

# Washington's South China Sea provocation and the spectre of World War III

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The US naval incursion yesterday within the 12-nautical-mile limit of territory claimed by China in the South China Sea was a deliberate and reckless provocation that threatens to trigger a far broader conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers.

No credence should be given to Washington's claims that it is simply exercising its rights under international law to "freedom of navigation." Unlike China, and many other nations, the United States has not even ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which it insists it is upholding. Once again, US imperialism has concocted a pretext to pursue its militarist agenda—in this case, maintaining its hegemony in Asia and subordinating China to US economic and strategic interests.

Speaking at a congressional hearing yesterday, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter made clear that the US acts as a law unto itself and that the so-called Freedom of Action operations will continue. "We will fly, sail and operate wherever international law permits," he declared. "There have been naval operations in that region in recent days and there will be more in the weeks and months to come."

Ian Storey, a strategic analyst at Singapore's Institute of South East Asian Studies, underlined the seriousness of the Pentagon's use of the guided missile destroyer USS Lassen to enter the contested waters. "They've gone in heavy. There is not much else heavier than that except an aircraft carrier," he told the *Guardian*.

In fact, the US navy had two aircraft carriers not too far away. The USS Theodore Roosevelt had just left the Middle East to resupply in Singapore, adjacent to the South China Sea, and the USS Ronald Reagan is based in Japan.

The decision to risk war by challenging China was made by a war cabal in the US military and foreign

policy establishment that operates without any democratic accountability, behind the backs of the American people, who are overwhelmingly opposed to the war policies of the government. For months, top officials of the US Pacific Command have been waging a public campaign denouncing Chinese land reclamation in the South China Sea. Insofar as Obama was involved at all, it was to give the final stamp of approval for the operation.

Speaking to the *Financial Times*, retired US admiral James Stavridis pointed to the broader objectives, declaring that the US was determined "not to cede international waters off China to an emerging regional power." Washington is not only unwilling to cede an inch to Beijing, it has engaged in an aggressive diplomatic, economic and military strategy, known as the "pivot to Asia," aimed at reducing China to a semi-colonial status.

The US has deliberately inflamed dangerous flashpoints such as the South China Sea to provide an excuse for its military build-up throughout the region and to drive a wedge between China and other territorial claimants in East Asia. Having ignored longstanding maritime disputes in the area for decades, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provocatively declared in mid-2010 that the United States had a "national interest" in securing "freedom of navigation" through the disputed waters.

Over the past five years, Washington has transformed what were minor territorial disputes into a *casus belli* for war against China, encouraging and assisting the Philippines and Vietnam, in particular, to challenge Chinese claims. This diplomatic offensive has gone hand-in-hand with new basing arrangements with Australia and the Philippines, the strengthening of defence ties throughout the region, and military

redeployments to ensure that 60 percent of US naval and air assets are located in the Indo-Pacific by 2020.

Yesterday's dispatch of the USS Lassen into Chinese-claimed waters is the first phase of Pentagon war plans to counter what it claims is China's tactic of Anti-Access/Area Denial. Such operations are part of a broader AirSea Battle strategy that envisages a devastating air and missile assault on the Chinese mainland if China retaliates.

Behind the US war drive is the deepening crisis of world capitalism. The American ruling class is responding to its own weakened global position by resorting ever more recklessly to military might in order to undermine its rivals, while at the same time deepening its assault on the democratic rights and living standards of the working class at home.

Even as he warned of further actions in the South China Sea against China, US Defence Secretary Carter declared yesterday that the US would step up its war in the Middle East by allowing American troops to engage in fighting on the ground. Moreover, Washington's provocations in Asia take place at the same time as NATO forces prepare for confrontations with Russia in Eastern Europe. The whole world has been placed on a hair trigger that could be tripped by an incident, intended or unintended, in virtually any part of the globe.

While its response is largely defensive in character, the actions of the Chinese regime are utterly reactionary. Organically incapable of making any appeal to the working class in China or internationally, the bureaucratic apparatus in Beijing, which represents the interests of a tiny ultra-wealthy layer of oligarchs, resorts to militarism and the whipping up of Chinese nationalism, thus heightening the danger of war. An editorial in the hawkish state-owned *Global Times* yesterday called on the Chinese leadership to "prepare for the worst" and show the White House that it "is not frightened to fight a war with the US in the region."

More and more, the world situation resembles the lead-up to World War I and World War II. In an interview in September 1938, on the eve of the Munich conference, Leon Trotsky explained the objective logic of events that was leading to conflict. "It is possible that this time, too, diplomacy will succeed in reaching a rotten compromise. But it will not last long. War is inevitable and moreover in the very near future. One

international crisis follows another. These convulsions are similar to the birth pangs of the approaching war. Each new paroxysm will bear a more severe and dangerous character," he said.

In its statement "Socialism and the Fight against Imperialist War" published in July 2014, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) explained that the same fundamental contradictions of capitalism—between global economy and the outmoded nation state system on the one hand, and socialised production and the private ownership of the means of production, on the other—were driving the world to war. "Another imperialist bloodbath is not only possible; it is inevitable unless the international working class intervenes on the basis of a revolutionary Marxist program," it warned.

The ICFI statement outlined the political basis for the building of an anti-war movement of the international working class. "All the great issues confronting the working class—the growth of social inequality, the resort to authoritarian forms of rule—are inseparable components of this struggle. There can be no fight for socialism without a struggle against war and there can be no fight against war without a struggle for socialism. Imperialist war must be opposed by the working class, leading behind it the youth and oppressed masses, on the basis of a socialist program: the fight to take political power, expropriate the banks and major corporations and begin the task of constructing a world federation of workers' states."

One year on, that task takes on new urgency. At its very centre lies the necessity of building the ICFI as the revolutionary leadership required to lead this struggle.



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