

Shangri La Dialogue: US Defence Secretary, Australian PM threaten North Korea, China

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US Defence Secretary James Mattis and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull used the annual Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore to once again demand that China compel North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. Both men insisted that the “international rules-based order,” based on the hegemony of US imperialism in Asia, must be maintained, and warned China not to try to assert its regional influence.

The Dialogue, the premier Asian conference on strategic and defence issues, is taking place amid acute tensions on the Korean Peninsula as the US threatens war against North Korea and continues a relentless military build-up in the area. The US Navy began joint exercises with Japan in the Sea of Japan this week, involving two aircraft carriers, the USS Vinson and the USS Ronald Reagan, together with their strike groups and Japanese warships—a helicopter carrier and a destroyer.

While the Pentagon downplayed the drill as routine, it was the first involving two US aircraft carriers off the Korean Peninsula for 20 years and the first ever involving Japanese naval vessels. A third US aircraft carrier strike group, led by the USS Nimitz, is reportedly heading to the area. The US military also has been engaged in extensive war games with South Korea in recent months, involving naval and air forces and up to 300,000 troops.

In his speech today in Singapore, Defence Secretary Mattis denounced North Korea’s long record of alleged criminal activity and “illegal” nuclear and missile tests. He declared that the Pyongyang regime was “a clear and present danger”—that is, an imminent threat—to “all of us.” In comments directed in particular at China, he added, “it is therefore imperative that we all do our part” to ensure the denuclearisation of the Korean

Peninsula.

While noting China’s efforts to force North Korea to denuclearise, Mattis reiterated President Donald Trump’s remark that the policy of “strategic patience” was over. In other words, the US will not wait indefinitely for North Korea to bow to its demands, but will use military force to deal with the Pyongyang regime. In a warning directed as much at Beijing as Pyongyang, Trump tweeted earlier this year that if China did not deal with North Korea, the US would “solve the problem without them.”

Mattis also warned Beijing that the US would not tolerate China’s land reclamation activities in the South China Sea and was committed to “freedom of navigation” in the disputed waters. He bluntly accused China of having “disregard for international law” and “contempt for other nations’ interests.” His comments come less than a week after the US Navy provocatively sent a guided missile destroyer inside the 12-nautical-mile limit claimed by China around Mischief Reef in the South China Sea.

Mattis accused China of “undermining the rules-based order that has benefited all countries represented here today including, and especially, China.” His repeated reference to the post-World War II “rules-based order” as the basis for “peace and prosperity” in the Asia Pacific is a complete fraud. After defeating Japan, the US reinforced its dominance by fighting two brutal neo-colonial wars—in Korea and Vietnam—that cost the lives of millions, as well as by carrying out coups and backing military dictatorships throughout the region. US imperialism established the conditions to finally stabilise its strategic position in Asia only through its rapprochement with China in 1972.

Amid the continuing economic breakdown following the 2008 global financial crisis, all the post-war

structures, including in Asia, are rapidly disintegrating. Confronted with its historic decline, US imperialism is resorting, with increasing recklessness, to military means to try to shore up its hegemony and undermine its rivals, especially China and Russia.

The danger of a US-led war on North Korea is driven not by the regime's human rights abuses and the so-called threat posed by its limited nuclear arsenal, but by Washington's determination to weaken Beijing's strategic position through attacks on its only formal ally.

Mattis made clear that the US response to the "challenges" in the Asia Pacific was overwhelmingly a military one. He outlined the strengthening of US alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the region, the boosting of the military capacities of its allies and partners, and, above all, the Pentagon's own military build-up.

"Currently, 60 percent of all US Navy ships, 55 percent of army forces, and about two-thirds of fleet Marine forces are assigned to the US Pacific Command area of responsibility. Soon, 60 percent of overseas tactical aviation assets will be assigned to this theatre," Mattis boasted.

Australian Prime Minister Turnbull, who delivered the opening keynote address to the Dialogue yesterday, set the stage for Mattis, anticipating the central thrust of the US defence secretary's speech.

Just days earlier, Turnbull had met with US Senator John McCain, chairman of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee, who, in an extraordinary speech in Sydney, heavily criticised Trump, but insisted the US was "counting on Australia and our other allies to stick with us." In what amounted to a menacing threat, McCain declared: "No-one has ever got rich betting against America, my friends, and now is not a good time to start" (see: "Senator McCain solicits support in Australia for Trump's removal").

Taking his cue from McCain, Turnbull warned China over North Korea and called on the assembled government representatives to stand by US imperialism as the guarantor of regional stability. In a rather blunt criticism, he implied that China was seeking to bring Asia under its thrall through a present-day version of America's Monroe Doctrine, which had brought Latin America under US domination in the nineteenth century.

Turnbull warned Beijing: "A coercive China would find its neighbours resenting demands they cede their autonomy and strategic space and looking to counterweight Beijing's power by bolstering alliances and partnerships, between themselves and especially the United States." He urged Beijing "to build trust and cooperation," saying there was "no better or more urgent opportunity" than to "use its great leverage" to "curb the unlawful, reckless and dangerous conduct of North Korea."

Turnbull described as "disappointing" aspects of the Trump administration's policies—its withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), which many Asian countries regarded as an economic boon, and more recently from the Paris Climate Change Agreement. However, he added, "We should take care not to rush to interpret an intent to engage on different terms as one not to engage at all."

The Australian prime minister declared he was confident that "this administration and those that follow it" will recognise that US interests in the Indo-Pacific "demand more US engagement not less."

McCain's visit to Australia took place in the midst of a deep political crisis in Washington over foreign policy, reflected in the intensifying moves against the Trump administration over its alleged links to Russia. His message, reflected in Turnbull's remarks, to look past the present Trump administration and "stick with us" was both an appeal and a warning.

The great danger is that the Trump administration will resort to military provocations and conflict as a means of not only bringing allies into line, but of trying to extricate itself from the worsening political morass over both domestic and foreign policy.



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