

US vice president's trip triggers debate on US-China conflict

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The diplomatic activity of Vice President Joe Biden in the wake of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling that China has no “historical right” to its maritime claims in the South China Sea has left no doubt that US imperialism intends to utilise the decision to dramatically ratchet up military tensions with Beijing.

Since July 16, Biden has held talks with Japanese and South Korean ministers in Hawaii, and conducted high-profile state visits to Australia and New Zealand—its ANZUS treaty allies. In Australia, in particular, Biden made clear that Washington expects full Australian military and diplomatic support in escalating so-called “freedom of navigation” provocations into the waters and airspace immediately surrounding Chinese-claimed islets and reefs into the disputed areas.

The Obama administration has prompted a number of other regional states to issue statements supporting the court decision, including India, Vietnam and the Philippines, whose government, with US backing, initiated the legal challenge to Chinese claims.

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers’ summit, which begins today in Laos and will be attended by both US Secretary of State John Kerry and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, will be dominated by divisions over the South China Sea among its member-states. Efforts to secure a statement supporting the PCA ruling will be opposed by at least Laos and Cambodia, which have backed China’s stance that the rival claims be resolved through “bilateral” negotiations.

Looming over all the diplomatic activity is the prospect of armed clashes when the US military conducts its next “freedom of navigation” operation.

In Australia, Biden’s visit has been followed by an open discussion in the media over the prospect of a war

between the US and China, primarily in the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR).

Throughout the campaign for the July 2 election in Australia, the political and media establishment maintained a conspiracy of silence around the US-led drive to war and the military preparations going on behind the backs of the population. Biden’s trip, and the message he delivered, has abruptly brought the war danger to centre stage.

In a speech on the US-Australian alliance last Wednesday, Biden declared that anyone who questioned “America’s dedication and staying power in the Asia Pacific” was “not paying attention.” With its “unparalleled” military spending and strength, the US had an “unmatched ability to project naval and air power to any and every corner of the globe and simultaneously.” Australia, Biden asserted, must stand “all the way” with the US.

An article in Thursday’s AFR was headlined: “If US, China go to war, who wins?” It flatly stated that, in the light of Biden’s visit, such an “extreme” and “serious” scenario could not be ruled out, even though “such a conflict would divide the world and bring the global economy to its knees.”

The AFR published an extract of Biden’s speech under the stark heading: “We’re all in—you are too.” This was a reference to Biden’s invocation of Barack Obama’s remarks when the US president announced the “pivot” in the Australian parliament in 2011: “In the Asia Pacific in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in.”

In another AFR column, Brian Toohey, a veteran journalist with sources inside the military and intelligence establishment, warned that sending an Australian warship close to an island claimed by China would “risk sparking a low-level clash that gets out of

hand.”

Toohy frankly canvassed the disastrous implications of a US-China war. “Some observers, including this writer, believe that the US and its allies would easily defeat China in a major offshore air and sea battle,” he wrote. “But the battle could crash the global economy and wreck Australian trade with China, without resolving the military position.”

Referring to the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, he wrote: “Declaring ‘mission accomplished’ would have no more meaning than in Iraq if a humiliated China regrouped and resumed hostilities. Ultimately, an enduring victory would involve invading the mainland, occupying numerous cities and winning a protracted guerrilla war against millions of patriotic Chinese. The absurdity of this prospect is usually dismissed by saying nobody wants the current arms race to end in war. But arms races can end badly.”

In reality, a full-scale US assault on China would almost certainly escalate into a nuclear war, in which millions of working people in China and internationally would likely die. The military bases in Australia hosting US forces, including the Pine Gap satellite communications station, would be among the targets in such a conflagration.

Warnings in May of the danger of nuclear war by the Union of Concerned Scientists have been followed by a recent report issued by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) discussing the possibility of a nuclear exchange between the US and China. The CSIS has been at the forefront of formulating the US “pivot to Asia” to subordinate China to the dictates of the American ruling elite.

The July 20 report was overseen by prominent strategic analyst Anthony Cordesman and is headlined “China’s nuclear forces and weapons of mass destruction.” A key section is devoted to reviewing allegations by some US sources that China has been concealing the full extent of its nuclear arsenal in a massive network of underground facilities and tunnels. The thread running through the CSIS analysis of China’s nuclear arsenal is that it is expanding in both size and capability. Along with other reports published in recent years by Pentagon-linked think tanks, it implicitly leads to the conclusion that the US should act sooner, rather than later, to militarily confront Beijing.

In the event of conflict, Cordesman writes: “China and the United States have every reason to calculate that moving beyond the tacit threat already posed by the existence of the other’s nuclear forces to actual nuclear exchanges at any level would almost certainly be so destructive and to be far costlier to both sides than any strategic or military gains could ever be worth. At the same time, history is a grim warning that deterrence sometimes fails, and escalation occurs in ways that are never properly planned or controlled.”

In 2013, Cordesman authored another document in which he invoked the need to “think about the unthinkable”—a reference to the 1960 claims by American strategist Herman Kahn that it was possible to both survive and “win” a nuclear war. At the time, Kahn was dismissed by many as essentially insane and became one of the inspirations for the Stanley Kubrick character “Doctor Strangelove.”

Cordesman, matching Kahn’s insanity, wrote in 2013 regarding a nuclear war between India and Pakistan: “The good news, from a ruthlessly ‘realist’ viewpoint is that such a human tragedy does not necessarily have serious grand strategic consequences for other states, and *might well have benefits* ... The loss of India and Pakistan might create some short term economic issues for importers of goods and services. However, the net effect would shift benefits to other suppliers without any clear problems in substitutions or costs” [emphasis added].

In a toxic atmosphere where China’s rise is being blamed for the economic decline of US imperialism, the horrifying prospect is that the American political establishment will conclude that the nuclear devastation of China also “might well have benefits.”



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