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US brinkmanship with China over South China Sea

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It does not require a great deal of imagination to work out how the United States would respond to China sending its aircraft carrier into the Gulf of Mexico to assert its “right” to “freedom of navigation”, or Russia dispatching military reconnaissance aircraft just outside the 12-mile territorial limit off the coast of New York State.

Such actions would immediately be denounced as flagrant aggression, if not acts of war. US warships and aircraft would—at the very least—closely shadow the “intruders”. And, a clamour would erupt in the media demanding American retaliation and preparations for war.

Yet that is exactly what the US is doing thousands of kilometres from the nearest American territory. State-of-the-art surveillance aircraft now routinely patrol close to Chinese-controlled islands in the South China Sea. Last month the littoral combat ship, the USS Fort Worth, prowled around the same atolls. Now the Pentagon is provocatively preparing to directly challenge China’s territorial claims by sailing or flying within the 12-mile limit.

These reckless military actions are being accompanied by a mounting propaganda campaign in the American and international press branding China’s land reclamation in the South China Sea as illegal, aggressive and aimed at securing control of the strategic waters. The United States is transforming “freedom of navigation” into a *casus belli* for war with China.

US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter exploited last weekend's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore—a security forum originally established to ease regional tensions—to condemn China for being “out of step with international rules and norms” and to solicit further participation from other Asian countries in the massive US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Carter declared that he was “personally committed” to the next phase of the US military “rebalance” aimed at encircling China. The Defence Department, he said, “will deepen longstanding alliances and partnerships, diversify America’s force posture, and make new investments in key capabilities and platforms.”

He continued, “The Department is investing in the technologies that are most relevant to this complex security environment, such as new unmanned systems for the air and sea, a new long-range bomber, and other technologies like the electromagnetic railgun, lasers, and new systems for space and cyberspace, including a few surprising ones.”

Carter emphasised that the US would “bring the best platforms and people forward to the Asia-Pacific.” These include “the latest Virginia-class [nuclear] submarines, the Navy's P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft, the newest stealth destroyer, the Zumwalt, and brand-new carrier-based E-2D Hawkeye early-warning-and-control aircraft.”

Having outlined this vast array of military might, Carter went on with a straight face to declare that the US opposed “any further militarisation of disputed features” in the South China Sea—a reference to two small mobile artillery guns that Washington claims China has placed on one of the islets.

While Carter declared that “there is no military solution to the South China Sea disputes,” the US has exploited these same disputes to secure new military basing and access arrangements with countries directly adjacent to its waters—the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam.

US imperialism is now actively preparing for war with China. It is not China that threatens “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea, but the United States. Central to the Pentagon’s war strategy against China are plans to cripple its economy by imposing a naval blockade to sever shipping routes on which it heavily relies for energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.

The Obama administration has made clear that it is willing to threaten, risk and provoke war in order to ensure its untrammelled domination in Asia in general and over China in particular. The historic decline of US imperialism during the past two decades has been matched by the eruption of American militarism in the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia. Now Washington is engaged in increasingly reckless brinkmanship in Asia in its efforts to force Beijing to back down.

An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Kaiser Xi’s Navy” ominously drew a parallel with the situation in Europe immediately prior to World War I, comparing China to Germany and Chinese President Xi Jinping to the German Kaiser. Its false depiction of China as an

aggressive imperialist power was aimed at justifying the call for a vast US naval expansion “to convince Beijing that a naval race is unwinnable and not worth running.”

The US is setting itself on a collision course with China whose strategic and economic interests are directly threatened by the aggressive American intrusion into the South China Sea. Beijing is well aware that any concessions to Washington will be quickly followed by more strident demands. Admiral Sun Jianguo, head of the Chinese delegation in Singapore, rejected US condemnations of China’s activities and calls for a halt to land reclamation.

The implications of escalating geo-political tensions were obviously heavy in the air at the Shangri-La Dialogue. Calling for a diplomatic resolution to territorial disputes, Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein warned: “If we are not careful it would escalate into one of the deadliest conflicts of our time, if not our history.”

American imperialism’s provocations against a nuclear-armed power do indeed threaten to plunge humanity into another, even deadlier world war that will not be stopped by diplomacy or appeals to reason. The only social force capable of preventing such a disaster is the international working class, through a unified struggle to put an end to its root cause—the bankrupt profit system and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states.