



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on May 20, 2016

After Intercepting U.S. Reconnaissance Plane, China Issues Demand

On May 17, two Chinese J-11 fighter jets flew within 50 feet of a U.S. EP-3 surveillance plane as it was engaged in a routine surveillance mission in international airspace over the South China Sea. After the incident, a Chinese spokesman demanded that the United States immediately cease such reconnaissance activities.



An NBC News report cited Defense Department spokeswoman Lieutenant Colonel Michelle Baldanza, who said that the incident took place about 100 nautical miles south of mainland China and about 50 nautical miles east of Hainan Island. Baldanza said the reconnaissance aircraft was flying in a “routine patrol” when “two tactical aircraft from the People’s Republic of China” intercepted the U.S. plane.

“Initial reports characterized the incident as unsafe,” Baldanza said, adding that “over the past year, DoD has seen improvements in PRC actions, flying in a safe and professional manner.”

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Reuters quoted a statement from China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei Hong, who told reporters:

It must be pointed out that U.S. military planes frequently carry out reconnaissance in Chinese coastal waters, seriously endangering Chinese maritime security.

We demand that the United States immediately cease this type of close reconnaissance activity to avoid having this sort of incident happening again.

Hong disputed the Pentagon statement, describing it as “not true,” and asserted that the actions of the Chinese aircraft were “completely in keeping with safety and professional standards.”

“[The Chinese pilots] maintained safe behavior and did not engage in any dangerous action,” Hong claimed.

In recent years, China has increasingly asserted its territorial claims over most of the South China Sea — which encompasses an area of almost one and a half million square miles, and extends from Taiwan to Vietnam. The sea’s importance results from the fact that one-third of the world’s shipping passes through its waters and also that it is believed to hold huge oil and gas reserves beneath its seabed. Several nations maintain their claims over the sea, including both the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan), which between them claim almost the entire body of water. However,



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several other nations also claim portions of the sea, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, and Singapore. Under an upcoming case pending before the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) — Philippines v. China — the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague will consider the territorial dispute between the two nations over the Spratly Islands.

Taiwan, Vietnam, and Malaysia have also claimed portions of these islands, The U.S. Seventh Fleet had such a lengthy presence in the Gulf of Tonkin, an arm of the South China Sea, during the long Vietnam War, that the fleet was humorously nicknamed “The Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club.”

Hong’s assertion that U.S. military planes “frequently carry out reconnaissance in Chinese coastal waters” obviously cannot refer to the coastal waters of mainland China, which are 100 miles from where this latest incident occurred. Hong evidently is referring to the waters off the disputed islands.

We noted in [an article a year ago](#) that *The Global Times*, a newspaper owned by the Chinese Communist Party’s *People’s Daily*, warned in a May 25, 2015 editorial that “U.S.-China war is inevitable in the South China Sea ... if the United States’ bottom line is that China has to halt its activities” in the disputed Spratly Islands. We wrote that The Spratlys, which China calls the Nansha Islands, are made up of approximately 750 islands and islets with a combined area of only 1.5 square miles.

Though half a dozen Asian nations occupy all or parts of the Spratlys, sometimes areas as simple as a reef or cay, only China (PRC), Taiwan (ROC), and Vietnam have made claims based on their historical presence on them. As noted above, the Philippines has gone to court to fight for its claim of part of the area as its territory under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Following a visit to China on May 17, 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry reaffirmed that the U.S. government will not take sides in the dispute.

As we wrote in last year’s article:

China is presently in the process of constructing seven artificial islands amidst the Spratlys/Nanshas and the United States fears that the communist nation might attempt to impose air and sea restrictions in the chain once it completes that construction....

Since construction began, the U.S. Navy has flown P8-A Poseidon surveillance aircraft over the sites to gather intelligence about the Chinese activities. The P8-A Poseidon, in addition to carrying highly sophisticated electronic surveillance equipment, also carries torpedoes, depth charges, SLAM-ER missiles, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, and other weapons for use in anti-submarine and anti-surface vessel warfare.

After a P-8A flew over the Chinese construction zone on May 20, the Chinese Navy contacted the plane by radio and asked it to leave the area.

Following that incident, Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel told reporters that the P-8A reconnaissance flight was “entirely appropriate” and that U.S. naval forces and military aircraft would “continue to fully exercise” the right to operate in international waters and airspace.

We also quoted a statement from Colonel Steve Warren, a Department of Defense spokesman, who described the P-8A mission as “routine” and said such flights occurred “every few days.”

Warren said at the time that while the Poseidon had not gone within 12-mile territorial limits that China claims around the artificial islands, future flights might do so.



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“We don’t recognize those islands as anything other than international space,” he said. “For us to fly through that, we wouldn’t see that as a change in the way we do business. It just so happens we haven’t flown over them in the last 20 years.”

A May 19 VOA report quoted a statement from William Choong, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore, who said based on what the Chinese have said, this latest incident “was kind of near Hainan Island. We are not really exactly sure how near or far it is. Then, it is kind of like the long-standing disagreement [between] the U.S. and China with regards to access of foreign military vessels and aircraft into Chinese maritime areas, and so it’s not a South China Sea issue per se.”

Hainan Island is more than 600 miles north of the Spratly Islands, so this incident involving the Chinese interception of the American EP-3 surveillance plane is definitely unrelated to last year’s dispute. The plane was even further distant from any claimed Chinese territory than the P-8A planes conducted surveillance over the Spratlys were. Hong’s reference to U.S. planes carrying out missions in “reconnaissance in Chinese coastal waters” is nothing more than fiction. The close encounter of Chinese fighter jets with our surveillance plane can only be viewed as an example of China’s increasingly bold attempts to provoke the United States into an international confrontation — if not military, then diplomatic.

Photo of an EP-3E Aries: U.S. Navy

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