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WORLD

# U.S. Military Proposes Challenge to China Sea Claims

Moves would send Navy planes, ships near artificial islands built by China in contested waters



One of China's reclamation projects on Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. *PHOTO: RITCHIE B. TONGO/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

by DM NTOS , ORDON LOLD and LIN . RNS  
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The U.S. military is considering using aircraft and Navy ships to directly contest Chinese territorial claims to a chain of rapidly expanding artificial islands, U.S. officials said, in a move that would raise the stakes in a regional showdown over who controls disputed waters in the South China Sea.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter has asked his staff to look at options that include flying Navy surveillance aircraft over the islands and sending U.S. naval ships to within 12 nautical miles of reefs that have been built up and claimed by the Chinese in an area known as the Spratly Islands.

Such moves, if approved by the White House, would be designed to send a message to Beijing that the U.S. won't accede to Chinese territorial claims to the man-made islands in what the U.S. considers to be international waters and airspace.

The Pentagon's calculation may be that the military planning, and any possible deployments, would increase pressure on the Chinese to make concessions over the artificial islands. But Beijing also could double down, expanding construction in defiance of the U.S. and potentially taking steps to further Chinese claims in the area.

The U.S. has said it doesn't recognize the man-made islands as sovereign Chinese territory. Nonetheless, military officials said, the Navy has so far not sent military aircraft or ships within 12 nautical miles of the reclaimed reefs to avoid escalating tensions.

If the U.S. challenges China's claims using ships or naval vessels and Beijing stands its ground, the result could escalate tensions in the region, with increasing pressure on both sides to flex military muscle in the disputed waters.

According to U.S. estimates, China has expanded the artificial islands in the Spratly chain to as much as 2,000 acres of land, up from 500 acres last year. Last month, satellite imagery from defense intelligence provider IHS Jane's showed China has begun building an airstrip on one of the islands, which appears to be large enough to accommodate fighter jets and surveillance aircraft.

The U.S. has used its military to challenge other Chinese claims Washington considers unfounded. In November 2013, the U.S. flew a pair of B-52 bombers over disputed islands in the East China Sea to contest an air identification zone that Beijing had declared in the area.

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Officials said there was now growing momentum within the Pentagon and the White House for taking concrete steps in order to send Beijing a signal that the recent buildup in the Spratlys went too far and needed to stop.

Chinese officials dismiss complaints about the island-building, saying Beijing is entitled to undertake construction projects within its own sovereign territory. They say the facilities will be used for military and civilian purposes.

“China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and their adjacent waters,” said embassy spokesman Zhu Haiquan, using the Chinese name for the Spratlys. “The relevant construction, which is reasonable, justified and lawful, is well within China’s sovereignty. It does not impact or target any country, and is thus beyond reproach.”

Mr. Zhu said that Beijing hopes that “relevant parties,” a reference to the U.S. military and its regional allies, will “refrain from playing up tensions or doing anything detrimental to security and mutual trust.”

China claims almost all of the South China Sea, one of the world’s busiest shipping routes, and its efforts to enforce control of the area in recent years have caused growing concern in the U.S. and in Asia, where several nations have competing claims, including the Philippines, a U.S. ally.

“The Philippines believes that the U.S., as well as all responsible members of the international community, do have an interest and say in what is happening in the South China Sea,” said Charles Jose, spokesman for the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, early Wednesday, citing freedom of navigation and unimpeded flow of commerce among other factors.



U.S. military aircraft have repeatedly approached the 12-nautical-mile zone declared by China around the built up reefs. But to avoid an escalation, the planes haven't penetrated the zone. A senior military official said the flights "have kept a distance from the islands and remained near the 12-mile mark."

U.S. planes have flown close to the islands where the building has been taking place, prompting Chinese military officers to radio the approaching U.S.

aircraft to notify the pilots that they are nearing Chinese sovereign territory. In response, U.S. pilots have told the Chinese that they are flying through international airspace.

The USS Fort Worth, a combat ship, has been operating in recent days in waters near the Spratlys. "We're just not going within the 12 miles—yet," a senior U.S. official said.

The military proposals haven't been formally presented to the White House, which would have to sign off on any change in the U.S. posture. The White House declined to comment on the deliberations.

Officials said the issue is a complicated one because at least some of the areas where the Chinese have been doing construction are, in eyes of the U.S. government, legitimate islands, which would be entitled to a 12-nautical-mile zone.

The proposal under consideration would be to send Navy ships and aircraft to within 12 nautical miles of only those built-up sites that the U.S. doesn't legally consider to be islands, officials say.

