

Pentagon inflates “China threat” to justify massive build-up in Asia

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Top US defence officials made a series of inflammatory statements this week about China’s activities in the South China Sea, in order to justify the Pentagon’s accelerating military build-up in the Indo-Pacific and to push for an expanded defence budget. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that advanced preparations are being made for war with China.

Speaking at the House Appropriations Committee on Thursday, Defence Secretary Ashton Carter accused China of increasing the risk of “miscalculation or conflict” between regional countries by its military presence in the South China Sea. “Chinese behaviour is having the effect of self-isolation, and it’s also galvanising others to take action against it,” he declared, noting that allies and partners were increasingly working with the US.

The South China Sea has been a central focus of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” since US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in mid-2010 that the US had a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” through the contested waters. Washington has deliberately stoked up tensions and exploited longstanding maritime disputes to drive a wedge between Beijing and rival claimants, especially Vietnam and the Philippines.

Carter claimed that the US was “not out to keep China down” but “we don’t look for anyone to dominate the region and certainly not for anybody to push the United States out.” The purpose of the “pivot,” however, is precisely to ensure the ongoing hegemony of US imperialism in Asia. That requires the subordination of China to Washington’s interests. “We are a Pacific power. We are there to stay,” he declared emphatically.

Carter’s message was reinforced by General Joe Dunford, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, who told

the committee that China was developing capabilities that “are intended to limit our ability to move into the Pacific or to operate freely within the Pacific.” He insisted that the US had to maintain its “competitive advantage versus China” which was why “we are fielding the most modern capabilities of the [Defence] Department to the Pacific first.”

As part of the “pivot,” the Pentagon is planning to station 60 percent of its air and naval assets to the Indo-Pacific by 2020. The US military build-up is already well underway, including the forging of new basing arrangements with Australia, the Philippines and Singapore, as well as the restructuring of US bases in Japan, South Korea and Guam. Under the guise of countering the threat posed by North Korea, the Pentagon is preparing to base “strategic assets”—that is, nuclear-capable aircraft and anti-ballistic missile systems—on the Korean Peninsula.

Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command (PACOM), made by far the most bellicose comments in testimony to the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, on Tuesday and Wednesday respectively, and during a press conference at the Pentagon on Thursday.

Harris, who took over as PACOM chief last May, has aggressively pressed for supposed “freedom of navigation” operations to directly challenge Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. Last October and again in January, US warships deliberately intruded within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-controlled islets.

At his Pentagon press conference, Harris grossly inflated the “threat” posed by Chinese activities in the South China Sea, declaring: “I’m of the opinion they’re militarising the South China Sea. They have reclaimed almost 3,000 acres of military bases in the

South China Sea.” While China has engaged in extensive land reclamation on a handful of reefs in the Spratlys, to claim that it has “3,000 acres of military bases” is absurd.

A week of congressional testimony was accompanied by what, in all likelihood, were planted articles in the American media highlighting two missile batteries and fighter aircraft on Woody Island, China’s administrative centre in the Paracels, as well as the possible construction of radar installations in the Spratlys. Even these much-hyped stories fall well short of Harris’s hyperbole.

To counter China, Harris called for more frequent “freedom of navigation” challenges to its territorial claims. He urged other “like-minded” nations to do the same. At present, the Australian government is under considerable pressure from Washington, as well as the opposition Labor Party and internally, to stage its own such operations.

Harris also claimed that China would declare an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea, which he branded as “destabilising and provocative.” In another calculated affront to Beijing, he added: “We would ignore it, just like we’ve ignored the ADIZ that they’ve put in place in the East China Sea.” When China announced an ADIZ in the East China Sea in late 2013, the Pentagon sent two B-52 strategic bombers into the zone unannounced, deliberately risking a confrontation.

Harris explicitly raised the necessity to prepare for war with China, in order to ensure that it does not undermine US military predominance in the Asia Pacific. “If China continues to arm all of the bases they have claimed in the South China Sea, they will change the operational landscape in the region. Short of war with the United States, China will exercise de facto control of the South China Sea,” he said.

Not surprisingly, Beijing reacted sharply to Harris’s remarks. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei declared that the admiral intended “to smear China’s legitimate and reasonable actions in the South China Sea and [is] sowing discord,” adding: “He is finding an excuse for US maritime hegemony and muscle-flexing on the sea.”

The Chinese regime is well aware that the Pentagon’s AirSea Battle strategy for war on China is premised on US military dominance in the South China Sea that

would enable a massive air and missile attack on the Chinese mainland, supplemented by a naval blockade. However, there is nothing progressive about Beijing’s response. It involves, on the one hand, seeking an accommodation with Washington while, on the other, engaging in an arms race that only provides the US with a pretext for its massive build-up.

Testifying at the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday, Harris was quite open about his demands for a greater military arsenal in the Indo-Pacific. He cited the comments of Defence Secretary Carter: “We must have, and be seen to have, the ability to impose unacceptable costs on an advance aggressor that will either dissuade them from taking provocative action or make them deeply regret it if they do.”

Harris insisted that PACOM needed “increased lethality, specifically ships and aircraft equipped with faster, more lethal, and more survivable weapons systems. We must have longer-range offensive weapons on every platform. Finally we must have a networked force that provides greater options for action or response.”

The admiral specifically complained that the US navy was only providing him with about 62 percent of the attack submarine patrols that he needed. “Critical munitions shortfalls are a top priority and concern,” he said. “Munitions are a major component of combat readiness. USPACOM forces need improvements in munitions technologies, production, and pre-positioning, but fiscal pressures places this at risk.”

Pressing his case before the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday, Harris made no bones about the purpose of his demands for greater weaponry and funds. “I’m comfortable where we are today, but today we’re not at war, and I think [that is] an important point,” he said. In other words, a war with China is precisely what is being prepared.



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