

US defense secretary steps up threats against China

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US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter used a visit yesterday to the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and an on-board press conference to deliver further provocative threats against China over disputed territorial claims in the South China Sea.

The visit came the day after a meeting of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) defence ministers in the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur. The summit broke up without issuing a communiqué on “freedom of navigation” in the region, which the US sought as the political cover for its military push against China.

Carter flew to the USS Theodore Roosevelt, stationed in the South China Sea, some 150–200 miles south of the disputed Spratly islands where China has undertaken land reclamation. He was accompanied by Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein in order to buttress US claims that its actions have the support of countries in the region.

Carter’s remarks on board the carrier made clear that the US is going to step up its military provocations following last week’s sail-through by the destroyer, the USS Larsen, of the 12-nautical-mile limit surrounding one of China’s reclaimed islands, and apply increased pressure on the countries of the region to back it.

Carter said his presence on the aircraft carrier was “a symbol and signifies that stabilising influence that the United States has had in this region of the world for decades.” He said the “rebalance” to the region—the official term for the US “pivot to Asia”—was “intended to keep that going.” That is, having established its military domination of the region at the end of World War II, including in the South China Sea, the US will seek to maintain it at all costs, including military confrontation with China, should that be considered necessary.

As with all its military campaigns since its rise as an imperialist power at the beginning of the twentieth century, the US is seeking to justify its actions on the basis that it is responding to the concerns of other countries. Carter adhered to this time-worn script.

“The fact that I’m here with the defence minister from another country ... in this case Malaysia ... indicates the great demand out here in this region for the American presence,” he said.

Carter claimed the central issue at the ASEAN meeting was the concern by the countries of the region over China’s activities, both what he called its “extravagant” territorial claims and its associated militarisation.

“Many countries in the region are coming to the United States and asking us to do more with them so that we can keep the peace out here. So this [his visit to the ship] is a symbol and sign of the critical role the United States military power plays ... in what is a very consequential region for the American future.”

This last point underscores the real objectives of US policy. They are not directed at preserving peace against Chinese military activity but at ensuring US domination over one of the most significant economic regions of the globe.

A revealing exchange in the press conference came in response to a question from a journalist, who noted that the aircraft carrier’s nickname was “The Big Stick”—following President Theodore Roosevelt’s slogan that the US should “talk softly and carry a big stick.”

After commenting that American objectives at the ASEAN talks “kind of fell through”—a reference to the fact that the US failed to secure direct support for its “freedom of navigation” actions in a final communiqué—the journalist asked: “Is this a reminder

of the American power behind the softer forms of diplomacy?”

Carter began his reply with pro forma remarks about how the US always sought to hold discussions about security affairs because it was better to talk about them, including with China, and claimed the region had enjoyed stability because of the US role.

“A lot of people are flocking to us, wanting us to maintain that role. We intend to. The power of the [aircraft carrier] TR is a reflecting of that,” he said, adding that “the world depends upon it because half of the population, half of the economy is here.”

The claim that the US has promoted “stability” in the region is a total fiction. For 30 years after World War II, which concluded with the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan, the entire region was wracked by US-instigated wars and mass murder, including the Korean War of 1950–53, the Vietnam War and the US-orchestrated coup in 1965 in Indonesia, which brought the military dictatorship of General Suharto to power and led to up to a million deaths.

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Relative stability only came after the 1971 discussions between US President Richard Nixon and Chinese leader Mao Zedong and the subsequent recognition of the Chinese Communist Party regime in Beijing, a deal in which the Maoist regime accepted US military dominance of the region.

The Nixon-Mao agreement was the starting point for the process of capitalist restoration by the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy that has led to China becoming the cheap-labour platform for global transnational corporations, and its elevation to the position of the second largest economy in the world.

However, this very economic growth has eroded the basis of the previous relative equilibrium. Confronted with the rise of China, and its ever-closer economic integration with the countries of South East Asia, as well as the commercial push into China by other major powers—most notably Germany, Britain and other European rivals—the once economically dominant position of the US has been severely undermined.

The US has sought to counter this situation by exercising power in the area where it still enjoys supremacy—military might. This is the underlying driving force of the “pivot to Asia” or “rebalancing”

formally launched by the Obama administration in 2011.

The “pivot” has taken the form of detailed military plans for attacks on the Chinese mainland, coupled with a concerted effort to drive a wedge between China and its South Eastern Asian neighbours by stoking up decades-long territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

The aim of these operations is not to maintain “stability,” promote economic growth, ensure “freedom of navigation,” ease the concerns of other countries over growing Chinese power, or any of the other justifications emanating from Washington. It is to assert US dominance over this vital economic region by reducing China to the status of a virtual semi-colony.

Carter’s flying visit to USS Theodore Roosevelt is an indication that the US will stop at nothing in the pursuit of this objective, including the “Big Stick” of military means, raising the threat of a new world war.



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