

US ramps up pressure on Beijing over South China Sea

By Peter Symonds
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Following its provocative naval intervention last week against Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, the Obama administration is engaged in an aggressive diplomatic offensive throughout Asia, seeking to ramp up the pressure on China over the explosive issue.

Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, deliberately inflamed tensions yesterday during his trip to Beijing. He emphatically declared that the US military would “continue to fly, sail and operate whenever and wherever international law allows. The South China Sea is not—and will not—be an exception.”

For months Harris pressed for President Obama to give the green light for “freedom of navigation” operations within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-controlled reefs. In March, the admiral implied that China’s land reclamation activities in the region posed a threat, describing it as creating “a great wall of sand.”

On October 27, the USS Lassen, a guided missile destroyer, intruded within the 12-mile limit surrounding at least one of the Chinese-administered islets in the Spratly Islands. It was the first such direct challenge to Beijing’s claims. Washington insists that under international law several of China’s reefs, before land reclamation, were submerged at high tide and therefore do not generate territorial waters. Significantly, however, the US has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea that is the basis for this assertion.

Harris declared yesterday that the USS Lassen was simply engaged in a routine operation. “We’ve been conducting freedom of navigation operations all over the world for decades, so no one should be surprised by them,” he said.

In reality, the deliberate violation of Chinese claims

has nothing to do with upholding international laws and norms. Rather it is a component of the Obama administration’s broader “pivot to Asia”—an all-encompassing diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at isolating China and subordinating it to US interests, by war if necessary.

Chinese officials rebuked Harris for his comments in Beijing. The People’s Liberation Army chief of general staff Fang Fenghui accused him of creating “a disharmonious atmosphere for our meeting.” Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying accused the US of “hypocrisy and hegemonism” for demanding that Beijing stop militarising the South China Sea, while sending warships into the region.

Harris attempted to play down the danger of conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers, saying: “Some pundits predict a coming clash between our nations. I do not ascribe to this pessimistic view.”

This remark, which implies that Washington expects Beijing to back down in the face of repeated provocations, actually highlights the dangers of conflict. China cannot relent indefinitely in such a strategically sensitive area. China’s Defence Minister Chang Wanquan warned his US counterpart Ashton Carter yesterday in Malaysia there was a “bottom line” for China in regard to US actions in the South China Sea.

An unnamed US defence official told Reuters yesterday that the Pentagon intended to repeat last week’s naval intrusion “about twice a quarter or a little more than that.” He said such a schedule would “make it regular but not a constant poke in the eye.” Nevertheless that is exactly what the US actions constitute—a constant humiliation that could goad China into responding.

US Defence Secretary Carter is in Kuala Lumpur to

attend this week's biennial meeting of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) defence ministers. In another deliberate affront to China, the US and Japan are both pressing for the South China Sea to be placed on the meeting's agenda and included in the concluding statement.

Carter has been in Asia to marshal support for the US campaign. Before flying to Malaysia, he visited South Korea where Defence Minister Han Min-koo parroted the line from Washington, declaring that "it is our stance that freedom of navigation and freedom of flight should be ensured in this region." Pointing to the pressure from Washington, John Delury, an associate professor at Yonsei University, told the *Wall Street Journal*: "The Americans are trying to get the Koreans to carry water on issues that are farther afield."

Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein made no reference to the South China Sea in opening the ASEAN defence ministers' meeting, but cautiously indicated some support for the US in a separate news conference. He said countries with a stake in the region should exercise their right to operate in "international waters." He nevertheless ruled out any discussion of the issue, saying that it came under the purview of foreign, rather than defence, ministers.

Hishammuddin's comments point to the nervousness among ASEAN members over the heightened tensions. While the Philippines and Vietnam fully support Washington's aggressive stance, others such as Malaysia are concerned about the impact on their economic relations with China.

Japan, which is backing the US, is also exploiting the issue to establish its own relations in South East Asia. It delivered two more patrol boats to Vietnam yesterday as part of an agreement last year to boost the country's coast guard to counter China. Tokyo recently reached a similar arrangement with the Philippines, which is aggressively pursuing its territorial disputes with China.

Washington's deliberate inflaming of flashpoints in the South China Sea is not only aimed at China but cuts across the efforts of its European rivals to establish closer relations with Beijing. The visits by Carter and Admiral Harris to Asia followed Chinese President Xi Jinping's trip to Britain where he was royally feted and sealed major economic agreements between the two countries. The Dutch king Willem-Alexander, German

Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande each visited Beijing over the past two weeks accompanied by corporate entourages.

None of this will have gone unnoticed in the US, which reacted bitterly earlier this year when Britain signed up to China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, despite US objections. Unable to secure its world domination by economic means, the US is increasingly resorting to risky military measures to undermine its rivals or potential rivals and disrupt their relations, heightening the dangers of war.

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