

US defense secretary threatens China during Japan visit

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US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel used his weekend visit to Japan, ahead of his first official visit to China which began yesterday, to threaten the Beijing regime over its territorial disputes with Tokyo and with the Philippines. Hagel's visits are part of a broader diplomatic offensive by Washington and its allies to blaze the trail for Barack Obama's tour of Asia, which starts on April 22 and will take him to Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Malaysia. The aim of the diplomacy is to underscore US determination to press ahead with its so-called "pivot" or "rebalance" to the region, which is focussed on undermining China's influence and militarily encircling it.

Hagel's language toward China was menacing and provocative. At a joint press conference with Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera on April 6, he compared China's territorial claims with Russia's annexation of Crimea. Hagel stated: "You cannot go around the world and redefine boundaries and violate territorial integrity and the sovereignty of nations by force, coercion or intimidation, whether it's in small islands in the Pacific or in large nations in Europe." Hagel declared that something else he would be "talking with the Chinese about is respect for their neighbours. Coercion, intimidation, is a very deadly thing that leads only to conflict." In fact, it is the US "pivot" that has encouraged American allies to take a more aggressive stance in their territorial disputes with China.

Relations between Japan and China have virtually broken down as the Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has taken a more assertive stance in North East Asia. The US has pushed for the expansion of the Japanese military, changes to the country's pacifist constitution and stepped-up joint exercises that are open rehearsals for the prospect of

conflict with China. Abe has declared Japan's willingness to wage war to keep control over the Japanese-held, but Chinese-claimed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Sharp tensions erupted last year after China declared an "air defence identification zone" that included the airspace above the Senkakus. Both the US and Japan flew military aircraft into the zone, making clear that Beijing's edicts would be ignored and posing the danger of an armed clash.

Hagel stressed that the Obama administration was prepared to go to war alongside Japan against China. He told journalists at an air base near Tokyo that he was in Japan to affirm Washington's "continued commitment to our partnership, friendship and our treaty obligations." At his press conference, he restated Washington's commitment that any hostilities that broke out over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would result in the United States entering the conflict on the side of Japan, "under Article 5 of our mutual security treaty."

Japan's Onodera welcomed the US reassurances. "As to the Senkaku Islands," he said, "the position the United States has taken all along has been affirmed. And as regards opposition attempts to change the [situation] through coercion in the East China Sea and other areas, we came to an agreement on it as well."

Hagel also announced the deployment of two more Aegis destroyers equipped with anti-ballistic missiles systems to Japanese bases, in addition to the five that already operate in the waters between China and Japan. Hagel justified the expansion of US naval assets in North East Asia with rhetoric about the threat posed by North Korea's alleged arsenal of short- and long-range missiles (see: "Japan gives green light to shoot down North Korean missiles").

Washington's unconditional support for the Abe government was reinforced by Evan Mendeiros, the senior director for Asian affairs of Obama's National Security Council. In a lengthy interview with the *Asahi Shimbun* published April 6, Mendeiros portrayed all the tensions in the region as the product of aggressive military, diplomatic and economic actions by China. Mendeiros heaped praise on Abe, declaring, "the president is very pleased with the leadership that Prime Minister Abe has shown." He also stated that "the US-Japan alliance plays a critical role in the security of the Korean peninsula"—a pointed reference to Washington's pressure on South Korea to accept a greater Japanese military role in the region.

Mendeiros condemned China over its neutral position towards the secession of Crimea. "China regularly, publicly, says that territorial integrity and sovereignty are of the utmost importance," he said, "but yet, in the face of a violation of them by Russia through its actions in Ukraine, China has remained agnostic, and has provided essentially de facto support for Russia... So the question is, 'does China feel that there are some conditions that are actually attached to its support for territorial integrity and sovereignty'? It is raising questions all over the world about China's intentions."

Mendeiros proceeded to stress that despite the events in Europe, the "rebalance" to Asia was "going ahead, full steam forward... If anything our continued diplomacy in Asia amid these other challenges underscores the importance of the United States remaining as active and strong in the Asia-Pacific as possible, *to prevent any kind of similar actions in this region.*" [emphasis added]

The openness of the US backing for Japan and other states in their disputes with China, and the steady build-up of rhetoric, military deployments and tensions, is provoking growing consternation within the Beijing regime. Hagel's remarks on Chinese "coercion" and "intimidation" were downplayed by the Chinese government and in much of the media. The *People's Daily*, which closely reflects the line of the top leadership, commented on April 7 that "messages sent... in the last few days seemed confusing and could not be easily interpreted as friendship." It concluded with an appeal that "China and America have a shared interest in a stable environment to facilitate economic prosperity. Neither of them, nor the global economy,

can afford confrontation or conflict."

As an overture toward US demands for "military transparency", Hagel yesterday made the first-ever inspection by a foreign defence official of China's only aircraft carrier, a ship that was originally purchased from Ukraine.

In the more virulent Chinese nationalist press, however, US foreign policy toward Beijing has been bitterly condemned. The *Global Times* declared today that the US "overestimates the value of the 'rebalancing to Asia' strategy if it misperceives China as easily cowed into submission. China is not Russia... If Washington continues to indulge Tokyo and Manila in provoking China, it will pay the price sooner or later."

As in Europe, Asia is fraught with the dangers of war arising from the reckless attempts of US imperialism to maintain its waning global dominance in every part of the globe.



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