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U.S. Patrols to Test China's Pledge on South China Sea Islands

'A matter of time' when operations will start despite Xi Jinping's surprise commitment in Washington



An April photo released by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative department at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank shows a satellite image of what is claimed to be an airstrip under construction at Fiery Cross Reef in the disputed South China Sea. *Photo: digitalglobe/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*

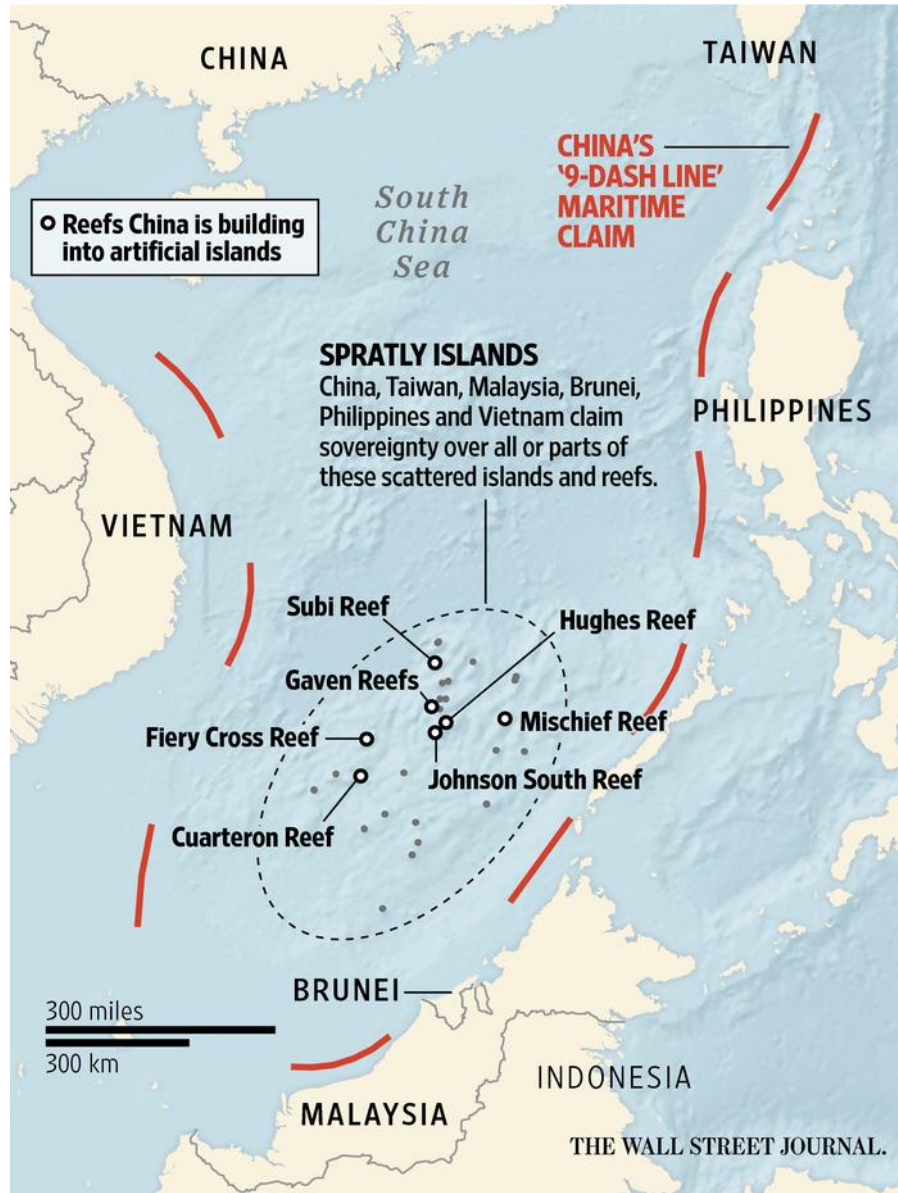
By Jeremy Page

WASHINGTON — The U.S. determination to challenge China with patrols near Chinese-built islands in the South China Sea will test Xi Jinping's recent pledge that Beijing doesn't intend to "militarize" the islands, an announcement that took U.S. officials by surprise.

