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THE ISSUE: China lands military plane on Fiery Cross Reef

On April 18, China [landed a military plane](#) on one of the islands in the South China Sea drawing sharp criticism. The plane landed on Fiery Cross Reef to evacuate three ill civilian workers and fly them to a hospital on nearby Hainan Island, according to Beijing. The requirement of a military plane to airlift the three civilians has been questioned when a civilian craft could have sufficed for the same. The criticism being leveled against China comes at a time when the country is repeatedly drawing flak for its position and actions from the U.S and littoral countries in the already disputed South China Sea. Pentagon spokesman Capt. Jeff Davis observed that military assistance should not be required for a civilian purpose.

China replied to the reproaches in its now rather familiar manner stating that it should not come as a surprise to anyone since the activity took place in its own sovereign space. The Chinese statement is to be anticipated since it has been quite a while that the country has chosen to disregard the disputed status of islands in the South China Sea which it firmly maintains is well within its own territory. But countries of the Asia Pacific including the U.S, Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines, among others, disagree with China's position. The apprehensions and concerns of these countries seem more and more vindicated as Beijing continues to ramp up its presence in the area with land reclamations and infrastructural developments which include airstrips, lighthouses and other installations which could be used the very near future for potential military purposes.



China's state-run daily, The Global Times, [reported](#) soon after this incident that Beijing has been planning to build its first floating maritime nuclear power platform with the aim to deploy it in the South China Sea. Such platforms will help to speed up the process of construction work on the islands and would also have the ability to sail into remote areas of the Sea according to the China Ship-building Industry Corporation, which as usual pointed out that the platforms are meant for civilian purposes such as providing electricity and drilling facilities. The Chinese Foreign Ministry

however declined to verify the media report, although Global Times reported that the National Development and Reform Commission has approved it.

The pace and enthusiasm with which China is advancing its presence in the Sea belies official statements which continue to allay concerns of neighbouring countries. These countries in their way are gradually seeking to bolster their own positions in many ways which include naval assistance from the U.S and calling on regional countries to support freedom of navigation and international maritime laws. Towards the end of the month, [U.S Senators introduced](#) the Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative Act of 2016 which authorizes Foreign Military Financing assistance and International Military and Education Training activities for building capacity for maritime security, besides upgrading the military procurement status enjoyed by Philippines and permitting the assistance for increasing maritime domain awareness and security. As Beijing continues to refuse a multi-lateral settlement of the disputes, the waters of the South China Sea would continue to remain restive.

MEDIA WATCH

MEDIA WATCH May 2016

Amid South China Sea tension, bill introduced to enhance US maritime in APAC region

Concerned over China's provocative actions in the disputed South China Sea, four top US Senators have introduced a legislation to enhance US maritime power in Asia Pacific region and provide more military aid to its American allies. The Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative Act of 2016 authorises the Secretary of State to provide Foreign Military Financing assistance and International Military and Education Training activities in the Asia-Pacific for maritime security capacity building. ([The Indian Express](#))

Disputes in South China Sea must be resolved between nations involved, not outsiders: Xi

China's President Xi Jinping has said territorial disputes in the South China Sea must be resolved through negotiations between the countries involved. His comments came as an international tribunal based in The Hague is due to rule shortly on China's claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea. The case was brought by a rival claimant, the Philippines. ([South China Morning Post](#))

China, Indonesia to boost security ties despite spat in South China Sea

Chinese and Indonesian officials pledged to boost security ties, marine cooperation and infrastructure investment, state media reported, after a diplomatic spat over what Indonesia called a breach of its sovereignty by the Chinese Coast Guard. ([The Japan Times](#))

U.S. challenged China, 12 others on navigation rights last year

The U.S. military conducted "freedom of navigation" operations against 13 countries last year, including several to challenge China's claims in the South and East China seas, according to an annual Pentagon report. The operations were against China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Libya, Malaysia, the Maldives, Oman, the Philippines and Vietnam, the report said. ([Reuters](#))

China closer to building its first maritime nuclear station

China is edging closer to building its first maritime nuclear power platform, which could sail to remote waters and provide stable power to offshore projects. Analysts believe that the platform, once accomplished, could significantly boost the efficiency of the country's construction work on islands in the South China Sea. Liu Zhengguo, director of the general office of the China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC), China's leading shipbuilding group in charge of designing and assembling the platforms, said the company is "pushing forward the work." ([Global Times](#))

