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## US sends aircraft carrier to challenge China in South China Sea

By Peter Symonds

5 March 2016

In a blunt warning to China, the United States has dispatched an aircraft carrier, the USS John C. Stennis, along with two destroyers and two cruisers, to the South China Sea. While the Pentagon played down the significance of this massive show of force, indicating it was routine, the *Navy Times* underscored the operation's purpose, headlining its article: "The US just sent a carrier strike group to confront China."

The Stennis strike group includes the destroyers, the USS Chung-Hoon and USS Stockdale, and the cruiser, the USS Mobile Bay. A second cruiser, the USS Antietam, is also in the area en route to the Philippines, as is the command ship, USS Blue Ridge, which met up with the Stennis before its entry into the South China Sea. Far from just passing through the region, the Stennis strike group has engaged in four days of exercises and patrols, which have included 266 sorties by warplanes from the aircraft carrier.

The dispatch of a carrier strike group follows an escalating campaign of condemnations and provocations over the past year against China's land reclamation and alleged militarisation of Chinese administered-islets in the South China Sea. Washington's intervention into maritime disputes in these waters between China and its neighbours is part of its broad "pivot to Asia" strategy and military build-up throughout the region aimed against Beijing.

To date, the Stennis and accompanying warships do not appear to have intruded within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese-administered atolls in the South China Sea. However, as the *Navy Times* noted, the US navy has already provocatively sent two guided-missile destroyers, the USS Lassen last October, and the USS Curtis Wilbur in January, into Chinese-claimed territorial waters on so-called freedom of navigation operations.

The arrival of the Stennis strike group follows a series of inflammatory statements last week by top US officials, including Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter and Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command (PACOM), who argued for greater military spending before congressional committees. As part of the “pivot,” the Pentagon plans to station 60 percent of its warships and military aircraft in the Asia Pacific by 2020.

The testimony coincided with well-timed and highly-inflated media revelations that the Chinese military had sent anti-aircraft missiles and fighters to Woody Island and was constructing radar installations on another islet. Admiral Harris accused China of militarising the South China Sea and declared that the US navy would be doing more “freedom of navigation operations” and with greater complexity in the future.

In a speech on Tuesday, Defence Secretary Carter criticised China for “placing anti-access systems and military aircraft on a disputed island” and warned “these activities have the potential to increase the risk of miscalculation and conflict among claimant states.” To underscore the warning, he flatly demanded: “China must not pursue militarisation in the South China Sea. Specific actions will have specific consequences.”

In New Delhi on Wednesday, Admiral Harris proposed the formation of a quadrilateral strategic coalition, involving the US, India, Japan and Australia, to counter China and safeguard “the rules-based global order that has served this region so well.” The international rules-based system has become the oft-repeated catch-phrase for a global order dominated by the US in which Washington sets the rules. (See: “US presses India to join anti-China alliance”)

The entry of the Stennis strike group into the South China Sea has also been timed to coincide with the opening of China’s annual National People’s Congress today. Chinese officials dismissed the US claim that China is militarising. Congress spokeswoman Fu Ying declared: “The accusation can lead to a miscalculation of the situation. If you look at the matter closely, it’s the US sending the most advanced aircraft and military vessels to the South China Sea.”

A commentary published yesterday by the state-owned Xinhua news agency accused the US of raising tensions in the South China Sea and made the obvious point that China relies on freedom of navigation through its waters for trade with Africa and the Middle East. “As a country heavily dependent on this important waterway, China is the last country in the world to wish for turbulence in the South China Sea,” it stated.

Washington’s determination to maintain “freedom of navigation” for its warships in the South China Sea is bound up with its preparations for war with China. The Pentagon’s AirSea Battle strategy envisages massive air and missile strikes on the Chinese mainland from warships,

submarines and bases in the western Pacific, supplemented by an economic blockade cutting off China's vital imports of raw materials and energy.

The control of the South China Sea is vital for both elements of this war strategy: it is adjacent to key military bases in southern China, including naval installations on Hainan Island; and at the same time, sits astride shipping routes through South East Asia to Africa and the Middle East.

The response of the Chinese leadership to the US "pivot" is conditioned by the class interests that it represents: a super-wealthy elite that has enriched itself at the expense of the working class through the processes of capitalist restoration. While constantly seeking an accommodation with US imperialism, the Chinese Communist Party beefs up its own military and whips up Chinese nationalism that divides workers in China from workers elsewhere in Asia and around the world.

The deliberate character of the intervention of the Stennis in the South China Sea is underscored by the fact that the carrier strike group detoured to the area on its way from the US West Coast to South Korea, where it will take part in the annual joint Key Resolve/Foal Eagle war games. This year's US-South Korean exercises, which involve hundreds of thousands of military personnel backed by armour, artillery, warships and military aircraft, will rehearse on a new joint strategy involving pre-emptive strikes on North Korea, including the assassination of its top leaders.

The passage of the aircraft carrier from one flashpoint in South East Asia to another in North East Asia, from one provocation to the next, is an expression both of the far-reaching scope of the US preparations for war against China and its reckless character. A miscalculation or mistake has the potential to trigger a conflict with terrible consequences for humanity as a whole.