

## Carter Raises South China Sea Stakes; China's New Military Strategy; Defense Reform ....

### SEA WARNINGS

Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter returned to Asia in late May and early June for his second trip to the region as Pentagon boss, delivering the Obama Administration's sharpest words yet regarding China's accelerated military construction activities in the South China Sea. He spoke at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue conference in Singapore, May 29-31. "There should be an immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation by all claimants," Carter said, adding that the US opposes any "further militarization of disputed features."

There was no mistaking, however, the claimant Carter was targeting with the broadside, acknowledging first the multiple claimants to the SCS and the outpost development by allies and emerging partners. (The Philippines has built eight, Vietnam has 48, he said.) "Yet one country has gone much further and much faster than any other, and that is China," Carter said. "China has reclaimed over 2,000 acres, more than all other claimants combined, and more than in the entire history of the region. And China did so in only the last 18 months."

Carter said it is "unclear how much farther China will go," but the US, he said, is "deeply concerned" about the pace and scope of reclamation and further militarization of land features in the sea, as they increase the risk of miscalculation or conflict among the various claimants. These actions put China out of step with the "regional consensus that favors diplomacy and opposes coercion."

Carter's stance was previewed prior to his arrival in Singapore, at the US Pacific Command change-of-command ceremony in Hawaii in late May, where Adm. Harry B. Harris Jr. took over for the retiring Adm. Samuel J. Locklear. Harris had already come out as a vocal critic of China's South China Sea buildup, when in a March speech in Australia he called the Chinese effort the "Great Wall of Sand" and said the activity raised "serious questions about Chinese intentions" with regard to its neighbors in the region. Prior to leaving PACOM, Locklear testified before the Senate in April, saying the reclamation activity has included the construction of new port facilities and airfields capable of hosting military aircraft.

There are indications China will move more aggressively to now assert control over the sea.

Before Carter's arrival in Singapore, the Chinese military warned a US Navy P-8 surveillance aircraft eight times to depart a "military alert zone" during a May 20 flight over the sea, from a People's Liberation Army Navy detachment on Fiery Cross Reef. The crew responded that the aircraft was conducting activities in international airspace. Fiery Cross Reef reportedly now hosts an early warning radar installation and a control tower, raising fears amongst US officials and Southeast Asian states that the Chinese intend to declare an air defense zone similar to the one China announced in late 2013 in the East China Sea.

The presence of an early warning radar indicates air defenses may soon be installed as well. US defense of-

officials speaking with reporters on Carter's trip to Singapore also confirmed that surveillance now shows the Chinese have placed artillery pieces on one of the inlets, but they do not yet threaten US ships or aircraft.

In his speech, Carter said the US would "continue to protect freedom of navigation and overflight" in the South China Sea and across the region, and the US military will "not be deterred" from operating in international airspace and waters, as is the right of all nations. "There should be no mistake: The United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as US forces do all over the world."

Adm. Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of the PLA's general staff, declared during his speech at Shangri-La that the construction activities "fall well within the scope of China's sovereignty and are legitimate, justified, and reasonable." He said the improvements are meeting "necessary defense needs" for China's outposts and are primarily geared toward maritime search and rescue activities and protection of fishery, maritime research, and meteorological observation activities. "The scale and pace of its construction is in line with the international responsibilities and obligations China assumes in the South China Sea," he stated.

However, Sun refused to rule out the creation of an air defense zone, like the one in the East China Sea. "Whether there is a plan to set up an air defense identification zone depends on risks to our air safety and the degree of threat, as well as taking into consideration all [other] aspects."

### A GLOBAL STRATEGY

The fact that China dispatched a high-ranking member of the PLA general staff to address the proceedings in Singapore, and rebuke US charges of unilateralism, should not have come as a surprise to Pentagon officials. Only days before the event, China released an unprecedented "military strategy," in both Mandarin and English, just over two weeks after the Pentagon released its annual China military and security report to Congress.

China's report contains sections that discuss the challenges posed by "provocative actions" by some of its "offshore neighbors" around its immediate periphery in the East and South China seas. It also puts down a bold marker for how the PLA is increasingly embracing its role as the global protector of Chinese interests around the world, requiring enhancing partnerships and investing in power projection capabilities and the tools to enable them. The paper acknowledges the US' "rebalancing" strategy in the Asia-Pacific, conceding that this strategy is driven by the world's economic and strategic forces shifting toward the region and prompting the US to enhance its military alliances and presence across Asia. These include its treaty obligations with Japan.

Rather than a limited focus on securing its territory and reintegrating Taiwan, the paper stresses that the country "enjoys growing international standing and influence" and

thus must face “multiple and complex security threats, as well as increasing external impediments and challenges.” In response to China’s “growing strategic interests” the PLA is now committed to “actively participate in both regional and international security cooperation” to effectively secure China’s “overseas interests.” The paper then lists the defense of China’s territory and its territorial claims at the top of the PLA’s list of strategic tasks, but also charges the armed forces with protecting the country’s interests in “new domains.”

