

US defence secretary challenges China at Singapore security forum

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At the Shangri-La Dialogue security forum in Singapore this morning, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter provocatively threw down the gauntlet to China, demanding “an immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation” in the South China Sea. “We also oppose the further militarisation of disputed features,” he said.

While his remarks were addressed to “all claimants” in the South China Sea, Carter was unmistakably targeting China. He blamed its “unprecedented” land reclamation for making these waters “the source of tension in the region and front-page news around the world.” The United States, he declared, had “deep concerns about any party that attempts to undermine the status quo and generate instability, whether by force, coercion, or simply creating irreversible facts on the ground, in the air, or in the water.”

In reality, the US has deliberately stoked tensions in the South China Sea by directly intervening in longstanding maritime disputes and encouraging China’s neighbours, including the Philippines and Vietnam, to more aggressively assert their claims against Beijing. The Obama administration has exploited the issue as part of its “pivot to Asia” to undermine Chinese influence and justify a US military build-up and the strengthening of alliances throughout the region.

In the lead-up to the Shangri-La Dialogue, the Pentagon ensured that the South China Sea would be “front-page news” by allowing a CNN news crew to join a US navy surveillance flight close to Chinese-controlled atolls. Yesterday the US claimed further evidence of China’s “militarisation” of the sea, citing the presence of two mobile artillery vehicles on one of China’s islets. Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, a US official acknowledged there was “no military threat,” but said “it is about symbolism.”

The Pentagon’s moves have been accompanied by inflammatory statements by US officials, as well as in the American and international press, magnifying the “threat” posed by China and indicating further military provocations. After last month denouncing China’s land reclamation as building “a great wall of sand,” Admiral Harry Harris, the newly installed head of the US Pacific Command, on Wednesday dismissed Beijing’s territorial claims as “preposterous.”

In what can only be interpreted as a threat to China, Harris declared there would be “no shortage of challenges that confront us. If called upon, we will fight tonight to defend American interests in the vast Indo-Asia-Pacific. This is not aspirational. It is in our DNA. Our nation deserves no less.”

In today’s speech, Defence Secretary Carter reaffirmed that the US would continue to challenge China’s claims through “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea. “There should be no mistake,” he said. “The United States will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, as US forces do around the world.”

Carter has reportedly ordered the Pentagon to draw up plans for US warships or aircraft to enter the 12-mile territorial limit around Chinese-controlled reefs, actions that risk a clash leading to an escalating conflict with China’s armed forces.

While asserting the “right” to freedom of navigation and overflight of territory claimed by China, the US routinely denounces similar activities by China in the East China Sea near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands administered by Japan as “provocative” and unjustified. Indeed, US President Obama has publicly pledged to back Japan in any war with China over the rocky, uninhabited outcrops.

Carter’s main pitch was an appeal for regional

cooperation to ensure “peace and stability.” Nothing could be further from the truth. As outlined in his speech, the US has for the past five years engaged in a comprehensive military build-up and strengthening of strategic partnerships directed against China throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Carter’s long list of “cooperative” arrangements focussed on stronger military ties with Japan, South Korea, Australia and India. He noted that the navy’s state-of-the-art littoral warship, the USS Fort Worth, which has just completed a “freedom of navigation” operation in the South China Sea, is based in Singapore. Carter foreshadowed the signing of a new operational cooperation agreement with Vietnam and a new US-India Defence Framework when he visits those two countries this week.

To underscore Washington’s commitment to its Asian allies, Carter declared that the US Defence Department would “continue to bring the best [weapons] platforms and people forward to the Asia Pacific, such as the latest Virginia-class [nuclear] submarines, the Navy’s P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft, the newest stealth destroyer, the Zumwalt, and brand-new carrier-based E-2D Hawkeye early warning-and-control aircraft.”

Carter announced a Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative, which is clearly centred on the South China Sea. The US Senate Armed Services Committee has just approved the measure, which will provide \$425 million over the next five years to help train and equip the armed forces of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.

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The committee chairman, right-wing Republican Senator John McCain, is at the Shangri-La Dialogue. Yesterday he added his voice to the denunciations of China. He highlighted the Pentagon’s claim that China had placed artillery on one island, describing it as a “disturbing and escalatory development.” Indicating his support for US military provocations, McCain declared that the US needed to “take certain measures which will be a disincentive to China to continue these types of activities.”

The sharp escalation of tensions in the South China Sea in recent months is generating growing concern in Asian capitals about the danger of war, even among

closer supporters the US “pivot.”

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who delivered the keynote opening address to the Shangri-La Dialogue yesterday, declared that without cooperation the Pacific Ocean could be divided between the US and China, “each with its own sphere of influence, circumscribing options for other countries, and increasing the risk of rivalry and conflict between two power blocs.”

Lee called for China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to conclude a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea as soon as possible, “so as to break the vicious cycle and not let disputes sour the broader relationship.” He warned: “On the other hand, if a physical clash occurs, which escalates into a wider tension or conflict, either by design or more likely by accident, that would be very bad. But even if we avoid a physical clash, if the outcome is determined on the basis of might is right, that will set a bad precedent.”

During question time following Carter’s speech, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Senior Colonel Zhao Xiaozhuo challenged Carter’s criticisms of China, calling them “groundless and not constructive.” He pointed out that “freedom of navigation and overflight” had never been at issue in the South China Sea and insisted that China’s land reclamation was “legitimate” and justified. Zhao questioned Washington’s “harsh criticism” and military reconnaissance.

Carter brushed aside these comments, falsely declaring that the US was doing nothing new in the South China Sea. The exchange presages further verbal clashes over the weekend between China and the US and its allies, including Japan, Australia and the Philippines, whose defence ministers are present. Several Chinese officers are slated to speak, including the head of the Chinese delegation, Admiral Sun Jianguo, a PLA deputy chief, who is due to address the forum tomorrow.



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