

US B-1 Bombers Challenge Chinese Claims in South China Sea

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Featured image: A B-1B Lancer drops back after air refueling training Sept. 30. (Source: [United States Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III / Wikimedia Commons](#))

In a further calculated provocation on the eve of talks between US President Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, two US B1-B strategic bombers flew over the South China Sea on Thursday. Trump and Xi are due to meet today on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Germany, where the US is expected to demand tough sanctions to compel North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs.

Japanese fighters joined the American bombers for a night exercise over the East China Sea, where Japan is engaged in an intensifying dispute with China over rocky outcrops known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. The US aircraft then flew south over the South China Sea to conduct a “freedom of navigation” operation to challenge Chinese territorial claims.

The bomber flight came less than a week after a US guided-missile destroyer deliberately intruded within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit claimed by China around Triton Island in the Paracel Islands. Beijing reacted by condemning that incursion as “a serious political and military provocation.”

Asked about yesterday’s flight by US bombers, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said there was no problem with freedom of navigation or overflight for the East and South China Seas. However, he added:

“China resolutely opposes individual countries using the banner of freedom of navigation and overflight to flaunt military force and harm China’s sovereignty and security.”

Two US officials told Reuters yesterday the US planned a test of its Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system in the coming days. China and Russia have both opposed the installation of a THAAD battery in South Korea, pointing out that its powerful X-band radar can spy on military installations deep within their territory. While the THAAD test will take place in Alaska, it can add to the tensions with Beijing and Moscow.

Xi will meet Trump after the US seized on a North Korean test on Tuesday of a purported intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). The US called a UN Security Council emergency session on Wednesday where US ambassador Nikki Haley demanded that all countries,

particularly China, impose crippling sanctions on Pyongyang. She warned that the US was prepared to use its “considerable military forces” against North Korea if that failed.

Yesterday, the US handed China a draft of the resolution it intends to place before the UN Security Council, a resolution likely to include punitive sanctions on finance and the sale of oil to Pyongyang. China and Russia have both opposed sanctions that will strangle the North Korean economy and any US attempt at regime-change or military action against North Korea.

In a bitter attack in the UN Security Council on Russia and China, Haley declared:

“To sit there and oppose sanctions or to sit there and go in defiance of a new resolution, means you’re holding the hands of [North Korean leader] Kim Jong-un.”

She warned that the US was prepared to impose secondary sanctions on countries that failed to implement US demands. Last week the US Treasury placed bans on two Chinese companies for doing business with North Korea.

In a bid to completely cut off North Korea from the global financial system, US prosecutors have obtained warrants to seize funds that involve eight of the world’s largest banks. According to legal filings unsealed this week, five major US banks, including Bank of America, JP Morgan Chase and Citigroup, along with three European banks are accused of processing more than \$700 million of “prohibited” transactions linked to North Korean entities banned under US sanctions. The legal moves are clearly a broader warning aimed at choking off Pyongyang’s access to international finance.

The Trump administration is not only exploiting this week’s missile launch by North Korea to put pressure on China and Russia. Amid growing schisms with Europe, the White House is trying to haul European allies back into line. The tensions over North Korea are a sharp manifestation at the G20 summit of the deepening crisis of global capitalism that is fueling geo-political tensions, threats of trade war and the growing danger of military conflict.

In the immediate lead-up to the Xi-Trump meeting today, the Trump administration backed away from statements that its efforts to enlist China’s help on North Korea had failed. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared yesterday that the US had “not given up hope” in persuading Beijing to do more in what he called the “peaceful pressure campaign” against North Korea.

Tillerson said China had taken “significant action” but had paused and failed to go further. He referred to the US imposition of secondary sanctions on Chinese firms, implying it was prepared to inflict more. In another barely veiled threat of military action, he added:

“This is a campaign to lead us to peaceful resolution because if this fails we don’t have very many good options left.”

Tillerson echoed Trump’s remarks yesterday that he would “never give up” when asked whether he no longer had faith in President Xi. The comment was clearly at odds with previous remarks by Trump that Chinese efforts to force North Korea to bow to US demands had “not worked out.” In fact, just before leaving Washington for the G20 summit, Trump

accused China of boosting trade with North Korea by 40 percent.

“So much for China working with us—but we had to give it a try!” he tweeted.

This tweet suggests that Trump’s meeting with Xi is a last-ditch effort to force China to impose crushing penalties on North Korea to compel it to give up its nuclear arsenal. The flight by B1-B bombers along with last Sunday’s naval intrusion into Chinese-claimed waters, a major arms sale to Taiwan and sanctions on Chinese companies are clear warnings of what China will face if it defies US demands.

The US threats against China demonstrate that the alleged threat posed by small, impoverished North Korea is simply a convenient pretext for a confrontation with Beijing, which Washington regards as the chief obstacle to ensuring its dominance in Asia.

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