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Surging Towards yet Another War

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On 10 May 2016 the United States navigated closer to war. Not content with having created chaos from Afghanistan to Libya and menacing Russia along its borders, the administration in Washington ordered a guided missile destroyer, USS William P Lawrence, to carry out manoeuvres within 12 nautical miles of Fiery Cross Reef in the South China Sea.

The Lawrence is but one vessel of the nuclear-armed US fleet deployed in the region. As the US *Navy Times* proudly reported on 4 March, «*The US Navy has dispatched a small armada to the South China Sea. The carrier John C Stennis, two destroyers, two cruisers and the 7th Fleet flagship have sailed into the disputed waters in recent days ... The carrier strike group is the latest show of force in the tense region, with the US asserting that China is militarizing the region to guard its excessive territorial claims*».

Fiery Cross Reef lies in the Spratly Island chain in which settlements have been established by Brunei (1), China (7), Malaysia (5), the Philippines (9), Taiwan (1) and Vietnam (21). The US reasoning for its «*latest show of force*» was delivered by the Pentagon whose spokesman announced that the US was taking military action to «*challenge excessive maritime claims*» by China which established a base at Fiery Cross over 25 years ago.

At a meeting of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation in Paris in March 1987 it was agreed that weather stations be constructed around the world to assist in a global oceanic survey. China built one at Fiery Cross Reef in 1988, but it was only in much more recent years that the United States resolved, in its military "pivot" to confront China in Asia, that the PRC should not be allowed to build anything in the South China Sea.

The United States has no territorial rights of any sort in the South China Sea which is 7,000 miles (11,000 kilometres) from its west coast. There is nothing in international law that justifies its unilateral military «challenge» to China's presence.

The Pentagon declared on 10 May that China's «*excessive maritime claims are inconsistent with international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention in that they purport to restrict the navigation rights that the United States and all states are entitled to exercise*».

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has been ratified by 167 countries. It lays down «*rights, duties, and jurisdictions of maritime states, defines the limits of a country's territorial sea, establishes rules for transit through international straits, and defines exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in a way compatible with freedom of navigation and overflight*», and is altogether an admirable international covenant.

But as with so many international agreements, including the Kyoto climate change Protocol, institution of the International Criminal Court, the Convention to eliminate Discrimination against Women, and the Protocol to the Convention Against Torture, the United States refuses to ratify the Law of the Sea Convention – while ordering every other country to abide by it.

So far as international law is concerned, Washington refuses to accede to a covenant that lays down directions for maritime transit, which makes nonsense of the Pentagon's attempted justification for actions it claims to be based on the provisions of UNCLOS. It would be extremely amusing if it were not so arrogantly insolent and potentially inflammable.

On 29 March the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dunford, proclaimed that «*In the South China Sea, Chinese activity is destabilizing and could pose a threat to commercial trade routes*», which is a fatuous assertion.

China's defence presence on its little rock outcrops is minimal – and intended to deter foreign military action rather than threaten civilian ships. Why on earth would it want to menace commercial shipping? China's lifeline is trade, and the vast majority of its raw materials and manufactured goods are transported by sea, in and out of the country. It would be insane for the Beijing government to even consider severing its own trade links.

If China wanted to engage in aggressive military confrontation, similar to that of the US nuclear-armed armadas (the word used by the US Navy Times), it would have no need to use a few rocks around its shores. It would do so from Hainan, the base of its Southern Fleet. If it so wished, it

could close off the China Sea to commercial shipping like turning off a tap – but that would be commercial suicide.

So why is the Pentagon being so confrontational? Why does it send guided-missile destroyers and electronic warfare aircraft to areas that have nothing to do with the United States? Why is it flaunting its military might to menace a country that does not in any way threaten the security of the United States? Does Washington believe that the waters around South China should be called the West American Sea?

Pentagon strategy is based on Washington's «Pivot to Asia» doctrine which is based on military encirclement of China, exactly as has been done by US-promoted expansion of NATO to menace Russia in Europe. As noted by the Voice of America, *«Washington has been moving more troops and military assets into the region... Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, said the Navy has already brought its newest and most capable military equipment to the area, like the P-8 surveillance airplane, the Littoral Combat Ship, the Virginia-class submarine, and new amphibious ships such as the USS America... These increased capabilities in Southeast Asia are complemented by extensive US military bases and deployments in Guam, Japan and South Korea»*. (There are some 800 US military bases, 350,000 uniformed personnel, in countries around the globe.)

There is one problem for America, and that is how China will react to Washington's increasingly confrontational behaviour. Because China, like Russia, is not going to take much more provocation before reacting militarily, which seems to be exactly what Washington wants to happen.

The US is surging towards yet another war – but this time it will be very much more serious for the world. The next US war will not result in expansion of terrorist networks and creation of countless millions of desperate refugees. It will begin with a comparatively minor clash caused by coat-trailing confrontation and provocation on the part of US ships and aircraft. The probability is that misjudgements by the bombastic generals and admirals of the Pentagon will cause the situation to get out of hand to the extent that there will be nuclear war. It is obvious that no rational person would wish to surge his country close to that appalling fate. But are they rational people?