China cautions U.S. to be discreet on South China Sea

China cautioned the United States to be discreet in its words and deeds regarding the South China Sea after U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken questioned China's intentions over its land reclamation project. The deployment of necessary defense facilities on islands and reefs of the Nansha Islands falls under China's sovereignty and the country is exercising its rights of self-protection and self-defense granted by international law, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said at a regular news briefing. ([Xinhua](#))

Beijing seeks Moscow's support over South China Sea court battle with Philippines

China is lobbying Russia for support in opposing international court proceedings launched by the Philippines over the disputed South China Sea. Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov during talks in Moscow the two nations should join hands to oppose "internationalising" the disputes. ([South China Morning Post](#))

U.S. to give Philippines eye in sky to track South China Sea activity

The United States will transfer an observation blimp to the Philippines to help it track maritime activity and guard its borders amid rising tensions in the South China Sea, a U.S. diplomat said on Monday. Philip Goldberg, U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, said Washington would give Manila, its oldest Asia-Pacific security ally, \$42 million worth of sensors, radar and communications equipment. ([Reuters](#))

China lands military plane on disputed South China Sea reef

China landed a military aircraft on one of its manmade islands in the disputed South China Sea. It is thought to be the first time China's military has publicly admitted to landing a plane on the artificial island, known as Fiery Cross Reef. State media said the plane evacuated three injured workers from the reef. ([BBC](#))

US defense chief visits aircraft carrier in South China Sea

For the second time in five months, Defense Secretary Ash Carter landed aboard a U.S. aircraft carrier in the bitterly contested South China Sea, sending a deliberate message to China on American power in the region. With a key Asia Pacific ally at his side, Carter's visit aboard the USS John C. Stennis underscores persistent complaints from the U.S. and its allies in the region about China's military build-up in the South China Sea. Beijing has been creating man-made islands, and equipping many with runways, fighter aircraft and other weapons. ([Philstar](#))

China hits back at G-7 for 'taking sides' in East and South China Sea disputes

China's government has slammed Group of Seven (G-7) members for "taking sides" in its maritime territorial disputes with other nations in the East and South China Seas. "We urge the G7 member states to honor their commitment of not taking sides on issues involving territorial disputes," China's Foreign Ministry said. ([TIME](#))

Taiwan president visits East China Sea island in show of sovereignty

President Ma Ying-jeou on Saturday visited a small island in the East China Sea to reassert Taiwan's sovereignty and its role in the contested region. Ma's visit today to Pengjia, roughly 56 Kilometres north of Taiwan proper, comes four years after he last visited the island to propose a plan to address territorial disputes between China, Taiwan and Japan over the nearby chain known as Senkaku in Japanese and Diaoyutai in Chinese. ([The Indian Express](#))

China switches on lighthouse on artificial island in South China Sea

China has begun operating a lighthouse on one of its artificial islands in the South China Sea near where a U.S. warship sailed last year to challenge China's territorial claims. China's transport ministry held a "completion ceremony", marking the start of operations of the 55-metre (180-ft) high lighthouse on Subi Reef, where construction began in October, state news agency Xinhua said late on Tuesday. ([Reuters](#))

COMMENTARIES

South China Sea: China will take the fight to the brink of war

- Peter Hartcher

The world's two greatest powers are competing for military dominance of the western Pacific Ocean and the contest is about to intensify. The US and China are each jockeying for advantage as they anticipate a quickening in a struggle that "has the potential to escalate into one of the deadliest conflicts of our time, if not history", according to Malaysia's Defence Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein.

An important ruling from the International Court of Justice in the Hague is expected in the weeks ahead. It will rule on a claim by a US ally, the Philippines, to sovereignty over reefs that are also claimed by China. Most experts expect the ruling, due by the end of June, will favour the Philippines. Beijing has warned it will not recognise the court's jurisdiction.

The South China Morning Post reported on Monday that, if the court ruled against it, Beijing would accelerate plans to build an artificial island around one of the reefs at the heart of the dispute, Scarborough Shoal. The shoal is 230kilometres from the Philippines coast and 1020kilometres from China's.

