

America needs more than symbolic gestures in the South China Sea

The Chinese have acted less like a responsible stakeholder and more like a bully, writes John McCain

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Admiral Harry Harris, the commander of US Pacific Command, was recently asked in a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing about China's strategic goals. "China seeks hegemony in East Asia. Simple as that," he responded. Admiral Harris concluded: "China is clearly militarising the South China Sea and you'd have to believe in the flat Earth to think otherwise."

But despite the Obama administration's "three nos" — no reclamation of land, no militarisation and no use of coercion — Beijing has pressed ahead with all three. The administration's aversion to risk has resulted in a policy that has failed to deter China's pursuit of maritime hegemony, while confusing and alarming America's regional allies and partners.

It is time to change course as we enter a critical two-month period for US policy in the Asia-Pacific region. The Permanent Court of Arbitration is expected to rule by early June in a case brought by the Philippines concerning China's claims in disputed areas of the South China Sea. Confronted with the possibility of an unfavourable ruling, China may use the coming months to secure its existing gains or pursue new forms of coercion to expand them. This could include further reclamation and militarisation at strategic locations such as Scarborough Shoal, attempts to expel another country from a disputed territory or the declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone in all or part of the South China Sea.

In response, the US will need to consider fresh policy options. As part of the annual Balikatan military exercise with the Philippines this month, the administration should consider having a carrier strike group patrol the waters near Scarborough Shoal in a visible display of US combat power.

Ashton Carter, US defence secretary, should emphasise on his trip to the Philippines that Manila is a treaty ally of the US. And the administration should urgently work with the Philippines and other regional allies and partners to develop strategies to counter Chinese behaviour that is in violation of international law.

If China declares a South China Sea ADIZ, the US must be prepared to challenge this claim immediately by flying military aircraft inside the area affected under normal procedures, including not filing a flight plan, radioing ahead or registering frequencies.

It is also time for the US to move beyond symbolic gestures and launch a robust "freedom of the seas" campaign. It should increase the pace and scope of the Freedom of Navigation programme to challenge China's maritime claims, as well as the number of sailing days that US warships

spend in the South China Sea. Joint patrols and exercises should be expanded and ocean surveillance patrols to gather intelligence throughout the western Pacific continued.

Finally, given the shifting military balance, the US needs to focus on enhancing its military posture across the region. Consistent with a recent Center for Strategic and International Studies report to Congress, it should deploy additional air, naval and ground forces forward to the region to reassure our allies.

Over the past several years, China has acted less like a "responsible stakeholder" in the rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific region and more like a bully. Up to now, American policy has failed to adapt to the scale and velocity of the challenge we face.

The potential threats China will pose in the South China Sea in the coming months demand a change of course that can reassure the region of America's commitment and demonstrate to Beijing that its pursuit of maritime hegemony will be met with a determined response