
China

China builds new missile shelters on South China Sea islands

Trump fails to change Beijing's course despite friendly relationship with Xi



YESTERDAY by: Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington and Charles Clover in Beijing

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China has built new military facilities on disputed islands in the South China Sea, suggesting that the friendly relationship Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping kindled at their April summit has not convinced China to change its maritime course.

Over the past three months, China has built four new missile shelters on Fiery Cross, boosting the number of installations on the reef to 12, according to satellite images provided to the Financial Times by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

China has also expanded radar facilities on Fiery Cross and two other disputed reefs — Subi and Mischief — in the Spratly Island chain, and started building underground structures that Greg Poling, director of CSIS's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, assesses will be used to store munitions.

“We haven’t seen any slowdown in construction, including since the Mar-a-Lago summit,” said Mr Poling. “The islands are built and they are clearly militarised, which means they already got over the hard part. Now every time they put in a new radar or new missile shelter, it is harder for the world to get angry. They are building a gun, they are just not putting the bullets in yet.”

The advances underscore how much progress China has made towards militarising the man-made islands in ways that significantly enhance its ability to both monitor activity in the South China Sea and to project power in the western Pacific where the US has been the dominant power in the seven decades since the second world war.



Euan Graham, an Asia expert at the Lowy Institute in Sydney, said it was “not quite game over in the South China Sea” but that China had fundamentally altered the status quo over the islands that would be hard to change barring war or natural disasters.

“They already exert a strategic effect by projecting China’s presence much further out,” said Mr Graham. “They will not prevent the US Navy from operating in their vicinity, but they will complicate the threat environment for US ships and aircraft – by extending the [Chinese navy’s] surveillance and targeting net, as well as the envelope of power projection.”

During a visit to Washington, Mr Xi told Barack Obama in 2015 that China would not militarise the man-made islands, but in the intervening 20 months Beijing has stepped up construction, and now has runways that can accommodate Chinese fighter jets.



Asked about freedom of navigation and new construction in the South China Sea, a People’s Liberation Army spokesperson said there were no issues about maritime freedom, and that there was “no problem with China’s freedom to carry out construction on its own territory”.

Chinese premier Li Keqiang in March said the islands were “primarily for civilian purposes” and that any defence facilities on them were “for maintaining the freedom of navigation”. But the foreign ministry in April said the “deployment of necessary national defence facilities is for the aim of safeguarding China’s own territory”.

China’s legal claim to the seas around the maritime features is legally controversial since many were dredged out of coral and sand and thus not entitled to status as islands. But Vasily Kashin, an expert on the Chinese military at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, said the goal was never legal sovereignty but to give China forward bases from which it could patrol and exercise control in their vicinity.



“If you have this infrastructure in the Spratlys, it allows China to constantly monitor aircraft and ships in the South China Sea. The point is that no one will be able to do anything in the area without them seeing.”

Ely Ratner, an Asia expert who served in the Obama administration, said Washington had failed to craft a strategy to convince China to halt militarisation of the man-made islands. “Until China believes that there will be significant costs . . . I don’t think they have any reason to slow down,” said Mr Ratner. “They have been pushing on an open door and have been surprised at how little resistance they have faced.”



Critics say the Obama administration took too cautious an approach to avoid creating tensions that would hurt the ability for co-operation on other issues. Meanwhile, some experts say the Trump team has given China a relatively free pass to maximise the chances it will boost pressure on North Korea to give up its nuclear programme.

Mr Ratner says the US should press Beijing harder, saying analysts tend to overstate China's willingness to risk conflict with the US over the South China Sea. "Their relative willingness to take risk has not been tested. There is a lot more running room for us to push back," he said.

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