

Trump Threats on South China Sea Heighten Risk of Nuclear War

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Global Research, January 25, 2017

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 25 January 2017

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

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Just days after taking office, the Trump administration has set course for a conflict with China over the South China Sea that threatens military clashes and war.

President Donald Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer, on Tuesday backed up an earlier assertion by the administration's nominee for secretary of state, former Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson, that Washington would bar Chinese access to islets being built up by Beijing in the South China Sea.

In his first full press briefing, Spicer bluntly declared,

"The US is going to make sure that we protect our interests there." Referring to Chinese-controlled islands in the disputed waters, he continued: "It's a question if those islands are in fact in international waters and not part of China proper, then yeah, we are going to make sure we defend international territories from being taken over by one country."

The reckless character of the Trump administration's threats was underscored by the *Washington Post's* headline: "Is Trump ready for war in the South China Sea, or is his team just not being clear?" While the *Post* suggested the problem was unclear or misspoken remarks, Spicer's statements were fully in line with what was said less than two weeks ago by Tillerson.

At his congressional confirmation hearing, Tillerson lashed out at China, declaring that its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea were "akin to Russia's taking Crimea." He warned that China's island-building would have to stop, adding that its "access to those islands also is not going to be allowed."

These comments mark a decisive shift from Washington's previous stance, which, nominally at least, took no position on the territorial disputes, but declared that it had a "national interest" in ensuring "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Under the Obama administration, the US Navy provocatively sent guided missile destroyers on three occasions within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese islets.

The Trump administration is directly challenging China's control over the islets. Asked how the US would carry out its threat to bar Chinese access, Spicer said that "we'll have more information on that" as the situation develops.

As various analysts have pointed out, the only means of barring China would be a naval and

air blockade in the South China Sea. Such action, a clear breach of international law, would constitute an act of war.

The islets in the South China Sea are not “international territories,” but are occupied by various countries and subject to longstanding disputes. Washington’s cynicism and hypocrisy are staggering. It is not proposing to take action against islets occupied by rival claimants—the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Taiwan.

The Chinese foreign ministry yesterday reaffirmed that China had “indisputable sovereignty” over the islets and warned that “we are firm in safeguarding our rights and interests.” After pointing out that US had no direct claim in the South China Sea, spokeswoman Hua Chunying urged Washington to “speak and act cautiously to avoid damaging peace and stability in the area.”

An earlier editorial in the state-owned *Global Times* declared that any attempt to prevent China’s access to its islands would “involve large-scale war” and suggested that Tillerson “bone up on nuclear power strategies if he wants to force a big nuclear power to withdraw from its own territories.”

The willingness of US imperialism to threaten a nuclear-armed power and risk a nuclear conflagration cannot be ascribed simply to the outlook or psyche of the right-wing demagogue Donald Trump or the militaristic and fascistic individuals in his administration. While Trump’s rise to power represents a qualitative shift in global politics, the basis for the looming confrontation with China was laid by the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot to Asia.” If Hillary Clinton, one of the chief architects of the “pivot,” had won office, her administration, whatever the differences in style, timing and tactics, would have pursued essentially the same war-mongering course.

The aim of Obama’s “pivot to Asia” was to arrest the historic decline of US imperialism and subordinate China to the “international rules based system” dominated by Washington. Trump’s advisers do not disagree with the aim, but have been scathing in denouncing the failure of the “pivot” to achieve those ends.

During his election campaign, Trump made clear that he intended to confront China across the board over trade and monetary issues, alleged cyber-spying, and some of the world’s most dangerous flashpoints—North Korea and Taiwan as well as the South China Sea. He has promised a vast expansion of the US military, including its nuclear arsenal, to back his demands with the threat of war.

A fundamental sea change is underway in global politics and economy. The election of Trump marks the final breakdown and collapse of the post-World War II order. Trump’s decision to tear up the Trans Pacific Partnership—the economic component of Obama’s “pivot”—spells the end to the era of “free trade” and multilateralism. Trump’s “America First” policy means a turn to punitive trade measures, in the first instance against China, and the return of the “beggar-thy-neighbour” policies of the 1930s that led to World War II.

The speculation by the media and governments around the world that Trump would moderate his views once in office is rapidly turning to consternation and fear. In the major capitals, calculations are being made as to how best to defend the national interest.

Germany’s economic affairs minister Sigmar Gabriel declared that Europe had to define its

own interests, suggesting that it turn to China and Asia if the US starts a trade war with Beijing. Any shift towards China, particularly by the European powers, will intensify Washington's bellicose words and actions, as it feels its geo-political position slipping away and concludes it must act sooner rather than later.

At this month's World Economy Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented his regime as the defender of the "liberal" capitalist trade and economic order in opposition to Washington, in a bid to increase Chinese influence among the traditional allies of the United States.

The US-based Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) released a report last week entitled "Preserving the Balance: A US Eurasia Defence Strategy." It declares that the US must prevent the domination of the Eurasian landmass by a rival power or powers. "If a single power came to dominate either Europe or Asia, it would possess substantially greater manpower, economic and technical capacity—and thus greater military potential—than the United States. Therefore, if possible, the emergence of such a power must be resisted," it states.

The report rules out nothing, including the use of nuclear weapons to achieve US objectives. After declaring there is "a need to rethink the problem of limited nuclear war," it continues: "US forces must be prepared to respond to a range of strategic warfare contingencies along the Eurasian periphery. The US military's ability to conduct operations to end such a conflict promptly and on favourable terms, as well as in a manner that discourages future nuclear use, could be crucial to America's long-term security."

The Trump administration's menacing threats on the South China Sea are the sharpest of warnings that the world is heading with gathering speed towards a nuclear catastrophe. But the same crisis that impels world capitalism on the road to world war impels the international working class on the road to socialist revolution.

The issue will in the end be decided by the level of political consciousness, unity and organisation of the working class, and that depends on the building of the new political leadership of the working class. That leadership—which alone is fighting to build an international movement against war on the basis of a united struggle of the working class against capitalism, the source of imperialist war—is the International Committee of the Fourth International. The urgent task is to join and help build the ICFI and its national sections.

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