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US defence secretary sends menacing message to China

By Peter Symonds
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US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter exploited his trip to the Philippines this week to ramp up tensions with China over the South China Sea. Speaking yesterday on board the aircraft carrier USS John C Stennis, he defended the presence of the huge warship in that sea, saying “we have been here decade upon decade.” He blamed “Chinese behaviour” for the mounting confrontation in the disputed waters.

Carter’s remarks were a declaration that the US intends to maintain its dominance in the Asia Pacific region through military force, and a thinly-veiled threat to China. While US propaganda routinely condemns China’s “militarisation” of the South China Sea, the USS Stennis, along with its air arm of around 90 warplanes and helicopters, and accompanying strike force of warships, dwarfs Beijing’s limited military presence on China’s islets in the area.

Since the Obama administration formally announced its “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia in 2011, the US has been sending its most advanced weaponry, strengthening military ties and forging new basing agreements throughout the region. Carter arrived in the Philippines as 8,000 US and Philippine troops were engaged in the annual joint Balikatan war games. “With each Balikatan and cruise by the Stennis, with each new multilateral exercise and each new defence agreement, we add a stitch to the fabric of the region’s security network,” he said.

There is nothing peaceful or benign about the US military build-up in Asia and its network of military alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the region. It is the preparation for war with China. The Pentagon is determined to maintain a major military presence in the South China Sea precisely because its AirSea Battle strategy involves massive air and missile strikes on the Chinese mainland, as well as a naval blockade to strangle the Chinese economy.

The former American colony of the Philippines is ideally located, directly adjacent to the South China Sea. Last month, the Philippines announced that US would have access to five Philippine military bases under the recently completed Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the two countries, but Carter has already indicated that the Pentagon will require greater access.

During a joint press conference on Thursday, the US defence secretary announced the US would this start stationing warplanes and Special Forces troops in the Philippines, including five A-10 Thunderbolt ground attack jets, three H-60G Pavehawk helicopters and an MC-130H Combat Talon aircraft used to infiltrate Special Forces units.

The *Wall Street Journal* described the move as “the vanguard of a major deployment to the South East Asian country as Washington and its allies mount a coordinated response to Beijing’s assertiveness in the South China Sea.”

Carter justified the deployment by saying that China’s actions in the South China Sea were “causing anxiety and raising regional tensions.” He said the US presence would lay the groundwork for joint air patrols in the region. Philippine Defence Secretary Voltaire Gazmin said he hoped the US build-up would “deter uncalled-for actions by the Chinese.”

During the visit, Carter announced \$40 million in military aid to boost intelligence-sharing, surveillance and naval patrols as part of Washington’s five-year, \$425 million Maritime Security Initiative, the bulk of which is intended for the Philippines. He also revealed for the first time that the US and the Philippines had already carried out two joint sea operations in the South China Sea since March. The US has also conducted joint patrols with Japan.

The US Navy has staged out two provocative “freedom of navigation” exercises—last October and in January—sending a destroyer within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit of Chinese-administered islets in the South China Sea. However, a US official told Reuters this week that US patrols were becoming more aggressive: “They’re sailing within 13, 14, 15 miles, without dipping into the 12-mile limit, and the Chinese have noticed.”

In a statement late Thursday, the Chinese defence ministry warned that the US plan for joint patrols with the Philippines “promotes the militarisation of the region.” It described the strengthening of the US-Philippine alliance as “the embodiment of Cold War thinking and not conducive to peace and stability in the South China Sea.” The Chinese military would “resolutely defend China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime interests.”

Yesterday, as Carter visited the USS Stennis, the Chinese defence ministry revealed that General Fan Changlong, vice chairman of the country’s Central Military Commission, recently led a

delegation of officers to visit the Spratly Island group to observe construction work. No further details were released.

Carter, who visited India before arriving in the Philippines and now heads to the Middle East, pointedly cancelled plans to visit China as part of his current trip. His visit to Asia is part of a concerted campaign being waged prior to a decision due to be handed down in coming weeks on a Philippine legal challenge in the Permanent Court of Arbitration to China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. The US, which has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, has not only supported, but assisted the Philippine administration to mount the case.

At Washington's instigation, the G7 foreign ministers meeting in Japan on Monday expressed "strong opposition to any intimidating, coercive or provocative unilateral actions that could alter the status quo and increase tensions." The statement, which was clearly aimed against China, provoked an angry response from Beijing, which called in senior diplomats from each of the G7 countries to register a formal protest.

The US and its allies will immediately seize upon a ruling by the international court against China, however limited, to condemn Chinese activities in the South China Sea as "illegal" and justify a further escalation of military provocations. Just as the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were not about a "war on terror" or "weapons of mass destruction," so Washington's reckless actions in Asia have nothing to do with "freedom of navigation." Rather US imperialism is again resorting to military force in a bid to ensure its dominance in Asia and internationally, despite the growing danger of a catastrophic war between nuclear-armed powers.