

US, Australian officials warn China over North Korea, South China Sea

By Peter Symonds
6 June 2017

In Sydney yesterday for Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN), US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sent a blunt message to China to end its reclamation activities in the South China Sea and do more to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs.

Usually held annually, this year's AUSMIN talks involved Tillerson and US Defence Secretary James Mattis with their Australian counterparts—Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defence Minister Marise Payne. Tillerson and Mattis were accompanied by two top military officials responsible for the huge US build-up in Asia—Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford and the head of Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris.

Speaking at a joint press conference with the Australian ministers, Tillerson emphasised that the US and Australia “speak with one voice” in demanding that North Korea denuclearise and “oppose China’s artificial island construction and their militarisation of features” in the South China Sea.

Referring to China’s growing economic influence, the secretary of state declared that “we cannot allow China to use its economic power to buy its way out of other problems, whether it’s militarising islands in the South China Sea or failure to put appropriate pressure on North Korea.”

The comments were a warning, not just to China but also Asian nations such as the Philippines that have tilted away from Washington and toward Beijing in a bid to boost economic relations. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has reversed the aggressive anti-China stance of his predecessor and played down his country’s territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

A joint AUSMIN statement emphasised “the

importance of upholding lawful freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea and “adhering to the rules-based order.” In the lead-up to last weekend’s Shangri La Dialogue, Asia’s premier annual security conference in Singapore, the US Navy carried out the Trump administration’s first “freedom of navigation” operation, sending a guided-missile destroyer within the 12-nautical-mile limit claimed by China around one islet.

The AUSMIN statement also provocatively proposed that last year’s ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague become the basis for settling territorial disputes in the South China Sea. China does not recognise the court’s jurisdiction or the ruling, which was heavily weighted in favour of the US-backed case brought by the Philippines.

The Trump administration has already placed China under great pressure to force North Korea to dismantle its nuclear arsenal, but has praised Chinese efforts and until recently refrained from exacerbating other dangerous flashpoints. Tillerson’s remarks opposing China’s actions in the South China Sea and insinuating that it was failing “to put appropriate pressure on North Korea” indicated a tougher approach as time runs out for Beijing. Trump has declared that if China does not “solve” North Korea, the US will—by implication through military means.

Facing rifts with US allies in Europe, notably Germany, it is significant that Trump officials chose to broadcast a harsher message to China at the talks in Sydney. Their Australian counterparts echoed Washington’s message, with Foreign Minister Bishop emphasising “we are like-minded in our worldview” and “AUSMIN has reaffirmed once more the strength of the bilateral relationship between Australia and the United States.”

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull set the stage in his keynote speech at the Shangri La Dialogue, warning that “a coercive China would find its neighbours resenting demands they cede their autonomy and strategic space” and urging Beijing to “use its great leverage” to “curb the unlawful, reckless and dangerous conduct of North Korea.” Both Turnbull and US Defence Secretary Mattis insisted that China abide by the “international rules-based order” established by the US and not seek to establish regional hegemony in Asia.

Turnbull’s comments followed last week’s visit to Australia by US Senator John McCain, chairman of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee, who publicly criticised Trump but urged allies such as Australia to stand by the US and collaborate closely with officials such as Mattis and Tillerson. Turnbull met privately with the two Trump officials for a dinner last night.

At yesterday’s press conference, Tillerson and Mattis were at pains to stress that Trump’s “America First” policies did not imply a retreat from Asia or from US allies in the region. Asked if Trump’s decision to “toss aside” pacts like the Paris climate agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) would undermine cooperation, Tillerson emphasised the “shared interests” between Australia and the US, and the “so many other areas of such strong mutual interest and cooperation.”

Foreign Minister Bishop stepped in to play down differences. While Australia always took its own national interest into account, she said: “We have shared values, shared interests ... And we certainly are absolutely aligned with the United States in supporting the rules-based order, and we make up our own mind about when Australia should act, when Australia should be involved in defense and security operations. As it happens, the United States and Australia share similar views.”

Tillerson stressed Washington’s commitment not only to Australia but the Asia Pacific region. “That’s why we’re here. That’s why we travelled to the region and that’s why we engage with our counterparts,” he said. He added that the Trump administration was going to be “very active” in regional gatherings such as the East Asia Conference and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.

In the wake of the London terror attack, Australian and American officials again exploited the pretext of the “war on terror” to justify the ongoing US-led wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, which the Trump administration is stepping up. “We stand resolute in our determination to fight terrorism and to fight the poisonous ideology that gives rise to these brutal attacks so often on innocent civilians,” Bishop declared. Just last week, the Australian military committed another 30 troops to the US occupation of Afghanistan.

The US and Australian militaries are already deeply integrated, with an ever-expanding use of Australian bases by US Marines, naval vessels and warplanes. Spy and communication bases, including the joint intelligence facility at Pine Gap in Central Australia, are essential to the US military’s ability to wage war over a vast swathe of territory, from the Middle East to East Asia.

While no new military basing arrangements or Australian deployments were announced during the AUSMIN talks, the statement stressed the joint “commitment to further strengthen the interoperability of our armed forces; and continued close collaboration on capability development and defence technology” as well as the “full implementation” of existing basing deals.

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