

US defence secretary's provocative tour of Asia

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Amid sharpening tensions and a US-led military build-up in Europe over the Ukraine crisis, US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel delivered a menacing warning to China this week that, like Russia, it could face diplomatic isolation and threats of war if it did not bow to the demands of Washington and its allies in Asia.

Hagel explicitly compared Russia's annexation of Crimea to China's territorial disputes with its neighbours in the South and East China seas. "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.

The hypocrisy of Hagel's remarks is staggering. The Obama administration is directly responsible for fuelling both the crisis in Ukraine and the rising tensions in Asia. The US engineered the fascist-led coup in Kiev on February 22 that pushed Russia to annex Crimea in order to protect its Black Sea fleet. Likewise, the US has, over the past three years, backed Japan and the Philippines in taking a far more aggressive stance in their territorial disputes with China, as a means of isolating Beijing.

Nominally, Washington claims to be neutral in the territorial dispute between Japan and China over the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Yet, standing alongside the Japanese defence minister on April 6, Hagel harangued China for attempting to "redefine boundaries" and "violate territorial integrity" by force.

Hagel's provocative remarks in Tokyo led to a sharp verbal exchange with Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan in Beijing at a joint press conference on Wednesday. Hagel made clear that the US would back up its threats with military force. He reaffirmed the

longstanding US alliances with Japan and the Philippines, then added, wagging his finger, that the US was "fully committed to those treaty obligations"—that is, to go to war against China should fighting break out between it and Washington's allies.

Hagel bluntly accused China of inflaming tensions last November by declaring an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. While acknowledging Beijing's right to an ADIZ, he warned that the lack of consultation could lead to "tensions, misunderstandings ... and eventually get to dangerous conflict." In fact, it was the Pentagon that threatened to set off a powder keg in the East China Sea by flying nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into the zone unannounced.

Hagel's trip has been an emphatic declaration by the Obama administration that there will be no backing away from the "pivot to Asia" against China, even as the US intensifies its confrontation with Russia in Europe. Obama's "pivot" is an aggressive diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and encircling the country militarily.

Washington's anti-Chinese "pivot" is closely linked to the escalating US confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. The Obama administration is proceeding with US imperialism's long-held ambition to dominate the vast Eurasian landmass—stretching from China through to Eastern Europe—which, in turn, is central to its strategy for global hegemony.

The capitalist regimes in Beijing and Moscow are obstacles that the US is no longer prepared to tolerate. Amid a deepening economic crisis of global capitalism, the US and its allies are engaged in a reckless drive to subordinate China and Russia, along with their markets and resources, to their direct exploitation. The

whipping up of reactionary ethnic and linguistic divisions in Ukraine is a warning that the same methods will be used to fragment Russia and China and transform them into semi-colonies.

Since the beginning of the year, the US and its allies have been stoking up regional tensions to intensify the pressure on China. In February, Philippine President Benigno Aquino gave an inflammatory interview to the *New York Times* in which he compared China to Nazi Germany and its claims in the South China Sea to Hitler's 1938 annexation of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland.

The Philippine government, with Washington's tacit backing, is currently mounting a case against China at the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea. President Obama is due to arrive in Manila later this month and is expected to sign a military basing agreement that will place US forces directly adjacent to the South China Sea.

Over the past two months, the US and South Korea have proceeded with their huge annual military exercises, involving 12,700 US troops and 200,000 South Korean military personnel, despite objections from China's ally, North Korea. The war games included the largest ever amphibious landing exercises, involving 9,500 US military personnel and 3,000 South Korean Marines, backed by 20 warships and 60 military aircraft.

Just as it is encouraging German rearmament in Europe, the US is pressing for the remilitarisation of Japan. Washington has given its full support to the right-wing government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as it increased military spending, moved to end constitutional restrictions on the armed forces, established a National Security Council, and shifted Japan's strategic orientation to "island defence"—that is, against China.

The US "pivot to Asia" has already transformed the Indo-Pacific into a dangerous cauldron of geo-political rivalries. By comparing the territorial disputes in the South and East China seas to the confrontation with Russia over Crimea, Hagel is underscoring Washington's determination to pursue its ambition for hegemony in Asia, even at the risk of triggering an all-out war with China.

Workers throughout Asia and the world face great dangers. The only means for halting the slide towards a

global conflagration is a unified movement of the working class in China, Japan, the United States and internationally to put an end to capitalism and its outmoded nation state system, which is the root cause of war. The crisis-ridden profit system must be replaced by a planned socialist economy and the restructuring of society to meet the pressing needs of humanity, not the profit requirements of the ultra-wealthy few.



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