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Why US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter is the Biggest Threat to World Peace

By Brian Cloughley
November 20, 2015



The terrorist threat posed by the barbarians of Islamic State is clearly of most serious concern to much of the world — but there are other threats of equal immediacy, not the least being the determination of Washington to continue confronting Russia and China.

The US *Navy Times* headline of November 5 summed up Washington’s policy as regards the South China Sea by recording that “Pentagon chief takes jab at China with aircraft carrier stop.”

This intriguing insight to America's official thinking about China was one result of the visit by intellectual US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter to the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, an enormous aircraft carrier in the South China Sea where, ten days previously, on October 27, the guided missile destroyer USS *Lassen* had been ordered to try to provoke China to react to a coat-trailing confrontational incursion into territorial waters claimed by China.

Carter was in Asia at the time, and as part of his country's demonstration of world-wide military presence and power decided to emphasize that dominance by holding a press conference on board one of its largest strike ships. The USS *Theodore Roosevelt* is nuclear-powered and very likely nuclear-armed (the Pentagon refuses to comment on such things) and is the most important vessel in Carrier Strike Group Twelve (CSG-12) which has 44 F-18 strike fighters, 5 Boeing EA-18G Growler electronic warfare aircraft and countless strike helicopters. In company with the carrier there are normally the USS *Normandy*, a guided missile cruiser; two guided missile destroyers (*Forrest Sherman* and *Winston S Churchill*); and an ordinary destroyer, the *Farragut*. Then over the horizon there is, as *IHS Jane's* records "an Amphibious Ready Group embarked with a marine expeditionary unit" about which "the US Navy has not ruled out the possibility that the ARG may be deployed for South China Sea operations."

It is unfortunate that the new and growing tension in the South China Sea has been so energetically fostered by Washington because on November 7 President Xi Jinping made it clear that "freedom of navigation and overflight in South China Sea neither has been nor will be hindered." He stressed that "China needs unimpeded passage in the body of water more than any other country does."

So what is Washington's problem?

Not a single merchant vessel of any country has had its movement through the South China Sea impeded by China. There is complete freedom of navigation which, as Beijing stresses, is most important for China's trade and economic progress. An enormous number of ships, including vital oil tankers, sail through to Chinese ports from which China exports raw materials and manufactured goods to Asia, the Middle East and Europe. It would be economic insanity for the PRC to in any way take measures that would cripple its own commercial conduits.

It is therefore disquieting that Washington — in the person of the Pentagon's extremely (if arrogantly) clever Mr Carter — states that "there is a lot of concern about Chinese behavior out here." When Carter was asked about his visit to the South China Sea he replied that "If it's being noted today in a special way, it's because of the tension in this part of the world, mostly arising from disputes over land features in the South China Sea, and most of the activity over the last year being perpetrated by China."

Then, as reported by the Pentagon, Carter observed that "the US military has helped to maintain peace and stability in the region for 70 years."

Peace for seventy years?

Mr Carter omits to mention that the first US troops were deployed to wage war in Vietnam in the mid-1950s, and that in 1959 the first two (of an eventual 58,220) members of the US military lost their lives in that catastrophic bloodbath. His memory is also selective about the twelve years of hideous conflict in which “from 1964 to 1973 the US dropped more than two million tons of ordnance on Laos during 580,000 bombing missions — equal to a planeload of bombs every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for 9 years — making Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history.”

Mr Carter’s understanding of ‘peace and stability’ is inconsistent with reality — as is his saber-rattling confrontational stance over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. His assertion that the United States has helped maintain peace and stability in Asia for 70 years is rubbish, and it is ironic that it was delivered when he was on a nuclear aircraft carrier sailing only a few miles east of the countries that Washington bombed mercilessly for so many awful years : Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

President Obama, the man who selected Carter to be Defence Secretary, set the scene for Washington’s confrontational global approach by telling CBS Television in June that China is certainly “big and powerful” and “it may be that some of their claims are legitimate . . . But they shouldn’t just try to establish that based on throwing elbows and pushing people out of the way.” Then he “threw his elbows out to the side for effect.”

Obama did not specify which people are being pushed out of the way by China, any more than his belligerent Defence Secretary expounded on his intellectual summation that China’s international success is in some fashion a “challenge” to the United States. On November 7 Carter gave a speech at the annual Reagan National Defence Forum where he “explained how Russia and China challenge the United States’ capacity to innovate and change.” His weird argument included the observation that “China is a rising power, and growing more ambitious in its objectives and capabilities.”

Of course China is ambitious about its future — just as is Russia, about which Carter revealed paranoia in his belligerent pronouncement that “I reject the notion that Russia should be afforded a ‘sphere of influence’.”

Washington does not realize how much resentment is created throughout the world by continual declaration and emphasis that only the US can be permitted an all-embracing “sphere of influence.” Obama’s declaration that America is “the one indispensable nation in world affairs” is regarded by the world’s more sophisticated citizens as being immature gas-bagging or even harmless conceit — but he and the Pentagon are deadly serious, and their policy of military antagonism is intended to counter and intimidate any nation that has the temerity to grow “more ambitious in its objectives and capabilities.”

He’s chosen to take on Beijing (and Moscow), and he’ll fail, of course — but in the meantime his silly prancing round the world telling people what to do is more than just annoying : it’s dangerous.

His frolics in the Philippines on November 18 are a case in point. As reported by the *New York Times*, he “urged the Chinese to stop military activities” in the South China Sea — where US submarines and an aircraft carrier strike group patrol with but one purpose : to menace China. And matters haven’t been helped by the new “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement” between Washington and Manila which President Aquino declared will help the US “have more stability in its ability to project its own power within the region, in an effort to help in the stability and the orderliness and the diffusion of the tension with the region.”

It is difficult to imagine how US power projection is going to calm things down in the South China Sea. It hasn’t calmed things down anywhere else in the world, as evidenced by its destruction of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Obama would be wise to heed the words of China, in that “The United States should stop playing up the South China Sea issue, stop heightening tensions in the South China Sea and stop complicating disputes in the South China Sea.” He could even pay attention to his own declaration of May 2014, when he said “We can’t try to resolve problems in the South China Sea when we have refused to make sure that the Law of the Sea Convention is ratified by our United States Senate.” How true: so get out and stay out.