China recently put fighter jets and surface-to-air missiles on another island a few hundred kilometres away, Woody Island. The President of China Xi Jinping is reported to be planning to travel there soon. The US Defence Secretary Ash Carter cancelled a visit to China, but two weeks ago went to India and the Philippines to conclude base-sharing and other

agreements to strengthen co-operation out of shared worry over China.

The US position is the same as Australia's: it takes no sides over the disputed territories but urges the claimants to settle the argument through negotiation, not force.

In the same week, the top Chinese military officer, General Fan Changlong, made a visit to the Spratly Islands, also subject to rival claims by China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines. China has built artificial islands, runways, lighthouses and ports there, despite the objections of all the other claimants.

Then, last week, in another unmistakable sign of hardening Chinese determination, Xi made his first public appearance in military uniform and formally claimed the title of commander in chief of China's war-fighting headquarters.

What is Xi doing? What does China hope to achieve? And where is this dispute heading? An eminent Chinese expert, Dr Shi Yinghong, provides answers.

Xi has declared the pursuit of "China's Dream", a national resurgence after centuries of foreign domination. Shi, a professor of international relations at Renmin University in Beijing, says there are three international implications. First, Xi wants China to be acknowledged as a superpower equal to the US. Second, he wants China to become the co-manager of global affairs with the US, a Group of Two for world governance. Third, "China must be the preponderant power in the Western Pacific and have some advantage over the US", he told me. Shi's definition of Chinese aims supports that of the commander of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Harry Harris, who says China seeks "hegemony in East Asia".

Shi, who has been an adviser to the State Council, China's cabinet, for the past five years, says this will be "based on an arms build up and the strategic ability to go tit-for-tat with the US and to force the US finally to recognise Chinese preponderance" in China's claimed sphere.

"China," Shi explains, "must be number one in diplomatic influence and economic clout and maybe in [military] force. It wants to prevent the US military's freedom of navigation eventually, and gradually

squeeze Vietnam, the Philippines and all the others out of the South China Sea." This is precisely what the region's governments fear.

Xi is a decisive leader, says Shi, who "shows that he has guts – he's not afraid of confrontation".

"He wants the support of the people and the support of the military and he wants to win glory. He believes in China's historical greatness." In this, Shi says, the president is at one with the Chinese public: "Xi is China. Chinese citizens are more nationalistic and triumphalist than ever before. In this sense, Xi represents the people."

China's claim to about 90 per cent of the South China Sea is based on "land left by our ancestors – it is sovereign and sacred and Xi's policy is not to concede even one inch".

Harvard's Ross Terrill describes today's China as an empire that "appropriates an imperial idea of China, reinventing a 2500-year-old autocracy to control its population and hector non-Chinese neighbouring peoples". Yet Shi says there is an important qualification to Xi's ambition. Xi wants regional preponderance "without a major war".

The truth of this is illustrated by China's decision to halt advances on territory claimed by Japan in their recent territorial clash. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reinterpreted Japan's constitution, rearmed its military, reaffirmed its US alliance and prepared for full-scale war to stop China. Faced with imminent, major war, Beijing relented.

But in the South China Sea, there is no such resistance, not yet, at least. Shi describes Barack Obama's responses so far as "minimalist". The risk that the US faces is "it will lose, step by step".

China's risk? "It will make substantial gains and finally may mobilise US society and other middle powers to say 'enough is enough'," particularly if there is a more assertive US president after November.

In the past few centuries, no new great power has managed to arise without going to war with an existing one over clashing spheres of influence. We will see if humanity has learnt anything.

Peter Hartcher is international editor, The Sunday Morning Herald

Australia's French Submarine Decision: A Long-standing Security Relationship

- Sam Bateman

Australia has awarded the French firm DCNS the contract to design and build new submarines for its Navy (*une victoire française*). It will build a scaled down conventional version of its Barracuda-class nuclear submarine with all, or most of the submarines, to be built in Adelaide, South Australia.

The decision has been highly controversial. As well as the French option, there were two other contenders - ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) of Germany with a Type 216 Class submarine, and the Government of Japan with a proposal based on the existing Soryu class submarine. Japan's contender had appeared the 'captain's pick' of former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, but this was overturned following domestic political outrage over the extent to which Australian industry and workers would be involved in building the Japanese option.

