

Threatening China: Influential Washington Think Tank Pushes US War Drive in the South China Sea

By [Joseph Santolan](#)

Global Research, August 02, 2014

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

On July 10–11, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) held a two-day conference on the South China Sea, from which they published a 22-page report entitled “Recent Trends in the South China Sea and US Policy.”

The CSIS has played a key role in the Obama administration’s ‘pivot’ to Asia. Their concrete recommendations for the provocative escalation of the US military encirclement and diplomatic isolation of China have been consistently carried out. A report on US policy in the South China Sea from the CSIS should be regarded as having semi-official status.

The report opens with a contrived history of the events of the past year in the South China Sea, at every turn blaming escalating regional tensions on the aggressiveness and intransigence of Beijing. The truth is that the drive to war in the region has been pushed at every turn by Washington, with the CSIS playing a leading role.

In the past six months there have been repeated armed standoffs in the South China Sea between Beijing and both Manila and Hanoi. Manila has filed a legal case—drawn up by Washington—disputing China’s claims to the sea before the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). And Washington has signed a deal—the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)—with Manila, allowing for the basing of unlimited numbers of US forces anywhere in the country.

In the new report, the CSIS is laying out an even more aggressive agenda for Washington, with two basic thrusts: establishing the legal pretext for rejecting Beijing’s claim to the South China Sea, and escalating the US military presence in the region.

Since former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the ‘pivot’, Washington has always maintained that it was neutral with regards territorial claims in the South China Sea and only had an interest in securing “freedom of navigation.”

The filing of the ITLOS case by Manila represented the beginning of a drive by Washington to legally invalidate nearly the entirety of the Chinese territorial claim. Building on this, the CSIS called on the State Department to draw up a map of the regional disputes “based strictly upon the overlap of coastal EEZs [Exclusive Economic Zones]/continental shelves and the potential maritime entitlements of disputed islands.”

There is pointedly no reference in this to historic maritime claims, which are the basis of the so-called 9-dash map of the South China Sea used by China. A map drawn up as official US policy on the strict criteria laid out by the CSIS would invalidate over 90 percent of Beijing’s territorial claim.

The CSIS called for a freeze on construction activities in the disputed areas, presenting this as a measure to defuse tensions. It is nothing of the sort. Rather this is meant to shore up the legal case before ITLOS, which is based on the argument that Beijing's claimed territory are simply rocks and not islands, and thus have no territorial baseline.

The concern of Washington and Manila is that Beijing's constructions in the Spratly islands may expand these 'rocks' into 'islands.' At the same time, the report approvingly noted that both Taiwan and the Philippines are constructing airstrips on disputed land features. The report claimed that Secretary of State John Kerry will "undoubtedly raise this issue at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)" on August 10.

The CSIS is pushing to couple this aggressive legal drive with increased military moves to tighten the noose around China.

The report called for the re-examination of the ban on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam. This would assist Vietnam in becoming "a credible deterrent against Chinese aggression."

Washington's pretext for the ban on the sale of lethal weaponry to Hanoi is Vietnam's human rights record. Washington, while carrying out bloody warfare, assassination, rendition and torture in every corner of the globe, trots out its concern for human rights whenever it wishes to enforce its political and economic dictates. To speak of a concern for human rights in Vietnam—a country whose experience of the United States was characterized by Agent Orange, napalm, and over a decade of imperialist war—is particularly hypocritical.

As it did with Burma last year, Washington is prepared to upgrade Vietnam's human rights status in exchange for economic concessions. Obama's nominee for ambassador to Vietnam, Ted Osius, made this clear in his confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations committee on June 17. He called for upgrading Hanoi's human rights status, declaring: "There's really no better time than this year given the Vietnamese interest in a deepening partnership with us." The proof he cited of Vietnamese interest was their willingness to work to join the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal.

Particularly provocative was the CSIS recommendation that the United States clarify that it would "consider itself obligated to respond under the terms of the Mutual Defense Treaty [MDT] with the Philippines if unprovoked Chinese actions in disputed areas led directly or injury of Philippine troops." The terms of the MDT obligate the United States to go to war if the Philippines is attacked in the Pacific or in its islands. There has been much concern expressed by the Philippine bourgeoisie that the terms of the MDT do not apply to the South China Sea.

The CSIS is advocating extending this war-trigger treaty to the contested waters, where for the past two years Philippine forces have almost routinely been at armed standoff with Chinese.

The document calls for using EDCA to develop a base at Oyster Bay on the island of Palawan for the immediate deployment of US forces into the South China Sea.

Finally, the CSIS advocates the installation of additional signals intelligence facilities throughout the region in order to establish real-time surveillance of the entire sea.

Negotiations with the Philippines have made clear that this would also include the use of aerial surveillance drones.

The CSIS report is a war-mongering document that clearly reflects the agenda of the Obama White House and all Washington to tighten the screws on China. This was made especially clear by a panel hosted during the conference which featured a former assistant secretary of state under Obama, an assistant secretary of National Intelligence under Bill Clinton, a special national security advisor to George W. Bush, and the former commander of the US Marine forces in the Pacific.

The panel staged a diplomatic simulation of war games in the South China Sea. In the simulation, Manila arrested 12 Chinese fishermen for poaching and Beijing responded by having its coast guard blockade eight Filipino Marines stationed on a derelict ship in the South China Sea. These events are pulled directly from the headlines of the past four months.

The panel stated that they needed to “impose a cost” on Beijing, and that the stranded Filipino Marines provided a humanitarian justification for intervention. They mobilized Littoral Combat Ships from Singapore, a portion of the US fleet from Okinawa, some of the Marines from Darwin in northern Australia and a battleship from the Subic Bay base in the Philippines to break up the Chinese blockade. The simulation concluded with the expectation that China would back down. There was applause.

Unlike the display of polite optimism among the warmongers of the CSIS, such a scenario would not end so neatly. It could quite easily escalate into global war.

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