

US secretary of state's new round of bullying in Beijing

Peter Symonds
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As part of his tour of Asia, US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday met with Chinese leaders in Beijing in a new round of bullying designed to pressure China to toe the US line in Asia. Having deliberately inflamed dangerous flashpoints such as the Korean Peninsula and stoked territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas, as part of its “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, Washington is making provocative new demands on Beijing.

At the top of the list was North Korea. Speaking to the press after meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Kerry declared that China had to use “every tool at their disposal, all of the means of persuasion that they have” to compel North Korea to denuclearise. The US has repeatedly exploited North Korea’s nuclear programs as a means of pressuring Beijing, knowing full well that China is in a bind. It does not want the collapse of its neighbour and ally, but neither does it want a conflict on its border or a nuclear arms race in the region involving Japan.

Kerry’s message to China’s leaders was that they had to take far tougher measures against Pyongyang. Speaking in Seoul on Thursday, he declared: “No country has a greater potential to influence North Korea’s behaviour than China... All of the refined fuel that goes in to move every automobile and every airplane in North Korea comes from China. All of the fundamental rudimentary banking structure that the North has with the world passes through China.”

Kerry is suggesting that China should impose economic measures that could collapse the North Korean regime, with far-reaching ramifications throughout the region. If China is not prepared to haul Pyongyang into line, the US has already demonstrated on more than one occasion that it is willing to push the Korean Peninsula to the brink of war. Last April, the

Obama administration responded to North Korea’s bellicose but empty threats over joint US-South Korean military exercises by provocatively flying nuclear-capable B-2 and B-52 bombers into South Korea.

Kerry also stepped up the pressure on China over its maritime disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea with neighbouring states, including US allies the Philippines and Japan. In his comments yesterday in Beijing, staggering for their hypocrisy, Kerry called on China to “establish a calmer, more rule-of-law based, less confrontational regime” in relation to these disputes. He called for differences to be settled according to the international Law of the Sea—an agreement that the US has refused to ratify.

Kerry’s reference is not an accidental one. Previously the US has declared itself “neutral” in the various maritime disputes, insisting that it is only interested in ensuring “freedom of navigation.” Last week, however, Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel specifically questioned China’s claims in the South China Sea, saying they lacked any “apparent basis under international law” and were “fundamentally flawed.” The US is aligning itself with the claims of the Philippines and placing itself on a collision course with China.

Kerry also laid down the law to Beijing over the declaration of any new Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZ). Last November, following China’s announcement of an ADIZ in the East China Sea, the Pentagon flew a B-52 bomber into the zone without notifying Chinese authorities. Last week, the US State Department seized on what appears to have been a planted story in a Japanese newspaper to condemn any Chinese plans for a new ADIZ in the South China Sea as “a provocative and unilateral act.” Kerry reinforced the point in Beijing yesterday, warning that a

“unilateral, unannounced and unprocessed initiative” would threaten “regional security.”

As for the US demand for a “less confrontational approach” from China, the Obama administration’s “pivot” has been deliberately designed to confront China in every sphere—diplomatic, economic and military. Even before Obama formally announced the “rebalance” in November 2011, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton intervened into what had previously been relatively minor disputes in the South China Sea to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours. She bluntly declared at an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in 2010 that the US had a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in these waters.

Encouraged by Washington, US allies took a far tougher stance in their maritime disputes with China. Philippine President Benigno Aquino, who has functioned as a point man for Washington’s provocations in South East Asia, earlier this month he likened the South China Sea to the disputed Sudetenland prior to Hitler’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938. This implied that China was acting like Nazi Germany. In Manila this week, US navy chief of operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert, did not distance himself from Aquino’s incendiary remarks, but instead declared “of course we will help you” when asked if the US would fight alongside the Philippines in the event of a Chinese attack.

Kerry’s tough stance yesterday in Beijing is partly to scotch concerns in Washington and from US allies in Asia that the Obama administration, and Kerry in particular, has failed to press ahead with the “pivot to Asia.” A comment in yesterday’s *Financial Times* observed that “you could almost hear the frustration [in Asia] as Mr Kerry focussed his energy over the past year on the Middle East, notwithstanding four trips to Asia.” Obama’s failure to attend key Asian summits last October, during the government shutdown in Washington, only heightened the criticism.

The so-called lack of focus on Asia was more apparent than real. As Kerry pointed out in Seoul on Thursday, the US was putting more diplomatic, economic and military resources into the region “every day.” Last October, Kerry and US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel met with their Japanese counterparts in Tokyo and announced wide-ranging plans to position

some of the most sophisticated and deadly US military hardware in Japan over the next few years. By 2020, the Pentagon plans to have 60 percent of its military aircraft and naval vessels stationed in the Indo-Pacific.

Kerry’s trip to China, as well as South Korea and Indonesia, signals a ramping up of the US diplomatic offensive against Beijing as well. The White House this week announced the itinerary of Obama’s trip in April to Asia, which will include Japan and South Korea, as well as the Philippines and Malaysia—where his visit was cancelled last October. In the Philippines, it is expected that he will reach a new military-basing agreement, along the lines of the one signed with Australia in November 2011 that positions US Marines in Darwin and allows greater access for US warships and warplanes.

While Chinese leaders made few comments over Kerry’s visit, sections of the state-owned press were critical. The *Global Times* declared that the US “rebalance” had made pressure on China “more unbearable compared to five years ago.” The official Xinhua news agency warned Kerry about continuing “to appease his traditional ally Japan, the real trouble-maker in the region.” The thrust of the article is in line with the attempt of the Chinese leadership to blame the Japanese government for rising tensions, while appealing to the US to work more closely together.

In reality, the Obama administration is the trouble-maker in chief, both in Asia and around the world. The US has fully backed Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as he has boosted the military budget and moved to end legal and constitutional restraints on its operations. Through the “pivot to Asia,” the US is seeking to offset its relative economic decline by using its military muscle to ensure its continued hegemony in the Indo-Pacific—the world’s fastest growing and most profitable region. As Washington never tires of repeating, Beijing must adhere to the present “rules-based” global order—one dominated by the US and in which China is to remain a subordinate cheap labour platform.



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