

US Defense Secretary Menaces China at Singapore Forum

By [Peter Symonds](#)

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In a menacing and provocative speech in Singapore on Saturday, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel directly accused China of “destabilising, unilateral actions asserting its claims in the South China Sea” and warned that the US “will not look the other way when fundamental principles of the international order are being challenged.”

Delivered at the Shangri-La Dialogue, the annual Asian defence forum, Hagel’s speech was an open and unequivocal statement that the US intends to maintain its undisputed dominance in Asia and will use its military might to that end. Hagel reaffirmed Washington’s commitment to the “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia—an aggressive strategy aimed at undermining and militarily encircling China. The rebalance, he declared, “is not a goal, not a promise, or a vision—it’s a reality.”

In the course of his speech, Hagel listed the recent steps taken by the Obama administration to strengthen military ties throughout the region, including: new strategic partnerships with Vietnam and Malaysia, the signing of a basing agreement for US forces in the Philippines, the build-up of advanced US military hardware in Japan, expanded anti-ballistic missile systems in Asia, and greater military collaboration with key allies including Japan, South Korea and Australia.

The rapid US military build-up in Asia makes a mockery of the Obama administration’s claims that its “pivot” is purely to maintain peace and stability and is not targeted against China. As Hagel reaffirmed, by 2020, the US will station 60 percent of its air and naval assets in the Asia Pacific. The Pentagon also plans to boost support for its allies and strategic partners by increasing foreign military financing by 35 percent and military education and training by 40 percent by 2016.

Hagel dispensed with customary diplomatic niceties and openly attacked China over its actions in the South China Sea. Accusing Beijing of “intimidation and coercion,” he declared: “It has restricted access to Scarborough Reef, put pressure on the long-standing Philippine presence at the Second Thomas Shoal, begun land reclamation activities at multiple locations, and moved an oil rig into disputed waters [with Vietnam] near the Paracel Islands.”

In reality, the US has deliberately inflamed these longstanding territorial disputes as a means of driving a wedge between China and its neighbours. In 2010, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provocatively declared at an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) forum that the US had “a national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. Over the past four years, Washington has encouraged ASEAN

countries, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, to press their claims against China. As a result, low-level regional disputes have been transformed into dangerous international flashpoints for war.

Hagel delivered what amounted to an ultimatum to Beijing, declaring that it had a choice: “to unite and recommit to a stable regional order, or walk away from that commitment and risk the peace and security that have benefitted millions of people throughout the Asia Pacific.” In the course of his Asian tour in April, President Obama explicitly declared support for Japan and the Philippines in any war with China over disputed territories.

Hagel’s speech was part of a concerted campaign at the Shangri-La Dialogue to bully and bait China. His remarks were not only echoed by high-level American officials such as Admiral Samuel Locklear, commander of the US Pacific Command, but by representatives of key Asian allies including Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Australian Defence Minister David Johnston.

In a keynote speech last Friday, Abe announced: “Japan intends to play an even greater and more proactive role” in security affairs in Asia and the world. He declared Japan’s “utmost support for efforts by ASEAN member countries to ensure the security of the seas and the skies and rigorously maintain freedom of navigation and overflight.”

Like the US, Japan is directly intervening in the disputes in the South China Sea, providing patrol boats to the Philippines and Indonesia and pushing for a deal with Vietnam to do the same. Targeting China, Abe declared: “What the world eagerly awaits is for our seas and our skies to be places governed by rules, laws and established dispute resolution procedures.”

Abe’s comments are utterly hypocritical. In the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, he refuses to acknowledge that there is even a dispute with China making “dispute resolution procedures” irrelevant. Since coming to power in December 2012, Abe has used the territorial dispute to justify Japan’s remilitarisation, including increased military budgets and the removal of constitutional constraints on the Japanese military.

The speeches by Hagel and Abe at the Shangri-La forum were calculated to goad Chinese officials present. Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong, the deputy chief of the general staff and head of the Chinese delegation, hit back, branding Hagel’s speech as “full of threats and intimidating language,” “completely non-constructive” and “full of hegemony.”

Hagel and Abe appeared to be “singing in duet,” Wang declared. “In this kind of public space with many people openly criticising China without reason, Secretary Hagel’s speech is full of encouragement, incitement for the Asian region’s instability giving rise to a disturbance,” he said.

The gang-up of US and its allies against China at the Singapore forum is a marked escalation of the Obama administration’s drive to war in Asia. Even as it is engaged in a confrontation with Russia in Ukraine, Hagel’s bellicose language indicates that the US is determined to ramp up pressure on China and continued its military build-up in Asia.

It is no accident that Hagel focused on the South China Sea. A critical component of the Pentagon’s plans for war against China is control of the key sea lanes through South East Asia on which China relies to import energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. In close collaboration with Japan and Australia, the US is positioning itself to be able to

impose a blockade of China aimed at crippling its industry and economy.

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