

US defence secretary's trip to Asia sets stage for new provocations against China

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US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter is due to arrive in the Philippines today in the midst of escalating tensions with China over the South China Sea. Arriving from New Delhi where he held high-level discussions to further cement the US strategic partnership with India, Carter's visit to Manila will set the stage for new military provocations against China in the neighbouring disputed waters.

Previewing the trip, a senior American defence official told CNN that Carter's visit was "a message to the region about our commitment to peace and stability," adding that the US regarded "the South China Sea as a core American security interest" and had an "ironclad commitment" to guaranteeing the security of its Philippine ally.

By a commitment to "peace and security," Washington means ensuring its continued dominance in South East Asia and the Indo-Pacific region as a whole, by all means, including military. As part of its "pivot to Asia" aimed against Beijing, the Obama administration signed a new basing agreement with the Philippines, is providing \$40 million in aid to boost its coast guard and backed the Philippine legal challenge to Chinese territorial claims in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.

During his visit, Carter will become the first US defence secretary to observe the annual joint Balikatan military exercises that are currently underway involving about 8,000 American, Philippine and Australian military personnel. This year's war games ominously include joint naval exercises, an amphibious landing and a simulation involving the retaking of an island in the South China Sea seized by an unnamed country.

Carter will also visit two of the five Philippine military bases that the US had gained access to under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement

(EDCA), which became operational this year. The five included the country's largest army base as well as four air force bases. In a particularly provocative gesture, one of the bases on Carter's itinerary is reportedly directly adjacent to the South China Sea.

Over the past year, Washington has condemned China's land reclamation activities in the South China Sea in increasingly strident terms, as "expansionist" and demanded a halt to Chinese "militarisation" of the area. In October and again in January, the US Navy sent a destroyer within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit surrounding a Chinese-administered islet under the bogus pretext of ensuring "freedom of navigation."

Earlier this month, an unnamed US official told Reuters that the Pentagon was planning a third "freedom of navigation" operation in April in the South China Sea. The US already has mustered considerable naval firepower with the aircraft carrier, USS John C Stennis, in the South China Sea along with its strike group of accompanying warships. The Japanese navy also has a strong presence, having last week dispatched the helicopter destroyer JS Ise, which is effectively an aircraft carrier, to take part in joint exercises with the Indonesian navy.

Such "freedom of navigation" operations are not, as is often implied, to ensure the sea lanes are open to international trade. Rather the purpose is the exact opposite. The US military is determined to ensure that its warships have free access to these strategic waters as part of the Pentagon's plans for war with China. Its AirSea Battle strategy envisages a massive bombardment of the Chinese mainland as well as a naval blockade to prevent Chinese ships from importing vital energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East via the South China Sea.

Washington heightened the pressure on Beijing by

securing a statement at the G-7 foreign ministers meeting in Japan on Monday expressing “strong opposition to any intimidating, coercive or provocative unilateral actions that could alter the status quo and increase tensions” and called on all states to refrain from land reclamation and building outposts, including for military purposes. It was the first time that the major European powers—Britain, France, Germany and Italy—had put their names to such a declaration.

While the statement did not name China, the message was obviously directed against Beijing and provoked an angry reaction. Foreign Ministry spokesperson declared that China was “strongly dissatisfied” with the G-7’s move and called on it to “respect the efforts by regional countries” and “stop all irresponsible words and actions.” China has repeatedly opposed the US interventions in the South China Sea and called for territorial disputes to be settled through bilateral negotiations.

The G-7 statement is part of US preparations for an aggressive new diplomatic offensive once the Permanent Court of Arbitration brings down its ruling in the Philippine case. The judgement, which is likely to be in May, is expected to favour the Philippines. China does not recognise the court’s jurisdiction and has not taken part. Washington will undoubtedly seize on the ruling to denounce Chinese activities in the South China Sea as “illegal,” even though the US has never ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea that is the basis of the Philippine case.

In the five years since Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the US had “a national interest” in the South China Sea, the Obama administration has transformed the strategic waters into a dangerous flashpoint for war with China. Now Obama is under pressure to escalate the confrontation with Beijing even further.

Writing in the British-based *Financial Times* yesterday, Republican Senator John McCain declared that China was acting “less like a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific region and more like a bully. Up to now, American policy has failed to adapt to the scale and velocity of the challenge we face.”

McCain called for a dramatic expansion of US military activities in the South China Sea, including the immediate dispatch of “a carrier strike group [to] patrol

the waters near Scarborough Shoal in a visible display of US combat power” as part of the Balikatan war games. “If China declares a South China Sea ADIZ [air defence identification zone], the US must be prepared to challenge this claim immediately by flying military aircraft inside the area affected under normal procedures,” he wrote.

The senator continued: “It is also time for the US to move beyond symbolic gestures and launch a robust ‘freedom of the seas campaign.’ It should increase the pace and scope of the freedom of navigation program to challenge China’s maritime claims, as well as the number of sailing days that US warships spend in the South China Sea. Joint patrols and exercises should be expanded and ocean surveillance patrols to gather intelligence throughout the western Pacific continued.”

What McCain is proposing is a recipe for war with China—a deliberate policy of reckless and escalating confrontations designed to force Beijing’s capitulation to Washington’s demands that will eventually lead to a clash between nuclear-armed powers. He makes clear that the US should prepare accordingly by “enhancing its military posture across the region” in line with a Centre for Strategic and International Studies report to Congress. It recommended an accelerated military build-up in Asia as well as massive investment in new weapons systems to fight a war with China.

McCain, who heads the Senate Armed Services Committee and has intimate ties with the Pentagon, represents the most militarist wing of the Republican Party. But what he states explicitly is already implicit in the Obama administration’s “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, which involves the redeployment of 60 percent of the Pentagon’s air and naval assets to the region, the strengthening of a network of military alliances and the carrying out of increasingly provocative actions.



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