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US ramps up anti-China “pivot to Asia”

Peter Symonds

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The latest US maritime strategic document, “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready,” released yesterday, makes clear that Washington is pressing ahead with its “pivot to Asia” and military build-up against China. In doing so, the US is continuing to stoke up tensions in the East and South China seas, compounding the danger of war.

The document, prepared by the US Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, and known by the acronym CS21R, is the first major maritime strategic update since 2007. In addressing “a global security environment characterised by volatility, instability, complexity and interdependencies,” it focuses on the “rising importance of the Indo-Asia-Pacific region,” and emphasises that “the economic importance, strategic interests and geography of this vast maritime region dictate a growing reliance on naval forces to protect US interests.”

CS21R insists it is “imperative” that the US maintain its global naval predominance to defend key American interests and prevent “our adversaries from leveraging the world’s oceans against us.” The document notes, “The ability to sustain operations in international waters far from our shores constitutes a distinct advantage for the United States.”

There is nothing benign about the US strategy of maintaining overwhelming naval superiority in the Indo-Pacific region. The Pentagon’s plans for war against China, known as “AirSea Battle,” rely on the ability to mount a massive offshore air and missile attack on the Chinese mainland,

including China's military and infrastructure, supplemented by an economic blockade. Under the pretext of securing "freedom of navigation," the US navy is ensuring that it has the ability to block key shipping lanes across the Indian Ocean used by China to import energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.

CS21R reaffirms the US military's plans to "rebalance" 60 percent of its naval and air forces to the Indo-Pacific region by 2020--just five years from now. It states: "The Navy will maintain a Carrier Strike Group, Carrier Airwing and Amphibious Ready Group in Japan; add an attack submarine to those already in Guam and... [increase] to four the number of Littoral Combat Ships forward-stationed in Singapore... The Navy will also provide its most advanced warfighting platforms to the region, including multi-mission ballistic missile defence-capable ships; submarines; and intelligence surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft."

Likewise, the Marine Corps will maintain a Marine expeditionary force in the region, as well as a Marine rotational force in Australia, backed by the latest warplanes, amphibious ships and vehicles to "give these forces the increased range and improved capabilities required in this vast region."

The only "cooperative" aspect of this strategy is the drive by the US to strengthen its alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific region against China, which the document highlights as presenting the main "challenges when it employs force or intimidation against other sovereign nations to assert territorial claims."

In fact, it is Washington that has deliberately inflamed maritime disputes in the Western Pacific by encouraging Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam to aggressively assert their territorial claims against China.

The Japanese government's provocative decision in 2012 to "nationalise" uninhabited, rocky outcrops in the East China Sea known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China set in motion a dangerous and escalating confrontation. The *New York Times* reported this week from the Japanese Air Force base at Naha that "at least once every day, Japanese F-15 fighter jets roar down the runway, scrambling to intercept foreign aircraft, mostly from China" near the disputed islands. Sometimes, it stated, they face Chinese fighters "in knuckle-whitening tests of piloting skills, and self-control."

While the US nominally declares its neutrality in the territorial dispute, President Obama last year publicly committed to backing Japan in a war with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. US-Japanese military collaboration is proceeding apace, including the training of Japanese Marine units for "island defence" and the development of anti-ballistic missile systems needed to fight a nuclear war. The Japanese military is planning to station another F-15 squadron at Naha and is building a radar base on Yonaguni Island—its first new military base in decades.

Tensions in the South China Sea are even more fraught. Last December, Washington jettisoned even the pretence of neutrality in maritime disputes in the region with the publication of a State Department report declaring that China's claims violate the international law of the sea. Behind

the scenes, the US is backing a legal challenge by the Philippines, supported by Vietnam, to Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Over the past month, the US media, military and political establishment has ramped up pressure on China, denouncing its construction projects on Chinese-administered islands and reefs in the South China Sea. In comments to the US Senate in late February, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper declared that China was making "aggressive" efforts to secure control of strategic waterways. Republican Senator John McCain was even more inflammatory, suggesting that China was constructing airfields and missile bases that could deny the US Navy access to the area.

Under the guise of "freedom of navigation," the US is determined to maintain its "right" to position substantial naval firepower in sensitive waters just off the Chinese mainland and near China's military bases. Not only is Washington backing the Philippines and Vietnam in their territorial disputes, it is encouraging Japan and India to maintain a greater military presence in the South China Sea.

The CS21R document underscores the reckless character of American foreign and military policy. In response to the world capitalist breakdown, US imperialism is determined to maintain and reinforce its global hegemony at any cost, pursuing a strategy, whether in Asia, the Middle East or Eastern Europe, that is inexorably fuelling a confrontation with nuclear armed powers—China and Russia.

The danger of nuclear war was highlighted by the British-based *Economist*. In an article this month entitled "The New Age," it concluded that "a quarter of a century after the end of the cold war, the world faces a growing threat of nuclear conflict."

While focussed on the dangers of war over Ukraine, the article also warned of a nuclear arms race and conflict in Asia. Noting that "a crisis, say, over Taiwan could escalate alarmingly," the magazine wrote, "Japan, seeing China's conventional military strengthen, may feel it can no longer rely on America for protection. If so, Japan and South Korea could go for the bomb—creating, with North Korea, another petrifying regional stand-off."