



NATO Foundation
Defense College

China February 2017

China consolidates its hold on the Spratly Islands building structures that could house missiles

According to U.S. intelligence, China has almost finished building some twenty concrete structures in three reefs of the Spratly Islands archipelago in the South China Sea. The structures appear to be fitted with retractable roofs raising the suspicion that they are meant to house long-range surface-to-air missiles.

The reconnaissance has generated concerns about Washington response, given its vows to take a tough line on China in the South China Sea.

China has already built military-length airstrips in the islands while claiming sovereignty over 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 and the Trump's administration considers China' illegal.

Beijing has ignored a pronouncement last year by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which ruled that China's maritime claims have no legal basis. Even though they now have international law on their side, the other claimants have done little to challenge Beijing.

In his Senate confirmation hearing last month, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said Beijing should be denied access to the islands in the South China Sea insinuating that Washington might impose a naval blockade. Beijing reacted angrily warning that the U.S. might have to "wage a large-scale war" to prevent Chinese access to the islands.

Tiller subsequently toned down his remarks but the dispute remains unresolved even if it was recently offset by the news that North Korea is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the United States.

Elenoire Laudieri di Biase - *Sinologist at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, and at Melbourne University. Senior Analyst on China at NATO Defense College Foundation*