

The Hague ruling: A dangerous step toward war

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In the wake of the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration's sweeping ruling on Tuesday in The Hague negating all Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea, there has been a chorus of US-led condemnations of China's "illegal activities," demands that Beijing abide by the court decision and calls for US diplomatic and military action to enforce the verdict.

A *New York Times* editorial entitled, "Testing the Rule of Law in the South China Sea," declared "the signs are troubling" that "Beijing has defiantly rejected an international arbitration court's jurisdiction" and will not accept the "path-breaking judgment." It gave its stamp of approval to the Obama administration's building of "closer security ties with Asian nations" and increased naval patrols to counter "China's assertiveness."

In its editorial, the *Wall Street Journal* declared that the UN Tribunal dealt "a necessary rebuke" to China's sovereignty claims and "aggressive attempts to enforce them" that "threatened the rules-based order" in Asia. It called for an "increase in scope and frequency" in the US navy's provocative "freedom of navigation" intrusions into waters surrounding Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea.

The hypocrisy involved is staggering. The United States has nothing but contempt for international law and has never been called to account by any UN tribunal for its illegal wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya that have resulted in the deaths of millions. As part of its "pivot to Asia" against China, the Obama administration is chiefly responsible for transforming longstanding, low-key regional disputes in the South China Sea into a dangerous flashpoint that threatens to trigger a new and even more devastating war.

Washington has refused to ratify the international law under which the case in The Hague was heard—the UN

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As such, the US had no standing before the UN court and used its former colony, the Philippines, as a proxy. The case was argued by the Washington-based law firm Foley Hoag, undoubtedly in the closest collaboration with the US State Department and the White House.

The outcome accepting the Philippine submissions, virtually in toto, was a foregone conclusion. The lengthy ruling was carefully contrived to skirt around the fact that the tribunal has no power to adjudicate on territorial disputes—that is, who actually owns land features and waters in the South China Sea—but it produced a conclusion that effectively did just that. The court not only dismissed China's historic claims to large areas of the South China Sea, but severely circumscribed its claims to waters around reefs and islets under its control, and condemned various of its activities, including land reclamation, as illegal.

The ruling has confirmed once again that the UN and its diverse bodies function as a "thieves' kitchen" of the major imperialist powers—above all the United States.

For Washington, the territorial disputes and its demands for "freedom of navigation" have been a convenient pretext for a huge military build-up in the South China Sea and the strengthening of strategic alliances and partnerships in South East Asia. Over the past five years, the US has established new basing arrangements in northern Australia and the Philippines, stationed the latest littoral combat vessels in Singapore, boosted ties with Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, and ramped up its joint military exercises throughout the region.

The US insistence on "freedom of navigation" has nothing to do with protecting regional trade, but rather seeks to ensure access for US warships and aircraft in strategically-sensitive waters close to the Chinese

mainland. The Pentagon's strategy for war with China—AirSea Battle—envisages a massive air and missile assault from ships, submarines and bases in the western Pacific, supplemented by a naval blockade to cripple the Chinese economy. The build-up in South East Asia is part of a broader expansion aimed at encircling China. By 2020, 60 percent of American military aircraft and ships will be deployed to the Indo-Pacific.

The United States government may not necessarily want a war with China, but it is determined to use every available means to maintain its global dominance and regards China as the chief obstacle. Its increasingly reckless confrontation with China, and also Russia, is aimed at ensuring their subordination to American interests, by breaking them up and reducing them to the status of colonial protectorates.

The Hague decision has underscored the complete political bankruptcy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in Beijing, which represents the interests of a tiny ultra-wealthy capitalist elite, not the vast majority of working people. By whipping up Chinese nationalism, expanding its armed forces and threatening to impose an Air Defence Identification Zone over the South China Sea, the CCP leadership plays directly into the hands of US imperialism and sows divisions in the international working class.

The court ruling marks a dangerous turning point that will inevitably heighten the risk that a minor incident, whether deliberate or not, involving rival claimants in the South China Sea will spiral out of control and trigger a conflict between the US and China—two nuclear-armed powers. As the global economic crisis of capitalism worsens, humanity is once again being plunged toward world war by the bankrupt profit system and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states.

The only social force capable of halting the drive to war is the international working class, on the basis of a unified struggle to abolish capitalism and fundamentally restructure society along socialist lines—to meet the urgent social needs of the majority, not the profit requirements of the super-rich few. We urge all our readers to support the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, which are alone in campaigning to build an international anti-war movement of workers to fight for

this socialist internationalist perspective.

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