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U.S. Gambit Risks Conflict With China

Option to challenge Beijing in South China Sea is fraught with danger



Photos by satellite-imagery provider DigitalGlobe shows what is believed to be Chinese vessels dredging sand at Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. *PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES*

By ANDREW BROWNE

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SHANGHAI—After repeated and unheeded warnings to China to halt its massive reclamation works in the South China Sea, the U.S. is contemplating an option fraught with danger: limited, but direct, military action.

By sending U.S. warplanes over artificial islands that China is building, and sailing naval vessels close by—an option now under consideration, according to U.S. officials in Washington—America could end up being sucked more deeply into an increasingly heated territorial dispute between China and its neighbors, say regional security experts.

If such action fails to deter China, America will face a hard choice: back down and damage its credibility with friends and allies in the region, or escalate with the risk of being drawn into open conflict with China.

China immediately suggested that America would be crossing a line if it goes ahead with the plan. “Do you think we would support that move?” asked Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying. “Freedom of navigation definitely does not mean the military vessel or aircraft of a foreign country can willfully enter the territorial waters or airspace of another country.”

Her comments reinforced a view that America and China may be on a collision course. There’s very little prospect that China will stop ballooning the specks of territory it controls in the Spratly Islands. Much of the work has already been completed, but there is still more to do.

“China will not stop activities on what it believes to be its own territory and within its sovereign rights,” asserts M. Taylor Fravel, an associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

That being the case, says Mr. Fravel, “greater pressure could form for the United States to do even more and become even more involved.”

China has cleverly exploited this dilemma in the past. Last May, after U.S. President Barack Obama sought to reassure U.S. allies on a visit to the region, China dragged a gigantic oil-drilling rig into disputed waters off Vietnam. Its apparent intention was partly to expose the hollowness of American security guarantees.

Indeed, China’s military strategy in the region has been built around developing the means—missiles, ships, warplanes, antisatellite weapons and cybercapabilities—to deter America from intervening in any crisis by dramatically raising the potential costs.

In ratcheting up its pressure on China, America must also consider the sensitivities of its regional allies who don’t want to be forced to choose between these two powers.



In a photo released by the Vietnamese Coast Guard in May last year, a Chinese coast guard vessel, right, fires water cannon at a Vietnamese vessel near a Chinese oil rig. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Gauging their response, as well China's, to possible military options will be important as U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter heads to Singapore at the end of this month for a security conference likely to be overshadowed by the gathering crisis over China's island-building.

So far, signals coming from China indicate that it has no desire for confrontation. It hasn't openly grabbed territory, as Russia did in Ukraine. And it has been careful to assert its territorial claims using mainly white-hulled coast-guard vessels rather than gray-painted naval ships.

Moreover, China isn't alone in conjuring fortresses from the sea. Chinese Foreign Ministry officials point out that Vietnam and the Philippines have done the same.

Nor is it entirely clear what the U.S. expects to achieve by sailing its naval vessels within 12 nautical miles of the expanded reefs, as U.S. officials suggest might happen. China has never explicitly set out what it considers to be its maritime rights around these features, even though it claims around 90% of the South China Sea within a “nine-dash line” that loops down from the Chinese coast almost to Indonesia.

For instance, it has never specified exactly how its claim to territorial waters around the entire Spratlys chain would be delineated.

If the U.S. plans to challenge China’s sovereignty over the man-made islands themselves that would represent a major shift. America has thus far insisted it takes no position on who owns these features.

Yet Washington is under pressure to act. Southeast Asian countries feel threatened by airstrips and docks under construction that they worry will give China permanent bases to exert even greater control over activities such as fishing and surveying for undersea oil.



Up to now, America’s response to the dredging has been largely rhetorical. Officials have repeatedly called on China to respect international law and honor a declaration on a code of conduct it signed with Southeast Asian nations. The U.S. has also ramped up military exercises with its partners, including the Philippines, and is providing them with technology to improve the ability to track Chinese ship and aircraft movements. Japan has joined these efforts.

None of this has worked. “The U.S. feels its credibility is on the line and needs to step up its game,” says Bonnie Glaser, a senior adviser for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Ms. Glaser believes that Washington realizes it can’t halt the mid-sea construction. Instead, its goal is to prevent China from using the islands to intimidate its neighbors and interfere with traffic in a stretch of water that carries about half the world’s shipping. And it wants to send a signal to China that it is prepared to take risks, albeit calculated ones, to back up its words.

Without such action, she says “the Chinese are not going to take this seriously.”

Although China’s own rhetoric is unyielding—it claims “indisputable sovereignty” over the South China Sea—its actions are often pragmatic. For instance, a few months after its rig caused dangerous encounters between dozens of Vietnamese and Chinese vessels and anti-Chinese riots on land, China quietly withdrew it. Beijing has since sought to patch up ties.

For now, U.S. military options remain just that—options. Even if adopted by the Pentagon they would need presidential signoff.

If they are implemented, however, a serious concern is that conflict could arise from miscalculation.

Ian Storey, a senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, sets out a scenario in which heavily armed U.S. and Chinese warships end up churning around the islands in close proximity. This could “quickly lead to a minor clash and then escalate into a major military and political Sino-U.S. crisis,” he says.

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