

US think tank urges Trump to confront China in South China Sea

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A report released last month by the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) calls for the incoming Trump administration to initiate a major escalation of the US confrontation with China over the South China Sea. It is written by Ross Babbage, a former top-level Australian defence and intelligence official.

Entitled “Countering China’s Adventurism in the South China Sea,” the report is highly critical of the “failure” of the Obama administration “to counter China’s territorial expansion in the South China Sea.” It speaks on behalf of militarist layers of the American defence establishment who have already been pressing for tougher action against China.

Babbage focusses on Chinese land reclamation and construction activities in the South China Sea declaring that “during Obama’s second term, Beijing militarized and established effective control over one of the world’s most important strategic waterways.” This, he declares, “poses a serious challenge to the power of the United States, its allies and partners, and, more fundamentally, to the rules-based global order.”

The report stands reality on its head. Over his two terms in office, Obama has transformed longstanding regional territorial disputes in the South China Sea into a dangerous international flashpoint—as part of his broader “pivot to Asia” to subordinate China to US interests. In 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed that the US had a “national interest” in “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea and sought to exploit the territorial disputes to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours.

Babbage goes to great lengths to paint China as an aggressive, rising power and presents Chinese land reclamation and construction over the past three years as a threat. He contrasts Beijing’s military build-up

with the response of Washington and its allies characterized by “distracted leaderships, a lack of focus, reactive behaviour, limited tactical steps, incremental management, and, above all, weak expressions of political will.”

The Chinese military, however, is far from the dominant force in the Asia Pacific including the South China Sea. As part of the “pivot,” the Pentagon is planning to deploy 60 percent of its air and naval assets, including its most advanced, to the region. It is restructuring its major military bases in South Korea, Japan and Guam, has established new basing agreements with Australia, the Philippines and Singapore, and strengthened military relations throughout Asia including with India and Vietnam.

Obama’s “failure,” as far as Babbage is concerned, is demonstrated by China’s refusal to bow to the “global rules based order”—that is a global order dominated by the United States, in which it sets the rules. Acutely sensitive to the US military’s growing presence in the South China Sea adjacent to the Chinese mainland and key naval bases, China is taking military steps to defend islands under its control.

The CSBA report argues that one of the main reasons for the present “timid and ineffectual” response of the US and its allies to China has been a “deep risk aversion” to possible economic retaliation and military clashes and conflict. It advocates that the US take a far more aggressive approach to force China to back down even at the risk of war between nuclear-armed powers.

Well aware of the dangers of full-scale war, Babbage insists that the US and its allies must confront China sooner rather than later. Failure to do so, he declares, has emboldened Beijing, creating “a serious risk that the close Western allies may be confronted by a more dangerous challenge downstream.

“Such a crisis could arise over Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands and the Ryukyu Island chain in southern Japan, the Philippines, northern India, the South China Sea itself, or possibly elsewhere. This larger crisis may be unavoidable, occur in much more difficult circumstances, and impose far high human, military, and economic costs.”

The CSBA report’s proposal is for a sharp escalation in the preparations for war with China, starting with a far more aggressive set of demands, accompanied by a comprehensive campaign of propaganda to vilify Beijing and undermine its influence and a military expansion throughout the region to ensure a dominant strategic position.

Babbage calls on the US to dispense with the fiction that it is interested only in “freedom of navigation” and takes no position on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Under Obama, Washington backed and assisted the legal case taken by the Philippines to the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague to challenge China’s maritime claims.

The report declares that the US must be far more explicit in demanding that China halt the expansion of its presence and activities not only in the South China Sea but also the East China Sea where tensions have escalated in a territorial dispute with America’s ally Japan. It must also insist that China abide by the one-sided Hague ruling in favour of the Philippines, even though Manila has backed away.

Babbage highlights the recent scare campaign in the Australian media about Chinese agents and influence in order to justify a co-ordinated public “information” effort by the US and its allies to inflate the “threat” posed by China in the South China Sea. As in the preparation for war in Afghanistan and Iraq, he is calling for a new deluge of half-truths and lies from politicians, the media and think tanks in a bid to create the public climate for a new and even more devastating conflict.

The report also suggests what amounts to a regime change operation. It would include exposing the corruption of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, undermining its legitimacy, instituting “slow burn” economic sanctions to erode confidence in China’s economic future and fostering “internal dissent, especially amongst senior Chinese business, military and Communist Party personnel, and the

successor young elites.”

Central to the strategy is a major military build-up in Asia, coordinated between the US and its allies, principally Australia and Japan, and the willingness of Washington to use military force to provoke, intimidate, undermine and if necessary, wage war against China. Babbage calls for the establishment of a Regional Security Partnership Program that would strengthen military ties throughout Asia as well as for “the United States and its close allies to permanently station and operate much stronger military forces in the Western Pacific.”

The report is pitched as “Strategy options for the Trump Administration” under conditions where Trump has already signaled his determination to confront China. Not only has he promised during the election campaign to implement trade war measures against China, but Trump has threatened to abandon the One China policy that has been the linchpin of US-China relations for four decades.

Significantly as he declared he would not be bound by the One China policy unless a deal could be struck with Beijing, Trump cited a list of complaints that would have to be addressed, including “building a massive fortress in the middle of the South China Sea.” In that context, the report is a chilling indication of the type of measures that the Trump administration could adopt. Such policies would greatly heighten the danger of clashes in the South China Sea that could precipitate all-out war between the US and China.



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