

## **China deploys anti-aircraft missiles on disputed South China Sea island**

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**Beijing:** China has deployed missiles to a disputed island in the South China Sea even as President Barack Obama called for 'tangible steps' to settle territorial disputes in the resource-rich region at the conclusion of a summit with Southeast Asian leaders.

According to media reports, satellite images showed two batteries of eight surface-to-air HQ-9 missile launchers as well as a radar system on Woody Island, part of the Paracel Island chain in the South China Sea.

According to the images, a beach on the island was empty on February 3, but the missiles were visible by February 14.

A US official said the imagery showed the HQ-9 air defence system with a range of over 200 kilometres, which would pose a threat to any civilian or military airplane flying close by, the report said.

It is the same island where a US Navy destroyer sailed close to another contested island a few weeks ago. Woody Island is part of the Paracels chain, under Chinese control for more than 40 years also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam. The missiles arrived on the island over the past week.

A US official confirmed that China has placed a surface-to-air missile system on Woody Island and the State Department said commercial satellite imagery appears to indicate that China has deployed such a system.

Spokesman Mark Toner told reporters here, that if true, China's action "will raise tensions further in the region."

China described the report as media hype. "We believe this is an attempt by certain Western media to create news stories," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said.

Claiming that the development was largely civilian oriented and benefited the region, Wang pointed to the construction of light houses, weather stations, and rescue and shelter facilities for fishermen.

"All of those are actions that China, as the biggest littoral state in the South China Sea, has undertaken to provide more public goods and services to the international community and play its positive role there," he said.

Wang said China's construction of military infrastructure was "consistent with the right to self-preservation and self-protection that China is entitled to under international law, so there should be no question about that."

The reported move by China comes as President Obama hosted 10 Asia-Pacific leaders in California, many of those concerned over China's recent activity in the South China Sea.

The US will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, and will support the right of all countries to do the same, Obama said yesterday, as he called for "tangible steps" to reduce tensions in the disputed and natural resource-rich South China Sea.

- With PTI Inputs