

Militarisation: China close to finishing buildings on South China Sea islands that could house missiles, US says

Thursday 23 February 2017, by [Reuters](#) (Date first published: 22 February 2017).

China, in an early test of US President Donald Trump, is nearly finished building almost two dozen structures on artificial islands in the South China Sea that appear designed to house long-range surface-to-air missiles, two US officials told Reuters.

The development is likely to raise questions about whether and how the United States will respond, given its vows to take a tough line on China in the South China Sea.

China claims almost all the South China Sea, which carries a third of the world's maritime traffic. Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also have claims. Trump's administration has called China's island building in the South China Sea illegal.

Building the concrete structures with retractable roofs on Subi, Mischief and Fiery Cross reefs, part of the Spratly Islands chain where China already has built military-length airstrips, could be considered a military escalation, the US officials said in recent days, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"It is not like the Chinese to build anything in the South China Sea just to build it, and these structures resemble others that house SAM batteries, so the logical conclusion is that's what they are for," said a US intelligence official.

Another official said the structures appeared to be 20m (66ft) long and 10m (33ft) high.

A Pentagon spokesman said the United States remained committed to "non-militarization in the South China Sea" and urged all claimants to take actions consistent with international law.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In his Senate confirmation hearing last month, US secretary of state Rex Tillerson raised China's ire when he said Beijing should be denied access to the islands it is building in the South China Sea.

Tillerson subsequently softened his language, and Trump further reduced tensions by pledging to honor the long-standing US "One China" policy in a 10 February telephone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Greg Poling, a South China Sea expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said in a December report that China apparently had installed weapons, including anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems, on all seven of the islands it has built in the South China Sea.

The officials said the new structures were likely to house surface-to-air missiles that would expand China's air defense umbrella over the islands. They did not give a time line on when they believed

China would deploy missiles on the islands.

“It certainly raises the tension,” Poling said. “The Chinese have gotten good at these steady increases in their capabilities.”

On Tuesday, the Philippines said Southeast Asian countries saw China’s installation of weapons in the South China Sea as “very unsettling” and have urged dialogue to stop an escalation of “recent developments”.

Reuters

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