Advantages of French Option

Looking back over the decision process, with perfect hindsight, the French option had advantages over the other two contenders. Technically, DCNS was offering what seems the 'best' submarine for Australia's requirements, and politically, they appeared the contender most likely to provide extensive Australian industry involvement.

Strategically, the French option offers a degree of strategic certainty that the Japanese option lacked. While a choice in favour of Japan may have been a solid manifestation of the Australia-Japan security relationship, it would also have been locking Australia into long-term dependency on Japan for logistic and technical support for a major defence asset. Given the uncertainty in the region, that may have been unacceptable. In comparison, Australia has a long-standing security relationship with France that has stood the test of time and will likely continue doing so for the full life of the new submarines.

While none of the three options was ideal for Australia's unique requirement for a long range conventional submarine, in the final analysis, the French contender was deemed the most suitable. It appeared the best option to provide the range and

endurance required while also being the quietest of the three options. DCNS claimed its design as the most advanced, with a pump jet-propulsion system being much quieter than a propeller, and making the submarine harder to detect. It will also include the most powerful sonar system ever produced for a conventional submarine.

Furthermore, unlike the Japanese, DCNS has extensive experience with building submarines for the foreign market, having built more than 100 submarines for nine navies across the world.

Australia-France: An Enduring Relationship

Although rarely given much attention alongside Australia's other bilateral security relationships, Australia has a strong security relationship with France that is both long-standing and functional. The two countries are close strategic partners both in the Indian and Pacific oceans. They have bilateral agreements on cooperative maritime surveillance and enforcement in the waters around Kerguelen, Heard and MacDonald islands in the southern Indian Ocean. Australian fisheries officers regularly embark in French patrol vessels to participate in joint operations in this area.

France cooperates actively with Australia on defence, disaster relief and regional maritime surveillance in the Pacific Ocean. The French territory of New Caledonia is one of Australia's closest neighbours. Australia and France also have a close working relationship in Antarctica where the French claim to part of Antarctica lies between Australia's two claimed areas. Coincidentally, the submarine decision was announced the day after Anzac Day 2016. Anzac Day is the national day of remembrance for those Australians who served and died in war or on operational service. The spirit of Anzac, with its qualities of courage, mateship, and sacrifice, is a key part of Australia's national identity.

France played a central role in the development of the Anzac spirit. While Anzac Day itself is the anniversary of the tragic and ill-conceived landing of Australian and New Zealand troops on Gallipoli in 1915, the Anzac spirit matured on the battlefields of France between 1916 and 1918. While 15,000 Australians fell at Gallipoli, more than 45,000 lost their lives in France during the First World War.

Anzac Day is commemorated around the world wherever there was a significant Australian expatriate community or Australians fell in battle, including at Kranji cemetery in Singapore. Of all these commemorations in 2016, possibly the most moving, and certainly the most graphic, was at the Australian War Memorial outside the village of Villers-Bretonneux in northern France. Australian troops played the leading role in defending this area during a decisive battle in April 1918.

In what might be seen as a fortuitous indication of the announcement of Australia's submarine decision next day, France was represented at the 2016 ceremony by the French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who extolled the strong bilateral relationship between the two countries.

Impact of Decision

Despite reports to the contrary, the submarine decision is unlikely to damage Australia's 'special relationship' with Japan. The simple reality is that Japan needs this relationship rather more than Australia does. When the dust settles, the Japanese government might even be relieved that it was not locked into a risky commercial venture with its fair share of critics on the domestic front.

The German shipbuilder TKMS said it respected the decision to award the nearly US\$40 billion contract to rival DCNS. The company has a range of other defence interests in Australia and has expressed willingness to further contribute to Australia's naval capabilities as needed.

The decision in favour of France is the first step in a long and tortuous process to build the new submarines. Major difficulties are likely to arise, but the long-standing relationship between Australia and France provides a solid basis on which to resolve any problems.

Sam Bateman is an adviser to the Maritime Security Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International

Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He is a former Australian naval commodore who has worked in force development areas of the Department of Defence in Canberra.

Source: RSIS

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