

## China missile test destroys trust

Written by Taipei Times Editorial  
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Between June 29 and Wednesday, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted unprecedented anti-ship ballistic missile tests in the South China Sea, launched from a missile battery stationed on one of the artificial islands China has created, two US officials told US broadcaster MSNBC.

Pentagon spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Dave Eastburn later confirmed the report, calling it "disturbing," but Beijing denied testing missiles, saying that only "ammunition" was fired during the exercises.

China's flimsy denial rings hollow: It is just the latest in a long line of carefully crafted deceptions over its fishy behavior in the South China Sea and further erodes trust in Beijing's leadership.

Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the country has been embroiled in a series of maritime disputes with neighboring nations, including the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia, over the most strategically important of the 200-odd reefs, rocks and islets that pepper the South China Sea.

The PRC bases its claim on the "nine-dash line" derived from the U-shaped line first delineated by the ROC government in 1947 and still favored by it today, which encapsulates nearly the entire sea as sovereign waters. Its claim was ruled unlawful by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in July 2016.

Over the years, there have been sporadic clashes between claimant nations, but none took steps to overtly militarize their possessions, until September 2013, when the PRC embarked on an aggressive project of land reclamation and construction on reefs in the Paracel (Xisha, 西沙群岛) and Spratly (Nansha, 南沙群岛) islands.

Faced with a mounting international backlash, Chinese officials swore until they were blue in the face that the island-building was for purely civilian purposes, with the official denials going up to the highest levels.

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At a White House news conference in the Rose Garden during a 2015 state visit to the US, Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) looked directly to the cameras, his face a picture of innocence, and assured the world China had “no intention” of militarizing the South China Sea.

Today, China’s 20 “civilian” outposts in the Paracels and seven in the Spratlys look rather more like fully fledged military bases, replete with radar equipment, runways — some capable of landing bomber aircraft — docks, numerous outbuildings and hangars, and reinforced concrete bunkers, all of which have been documented through satellite imagery and US military reconnaissance aircraft.

Xi and his coterie of yes-men in the politburo are no doubt slapping one another’s backs and clinking glasses of expensive French wine in the belief they have pulled off a diplomatic and military master stroke.

Yet the constant stream of whoppers emanating from brass-necked Chinese officials have caused irreparable damage to the PRC’s already tainted image on the world stage.

Who now will seriously believe Beijing’s claims that the internment camps housing 1 million or more Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang are merely benign vocational training centers? Or that Hong Kongers have nothing to fear from the proposed extradition law that Beijing is attempting to foist on the territory through Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥)?

And who in Taiwan will trust Xi’s assurances that they have nothing to fear from a similar “one county, two systems” model, when his regime is busily dismantling Hong Kong’s version before their very eyes?

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