

US navy reinforces spying operation in South China Sea

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The US navy last week sent a heavily-armed destroyer, USS Chung-Hoon, to the South China Sea to escort the USNS Impeccable, the survey vessel involved in a confrontation with small Chinese navy and fishing vessels on March 8. Washington insisted that the Impeccable had been conducting legitimate activities in international waters, but Beijing accused the US navy of carrying out illegal spying operations within China's exclusive economic zone.

US President Obama, who met with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi last Thursday, played down the incident, calling for greater military dialogue between the two countries. However, the dispatch of the USS Chung-Hoon makes clear that the US has not resiled from its provocative naval operations, which remain a constant source of friction with China.

There is no doubt that the Impeccable was gathering intelligence for the US navy on its Chinese counterparts. The incident took place some 75 miles south of China's Yulin naval base on Hainan Island. The Impeccable is a purpose-built surveillance vessel equipped with sophisticated sonar systems that can track Chinese submarines based at Yulin.

The US navy appears to have inflated the incident. While American officials emphasised that the Impeccable was unarmed and operated by civilian contractors, the vessel was never in danger. A US defence photograph shows the American ship towering over two small Chinese fishing vessels that allegedly stopped in its path. As for being civilian-operated, the Impeccable works directly with the US navy and was involved in a major naval exercise in the Western Pacific in 2007 involving three aircraft carriers.

Who was in breach of international law is the subject of debate. Beijing claims that such "military operations" are banned within its 200-mile exclusive economic zone under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The US, which unlike China has not ratified the Convention, disagrees with the Chinese interpretation and continues its intelligence-gathering operations.

Whether or not the US has the legal "right" to engage in such activities, their purpose is hardly benign. As Time magazine commented: "The US wants to know how well it can track Chinese submarines moving in and out of their new and growing base off Hainan. And the Chinese want to prevent the US from gathering such intelligence. Both sides claim legal cover for their actions, which suggests that similar showdowns will occur in the future."

China's response to the US spying operations is not surprising. One only has to consider the reaction in Washington to a decision by the Chinese navy to routinely station surveillance ships some 75 miles from US naval bases in Hawaii or in California. Retired Chinese general

Xu Guangyu told the South China Morning Post last week: “The Chinese vessels just wanted to tell the US that waters off Hainan are not the Gulf of Mexico where they could enter and exit freely.”

While the incident appears to have been pushed into the background, tensions between the two powers remain. The immediate focus of Chinese Foreign Minister Yang’s trip to Washington was to improve economic collaboration in the face of the worst global economic crisis since the 1930s. But on this front, Washington’s appeal for continuing Chinese investment in US bonds was offset last Friday by comments by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao questioning the solvency of the American economy and “the security of our assets.”

Underlying the tensions between the US and China is a shifting relationship of forces. The global recession has only underscored the declining economic power of the US and its dependence on European and Asian creditors. Washington is acutely aware of China’s rapid economic rise, which threatens to undermine American economic and strategic interests in Asia and internationally.

The flare-up of tensions in the South China Sea is not accidental. As the world’s largest cheap labour platform, China has been forced to scour the globe for raw materials and energy. The bulk of its oil and gas supplies from the Middle East pass through the Malacca Strait and then through the South China Sea to Chinese ports. China has been expanding its navy and establishing a string of bases across the Indian Ocean to protect these crucial sea routes.

China’s claims in the South China Sea, including over the disputed Paracel and Spratly islands, have brought it into conflict with its South East Asian neighbours, including the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam. The quarrels remain unresolved and a continuing source of tension. On March 5, Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi landed on a disputed reef known as Layang Layang and claimed sovereignty. Last week, the Philippines passed a law proclaiming its rights over islands in the Spratly group.

China immediately described the new law as “illegal and invalid” and dispatched a vessel to patrol China’s exclusive economic zone and “strengthen fisheries administration” in the South China Sea. According to the Beijing News, the Yuzheng 311, a converted naval rescue vessel, arrived in the area on Sunday.

China’s growing naval activity is coming into conflict with Washington’s strategic objectives. Even since the end of World War II, American strategic planners have regarded the Pacific Ocean as an American lake with major US bases in South Korea, Japan, Guam and, until 1991, the Philippines. US warships have insisted on free passage not only through the South China Sea but other strategic sea lanes in the region. In time of conflict, control of these areas would enable the US to cut off vital supplies to China.

The March 8 incident involving the Impeccable was more of a preliminary scuffle than an open naval clash. But the underlying tensions remain. As Time magazine rather pointedly warned: “Such events, far from home and with few if any independent witnesses, can quickly escalate into more serious confrontations—as in the case of the Gulf of Tonkin ‘attack’ by North Vietnamese patrol boats against a pair of US navy destroyers that [US] President Lyndon B. Johnson used as a pretext to win congressional support for his war in Vietnam.”

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