

US defense secretary signs joint military statement with Hanoi

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US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter traveled to Haiphong and Hanoi yesterday as part of his 11-day tour through the Asia-Pacific region, prosecuting Washington's campaign toward war against China in the South China Sea. During his stay, Carter worked to further enmesh Vietnam in the imperialist military agenda of the United States.

Carter arrived in Vietnam from Singapore, where he delivered a plenary address at the Shangri-La Dialogue denouncing Beijing for its land-reclamation activity in the South China Sea, which he condemned as "out of step with international rules and norms."

Washington has seized upon China's minor construction activity as the pretext for the dramatic escalation of regional tensions, going so far as to deliberately provoke a military encounter in the disputed waters by deploying surveillance aircraft over territory occupied by the Chinese.

The recklessness of Washington is made all the more apparent by the flimsiness of the pretext. The *Wall Street Journal* admitted in an analysis published on Sunday that "the U.S. is constrained by the fact that China's island-building doesn't violate maritime law, and other claimants to the Spratlys, including Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines, have all expanded the geographical features they control ... Nor has China threatened shipping in the South China Sea ... And although the U.S. accuses China of militarizing the islands, so far it has identified only two light motorized artillery pieces on one of them. Even after their expansion ... the islands remain mere specks in the ocean and have limited military value ... they are virtually indefensible."

Carter sought to shore up Washington's pretext of opposing "destabilizing reclamation activity" by calling on Hanoi to discontinue its own reclamation

work on disputed islands. He told a joint press conference that the Vietnamese government was "considering" the request. His counterpart, Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh, said the Vietnamese military was only engaged in maintenance against erosion, and not expansion activity. He added that the Vietnamese military occupied nine "floating islands" and twelve "submerged islands," where they were shoring up existing structures.

Carter reportedly said he would like clearer distinctions drawn "between what is new construction that would be barred and what is maintenance that might be permitted."

This rather friendly treatment of Vietnamese reclamation activity highlights the hypocrisy of Washington's outrage at China's so-called island building. Washington will not be publicly denouncing Vietnam for its "flagrant disregard for international norms," nor will it be staging provocative military encounters against Hanoi. It is China that is in Washington's crosshairs.

Carter and the Vietnamese government signed a Joint Vision Statement, underscoring the alignment of Hanoi's military interests with those of Washington.

As part of this deal, Carter announced that the United States would begin training Vietnamese troops to participate in United Nations peacekeeping operations and would station a US peacekeeping trainer at the American embassy in Hanoi. This training will amount to preparation to carry water for US imperialist ventures around the globe.

Carter committed the US to providing Vietnam with \$18 million for the purchase of two US Metal Shark 75 Defiant patrol boats. He pointedly made this announcement after touring the Vietnamese coast guard vessel that Hanoi accused a Chinese navy ship of

having rammed in May of last year.

The most crucial component of the Joint Vision Statement that has been announced was the intent to begin the co-production of weapons and defense supplies.

Vietnam currently buys more than 90 percent of its defense materiel from Russia. In October 2014, Washington lifted its ban on the sale of lethal maritime weaponry to Vietnam. The move toward co-producing weapons in Vietnam seeks to simultaneously curtail Russian military influence in the country and the region, and fully enmesh Vietnam in Washington's imperial orbit.

Washington has already stepped up its pressure on Hanoi to end its military ties with Moscow. On March 11, Reuters reported that Washington asked Hanoi to stop letting Russian ships and aircraft use the military facilities at Cam Ranh Bay. The implementation of this request will no doubt be a prerequisite for increasing military ties with the United States.

Russia announced yesterday that it would conduct joint war games in the South China Sea with Beijing, although no date for these exercises has yet been announced.

In order for Washington to replace Moscow as the Vietnamese military's chief supplier, Hanoi has requested the full removal of the US weapons sales restrictions. Currently Washington has only lifted the maritime weaponry ban. Defense Minister Thanh said lifting the ban would be "in line with the interests of both countries. And I think we should not attach that decision to the human rights issue." Carter made no mention of human rights.

Carter's visit was clothed in the hubris of imperialism. He visited Hanoi and Haiphong, both of which were devastated by the "Christmas bombing" of 1972 on the orders of President Richard Nixon. Carter officially inspected Vietnamese troops. A Vietnamese military band played the US national anthem. The US defense secretary then gave Thanh a belt and a diary that was stripped from a Vietnamese soldier's corpse in 1972. Carter referred to them as tokens of "a shared past."

Vietnamese Communist Party secretary general Nguyen Phu Trong is scheduled to visit the United States soon, possibly within the month. Further details of Hanoi's military cooperation with Washington will

no doubt be hammered out.

Vietnam's economy was left in smoldering ruins in 1975, when the Vietnamese people succeeded in defeating the US military occupation of the country. As in China and the Soviet Union, the Vietnamese Stalinist bureaucracy's nationalist program was incapable of keeping pace with the integrated world economy. In 1986, the Communist Party leadership opened up the country as cheap labor platform for the imperialist powers, on whose behalf they policed the working class. In 1995 Washington and Hanoi normalized relations.

Over the past five years, Washington has used tensions with China, which it has deliberately inflamed, to drive a wedge between Hanoi and its leading trade partner, Beijing. As the threat of war in the region has mounted at a breathtaking rate, driven by the policies of the Obama administration, so too has the process of converting Hanoi into a proxy of US interests in the region. Carter's visit marked a further escalation of that process.



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