

“Pivot to Asia”: US Military Build-up in Asia, Threatening China

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A speech on Saturday by US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel to the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore—the region’s top annual security conference—underscored the speed and extent of the US military build-up in Asia directed against China. Defence ministers, officials and top military officers from across the Asia Pacific, including China, attended.

The Obama administration’s so-called “pivot to Asia” involves strengthening US military alliances and strategic partnerships, as well as restructuring and repositioning American military forces, throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

At last year’s Shangri-la Dialogue, the previous defence secretary, Leon Panetta, announced that the Pentagon would shift 60 percent of US naval assets to the Indo-Pacific region by 2020. On Saturday, Hagel declared that the US Air Force would also “allocate 60 percent of its overseas-based forces to the Asia Pacific—including tactical aircraft and bombers from the continental United States.”

Hagel reassured US allies at the gathering that financial cutbacks would not affect the expanding American military presence in Asia. He noted that “even under the most extreme budget scenarios, the United States military will continue to represent nearly 40 percent of global defence expenditures.” In other words, US military spending dwarfs that of any other country, including China.

Hagel said this year’s five-year budget plan “put a premium on rapidly deployable, self-sustaining forces—such as submarines, long-range bombers and carrier strike groups—that can project power over great distance.” He added: [T]his region will see more of these capabilities as we prioritise developments of our most advanced platforms to the Pacific.”

The US military build-up was on display when the first of four Littoral Combat Ships to be stationed in Singapore arrived in April and docked at Changi Naval Base. Hagel yesterday visited the USS Freedom—a shallow draft warship designed to operate close to shore and carry out a range of functions, from mine-sweeping to surface and anti-submarine warfare.

In his speech, Hagel directly accused China of being involved in cyber espionage against the United States, claiming that some cyber intrusions “appear to be tied to the Chinese government and military.” His remarks are part of a mounting campaign by Washington on the issue, aimed at putting pressure on the newly-installed Chinese leadership to make economic and foreign policy concessions. Beijing has repeatedly denied the US accusations, saying it was the victim of cyber-attacks, not the perpetrator.

Chinese President Xi Jinping is due to meet Obama later this week in California for two days of talks. US officials have already signalled that the US president will press Xi on cyber security as well as for tougher measures against North Korea. After meeting with US National Security Adviser Tom Donilon last Monday in Beijing, Xi declared that relations between the US and China were at a “critical juncture”—a reference to rising tensions.

At the Singapore meeting on Saturday, Chinese Major General Yao Yunzhu challenged Washington’s claims that Obama’s “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia was not aimed against China. “China is not convinced,” she said. “How can you assure China? How can you balance the two different objectives—to assure allies, and to build a positive relationship with China?”

Hagel brushed aside the question, insisting that the US welcomed “a strong and emerging and responsible China”—a response belied by the content of his speech. His comments were not pitched at easing tensions with China, but rather at encouraging allies and strategic partners to take a stronger stance against Beijing. Already this has led to dangerous frictions, with Japan and the Philippines pressing territorial claims against China in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

In his speech, Hagel indicated the scale of US efforts to strengthen military ties with virtually every country in the region at China’s expense.

The US defence secretary highlighted “substantial progress” with Japan “in realigning our force posture and enhancing alliance missile defence capabilities,” as well as greater cooperation with India, South Korea and Australia. He noted in particular that an Australian warship was now part of a US carrier strike group based in Japan, “giving our naval forces new practical experience in operating together.”

US officials pointed out that the number of US Marines based in the northern Australian city of Darwin was due to rise from 250 to 1,100 by mid-2014. The Pentagon is also seeking basing arrangements with the Philippines. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, these should be finalised by the end of the year.

Hagel outlined enhanced military relations throughout South East Asia: a joint vision statement with Thailand for the first time in over 50 years; a new memorandum of understanding with Vietnam; the first-ever visit of an aircraft carrier to Malaysia; military-military engagement with Burma; and closer collaboration with the Indonesian military.

Hagel announced that the US would host its first meeting with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) defence ministers next year in Hawaii. He revealed that the Pentagon would allocate an additional \$100 million to fund joint military exercises in Asia, and extra finances for students from the region to engage in security studies in Hawaii.

Hagel’s tone toward China was markedly different to that he adopted for each other country. Tacitly recognising the sharpening tensions between the two countries and the danger of conflict, he called for dialogue to reduce “the risk of miscalculation, particularly between our militaries.”

While the American media and political establishment seeks to portray China as a threat to peace, the US military build-up and forging of alliances in Asia is destabilising the entire region. While China is in no position to challenge the US militarily, its huge and growing

requirements for energy and raw materials are bringing it into conflict with the domination of the major powers over Asia, Africa and Latin America.

That rivalry was evident in the Americas as Chinese President Xi visited Trinidad and Tobago on Friday to discuss access to Caribbean gas, before heading to Costa Rica and Mexico for economic talks, ahead of his meeting with Obama on Friday and Saturday. US Vice President Joe Biden was also in the region—which the US regards as its “backyard”—last week for talks in Brazil, Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago.

The Obama-Xi talks, far from being a friendly get-to-know-you meeting as has been billed, will be the occasion for the US to further intensify its pressure on China to make major economic and strategic concessions.

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