

CHINA RENEWS ISLANDS CLAIM, US WARNS ON AIRSTRIP

BEIJING: Beijing will never give up its claims to South China Sea islands, its foreign minister insisted yesterday ahead of a state visit to the US by President Xi Jinping, after a Washington think-tank said it may be building its third airstrip in the area. China claims almost the whole of the sea and over the past year has asserted its stance by rapidly converting tiny reefs into artificial islands, with facilities for military use.

Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei all have rival claims to the waters, which incorporate strategically crucial shipping lanes and could harbor oil and gas deposits. The Pentagon has warned that Beijing's activities are changing the regional status quo, and has weighed sending warships and surveillance aircraft within 12 nautical miles of the normal territorial zone around natural land-of the new artificial islands.

Foreign minister Wang Yi stressed that China has no intention of backing down on its claims. "I wish to reiterate here that (the) Nansha Islands are China's territory," he said in a speech to foreign diplomats in

Beijing, using the Chinese name for the Spratly islands. "This is fully backed by historical and legal facts," he added. "It is totally understandable for China to uphold its own territorial sovereignty and prevent its legitimate interests from infringement."

Work began last year on a 3,000-metre (9,842 feet) runway on Fiery Cross reef in the Spratlys, around 1,000 kilometers from China's island province of Hainan.

It was now "well advanced" said the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on Tuesday. Satellite photos of another reef, Subi, where nearly four million square meters of land have been reclaimed, show grading work and possible runway construction is being carried out, it said. And satellite photos taken last week show that a retaining wall has been built on Mischief Reef, creating a 3,000-metre rectangular area, with a cement plant set up, CSIS said, "suggesting another runway could be in the works".

The images appear to contradict a claim by China

in August that its reclamation activities had stopped. Mischief Reef is only 21 nautical miles from Second Thomas Shoal, where the Philippines-whose defense budget is a fraction of China's-deliberately grounded a landing ship in 1999 to serve as a makeshift base for a contingent of marines.

"A third airstrip on Mischief Reef... would complete the triangle, significantly boosting China's air patrol and interdiction capabilities over the contested waters and features of the Spratlys," wrote Gregory Poling of CSIS' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI). It would heighten tensions and present "greater operational headaches for all the claimants as well as outside players like the United States", he added, as Chinese President Xi Jinping prepares to make his first state visit to the US next week.

'Already stopped'

Airstrip building in the Spratlys goes back nearly 40 years and four other claimants already have such facilities, although China's are much longer and

could be used by any of the People's Liberation Army's aircraft, analysts say. Beijing says its reclamations and facilities are intended for civilian and well as military purposes, with Wang saying the intent was to fulfill China's "international obligation".

China was "committed to maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea and assuring freedom of navigation and overflight", he said. The latest satellite pictures-showing continuing dredging and channel widening-were taken after Wang said at an ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur last month that land reclamation works were over.

Bonnie Glaser of AMTI said the works "underscore Beijing's unwillingness to exercise self-restraint and look for diplomatic paths to reduce tensions with its neighbors, the United States, and other nations". "Beijing appears to be sending a message to President Barack Obama that China is determined to advance its interests in the South China Sea even if doing so results in heightened tensions with the United States," she added. — AFP

DAUGHTER OF PHILIPPINE MOVIE ROYALTY AIMS FOR PRESIDENCY

MANILA: First-term Philippine senator Grace Poe yesterday announced plans to run for president next year, seeking a post that eluded her adoptive father, an action movie hero, more than a decade ago. Poe, 47, is the only woman in the contest, but the third candidate to declare the aim to succeed President Benigno Aquino. The others are Vice President Jejomar Binay and former Interior Minister Manuel Roxas.

The May election will be closely watched by investors, who fear the political succession in one of Asia's fastest growing economies could derail gains made during Aquino's rule. Under Aquino, the Philippines has seen economic growth of more than 6 percent on average, its best 5-year record in four decades. He has also battled to rein in corruption.

Poe, 47, a former pre-school teacher in the United States who is seen as a clean politician, has dominated two recent independent opinion polls, overtaking Binay, who had led surveys since last year. If successful, she would become the third woman to hold the post, after democracy hero Corazon Aquino, mother of the incumbent, and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, now in detention on plunder charges.

"I am Grace Poe, Filipino, daughter, wife, and mother, and with the help of God, I offer myself to all of you for higher service as your president," Poe, dressed in her trademark white polo shirt, told hundreds of cheering supporters at a rally in Manila to announce her bid for office.

