

US admiral pledges to confront China in South China Sea

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Admiral Harry Harris, commander of US Pacific Command, used a speech in Sydney yesterday to warn that the United States was ready to confront China over its activities in the South China Sea. Under the Obama administration, the South China Sea has been transformed into a volatile flashpoint for war between China and the US. Harris's remarks make clear that those dangers will only rise under a Trump administration.

Harris has been one of the most strident advocates of aggressively challenging China in the South China Sea. In March last year, he claimed that China's land reclamation activities in the Spratly Islands were "creating a great wall of sand" for military purposes. His comments were the opening shot of an escalating US campaign to demand Beijing cease those activities and to justify the US military build-up in the region.

Speaking at the Lowy Institute, Harris declared: "We will not allow a shared domain to be closed down unilaterally, no matter how many bases are built on artificial features in the South China Sea." He warned: "We will cooperate when we can but we will be ready to confront when we must."

As in the past, Harris provided no evidence that China was constructing military bases on islets under its control. The US and international media continue to seize on any indication of Chinese military activity to hype up the alleged "threat" posed. The latest is a report from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that alleges China is building anti-aircraft and missile defence systems in the Spratlys.

The Pentagon has used China's activities as the pretext for stepped-up naval patrols and exercises in the South China Sea, which is immediately adjacent to the Chinese mainland and key military bases on Hainan Island. The US Navy has carried out three so-called

"freedom of navigation operations" (FONOPs), provocatively sending warships within the 12-nautical mile territorial limits of China's islets.

Far from being to counter what Harris described as China's "assertive, aggressive behaviour," the US military build-up in the South China Sea is part of its broader preparations for war with China. The Pentagon's AirSea Battle strategy involves massive air and missile attacks on the Chinese mainland from bases, warships and submarines in the western Pacific, supported by a naval blockade to strangle the Chinese economy.

US news reports this year have repeatedly suggested that Harris has been frustrated with the Obama administration's failure to make a more "muscular" response to China in the South China Sea. His comments yesterday were certainly encouraged by the prospect of a Trump presidency after the president-elect's declaration on Sunday that he did not feel bound by the One China policy that has been the linchpin of US-China relations for more than four decades. Along with allegations of unfair trade and failing to rein in North Korea, Trump falsely accused China of "building a massive fortress" in the South China Sea.

During his election campaign, Trump repeatedly charged China with stealing American jobs and threatened trade war measures, including to brand China as a currency manipulator and impose 45 percent tariffs on Chinese goods. He is also promising a massive expansion of the US military, including enlarging the navy to 350 warships. Trump adviser Rudy Giuliani boasted last month that "at 350, China can't match us in the Pacific."

Trump is under pressure for his appointment of ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson as secretary of state,

because of Tillerson's ties to Russia. The condemnations reflect the bitter feuding within the American ruling elite—fuelled by bogus allegations of “Russian hacking” influencing the election outcome—over whether the US military build-up should target Russia or China first.

A *Wall Street Journal* article entitled, “For Tillerson, South China Sea storms aren't new,” pointed out that as Exxon chief he had already confronted China in the South China Sea by signing a deal with Vietnam in waters partly claimed by China. A former Chinese foreign ministry official Victor Gao told the *Journal* that Exxon's venture in Vietnam “creates some friction” with China and urged Tillerson to “start from a fresh page.”

It is no accident that Harris chose Sydney to deliver his speech, reassuring allies and strategic partners that the US remained committed to the region. “My point is that you can count on America now and in the future,” he said. “It's in our national interest to continue our engagement in this vital region as we support the rules-based international order ... It's underpinned by American military presence and our network of allies and partners.” The existing rules-based order is one in which Washington sets the rules to ensure its domination in Asia.

Harris and the Pentagon regard Australia as the crucial southern anchor of the US military “rebalance” to Asia, which envisages 60 percent of Washington's air and naval assets, including its most sophisticated, being allocated to the Indo-Pacific by 2020. Harris revealed yesterday that he had just signed an agreement with his Australian counterpart to further expand the US military presence with the dispatch next year of advanced, fifth-generation F-22 Raptor fighters to northern Australia.

Harris highlighted the close relations that already exist between the Australian and American militaries, exemplified by the integration of an Australian major-general into the PACOM command structure as deputy commander of US Army Pacific. He again supported the formation of a strategic “quadrilateral,” comprising Australia, Japan, India and the United States, to contain and confront China militarily.

“No one, including me, wants conflict,” Harris declared, but his speech implied precisely that. To confront China, he outlined his own simplistic

formula—capability, resolve and signalling—in other words, a massive build-up in military capability in Asia, the resolve to use it, and signalling that threat “through words and actions that the other side receives load and clear.”

Harris's speech is an ominous warning of what is being prepared once Trump takes office. It involves the intensification and expansion of the Obama administration's confrontational “pivot to Asia” that can only accelerate the slide toward trade war and war.



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