

Congressmen suggested that unless these matters are clarified immediately, including by coughing up the specifics of who was involved in the leaks against the Trump team, it would probably not be renewed.

The same day, Trump associates Paul Manafort, Roger Stone and Carter Page, who have been attacked in the media and by Obama operatives for their purported ties to Russia, called the bluff by offering to voluntarily testify before the Intelligence Committee.

The “case” against Manafort, Trump’s (unpaid) campaign chairman in March-August 2016, demonstrates just how overstretched the efforts to paint Trump as a Russian agent have become. According to London’s *Independent* on 22 March, career political lobbyist Manafort in 2005 allegedly proposed “a confidential strategy to influence politics, business and news coverage in the US and across Europe” to Russian aluminium tycoon Oleg Deripaska, whom the *Independent* describes as “a close ally of the Russian president”. “[We] will be offering a great service that can re-focus, both internally and externally, the policies of the Putin government”, Manafort allegedly wrote in a memo. Deripaska later contracted Manafort’s firm’s services for US\$10 million per annum for three years, 2006-09. The *Independent* chooses

to interpret this as Manafort’s having “worked in the Kremlin’s interests”.

Oleg Deripaska is a member of the new Russian oligarchy who raped and pillaged the post-Soviet economy in the 1990s, snapping up former state-owned enterprises for a song and “offshoring” their ill-gotten fortunes through London’s network of dirty banks and tax havens. Vladimir Putin has worked to reverse this carnage, with varying success, ever since he came to power in 2000, including as Prime Minister in 2008-12. Some of the most corrupt oligarchs have been jailed; others fled the country, and are now living in luxurious self-imposed exile in London. Still others, like Deripaska, made concessions enough to stay mostly out of trouble while they wait for the tide to change.

So, to recap: a Russian business magnate, living in uneasy truce with his nation’s government, hires a lobbyist to help “re-focus, both internally and externally, the policies” of said government, to suit the magnate’s interests. A decade later, the same lobbyist volunteers his services, for six months, to the campaign of his preferred party’s Presidential candidate. Therefore, said candidate—now President—is a Russian agent.

Fake news, anyone?

Who is really militarising the South China Sea?

The first question at Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s joint press conference with Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull last week concerned China’s “reclamation and militarisation of the South China Sea”, which the journalist described as “a major source of regional tension” that China should abandon as a show of goodwill.

Li responded that China is not militarising the South China Sea at all, nor does it intend to. The new facilities—runways, ports, storage units and lighthouses—“are primarily for civilian purposes”, he said, “and even if there is a certain amount of defence equipment or facilities, it is for maintaining the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea”. After all, he pointed out, China is the biggest trader in the world, and much of the traffic through or above the South China Sea is bound to or from China—freedom of navigation is vital to China’s national interest. “The logic is very simple here”, he said.

The United States also cites concern for freedom of navigation as the basis for its frequent naval deployments in the area. So who is actually doing the militarising?

The USA?

The US Navy announced in an 18 February press release that Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 1, led by the nuclear-powered Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson*, had commenced “routine operations” in the South China Sea. The release did not state how many vessels would participate, and news reports have been likewise sketchy; but according to the Navy’s website, besides the carrier itself a CSG typically comprises:

- One Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser armed with torpedoes, eight Harpoon over-the-horizon anti-ship missiles, and a variable array of 122 short-, medium- and long-range surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles, including nuclear-capable Tomahawk cruise missiles.

- Two Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers, one of which—the USS *Wayne E. Meyer*—was named in the Navy’s press release. Armed with torpedoes, a 127 mm artillery piece and 96 assorted missiles, Arleigh Burke-class destroyers also host the advanced Aegis Combat System. Their

main purpose is to penetrate onshore defences, knock out the target’s nuclear first-strike capability, and deliver a nuclear strike of their own.

- One Los Angeles-class nuclear powered fast-attack submarine, armed with a total 37 anti-shiping mines, torpedoes, or Tomahawk missiles.

- One Supply-class “fast combat support ship”, a resupply vessel which carries over 28 million litres of liquid fuels; 1,950 tonnes of ammunition; 450 tonnes of dry stores; and 230 tonnes of refrigerated stores, greatly extending the potential duration of deployments.

- A Carrier Air Wing (CVW), the complement of which varies by carrier; the *Vinson* can carry 90 aircraft. Currently assigned to it is CVW 2, comprising two squadrons of Seahawk helicopters; four squadrons of FA-18 Super Hornets of various configurations; one squadron of EA-18G Growlers, a Hornet variant re-tooled for electronic warfare; one squadron of E-2 Hawkeye Airborne Early Warning and Control craft; and one squadron of C-2 Greyhound resupply aircraft. Per the Navy press release, at least some aircraft from each of these squadrons were to participate in the exercise.

...or China?

Early last year China stationed a mobile anti-aircraft missile battery on Yongxing (Woody) Island in the Xisha (Paracel) group, where from time to time it deploys fighter jets. What most English-language media gloss over is that Yongxing is a *natural* island—the largest in the Xishas—which has hosted a permanent Chinese garrison since 1956. Incessant US overflights and satellite surveillance of the Spratly group, far to the south where most of island-building is going on, has revealed only low-powered mobile artillery, reportedly with a range of less than one mile—and therefore purely defensive.

As to “expansionism”: The Nine-Dash Line delineating China’s claim of sovereignty over most of the South China Sea was promulgated by the former Republic of China in the 1940s, based on historical claims going back many centuries—at the risk of sounding trite, it isn’t called the South China Sea for nothing. One may agree or not with China’s claims, but they have been nothing if not consistent.