Some prominent politicians joined the crowd chanting her name to the strains of a jingle from her late father's campaign. Poe promised to fight graft, boost spending on

infrastructure, cut taxes and power tariffs, modernize farming and help overseas workers. "The West Philippine Sea is ours and it is just right that we defend it using peaceful and legal means," she said, pushing for a strong military and coastguard "so that we will not be bullied by other countries". Her remarks referred to a dispute the Philippines has with neighbor China over territorial claims in parts of the South China Sea, including some areas of the Spratly Islands. The Philippines has taken its case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, but China has declined to take part.

'Immaculately clean'

Philippine politics has long been dominated by political clans and film celebrities, and Poe topped senatorial polls in 2013 with a record number of votes, despite being a newcomer. This was a testament to the enduring popularity of her adoptive parents, both movie stars, and her clean image compared with rivals who were seen mostly as traditional politicians.

"Filipinos are looking for clear alternatives," said Earl Parreno, an analyst at the Institute of Political and Electoral Reforms. "She is immaculately clean but she is also untested in the face of crisis." Poe faces an election disqualification case in the Supreme Court after a losing candidate queried her citizenship, as a founding whose parents were unknown. Voters see her as injecting a breath of fresh air to a tired political scene. "Let's try a new candidate," said Marietta Fernandez, 54, a housewife who came to hear Poe. "Our lives didn't improve under traditional politicians, she may be able to do the job." — Reuters



PYONGYANG: North Koreans gather in to prepare for events to be held during the 70th anniversary of the founding of their country's ruling party in October. — AP

N KOREA GEARS UP FOR MAJOR FETE, MAY HAVE NUCLEAR TEST PLANNED

UNDISPUTED GOOSE-STEPPING CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

PYONGYANG: China just put on a big military parade, a few months after Russia did the same. But there's no country more adept at putting on elaborate, massive displays of state power than North Korea, the undisputed goose-stepping capital of the world, and next month, Pyongyang will stage what is likely to be its biggest celebration in years. Question is: Will it come with a rocket launch? A nuclear test? Or both?

North Korea is already in high gear as it prepares to mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of its ruling party. Students and workers are being mobilized by the thousands to practice their parts in the grand show - some carrying wooden torches, others bouquets of red plastic flowers. Shock brigades of soldier-builders are toiling around the clock to paint bridges, build stages and finish high-rise apartments. To pretty up the capital, Pyongyang now even has bicycle lanes.

What exactly is in store for the Oct 10 anniversary remains a mystery. The government has been typically mum on its plans, though a military parade and appearance by leader Kim Jong Un would seem to be pretty safe bets. Adding to the buzz, senior officials speaking in interviews with the North's state-run media over the past few days have dropped hints that the real fireworks might not happen in Pyongyang at all.

Propaganda value

On Monday, the head of North Korea's space agency said the country has the right to launch rockets any time it sees fit and suggested Pyongyang is preparing to put its second satellite into orbit. He didn't explicitly state a launch was in the works, and open-source satellite imagery doesn't show a rocket is being readied. But a new space mission would have great domestic propaganda value, and many North Korea watchers have been expecting one around the time of the anniversary.

The North claims its rockets are meant for scientific purposes. Washington, Seoul and their allies believe they are used as a pretext for testing long-range missile technology, which it is banned from doing under UN sanctions. The rocket remarks were followed Tuesday by a senior nuclear official's claim that the North has "rearranged, changed or readjusted" the plutonium and highly enriched uranium facilities at its main Nyongbyon nuclear complex. He said it has started normal operations and scientists have improved the capabilities of the country's nuclear weapons "in quality and quantity." Both avenues of research are essential to North Korea's military strategy of perfecting a nuclear weapon small enough to be mounted on a reliable, long-range missile that could hit targets in the United States. Every long-range rocket launch and nuclear test gets Pyongyang closer to that goal.

"If (North Korea) launches a missile or tests nuclear weapons, it is a grave provocation. And it is a military threat," South Korea Unification Ministry spokesman Jeong Joon-hee told reporters in Seoul yesterday. "We will properly and sternly deal with the matter in cooperation with the international community." That might be jumping the gun a bit. South Korean officials have said they are confident they could detect preparations for a nuclear test a month in advance, and one week for a rocket launch. Last week, a South Korean Defense Ministry official told the National Assembly no such indications have been observed. In a report published Tuesday by the US-based 38 North website, analysts Jack Liu and Joseph Bermudez, using satellite imagery, also reported no signs of an imminent launch from the North's Sohae facility.

Keeping North Korea-watchers guessing about whether it will launch or test helps Pyongyang ensure that its October spectacle gets attention. The event will be something to see in any case. After North

Korea held its last big blowout, for the 60th anniversary of the armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953, military analysts were busy for months trying to understand the capabilities of all the missiles it rolled out. There was also an ominous-looking unit bearing the international symbol for radioactivity - probably troops who specialize in nuclear, biological or chemical attacks.

