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US stages show of naval force in the South China Sea

By Joseph Santolan

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On October 25, the US Nimitz class aircraft carrier USS George Washington entered Manila Bay. At the head of Carrier Strike Group Five, the aircraft carrier had spent the past week sailing the disputed waters of the South China Sea, visiting various regional claimants.

Washington is seeking, through this show of military force in the region, to shore up its slipping diplomatic position in the wake of Obama's absence from the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits in early October.

Obama canceled his travel to Southeast Asia to deal with the government shut down. His absence at the summits was seen as a clear indication in Asia of the declining economic and diplomatic power of Washington. Beijing seized upon the opportunity afforded by Obama's no-show to conduct a 'charm offensive' in South East Asia. Prime Minister Xi Jinping and Premier Li Kejiang traveled throughout the region meeting with heads of state and dispensing economic largesse in the form lucrative new trade deals and investments.

Obama's absence raised questions about the seriousness of the US 'pivot' to Asia, which includes the shifting of the majority of US forces to the Indo-Pacific in a calculated strategy to encircle China. Countries throughout the region, most notably the Philippines and Vietnam, have

engaged in increasingly aggressive assertions of their claims to the South China Sea, spurred on by Washington's pivot.

In the wake of the ASEAN summit, the bourgeoisie throughout the region were left uncertain if, in the event of conflict with China, Washington would be willing to intervene militarily, and further, if it could afford to.

Unable to match the economic hand-outs of Beijing, Washington is shoring up its diplomatic and political power in the region through the escalation of its military presence. Every stop of the Fifth Carrier strike group was directed to this end.

The USS George Washington heads Carrier Strike Group 5, which is the largest such group in the US Navy. It includes two guided missile cruisers, a destroyer, a supply ship and a fast attack submarine. There are over 6,000 military personnel on board the aircraft carrier alone.

On Sunday, the USS George Washington was 200 miles off the coast of Danang, Vietnam. According to the *Huffington Post*, "a group of high-ranking Vietnamese military officials was flown onto the carrier Sunday along with other Vietnamese government officials and the U.S. ambassador to the country." The location is highly symbolic as Danang was a key US airforce base during the American war in Vietnam, and US aircraft conducted bombing runs over Vietnam and Laos from the airbase.

Commander of the George Washington airwing, Captain Ross Meyers told the visitors: "The strategic implications and importance of the waters of the South China Sea and the freedom of navigation is vital to both Vietnam and the United States." 'Freedom of navigation' has long been the code phrase used to justify Washington's military drive against China in the region.

It was announced that the destroyer, USS John McCain, would make a port call to Vietnam later in the week, where it would engage in joint training exercises. The exercises were also to include three ships from the Japanese so-called Self-Defense Forces.

It was also announced that a military delegation from Hanoi, led by Deputy Defence Minister Lieutenant-General Nguyen Chi Vinh, would visit Washington on October 24 to conduct a 'Defence Strategy dialogue.'

On Monday, General Vincent Brooks, Commanding General of the US Army in the Pacific, announced that the Pentagon was planning to hold the first-ever joint Army-Navy Maritime exercises in the Pacific theater. This move is a sharp escalation of Washington's preparations for war against China. Brooks justified the move as "fitting" by citing the origins of US imperialism in the American war of conquest in the Philippines, saying, "the roots of our expeditionary experience in the Army were born in the Pacific." Lieutenant Colonel Michael Donnelly, US

Army Pacific spokesman further justified the joint Army-Navy exercises by saying: “The ground element of the Pacific rebalance is important to ensure the stability in the region.”

On Wednesday, the USS George Washington sailed to Malaysia. Sixteen ‘high-level’ Malaysian government officials were given a tour of the carrier, including Shakib Ahmad Shakir, deputy undersecretary of defense. The US defense attaché in Malaysia welcomed them to “1,100 feet of sovereign US Territory” while they sailed through the South China Sea and launched fighter jets.

The carrier group staged joint military and naval exercises with Malaysian forces.

Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin Tun Hussein announced that Kuala Lumpur would be building a naval base on Bintulu in the South China Sea, just 60 miles from the disputed James Shoal where the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had staged amphibious landing drills earlier this year. The base will house Malaysian Marines who, it was announced, will receive support, training and expertise exchange from the US Marine Corps.

Washington has offered Kuala Lumpur the amphibious platform dock, USS Denver, after its decommission in 2014, and is also looking to sell Malaysia several AH-1Z Super Cobra attack helicopters, according to *IHS Jane ’ s Defense Weekly* .

On the same day, the Los Angeles-class, fast attack submarine USS Santa Fe docked at Changi naval base in Singapore, showcasing to members of the Singaporean Navy its littoral combat capabilities. Leading Singaporean government figures were also flown out to the USS George Washington.

On October 24, while sailing in the midst of the South China Sea from Malaysia to the Philippines, Rear Admiral Mark C. Montgomery, commander of the USS George Washington held a press conference with reporters from BBC, CNN, AFP, and other news agencies on the flag bridge with fighter jets taking off in the background.

The ‘pivot’ has led to “an increase in surface combatant presence here in the Western Pacific... so these [US] ships are spread throughout those areas,” he stated. “Having more ships gives us more presence. It allows us to have a greater force.” The ‘pivot’ is “gaining strength,” he said.

According to AFP, Montgomery stated that “US defence budget cuts and the recent 16-day partial US government shutdown have not affected his command.” He continued: “The strategic rebalance is continuing in earnest ... We have sufficient funds for our operations.”

Asked by a reporter about what would happen in the event of “military conflict in the region,” Montgomery stated, “I think the fact that we’re here (now) says a lot whether or not we will be here if there was a crisis.”

Just arrived in Manila Bay, it is reported that the USS George Washington will be hosting several hundred leading Philippine government, military and business leaders.

On Friday, the PLA issued a press release announcing that Chinese military forces had sailed out the Bashi Channel into the Pacific and were staging the “first open-sea drill with maritime and air forces from all three of China’s fleets taking part.” According to the *Global Times*, the drills were conducted to prepare for “open-sea combat” to “safeguard national security and maritime interests.”