

US military intensifies training for a war with China

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The US military and those of its major allies are carrying out a heightened tempo of training exercises and personnel exchanges across Asia, underscoring the fact that the Obama administration's "pivot," or rebalance, to the region is centrally aimed at preparing for a war with China.

Since the pivot was formally announced in November 2011, annual or biennial military exercises have taken on an increasingly menacing character and scope. The training rehearses the integration of the armed forces of other countries into US war plans.

These plans include "AirSea Battle," which envisages missile and air assaults on command-and-control and other military targets across mainland China, operations to destroy the Chinese Navy and Air Force and a naval blockade of key Asian sea lanes to cut off China's access to energy supplies and raw materials.

This week, the details were announced of the 2014 "Rim of the Pacific" or "RIMPAC" exercise. RIMPAC, which is hosted by the US Pacific Fleet in the waters surrounding Hawaii, began in 1971. It is the world's largest naval training operation. From late June, a "combined task force" of 47 warships, six submarines and 200 aircraft, with 25,000 personnel, from 23 countries, will conduct more than a month of exercises.

Historically, the main RIMPAC participants have been the United States, Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea and the United Kingdom. In 2010, the invited countries expanded to include New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Chile, Colombia, Peru, France and the Netherlands. In 2012, the number swelled again to involve India, Mexico, the Philippines, Tonga, Norway and Russia.

This year, amid the sharp tensions over Ukraine, Russia declined to participate. China, however,

accepted an invitation. The Chinese Navy is reportedly sending four ships—a destroyer, a frigate, a refuelling vessel and a hospital ship.

The invitation to Beijing followed an outcry in the Chinese media that China's previous exclusion demonstrated the aggressive character of the "pivot." The inclusion of a few Chinese ships is intended to shore up Washington's threadbare claims that its plan to concentrate 60 percent of its Navy and Air Force in Asia is not directed at China. It will also enable the US military to acquire intelligence and insights by observing its Chinese counterparts at close quarters.

Under overall US command, an Australian and a Japanese admiral will be the deputy and vice commanders of the assembled armada this year. A Canadian admiral will command the naval component; an Australian officer will command the air component; and a US marine general will direct the land component. A special forces component has been included in the exercises for the first time.

The Chinese ships will join exercises in which the scenario is disaster relief—responding to an earthquake, tsunami or typhoon. They are also slated to participate in an "interdiction" exercise, commanded by the US Coast Guard, based on scenarios of combatting piracy. The Chinese Navy joined anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden last year.

In late July, the US aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan, amphibious assault ship Peleliu, and destroyers, frigates and submarines from closely allied countries will take part in what the US Navy describes as "large-scale, multilateral, unscripted exercises." The scenario will see them rehearse operations to "restore freedom of navigation"—that is, destroy enemy ships and aircraft in contested waters—and land marines and special forces to seize back control of territory.

RIMPAC is above all aimed at familiarising the navies of other countries with functioning as part of a US-commanded fleet deployed to control the sea lanes between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Further military exercises are rehearsing other aspects of the AirSea Battle plan.

In recent months, the US Navy has already carried out its own intensive live fire exercises. Exercise Koa Kai in January and Multi-Sail in March featured destroyers, frigates and cruisers based in Hawaii and San Diego testing missile systems, torpedoes, depth charges, guns and air defence weapons.

In February, thousands of Thai and US troops took part in the Cobra Gold exercise, the largest annual ground war simulation in the Asia-Pacific. In April–May, US and Thai navies practised anti-submarine operations in the approaches to the Strait of Malacca—the region’s most important sea lane.

In March–April, 7,500 US and 3,500 Korean marines, backed by 20 warships and aircraft, rehearsed beach landings. A detachment of 130 Australian troops also took part. In April, the US and South Korea held their largest-ever joint air force exercise, with over 100 jet fighters and bombers drilling for an outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula.

This week, 3,500 Filipino and 2,500 US troops, with a small contingent of Australians, began the annual “Balikatan” exercises. Philippines Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario bluntly stated that the operations would prepare for conflict arising from “excessive and expansive maritime and territorial claims” and “aggressive patterns of behaviour”—a reference to the Philippines’ territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. The US has just concluded a basing agreement with the Philippines allowing unfettered access for American forces to the country’s military facilities.

In August, the Australian Air Force will host “Pitch Black,” with up to 100 aircraft from Australia, the US, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, New Zealand, France, the Netherlands and the United Arab Emirates. It is among the largest air exercises in the region, making use of Australia’s remote Delamere and Bradley training ranges, in the country’s north, near Darwin, to test air-to-air combat, air-to ground bombing attacks, ground-to-air missile systems and other operations.

A force of 1,250 American marines who deployed from California in March for a six-month basing rotation in Darwin, are conducting exercises to acclimatise them to fighting conditions in South East Asia and working with Australian troops. In 2011, when the “pivot” was announced, the Australian Labor government agreed to the stationing of an entire US marine task force of 2,500 troops in Darwin, along with supporting ships and aircraft, by 2017. To control the sea lanes through the Indonesian archipelago, military analysts have speculated that US and Australian troops would be deployed on the shores of the narrow Sunda and Lombok straits to establish anti-shipping missile systems.

The US military presently conducts over 170 major exercises or drills in the Asia-Pacific each year, in virtually every country in the region, and hundreds of lower profile activities. In Indonesia alone, at least 200 small-scale training operations take place annually between the American and Indonesian militaries, while up to 500 Indonesian officers are sent for training in the US. In 2013, the US conducted more than 75 activities, exchanges and visits with the Malaysian military.

While military inter-operability is a key consideration in all these exercises, Washington is also seeking to entrench a pro-US alignment within the armed forces of the region, in anticipation of anti-war opposition emerging within the working class.



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