Flat-out fake

Analysts determined that one missile was at best a mock-up and possibly a flat-out fake. The truck it was paraded on turned out to have likely come from China, which sparked a debate in the UN over whether international sanctions had been violated. Kim Jong Un watched the parade from a special reviewing stand in one of his first public appearances before a big international audience after assuming power in December 2011. The North invited hordes of foreign journalists, and Kim gave them a huge surprise by making himself available for photos at a newly opened war museum. Photographers found themselves suddenly within arm's length of the world's youngest and most mysterious leader. Some journalists shouted questions but were ignored. For the upcoming event, flights to Pyongyang are already fully booked. Hotels normally used for foreigners are filling up so fast that some visitors have been warned they may have to double or triple up.

The guest list of foreign VIPs remains a matter of speculation, but may be less than stellar. Kim, who has yet to make a state visit abroad, chose not to travel to Beijing or Moscow to attend their recent parades, both of which marked the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. So it is unlikely that China or Russia, North Korea's primary allies, will send their leaders to Pyongyang. — AP



QUEZON CITY: Sen. Grace Poe acknowledges her supporters shortly after announcing her intention to run for the 2016 presidential elections yesterday at the alumni hall of the country's premier university, the University of the Philippines. — AP

NEW AUSTRALIAN PM FLAGS MORE WOMEN IN CABINET

CANBERRA: Australia's new Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday flagged that more women would be included in his first Cabinet to be sworn in Monday. "There is no greater enthusiast than me for seeing more women in positions of power and influence in Parliament, in ministries right across the country," Turnbull told reporters in his first news conference as prime minister. "I am very committed to that, but I am not going to say any more about the new ministerial arrangements," he said.

Turnbull replaced his unpopular predecessor Tony Abbott in a surprise leadership vote of lawmakers in the ruling conservative Liberal Party on Monday night. Abbott was widely criticized for including only two women in his 19-member Cabinet, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Health Minister Sussan Ley. Bishop was the only woman in Abbott's first Cabinet sworn in in 2013.

Turnbull said there would be "some changes" in his Cabinet, but gave no indication of the scale. He declined to comment on the future of the government's chief economic minister, Treasurer Joe Hockey. In challenging Abbott's leadership, Turnbull indirectly attacked Hockey with the criticism that "the government is not successful in providing the economic leadership that we need."

The government's popularity plunged in opinion polls and never recovered after Hockey revealed his first annual budget in May last year. That budget was widely criticized as unfair toward the poor. Hockey revealed yesterday that he had had discussions about his future with Turnbull, suggesting he might accept another ministry. Turnbull said he had spoken to Abbott since his ouster, but did not know whether the former prime minister intended to stay in Parliament. — AP



CANBERRA: Malcolm Turnbull makes an address at Parliament after he was sworn in as prime minister. — AP

MALAYSIAN POLICE FIRE WATER CANNON AT ETHNIC PROTEST

KUALA LUMPUR: Police fired water cannons at ethnic Malays who turned unruly yesterday at a pro-government rally that many fear has the potential to provoke racial trouble in this multiethnic nation with large Chinese and Indian minorities.

The rally - a collection of several marches that converged on a central field near Parliament - was ostensibly called to emphasize the dominance of Malays in Malaysia, as well as to support the government of Prime Minister Najib Razak, who is under pressure to resign over a \$700 million financial scandal. But the rally is also being seen as a challenge to the Chinese and Indians, who had gathered in large numbers in an anti-Najib rally on Aug 29 and 30.

Unlike that rally, which was banned by the police, the Malay parade yesterday was allowed to go ahead by authorities, albeit with a warning that the demonstrators would not be allowed to carry banners or posters with racial overtones. "I am here to defend Malay dignity and dominance," said Rahamah Abdul Majid, one of the protesters. "We must not let others take over our country."

Other demonstrators blew horns and chanted "Long live the Malays." Some carried banners that read, "People unite to defend the government of the people's choice." Most of the thousands of red-shirted protesters taking part in the rally demonstrated peacefully at the grounds near Parliament. But a small group threw plastic bottles at police and tried to push their way through barricades into Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown, shouting "This is Malay land." Riot police retaliated by firing chemical-laced

water from a fire truck. The rally included Cabinet members and leaders from Najib's ruling United Malays National Organization, or UMNO party, the dominant group in the ruling coalition that has held power since independence in 1957. It draws its support from the

Malay Muslims, who form about 60 percent of the country's 30 million people. Many see themselves as the rightful owners of Malaysia's history, heritage and governmental power. The other name for the Malays, Bumiputras, means sons of the soil. — AP



KUALA LUMPUR: Riot police fires a water cannon to pro-government "red shirt" protesters as they try to enter China Town during a demonstration. — AP