The Chinese leader made the commitment during a news conference with President Barack Obama at the White House late last month, though he left it unclear how the pledge would affect China's activities in the disputed area of the South China Sea.

If Mr. Xi's goal was to discourage the U.S. from conducting patrols near the artificial islands, he doesn't appear to have succeeded. After months of debate in the U.S. government, there is now a consensus that the U.S. Navy should send ships or aircraft within 12 nautical miles of the artificial islands to challenge China's territorial claims there, according to people familiar with internal discussions.

A U.S. official confirmed Sunday that a decision had been made to conduct such patrols but said it was unclear when that might happen or where exactly. "It's just a matter of time when it happens," the official said. Another U.S. official indicated that the operation could come within days.



The question now is whether China will respond to such operations by reining in its plans to develop the islands or backing away from the commitment not to militarize them, pointing to the U.S. patrols as a provocation.

The Pacific Fleet has been ready to conduct "freedom of navigation operations," or FONOPs, around China's artificial islands for months after being asked to draw up options by U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter earlier this year. The decision to begin the patrols appears to have been delayed to avoid disrupting the summit, people familiar with internal discussions say.

"A U.S. FONOP gives China an opportunity to assert that the United States is the country 'militarizing' the South China Sea and, if China chooses, such a FONOP provides a rationale for China to further militarize or develop the features it occupies," said Taylor Fravel, an expert on the Chinese military at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Mr. Xi issued no such pledge about not intending to militarize the islands in his private discussions with Mr. Obama, according to people briefed on the talks, and U.S. officials had no time immediately after the news conference to clarify with their Chinese counterparts what was meant by "militarize."

U.S. officials, who have been seeking clarification from their Beijing counterparts since, don't think Mr. Xi misspoke. But the unexpected remarks on one of the most sensitive issues in China-U.S. relations suggested how Mr. Xi's top-down leadership style can cause confusion.

A White House spokesman declined to comment on Mr. Xi's remarks but referred to President Obama's statement at the joint news conference that "The United States will continue to sail, fly and operate anywhere that international law allows."

China's land reclamation in the past year around rocks and reefs it controls in the South China Sea has raised fears among the U.S. and its allies and regional partners that Beijing plans to assert its claims in the area through military force.

China claims indisputable sovereignty over all the islands in the South China Sea and their adjacent waters. It says its artificial islands are mainly for civilian activities such as weather monitoring and search and rescue, but will also be used for military purposes.

The U.S. says China threatens freedom of navigation through one of the world's busiest trade routes and is using military muscle to intimidate neighbors that have overlapping claims—Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally.

Before the summit, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry persuaded the other claimants to agree not to develop the land features they control in the disputed Spratlys if China pledged it would forgo further land reclamation, large-scale construction and militarization, according to U.S. officials.

In August, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi described the U.S. proposal as "not feasible" and announced that Beijing had already stopped its land reclamation. Satellite photographs taken since then show China has continued dredging and construction and completed one runway.

China's foreign ministry didn't respond to a request for comment about what Mr. Xi meant by militarization and whether he had made the commitment in private sessions with President Obama.

But at a regular news briefing on Friday, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Beijing was "severely concerned" about media reports that said the U.S. could begin patrols within 12 nautical miles of China's artificial islands in the Spratlys, which Beijing calls the Nansha.

China respects freedom of navigation but we are firmly opposed to other countries' intrusion into China's territorial sea and airspace of the Nansha Islands under the name of safeguarding freedom of navigation and overflight," Ms. Hua said.

The U.S. has carried out freedom-of-navigation patrols in the South China Sea six times since 2011, including three times around the Spratlys. But since 2012, it hasn't done so within 12 nautical miles of the rocks and reefs where China has built its artificial islands, according to U.S. officials.

Going within 12 nautical miles is significant because, according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, nations that have sovereignty over naturally formed islands and rocks are entitled to territorial seas stretching out that far around them.

But under the same convention, that principle doesn't apply to most submerged and semi-submerged reefs, even if they have been turned into islands through land reclamation.

• Gordon Lubold in Washington contributed to this article.