

Pentagon Chief Asserts US “National Interest” in China Seas

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US Defense Secretary Robert Gates used a defense ministers meeting in Hanoi Tuesday to reassert US “national interests” in the maritime disputes roiling relations between China and its neighbors.

The forum for the Pentagon chief’s assertion of American power in the region was a one-day conference convened by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The meeting was attended by defense ministers and other representatives from ASEAN’s ten member states, as well as the US, China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and India.

“The United States has always exercised our rights and supported the rights of others to transit through, and operate in, international waters,” Gates told the conference. “This will not change. Nor will our commitment to engage in exercises together with our allies and partners.”

Gates continued: “We have a national interest in freedom of navigation, in unimpeded economic development and commerce and in respect for international law.” He described disputes in the region over access to the seas and their resources as “a growing challenge to regional stability and prosperity.”

The US media described Gates’s address as “diplomatic” because he did not criticize China by name, but it was clear to all those in attendance that the US defense secretary was continuing a months-long campaign by Washington to inject itself into regional disputes in Asia, with the aim of challenging China’s rise and asserting its own military hegemony.

As the *Financial Times* noted: “At a time when some governments in the region and beyond are expressing concern about China’s ambitious naval buildup, the forum gives the US an opportunity to present itself as a natural counterpoint to a rising China.”

The speech also put Beijing on notice that the US military will continue the kind of provocative military exercises it staged together with South Korea last month in the Yellow Sea, barely 400 miles from the Chinese capital.

Gates invoked the United Nations Law of the Sea treaty to demand “equal and open access to international waterways” against Beijing’s territorial claims beyond the 12-mile limit specified in the treaty. While the treaty has been ratified by 160 countries, the US is one of the few countries—together with Iran and North Korea—not to accept it.

Gates’s remarks echoed those made by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a similar

ASEAN security forum in July, in which Clinton demanded “open access” to the waters in the South China Sea claimed by Beijing. At the time, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jichi described her remarks as “virtually an attack on China.”

China’s immediate reaction to Gates’s remarks was more conciliatory, and Chinese defense minister, Gen. Liang Guanglie, extended an invitation to the US defense secretary to visit Beijing next month, effectively ending a freeze on US-China military-to-military relations that had been in effect since the beginning of this year.

China had suspended the ties in retaliation for US provocations, in particular its sale of \$6.4 billion in advanced weapons, including Patriot missiles, to Taiwan, in violation of a 1982 pledge by Washington to curtail such arms sales. Beijing considers Taiwan an integral part of its sovereign territory.

In his speech to the conference, the Chinese defense minister sought to counter the growing drumbeat of charges from the US over China’s alleged “bullying” in the region. “China’s defense development is not aimed to challenge or threaten anyone, but to ensure its security and promote international and regional peace and stability,” Liang said. “Security of a country relies not only on self-defense capabilities, but also on mutual trust with others.”

In conjunction with the meeting, China appeared to take several steps aimed at easing tensions. Defense Minister Liang met with his Japanese counterpart, Toshimi Kitazawa, the first such contact since Sino-Japanese relations deteriorated sharply over Tokyo’s detention of a Chinese trawler captain after a collision with Japanese coast guard vessels in a disputed area of the East China Sea. The Japanese media reported that the two ministers reached an agreement on measures aimed at preventing future maritime confrontations.

According to Japan’s Kyodo news service, however, Liang rejected Kitazawa’s request that Beijing reconsider its postponement of a Japanese naval training visit to China that had been scheduled for October 15

China and Japan both claim sovereignty over islands in the East China Sea, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China.

Similar disputes exist between China and Vietnam over the Paracel islands and between China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei over the Spratly islands, both in the South China Sea. The islands are the site of rich fishing areas and potentially important oil and gas reserves.

Vietnam reported Tuesday that China had released nine Vietnamese fishermen it had detained near the disputed Paracel islands last month.

Whatever the immediate fence-mending moves, rising tensions between the US and China are the inevitable result of the underlying changes in the global balance of power, driven by the rapid economic development that this year catapulted China to the status of the world’s second-largest economy.

Washington’s strategy is to prevent China from supplanting US power in the region by promoting itself as the defender of “freedom of navigation” and the champion and ally of the countries on China’s periphery, ranging from India to Pakistan, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam and others.

Reflecting growing concern within the US military and intelligence establishment over China's rise, and in particular its efforts to build up a "blue water navy," the *New York Times* published an article Tuesday that reported: "The Pentagon is worried that its increasingly tense relationship with the Chinese military owes itself in part to the rising leaders... who, much more than the country's military elders, view the United States as the enemy."

The article continued: "The navy, the centerpiece of China's military expansion, has added dozens of surface ships and submarines, and is widely reported to be building its first aircraft carrier. Last month's Yellow Sea maneuvers with the Australian Navy are but the most recent in a series of Chinese military excursions to places as diverse as New Zealand, Britain and Spain.

"China is also reported to be building an anti-ship ballistic missile base in southern China's Guangdong Province, with missiles capable of reaching the Philippines and Vietnam. The base is regarded as an effort to enforce China's territorial claims to vast areas of the South China Sea claimed by other nations, and to confront American aircraft carriers that now patrol the area unmolested."

The *Times* added that the Chinese military's "increasing range and ability, and the certainty that they will only become stronger, have prompted China to assert itself regionally and challenge American dominance in the Pacific."

The newspaper noted that Washington's stepped-up moves to challenge China have provoked increasing disquiet within the Chinese military leadership. It quoted a recent article by Rear Adm. Yang Yi, former head of strategic studies at the Chinese Army's National Defense University, complaining that the US "is engaging in an increasingly tight encirclement of China and constantly challenging China's core interests." The admiral warned that "Washington will inevitably pay a costly price for its muddled decision."

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