Security Adviser Susan Rice was particularly cautious about a military response to China's island buildup, worried a show of force could undercut talks with Beijing on other critical issues, such as cybersecurity.

Ms. Rice ordered what officials described as a rigorous review of the military options, not only of the proposed freedom of navigation mission but also the history of any similar U.S. naval maneuvers in the chain.

As part of that review, Ms. Rice asked the Pentagon to produce extensive documentation about past operations in the area. The review concluded the Navy had conducted six naval passes since 2011 in the South China Sea, including three around the Spratlys and three around the Paracels. That helped the administration to paint Monday's action as routine, officials said.

Mr. Obama decided to postpone any operation before Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit in September, and instead issued a warning while standing alongside Mr. Xi in the Rose Garden. Officials said the last thing the White House wanted was to make the state visit all about the islands.

Mr. Obama approved the operation following Mr. Xi's visit, officials said. Aides said Mr. Carter wanted to back up the administration's commitment to "fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows" before both he and Mr. Obama visited the region this fall.

"It was meant to be a demonstration that we mean what we say," a senior U.S. official said.

When the destroyer moved into the zone on Monday, the Chinese warships shadowing it kept a distance of a few thousand feet in an otherwise uneventful operation, U.S. officials said.

The destroyer heard a communication on its radio in which someone told the ship's captain to "stay away from our island," a U.S. official said. The official said that the radio frequencies used in the region often contain chatter and it was impossible to confirm where the voice came from.

"It's like driving down Interstate-40 with a CB radio," one official said.

Pentagon officials said the military would continue its freedom of navigation operations, in both air and sea, in the South China Sea. "Our intent is to keep doing it," a senior Pentagon official said Tuesday.

If the U.S. continues with such patrols, Mr. Xi will face mounting public and internal pressure to take firmer action on an issue he has made central to his "China Dream" of establishing the nation as a great world power.

For Beijing, the patrol was especially provocative as it came during a meeting this week of the Communist Party's Central Committee—its top 300 or so leaders—which is seen as a test of Mr. Xi's political standing.

China is highly unlikely to scale back its construction work on the islands and could respond by sending civilian ships, rather than military ones, to track or confront U.S. Navy vessels, analysts said.

"This way, China can issue a firm response to the U.S. while signaling that they don't want to escalate the situation militarily," said Huang Jing, an expert on Chinese politics at the National University of Singapore.