

Reports earlier this week said that China was continuing its militarization of North Island (北礁) in the Paracel Islands (Xisha Islands, 西沙群岛) — which are also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam — including land clearing and what could be preparations for a harbor to support future military installations.

These are part of China's regional maritime strategy that it has been developing for decades.

North Island is part of an arc of reefs expected to form a protective screen for Woody Island (Yongxing Island, 永暑礁), on which China has temporarily based surface-to-air missile launchers and jets, to protect its nuclear submarine facilities on Hainan Island.

The latest intelligence suggests that Beijing is introducing incremental changes in an effort to dominate its maritime backyard, and at times they might not ruffle too many feathers.

Beijing might be gambling that the young administration of US President Donald Trump will not see these small changes as overly provocative, despite US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's cautions.

Beijing might even have been emboldened by Trump's less predictable approach to foreign policy, which has already raised doubts about the US' commitments in Asia.

Beijing has capitalized on a US withdrawal in the past — the closure of US bases in the Philippines in 1991 — and began reasserting its “nine-dash line” claim, extending over huge areas of the South China Sea, despite a lack of international legal grounds to do so. It is this strategy that is being built upon.

One would be perfectly justified in contending that claiming such a huge expanse of international waters merely for its energy and natural resources is unreasonable. However, Beijing has other fish to fry.

China's South China Sea strategy

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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China's maritime war strategy has long included securing sea approaches to Taiwan, denying the enemy freedom of action in the western Pacific Ocean and safeguarding Chinese sea lines of communication.

However, for the past two decades, control over much of the South China Sea has been integral to its nuclear deterrent strategy, too.

China must keep this area clear so it can operate its growing number of nuclear submarines equipped with long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles as defense if its land-based launchers were destroyed.

This is the reason for its tenacious expansion in the South China Sea.

For the past 17 years, it has been building an impressive, well-defended underwater submarine base on its Hainan Island Yulin Base. This might be the reason for the development on the Paracels; to protect the base, as part of wider defenses.

For the past seven years, it has also been gradually introducing its Type 094 Jin-class submarines, which can be mounted with ballistic missiles with a range of 8,000km, allowing China to target parts of the US from near China's coast. According to reports, as many as eight could be operational by 2020.

Many other countries have their own strategic interests in the region, and face real potential for clashes with China.

For example, the vast majority of Japan's imported oil passes through the South China Sea, and if China dominates the region, Japan's security would be severely jeopardized.

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It is no coincidence that this week, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force announced plans to send the helicopter carrier JS Izumo, its largest warship, to the South China Sea in May, where it is to train with the US Navy. The carrier, primarily a surveillance and humanitarian assistance ship, can also serve as a platform for anti-submarine warfare.

China's bullying tactics are born of considerations far beyond a mere desire for territory or need for natural resources. Grave, competing strategic considerations are involved. The South China Sea is becoming very crowded, and governments are on tenterhooks.

These are dangerous times for Taiwan.

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