Over the years, U.S. vessels and aircraft have had several encounters with Chinese assets, often arising from disagreements over Beijing's territorial claims.

March 2001 China orders an unarmed U.S. Navy survey ship out of waters in the Yellow Sea, claiming a violation of its exclusive economic zone. The U.S. disputed the claim, and days later the ship returned to the Yellow Sea with an armed escort.

April 2001 Chinese fighter collides with a U.S. Navy electronic surveillance aircraft near China's Hainan Island in the South China Sea, forcing the U.S. aircraft to make an emergency landing.

May 2003 Chinese fishing boats are used to bump the same U.S. Navy survey ship involved in the 2001 incident, causing some damage.

March 2009 Chinese military and government ships surround a U.S. Navy surveillance ship in the South China Sea in a disputed economic zone, forcing the U.S. vessel to take evasive action. The Navy ship returned the next day accompanied by a guided missile destroyer.

Nov. 2013 The U.S. flies a pair of B-2 bombers over disputed islands in the East China Sea to contest Beijing's air identification zone.

Dec. 2013 Chinese ship blocks the path of a U.S. Navy cruiser, the Cowpens, in the South China Sea, some distance from China's aircraft carrier, forcing the Cowpens to change course to avoid a collision.

Aug. 2014 a Chinese fighter conducted what U.S. officials said was a dangerous intercept of a U.S. Navy maritime patrol aircraft that was flying in international airspace about 13 miles east of Hainan Island.

Under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, reclaimed features aren't entitled to territorial waters if the original features are not islands recognized under the agreement, U.S. officials say. Under that interpretation, the U.S. believes it doesn't need to honor the 12-mile zone around the built-up reefs that weren't considered to be islands before construction there began.

Several U.S. allies in the region have been privately urging the White House to do more to challenge Chinese behavior, warning Washington that U.S. inaction in the South China Sea risked inadvertently reinforcing Beijing's territorial claims, U.S. officials said. Some allies in the region have, in contrast, expressed concern to Washington that a change in the U.S.'s approach could inadvertently draw them into a conflict.

"It's important that everyone in the region have a clear understanding of exactly what China is doing," a U.S. official said. "We've got to get eyes on." The U.S. has been using satellites to monitor building at the islands.

In recent months, the White House has sought to increase pressure on Beijing to halt construction on the islands through diplomatic channels, as well as by calling out the Chinese publicly in recent press briefings and government reports.

The U.S. Navy regularly conducts “freedom of navigation transits” in the region, including across the South China Sea. But the Navy has yet to receive explicit authorization from the administration to do so within 12 nautical miles of the artificial islands.

John Kerry, the U.S. secretary of state, is due in Beijing this weekend to make preparations for a visit to the U.S. in September by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who has made improving military ties with the U.S. a top priority.

A new standoff with China would add to mounting security crises facing the U.S. in other regions.

Last year, after Russia seized Ukrainian territory, the White House imposed sanctions on Moscow but so far has rebuffed Ukrainian requests for U.S. weapons. In the Middle East, Islamic State militants took over large swaths of Iraq last summer, prompting the U.S. to launch an air campaign against the group.

The U.S. has long maintained that it doesn’t take sides in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, though it has a national interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the area. In the last year, though, U.S. officials have stepped up its criticism of China’s efforts to enforce and justify its claims in the region.

U.S. officials say they are concerned that a decision not to send naval vessels into the zone would inadvertently help the Chinese build their own case for sovereignty in the area.

Chinese coast guard vessels routinely sail within 12 nautical miles of the Senkaku Islands, which are controlled by Tokyo but claimed by Beijing, which calls them the Diaoyu.

U.S. officials say they believe China sends vessels into the Senkaku area in the East China Sea because it wants to demonstrate to Tokyo and to others that Beijing doesn’t recognize the islands as Japanese sovereign territory.

China’s claims include territorial seas stretching out 12 nautical miles from all the Spratlys, where it controls seven reefs—all recently expanded into artificial islands. Several claimants occupy several other islands, reefs and rocks.

Historical images from Google Earth and elsewhere reveal that reclamation work at most of the Chinese held reefs began after President Xi took power in 2012.

Much of the construction began in the past year, despite protests from neighboring countries, warming military ties with Washington, and a new Chinese drive to improve relations in its periphery.

U.S. officials say they have repeatedly asked China to stop the work, to no avail.

—*Jeremy Page and Trefor Moss contributed to this article.*

Write to Adam Entous at [adam.entous@wsj.com](mailto:adam.entous@wsj.com) and Julian E. Barnes at [julian.barnes@wsj.com](mailto:julian.barnes@wsj.com)