

Syria and the South China Sea: Two flashpoints for world war

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The downing of a Russian bomber by Turkish fighters this week dramatically escalated global tensions and posed point blank the danger of a conflict between nuclear-armed powers. Yet even as the US-led war in the Middle East was placing the world on a knife-edge, President Barack Obama spent last week ramping up the confrontation with China over its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea.

Obama took part in top-level Asian gatherings—the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Manila and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)-sponsored East Asia Summit—determined to drive home the point that the US would continue to challenge Chinese maritime claims, even if that led to war.

In the lead-up to the summits, the Pentagon last month provocatively sent the guided missile destroyer, the USS Lassen, within the 12-mile-territorial limit around Chinese-controlled islets and flew nuclear-capable B-52 strategic bombers close to the same area. Like the shooting down of the Russian aircraft, a provocation, accident or miscalculation on either side in the hotly-contested South China Sea could become the trigger for a catastrophic conflict.

Obama's first engagement in Manila was on board the Philippine navy's flagship, the Gregorio del Pilar, speaking to assembled military officials, including the country's defence secretary and armed forces chief. He used the occasion to again declare his commitment to "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea and announce \$250 million to provide "maritime security assistance to our allies and our partners across the region."

The Obama administration has exploited "freedom of navigation" as the pretext for intervening in the maritime disputes between China and its neighbours

ever since Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in 2010 that the US had a "national interest" in the South China Sea. While regularly lecturing China over its failure to adhere to international law, Washington has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which is supposed to determine the competing maritime claims.

Obama's announcement in Manila was a deliberate slap in the face to Beijing. China had insisted that the South China Sea not be discussed at the APEC summit, which focusses on trade and economic issues. Obama followed this up in his meeting with Philippine President Benigno Aquino. He specifically named China, rather than referring to it indirectly, as the chief culprit and demanded it halt reclamation activities, new construction and militarisation.

Over the past five years, the Obama administration has transformed the South China Sea into a dangerous flashpoint. It has encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam, in particular, to more aggressively press their territorial claims against China. The deliberate whipping up of tensions in the area is part of Obama's "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at establishing unchallenged American domination in Asia and subordinating China to US interests, if necessary by military means.

In Kuala Lumpur last Saturday, Obama sealed a "strategic partnership" with ASEAN leaders, with an emphasis on "ensuring maritime security and safety." In the closed door leaders' session of the East Asia Summit, key US allies, including Japan and the Philippines, lined up to criticise Beijing, prompting Chinese officials to hit back. Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin defended China's actions as "beyond reproach" and branded the USS Lassen's intrusion as a

“political provocation” by Washington.

The driving force behind Washington’s actions in the Middle East and Asia is the worsening crisis of world capitalism that erupted in 2008. Determined to maintain its global hegemony, US imperialism is increasingly resorting to military might to offset its historic economic decline. The Obama administration’s willingness to recklessly risk war to achieve its ends in seemingly disparate areas of the globe points to the huge stakes involved.

American geo-political strategists such as former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski have long regarded the huge Eurasian landmass, its people and resources as the key to world domination and thus view China and Russia as the chief obstacles to US ambitions and interests. Washington’s confrontations with Moscow in Syria and Beijing in the South China Sea are components of an overarching strategy aimed at securing a dominant position across this vast region.

China’s emergence as the world’s second largest economy cuts across US plans. Beijing has reacted to the US “pivot to Asia” by elaborating an ambitious grand scheme to integrate Eurasia. Announced in 2013, it is known as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Silk Road, or One Belt, One Road (OBOR). President Xi Jinping has indicated that China is willing to commit \$1.4 trillion to create a comprehensive network of high-speed railways, roads, air and sea links, pipelines, transmission grids and electronic cables linking Europe and Asia.

Beijing is clearly hoping to entice European powers to sign on and, in the process, marginalise the United States. As Wang Yiwei, one of the project’s proponents, declared in May: “The New Silk Road Initiative could help redirect the centre of geopolitical gravity away from the US and back to Eurasia. Europe is faced with an historic opportunity to return to the centre of the world through the revival of Eurasia.”

US imperialism cannot tolerate such a development. Just as the “pivot to Asia” involves the consolidation of military alliances and partnerships throughout Asia directed against China, so the US seeks to disrupt and prevent the emergence of ties between its European allies and Russia and China. There is no question that, given the potential for a conflict involving NATO, Washington gave the green light to Turkey to shoot down the Russian war plane. By doing so, the US

effectively sabotaged French plans for closer collaboration with Russia over the war in Syria.

Neither Moscow nor Beijing has any progressive answer to Washington’s military provocations and threats of war. Both regimes represent the class interests of the super-wealthy oligopolies that emerged through the processes of capitalist restoration and accumulated their fortunes at the expense of the working class. Their responses oscillate between cringing appeals to imperialism, and military bluster and actions that only heighten the danger of war.

The planet is sliding inexorably towards a third world war, which can be stopped only through the revolutionary intervention of a unified socialist movement of the international working class to abolish capitalism—the source of imperialist predations and conflict.



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