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CHINA

There is a significant risk of conflict in the South China Sea

It has been confirmed that the Chinese President Xi Jinping will make an official visit to the United States in September, his first since assuming the presidency in March, 2013. The visit was announced last February after a telephone conversation between President Obama and President Xi and the confirmation came after the two leaders lately talked again on the phone discussing the visit final arrangements and exchanging views on the newly-reached Iranian nuclear agreement.

Obama said that China has played a vital role during the negotiations and expressed gratitude for China's contribution to the historic deal. In turn, Xi told Obama that China will continue a constructive co-operation with all parties to ensure the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal and the following UN resolution.

As far as China-US relations are concerned, the Chinese President said that the two countries have kept close contact with each other, steadily promoting their pragmatic co-operation in all fields and maintaining close communication and coordination on major international, regional and global issues. On the same note, Obama stated that the US and China can address global challenges such as climate change, economic development, and public health through mutual co-operation and joint effort.

These are, of course, goodwill statements ahead of the September summit while in reality the US and China remain at odds over many issues and particularly regarding China's intention to control the whole South China Sea.

As stated in a white paper on military strategy released last May, the Chinese believe that this region is a vital part of their country and any attempt to disrupt this policy is considered a challenge to China's security interests.

China claims nearly 90% of South China Sea and has already created seven artificial islands in the area of the Spratly archipelago to be used for military purposes raising the possibility of a military standoff in the region.

This posture risks escalating the tension in the South China Sea where the United States is determined to protect the interests of its allies like Taiwan and the Philippines. Recently, a US aircraft ignored repeated warnings from the Chinese military to fly a reconnaissance mission over the artificial islands.

Global Times, a newspaper run by the Chinese Communist Party, has suggested that China might have to *2accept» there would be conflict with the United States”.*

“If the United States’ bottom line is that China has to halt its activities, then a US-China war is inevitable in the South China Sea”, wrote the newspaper, which is seen as a mouthpiece of hard line nationalists in the Chinese government.

As a matter of fact neither Washington nor Beijing appear to be in the mood to back down and there is a serious risk that a minor incident in the airspace around the Spratly islands might escalate into a military confrontation. It is to be hoped that China will not misjudge the situation thinking that the US is a declining power and will not react if one of its observation aircrafts is shot down. Washington has too much at stake to let China do whatever she likes.