

US defence secretary clashes with Chinese counterpart

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In a joint press conference in Beijing yesterday, US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel and Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan traded barbed comments over territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas. The public display of hostility is another warning of the dangerous tensions that the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" has provoked throughout the region.

Hagel set the stage for the verbal clash with Chang earlier in the week, when in Tokyo he compared China's territorial claims in nearby waters to Russia's annexation of Crimea. "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," he said.

In both Europe and the Pacific, however, it has been Washington's provocative actions that have inflamed tensions. In Ukraine, the US engineered a fascist-led coup in Kiev that prompted Russia to annex Crimea where its Black Sea fleet is based. In the Asia-Pacific, US has backed allies such as Japan and the Philippines to take a far more assertive stance over their territorial claims against China.

In Beijing, Hagel repeated Washington's standard line that "the United States takes no position on individual claims" in the disputes between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Clearly, however, the US does support the "boundaries" and "territorial integrity" as defined by Japan and the Philippines, against any attempt by China to assert its claims.

Moreover, as Hagel made absolutely clear, the US is prepared to back its allies with military force. He told the press conference: "The Philippines and Japan are long-time allies of the United States... We have mutual

self-defence treaties with each of those countries." Then, wagging his finger, Hagel added that the US was "fully committed to those treaty obligations"—that is, to go to war against China if need be.

Hagel also publicly criticised China for declaring an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea last November "unilaterally, with no collaboration, no consultation." In response, the Pentagon immediately challenged China's ADIZ by flying nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into the airspace without prior notification. The potential for a US air clash with China put the entire region on a knife-edge.

Hagel, however, blamed China for "tensions, misunderstandings... [that] could eventually add to, and eventually get to, dangerous conflict." Such accusations against Beijing are being exploited by the US to justify its "rebalance", or build-up of military forces throughout Asia aimed at encircling China. While in Japan, Hagel announced the dispatch of two more Aegis destroyers equipped with anti-ballistic missile systems to Japanese bases.

Chinese defence minister Chang insisted: "It is Japan who is being provocative. If you come to the conclusion that China is going to resort to force against Japan, that is wrong... We will not take the initiative to stir up troubles." He called for the resolution of the island disputes through negotiation, but added that China had "indisputable sovereignty" of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets. "On this issue, we will make no compromise, no concession—not even a tiny violation is allowed... We are prepared at any time to cope with any type of threats and challenges," he warned.

Hagel pressed Chang on other issues, calling on China to do more to rein in North Korea. He also appealed for the Chinese military to be more open about its cyber warfare capabilities. "More

transparency will strengthen China-US relations,” Hagel said. “Greater openness about cyber reduces the risk that misunderstanding and misperception could lead to miscalculation.”

Hagel’s remarks are utterly cynical. Former NSA contractor Edward Snowden has exposed the massive electronic spying operations of the US military and intelligence agencies throughout the world that particularly target China. Washington claims that the Chinese military has been involved in economic espionage, yet last month the *New York Times* reported that the US intelligence agencies had hacked into the networks of the Chinese telecommunications giant, Huawei.

The *New York Times* has also reported that the Pentagon, several months ago, had briefed Chinese military officials on its cyber warfare capabilities. The US is planning to triple the number of cyber warfare specialists to 6,000 by the end of 2016. During his comments yesterday, Hagel made clear that the purpose of the US briefing—undoubtedly very limited in scope—was to solicit a Chinese briefing. In response, Chang declared that China’s cyber activities “will not pose a threat to others.”

Hagel had billed his visit to Beijing as an attempt to improve defence relations between the two countries. On Monday, he became the first foreign official to be given a tour of China’s first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning. The constant US calls for greater Chinese transparency about its defence capacities, have nothing to do with easing tensions. Rather while the US closely guards its military secrets, it is seeking to gauge the capacities of China as precisely as possible.

The *Washington Post* caught the mood of the Hagel-Chang press conference—“icy body language and barbs telegraphed a relationship utterly devoid of warmth and very much saddled with suspicion.”

The tensions were also evident when Hagel addressed the National Defence University later yesterday. He was challenged by one officer who accused the US of stirring up trouble in the East China and South China Seas because it feared someday that “China will be too big a challenge for the United States to cope with.” He continued: “Therefore you are using such issues... to make trouble to hamper [China’s] development.”

Hagel lamely responded, by declaring that “the American rebalance to Asia Pacific is not to contain

China.” He will have convinced no one in the audience. The whole purpose of Hagel’s trip to the region—in advance of Obama’s tour later this month—is to reinforce the message that the US military build-up in the region against China will continue.



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