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Growing tension in the South China Sea

China accused the United States of trying to “create tension and undermine peace” by sending two guided-missile destroyers in the South China Sea. The two warships transited near the Beijing-claimed Spratly Islands as China and the US were resuming negotiations seeking to avoid an all-out trade war between the world’s two biggest economies.

Beijing asserts its sovereignty over nearly all of the South China Sea while the US and its allies periodically send planes and warships near the islands and reefs, where China is building bases and air strips, to affirm their right to pass through the waters, under international law.

In mid-January, US and British warships carried out their first joint military exercises in the South China Sea since Beijing began building bases and air strips on the islands. Another US warship, USS McCampbell (another Arleigh Burke-class destroyer), sailed within 12 nautical miles (22 kilometres) of the Paracel Islands chain, north of the Spratly Islands, on the 7th of January during a previous round of trade talks between the two countries.

Just a day after that operation, Chinese state broadcaster CCTV reported that Beijing had deployed an anti-ship ballistic missile known as the DF-26 – with a range of 3.000 to 4.000 kilometres – to the country’s northwest i.e. in Inner Mongolia (Alxa base).

The DF-26 (Dong Feng – Eastern Wind) is China’s most powerful anti-ship missile with a modular design allowing the deployment of two types of nuclear warheads and different types of conventional ones. Dubbed popularly a carrier killer missile or “Guam express” due to its ordnance and its range, it is satellite guided and in principle it could engage adversary warships across the Western Pacific Ocean.

It is a typical area denial weapon system and its latest deployment far from the coast allows it to be outside the range of detection by US radars such as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system in South Korea, avoiding an interception during the more vulnerable boost-phase and leaving to the US Navy SM-6 interceptor missile (on board of cruisers and destroyers) only the terminal phase to destroy the incoming warhead.

On the other hand, the CEP (circular error probability) without satellite guidance is still uncertain with estimates ranging between 150 to 450 metres, still too much for most conventional warheads against a capital ship.

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