US defence secretary warns China not to "underestimate" US military power

John Chan
11 January 2011

In an extraordinary statement while flying to China for a three-day visit last Sunday, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates warned Beijing not to underestimate the United States and its military power.

"I've watched this sort of cyclical view of American decline come around two or three times, perhaps most dramatically in the latter half of the 1970s," Gates told reporters. "And my general line for those both at home and around the world who think the US is in decline is that history's dustbins are filled with countries that underestimated the resilience of the United States."

Gates was responding to a journalist's suggestion that China now viewed the US as a declining power. Gates's reply was clearly aimed not only at Beijing, but at any country seeking to develop closer political and military ties with China. He was also putting paid to any conception that Washington would peacefully cede its dominant position in the Asia-Pacific region to Beijing.

Far from accepting China's rise, Washington is aggressively seeking to undermine Beijing's influence in Asia. Gates's remarks are a further indication of preparedness to use military means to offset the waning position of the US, which has gathered pace since the 1970s. American capitalism is today in an unmistakable historic decline, with mounting public debts and industrial decay, and mired in the worst economic crisis since the 1930s.

Gates was officially heading to China to restore military-to-military exchanges, which Beijing cut off when the Obama administration last January announced a $6.4 billion arms sale to Taiwan. His comments highlight the depth of tensions created over the past 18 months since the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in mid-2009 that the US was "back to Asia"—that is, determined to actively contain China strategically and diplomatically.

Following the arms sales to Taiwan, President Obama met with Tibet's Dalai Lama, despite strong Chinese opposition. The tensions accelerated after Clinton proclaimed at an Association of the South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit last July that the US had a "national interest" in maintaining "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. She also effectively backed ASEAN member states in disputes with Beijing over islands in the South China Sea.

In September, Washington also tacitly backed Tokyo in its diplomatic row with Beijing after Japanese coastguard vessels arrested a Chinese fishing captain near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets. After an exchange of shelling between the two Koreas on November 23, Washington encouraged and joined with South Korea in carrying out a series of military drills near North Korea in December and rejected Chinese diplomatic efforts to ease the danger of open conflict.

These ongoing tensions dominated Gates's visit. China apparently leaked photos of its new "stealth" fighter, J-20, just ahead of Gates' arrival. The jet is widely regarded by military analysts as designed to rival the advanced US F-22 Raptor stealth fighter. The photos prompted US media criticism that Gates had "underestimated" or "misjudged" China's military build-up. He declared in 2009 that China would not have a stealth fighter before 2020.

At his same airborne press briefing, Gates responded, saying of China's J-20s, as well as cruise and ballistic

© World Socialist Web Site

missiles: “They clearly have the potential to put some of our capabilities at risk. And we have to pay attention to them, we have to respond appropriately with our own programs.” Gates said the Pentagon would prioritise the development of military capabilities against China’s new weaponry.

In Beijing, Gates met with China’s Defence Minister Liang Guanglie yesterday, but relations remained cool. Only tentative steps were taken towards reestablishing military relations between the two countries. Moreover, Liang again raised China’s concerns about US arms sales to Taiwan—the reason relations broke off. “US arms sales to Taiwan seriously damaged China’s core interests and we do not want to see that happen again,” he declared.

The Pentagon chose to show off its own might just as Gates was in China, announcing it would deploy 15 F-22 fighters in Okinawa, Japan from this week for four months. In addition, the US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and its associated battle group arrived in Japan to carry out exercises with the Japanese navy on Monday. The USS Carl Vinson has been deployed to replace the USS George Washington, which was recently involved in joint naval drills with South Korea and Japan.

When Gates heads to South Korea on Friday, the USS Carl Vinson will hold joint exercises with the South Korean navy in the sensitive Yellow Sea. China had previously warned against any deployment of US aircraft carriers in the Yellow Sea, but was ignored by Washington. Japan’s conservative *Sankai Shimbun* newspaper reported last week that after exercises in North East Asia, the battle group will head to the South China Sea “to contain an increasingly active Chinese navy”.

Sections of the Chinese ruling elite have responded to US military exercises in China’s backyard by calling for more military spending. Major General Jiang Luming of China’s National Defence University wrote in an official journal *Study Times* last week that Beijing must permanently double military spending from 1.4 percent of gross domestic product to 2.8 percent. Another professor from the same university, Liu Mingfu, published a book last year calling for China to prepare “for a fight with the US for global dominance in the 21st century”.

Chinese President Hu Jintao is due in the US on January 19. In order to ensure a smooth visit, Beijing sent Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to Washington last week to meet with President Obama, Clinton and other senior US officials. The Obama administration has already made clear that it will use the visit to press the Chinese president for major concessions.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs announced last Wednesday that a major theme would be Obama’s demand for a rapid revaluation of the Chinese currency—a step that could devastate large sections of Chinese industry. Gibbs indicated that Obama would press Hu on other sensitive issues, including “human rights” and Korean tensions. While encouraging South Korea to take a tougher stand, the US has repeatedly criticised China for failing to curb North Korea’s supposedly “rogue” behaviour.

The trip by Gates to Beijing makes clear the Obama administration has no intention of accommodating to China, but rather will continue to its aggressive push to counter China’s military buildup and to undermine its influence in Asia.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site