

Gates outlines aggressive agenda for US imperialism in Asia

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In a speech given in Singapore on June 4, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates laid out plans for American military expansion in the Asian region and for heightened confrontation with China. His remarks, delivered at the 10th International Institute for Security Studies (IISS) Asia Security Summit, came amid rapidly rising tensions between China and other claimants to the South China Sea.

The 10th IISS Asia Security Summit, known as the Shangri-La dialogue, took place from June 3 to 5. Previous years have seen military and diplomatic figures speaking on key regional issues at plenary sessions. Gates has attended the past five years and used his address last year to unequivocally warn China that “intimidation” of American oil corporations companies operating in the South China Sea would not be tolerated. This year the Chinese Defense Minister attended for the first time, and delivered an address to the summit as well.

Regional tensions have mounted substantially since Gates’s speech last year, particularly over the disputed waters of the South China Sea. The waters are a vital shipping lane and the seabed contains large oil and gas deposits. The South China Sea is claimed in whole or in part by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines. The intensifying regional friction reflects the deepening confrontation between the US, whose global economic position has been in steady decline, and China.

The past two weeks saw two confrontations. On May 26, Vietnam accused China of cutting the cables being laid by an oil exploration vessel belonging to the state-owned corporation PetroVietnam, which was conducting pre-drilling surveys on behalf of ExxonMobil and the Canadian oil company Talisman Energy.

On May 31, the Philippines claimed that China had begun construction of new military facilities on unoccupied islands in the Spratly Island chain. It summoned the Chinese ambassador and denounced the construction as a “clear violation” of the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea, which is an agreement for the shared use of disputed

waters.

Gates was the first plenary speaker at the security summit. His speech was a shot fired across the bows of China and call to regional allies to oppose Chinese expansion in the region. It laid out the agenda for an expanded US military presence in the Asia-Pacific region and warned sharply against underestimating the US military commitment to the region.

Gates opened by pointing to what he said was “foremost in everyone’s mind”—the declining economic power of the US and its stretched military resources. The credibility of US global commitments was being questioned, he said. “No doubt, fighting two protracted and costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has strained the US military’s ground forces, and worn out the patience and appetite of the American people for similar interventions in the future. On the domestic front, the United States is emerging slowly from a serious recession with huge budget deficits and growing debt that is putting new scrutiny and downward pressure on the US defense budget.”

Gates made clear that none of this—including mounting opposition from the American public—would deter Washington. We should expect to see, he said, a “significant growth in the breadth and intensity of US engagement in Asia.” This increased military deployment would establish a “defense posture across the Asia Pacific that is more geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable. A posture that maintains our presence in Northeast Asia while enhancing our presence in Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean.”

To this end, Gates stated, the US had deployed its newly-constructed Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore, from where to guard the vital strategic Straits of Malacca. “In the coming years,” he stated, “the US military is going to be increasing its port calls, naval engagements, and multilateral training efforts with multiple countries throughout the region.”

The US has a vital national interest, Gates asserted, in freedom of navigation. While the American military was

already stretched thin by two ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it would engage in “key modernization programs [which] would address one of the principal security challenges we see growing over the horizon: The prospect that new and disruptive technologies and weapons could be employed to deny US forces access to key sea routes and lines of communication.” This vow was obviously directed at Beijing. US diplomats and military officials have repeatedly leveled the charge against China that it is seeking to control the flow of commerce and sea traffic in the South China Sea.

Liang Guanglie, the Chinese defense minister, gave a stiff but deliberately conciliatory address. He studiously avoided mention of mounting tensions in the region, never mentioned Taiwan or the recent events with Vietnam and the Philippines. Only at the conclusion to his question and answer session, when repeatedly pressed by a reporter from the American *Foreign Policy* journal, did he respond to Gates’s claims with a certain amount of pique, saying “freedom of navigation has never been impeded, has never been a problem, and the situation in the South China Sea remains stable.”

Gates’s words, on the other hand, were sharply confrontational throughout. He had concluded his comments by declaring “history’s dustbin is littered with dictators and aggressors who underestimated America’s resilience, will and underlying power.” This was a threat, not even thinly disguised, to China.

During an interview prior to the summit, Gates stated: “The Chinese have learned a powerful lesson from the Soviet experience, and they do not intend to try and compete with us across the full range of military capabilities. But I think they are intending to build capabilities that give them a considerable freedom of action in Asia, and the opportunity to extend their influence.” As his speech made clear, the US intends to respond no less aggressively to China than it did to the Soviet Union.

Gates’s speech was hailed by the *Wall Street Journal*, in an opinion piece on June 6, which excitedly trumpeted the fact that “Beijing is uncomfortably confronting the reality that almost all regional countries choose not only to hedge with America, but are actively maneuvering to perpetuate American strategic dominance in Asia.”

As other summit speeches demonstrated, however, more than active maneuvering is taking place. Encouraged by US support, the Vietnamese and Philippine defense ministers spoke sharply and pointedly about recent events in the South China Sea.

Vietnamese Defense Minister General Phung Quang Thanh explicitly cited the May 26 confrontation between Chinese and

Vietnamese ships and stated: “We truly expect no repetition of similar incidents.” China’s claim to the almost all of the South China Sea had no basis in international law, Thanh insisted. Deputy defence minister Nguyen Chi Vinh stated in an interview: “If any party concerned wishes to escalate, Vietnam will act to defend its sovereignty. We will not sit there and watch.”

The words of Philippine Defense Secretary General Voltaire Gazmin were even stronger. The actions of China had caused the Philippines “worry and concern,” he declared. Private business firms conducting resource exploration, i.e., oil drilling, were threatened. Gazmin denounced the construction of structures on the disputed islands. What he did not mention was that Philippine President Aquino announced just three months ago, after US prodding, that he would begin construction of military installations on precisely these disputed islands. The Chinese construction has simply pre-empted what the Philippines was preparing to do.

Gazmin stressed repeatedly that the Philippine response involved “collaboration with other armed forces to ensure the safety of navigation and peace.” The Philippines would pursue “robust ties with other forces” to ensure that it remained free from “forces that would disturb its peace.” If the veiled language of “forces” was unclear, an interview after the speech was explicit. US navy ships were needed in the region, he stated, to make it more difficult for China to misbehave. “When the cat is away the mice will play,” he said. He urged the US “to exercise its persuasive power over the South China Sea.”

Vietnam, the Philippines and other ASEAN members are playing a dangerous balancing game: while economically dependent on China, which is for many their largest trading partner, they are encouraging a greater US military presence as a means of asserting their own interests against Beijing. The result of the Obama administration’s aggressive intervention into South East Asia is a marked rise of regional tensions and the potential for military confrontations and clashes.



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