

US Defence Secretary Sets Stage for Confrontation with China

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In the lead-up to this weekend's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter yesterday bluntly declared that the US would continue its military provocations against China in the South China Sea.

The Pentagon deliberately inflamed tensions with Beijing last week by allowing a CNN news crew to fly on board a navy reconnaissance flight near Chinese-controlled atolls. The CNN report was designed to put a spotlight on China's land reclamation activities. It also featured the warnings of Chinese authorities as the aircraft approached what China regards as its territory.

China issued a formal protest to the US on Monday. Its spokesperson condemned American actions as "utterly dangerous and irresponsible" and "highly likely to cause miscalculation and untoward incidents in the waters and airspace."

Speaking in Hawaii yesterday, Carter again called for an immediate halt to China's land reclamation activities, which the US insists are for military purposes. He made clear that the US would continue its "freedom of navigation" operations to challenge China's territorial claims.

"There should be no mistake about this," Carter declared, "the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as we do around the world."

In other words, under the pretext of "freedom of navigation," the US will keep sending warships and warplanes near Chinese-administered islets, risking a clash that could rapidly escalate into conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers. Even more recklessly, the Pentagon is planning "freedom of navigation" missions to enter the 12-mile territorial limit around Chinese islets.

Carter accused China of being "out of step with both international norms that underscore the Asia Pacific's security architecture and the regional consensus in favour of a non-coercive approach to this and other longstanding disputes."

The cynicism involved in Carter's remarks is breathtaking. Since 2010, the Obama administration has systematically exploited the maritime disputes in the South China Sea to drive a wedge between China and its South East Asian neighbours. Carter's references to "international norms" are particularly hypocritical. Unlike China, the US has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Having encouraged Vietnam and the Philippines to aggressively pursue their claims against China, the US is now flying military missions, thousands of kilometres from any American territory, aimed at provoking a response from China and a major international crisis to force Beijing to back down.

The US military intervention in the South China Sea is part of the broader “pivot to Asia”—a diplomatic, economic and military strategy directed against China, aimed at securing American hegemony throughout the region. Carter declared yesterday: “We will remain the principal security power in the Asia Pacific for decades to come.”

Carter’s remarks are a prelude to a showdown with Chinese officials at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue, which starts tomorrow. At last year’s gathering, Carter’s predecessor, Chuck Hagel, rebuked China for “destabilising, unilateral actions” in the South China Sea and warned that the US would “not look the other way.”

Over the past year, the US has rapidly ratcheted up its pressure on China in the South China Sea, securing a basing arrangement with the Philippines, urging Japan to send its own patrols to the tense region and beefing up access to military bases in northern Australia. Last week’s navy surveillance flight left from the Clark Air Force base in the Philippines.

The foreign policy and military establishment in Washington is well aware that US actions in the South China Sea could lead to war.

Writing this week on the *Daily Beast* website, Gordon Chang identified the South China Sea as “history’s next great war zone.” Portraying China as the aggressive threat to peace, he concluded: “China’s challenge to the United States in the South China Sea sets up the classic zero sum confrontation.

“Beijing has declared that its South China Sea claims are a ‘core interest’ that cannot be negotiated. Washington, which has plied the seas from its very first days as a nation, cannot compromise its defence of the global commons. Each side can make tactical retreats, but neither can abandon its position for long.”

Chang warned: “There are two competing visions of the world, and only one can prevail.”

In reality, the “zero sum confrontation” is of Washington’s making. The Obama administration is demanding the unfettered “right” of access for the US military throughout the South China Sea, including in Chinese-controlled territory, and is also dictating the terms of China’s activities in these strategic waters. The US would regard similar actions by China in waters near Hawaii or California as an act of war.

China has already signalled that it might respond to US provocations by declaring an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea. In an interview published yesterday in the Chinese press, Ouyang Yujing, director of boundaries and oceanic affairs for the foreign ministry, declared: “China has the right to establish ADIZs.”

While downplaying the immediate likelihood, he declared: “Whether or not China will establish a South China Sea ADIZ will depend on factors such as whether China’s air safety is under threat and the seriousness of the threat.”

Such a move would dramatically intensify the South China Sea confrontation. In November

2013, when China announced an ADIZ covering the East China Sea, including disputed islands administered by Japan, the US reacted by immediately flying nuclear capable B-52 bombers into the zone.

While the responsibility for the mounting crisis lies with Washington, there is nothing progressive about the Chinese regime's response. Incapable of making any appeal to the working class in China or internationally, the Chinese Communist Party leadership is expanding its own military apparatus, playing directly into the hands of US imperialism. This only heightens the danger of humanity being dragged into a devastating world war.

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