Provocative remarks by US Pacific fleet commander fuel disputes with China

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The US has increased tensions over territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas, warning that a Crimea-like crisis could develop as a result of China's "revanchist tendencies."

Speaking at a meeting of the Jakarta International Defence Dialogue on Wednesday, in the presence of Chinese delegates and South-East Asian officials, the US Pacific Fleet commander, Admiral Harry Harris, pointed to the "global tensions caused by one neighbour against another in the Crimean Peninsula."

Harris, who took up his post last October, added to his inflammatory remarks in an interview with the *Financial Times* on the sidelines of the conference. He said maritime tensions were at the highest point he had seen for thirty years because of what he called China's "destabilising" influence.

"We welcome the rise of a strong and prosperous China that adheres to international norms," he said. "What worries me though is China's lack of transparency at times and their revanchist tendencies. I worry about that and I think it's destabilising the region."

The use of the term "revanchist" is significant. In diplomatic parlance it refers to a drive by a country to recover lost territory. In other words, China is accused of expansionist aims.

Replying to Harris, Sun Jianguo, the Chinese army deputy chief of general staff, rejected claims that China was responsible for increased tensions. Rather, it faced "pressing and immediate risks" because of provocations by other countries.

"We face so many disputes and some disputes are very thorny and difficult to tackle," he said. In remarks directed at the United States, while not directly naming it, he continued: "In particular, some are trying to take advantage of these disputes to realise their own strategic objectives. Our goal is to make sure these disputes are properly managed and will not blow into conflict or war."

The "strategic objectives" to which he referred are contained in the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, which is aimed at isolating China, diplomatically and militarily in the region, with the goal of ensuring continued US dominance.

This is what is meant by the American insistence that China must adhere to "international norms." Its economic growth is to be "welcomed," provided China remains subordinate to the geo-political and economic relationships dictated by the US.

The US is demanding that the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which involve China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam, be dealt with on a multilateral basis so that Washington can intervene. China, by contrast, insists that the disputes be settled through bilateral negotiations.

The long-running territorial disputes—some have continued for more than three decades—were elevated from second-order issues into matters of global significance through the intervention of the US.

In mid-2010, even before the "pivot" was officially announced, Hillary Clinton, then secretary of state, declared that the US had a "national interest" in "freedom of navigation" in the South China, effectively giving support to Vietnam and the Philippines.

While the US takes no official position on the Chinese and Japanese claims to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea, it insists they are covered by its treaty obligations to Japan, meaning that the US would come to Tokyo's aid in any conflict. The dispute, which has existed since the end of World War II, was inflamed in September 2012 when the Japanese government purchased the rocky outposts

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The Jakarta conference, which focused on maritime security, also saw an intervention by Australia, aimed at drawing Indonesia into the web of US relations with South East Asian countries directed against China.

Indonesia occupies a key strategic position because the archipelago contains the maritime "choke points" through which supplies of oil and other vital resources must pass to reach China, and which US military planners intend to cut off in the event of a conflict. So far, Indonesia has carefully retained a certain distance from US objectives regarding China because of the key role that China plays in Indonesia's economic development.

Addressing the conference, Australian Defence Minister David Johnston urged Indonesia to carry out joint military patrols and participate in international peacekeeping operations. "This is the best Indonesia for Australia, a strong neighbour, a close friend and a partner in security," he said.

Given that no member of the Australian government utters a single word on foreign policy without first checking with the US—such is the complete integration of Australia into the US pivot and war planning—the speech was undoubtedly part of an initiative by Washington to bring Indonesia closer into its fold.

Harris's remarks about China's "revanchist" aims were the latest in a series of war-like statements issued this year by the US and its allies.

In January, at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said relations between Japan and China were in a "similar situation" to Britain and Germany on the eve of World War I.

Last month, in a featured interview with the *New York Times*, Philippine President Benigno Aquino said the failure to confront China over its territorial ambitions was akin to the appeasement of Hitler in the late 1930s and it was time to tell China that "enough is enough."

Likening his country to Czechoslovakia in the lead-up to World War II, Aquino said: "Remember that the Sudetenland was given in an attempt to appease Hitler."

Now the Crimean crisis is being invoked to step up pressure on China. An article by Mark Landler in Wednesday's *New York Times*, headlined "With Russia, as with China, unnerved US allies seek reassurances," indicated how the Crimea issue will be exploited.

According to the article, while there were obvious differences and China had shown "prudence" in its establishment of an air defence zone over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets, there were also "striking parallels."

"Russia and China are both ambitious powers, riding a tide of nationalism and nursing grievances over historical slights at the hands of the West," Landler wrote.

The article cited comments by Ian Bremmer, the head of the Eurasia Group, which provides geo-political "risk" assessments, who said he viewed China as a greater threat than Russia "and by a very large margin."

Former under-secretary of state Nicholas Burns said the US should draw clear red lines with Russia and China and show it is prepared to honour its treaty obligations.

To underscore the significance of President Obama's planned visit to Asia next month, Landler cited remarks by Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow Robert Danin that in contrast to Russia, which had a declining economic and industrial base, "China is a military power rooted in a strong and growing economic foundation."

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