

A US-led chorus of condemnation of China

By Peter Symonds
6 June 2015

The United States and its allies have continued to lash China over its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea following US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter's open challenge last weekend at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. The mounting tensions threaten to trigger an incident that could lead to a clash and open conflict.

Speaking at a gathering of the US-sponsored Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative on Tuesday, President Barack Obama again accused China of bullying its smaller neighbours and insisted that it had failed to abide by international norms and rules. While some of China's claims might be legitimate, he said, "they shouldn't just try to establish that based on throwing elbows and pushing people out of the way."

In reality, the US has played the prime role in transforming long-running maritime disputes into dangerous flashpoints for war. Under the pretext of ensuring "freedom of navigation," the Obama administration has encouraged China's neighbours—particularly the Philippines and Vietnam—to more stridently assert their claims, while building up US forces in the region, and strengthening alliances and partnerships throughout Asia, including with Japan, Australia and India.

Carter's comments in Singapore demanding an immediate halt to land reclamation in the South China Sea were the signal for a chorus of condemnation. In remarks directed at China, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott on Thursday declared that his government "deplores any unilateral alteration of the status quo."

Abbott targeted "coercive or unilateral actions," including "large-scale land reclamation activity," and voiced particular concerns "at the prospect of militarisation of artificial structures." The prime minister is parroting the line from Washington, focusing on China's supposedly "aggressive" land reclamation, while ignoring the fact that other

claimants—including the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan—already have substantial infrastructure, including military-capable airfields, on some of their islets.

A front-page article in the *Australian* this week reported that the Abbott government is "actively considering"—egged on by the US—its own coercive actions in the South China Sea. Plans are being drawn up to provocatively fly a military reconnaissance aircraft within the 12-mile territorial limit of one or more Chinese-controlled atolls.

At a joint press conference with Philippine President Benigno Aquino III yesterday in Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent an identical message. "Regarding the South China Seas, we've reaffirmed that we are concerned about large-scale land reclamation and that we are opposed to unilateral attempts to change the status quo." Earlier in the week, Aquino issued a far more belligerent condemnation, comparing China to Nazi Germany.

Along with the war of words, military preparations are being made. Aquino indicated his willingness to enter discussions with Japan over a Visiting Forces Agreement, along the lines of those with the US and Australia. Such a deal would provide Japanese armed forces with their first basing arrangement in South East Asia since the end of World War II, during which Japan militarily seized much of the region, including the Philippines.

Abe and Aquino signed a strategic partnership agreement on Thursday and agreed to hold talks on the sale of Japanese military hardware to the Philippines, including P-C3 anti-submarine reconnaissance aircraft and radar technology. Japan has already agreed to supply 10 patrol vessels to boost the Philippine Coast Guard and the two countries are stepping up their joint military exercises and operations in the South China Sea.

Last year, the Aquino administration signed an Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement with the US that provides virtually unlimited access for the American military to Philippine bases. The Philippines is currently involved in a massive three-year upgrade to establish a major naval base at Oyster Bay on Palawan Island, directly adjacent to the South China Sea and the disputed Spratly Island group. According to IHS Jane's, which monitors military activity globally, the facility will eventually have a helipad, an amphibious jungle warfare training centre, a coast watch radar station and communications centre, and a joint operations centre for visiting allies and partners.

Following a visit by US Defence Secretary Carter this week, Vietnam provocatively announced the offer of a holiday cruise of the Spratlys, known as Truong Sa in Vietnamese, to its citizens. "Travelling to Truong Sa... means the big trip of your life, reviving national pride and citizens' awareness of the sacred maritime sovereignty of the country," the promotion declared. China reacted yesterday by declaring that the cruise to disputed islets was an "interference" in China's sovereignty.

Reuters reported yesterday that Vietnam was holding discussions with European and US military contractors to buy fighter jets, patrol aircraft and unarmed drones. The focus is clearly on disputed territory in the South China Sea. Australian Defence Force Academy analyst Carl Thayer told the *Guardian*: "Vietnam badly needs modern maritime reconnaissance aircraft to patrol its vast maritime domain."

The Vietnamese and Philippine weapons purchases are part of an escalating arms race in Asia fuelled by rising geo-political tensions and stoked in particular by the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot to Asia" directed against China. According to IHS Jane's, annual defence spending in South East Asia is projected to reach \$52 billion by 2020, up from an estimated \$42 billion this year. The 10 countries that make up the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are expected to spend \$58 billion on new military hardware over the next five years, with naval procurement comprising a large portion.

A blog by Sean O'Connor on the US-based Council of Foreign Relations website, entitled "How to defuse the looming Asia-Pacific arms race," pointed to the heavy involvement of the United States in arms sales.

This included upgrading Singapore's F-16 program, selling missiles to Indonesia and Malaysia, and providing military financing to the Philippines to procure stealth frigates, anti-submarine helicopters and guided missile fast attack craft. Taiwan has just announced that it will deploy its P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft, recently acquired from the US, to the South China Sea.

"Clearly, US policymakers believe the best strategy for discouraging Chinese aggression in the South China Sea is to arm US allies in the region," O'Connor declared. "What Washington must recognise, however, is that foreign military sales have unintended consequences. With more capabilities and vessels deployed in the disputed territory, a small skirmish could ignite an all-out crisis."

The warning will undoubtedly fall on deaf ears. US imperialism is engaged in an all-embracing military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific and has already staged a series of reckless provocations. Its aim is not to protect small nations from bullying or "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea, but engineer a confrontation with China, even at the risk of all-out war, to ensure its subordination to US interests in Asia and internationally.

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