Despite China’s prolonged period of modernization in its military, both independent analysts and DOD’s annual assessments note the PLA still lacks capacity in critical areas where the US has long enjoyed superiority, such as a robust and layered global intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance network and sustainable global combat mobility. However, a pronounced theme of China’s new strategy is emphasizing the PLA’s embrace of operating beyond its borders and “near seas.” This includes the need to invest in and develop more refined operating concepts similar to the US military, such as expeditionary deployment of combat troops, humanitarian and disaster relief operations over long distances, and the projection of air and naval forces over long distances. The People’s Liberation Army, for example, will continue to adapt from “theater defense” to “trans-theater mobility,” by emphasizing the construction of “multifunctional and modular” units that can be utilized for both noncombat and combat scenarios. These forces will be capable of joint operations with the other PLA services, the paper states, and will be able to self-sustain while carrying out tasks with precision, across theaters.

The strategy openly reveals China’s desire to enable its forces to operate at longer distances, on the open seas and in the air, as well as exploit both space and cyberspace to achieve its goals. The PLA Navy will also gradually shift its central focus from protecting China’s “offshore” to a combination of offshore and open seas protection. This demands a combined, multifunctional marine combat force structure and requires the PLAN to enhance tools for “strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuvers,” and “joint operations at sea.”

The PLA Air Force, also, will shift its focus from “territorial air defense” to both “defense and offense” and will build an “air-space defense force structure” that can successfully prosecute “informationized operations.” To support these tasks, the PLAAF will increase investments in strategic early warning tools, air strike capabilities, air and missile defense systems, “information countermeasures,” airborne operations, and “strategic projection”—specifically “medium- and long-range precision strikes.”

To do all of this, China will press to address the problems “constraining the capabilities for system [vs.] system operations,” the strategy states, to include building up a more robust ISR network, and more capable command and control tools. Much like the Pentagon’s recent reports point out, China seems intent on closing the gaps in C2 and “theater-level command systems” for the PLA, to aid its global ambitions in the next decade.

## REFORM PRESS ON CAPITOL HILL

As the defense authorization and appropriations bills work their way through Congress, a bipartisan group of think tank experts have petitioned both the congressional Armed Services committees and the Appropriations committees to take action on three needed reforms inside the Department of Defense: closing excess infrastructure, reducing and restructuring the federal defense civilian

workforce, and comprehensively addressing the military compensation system.

Calling their effort the “Defense Reform Consensus,” 39 leading defense experts, from organizations as diverse as the Hoover Institution to the Stimson Center and the American Enterprise Institute, released an open letter on April 29 addressed to the congressional committee chairs and Secretary Carter declaring that the “urgency for change is even greater” than when the group urged action on the topics back in 2013. The group’s letter was followed with a May 14 event held on Capitol Hill, featuring addresses and support from HASC Chairman Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), Ranking Member Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), as well as Sen. Angus King (I-Maine), and Rep. Randy Forbes (R-Va.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee seapower and projection forces panel.

The DRC signatories give some credit to Congress and the Obama Administration for “some incremental and modest changes that begin to bend the cost curves in personnel, compensation, and infrastructure,” the letter states. By and large, however, “difficult trade-offs have been deferred,” and this will make needed change much harder to accomplish as time goes on. Given the gravity of the presidential election cycle, the signers of the letter concede that any action on these questions “will surely be deferred until 2017, or later, if another year is lost.” In the meantime, combat power will suffer and America’s adversaries will become “more capable of contesting US interests around the world.”

The DRC says a new base closure round is overdue, even though DOD’s inventory of buildings remains at 2.2 billion square feet and 86 percent of this space is in the United States. “Meanwhile the military services have arguably drawn down too far in overseas basing,” the letter states. Congress should work with DOD “to identify the true scale of excess capacity and better match” its facilities to its smaller force.

The size and structure of DOD’s civilian workforce also needs urgent attention, the petitioners say, stating that from 2001 to 2014 the Active Duty military shrank by some three percent, yet the number of civilian DOD employees grew by 10 percent, to 756,000 and another three percent in just the last year alone, creating a workforce that is “now out of proportion to need.” While select cuts have been made, it is not clear if these have been matched to a downsized military or a shifting military strategy, and DOD does not appear to have the necessary information on hand to assess “the most efficient balance between contractors, civilians, and military personnel.” Getting this information is vital to bringing the workforce back into balance, and the Pentagon also needs to “de-layer” headquarters organizations across the military and optimize “spans of control to enable better performance at lower cost.”

The signers tout the work of the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, declaring that Congress has yet to act in a “holistic manner” on these issues and should bring the commission’s recommendations to a vote this year.

During the May 14 event, Thornberry declared he was supportive of the DRC letter, but change will likely be incremental rather than comprehensive and will have to be reconciled with the Senate’s wishes as well. There are some provisions addressing all three of the areas the letter talks about in the House version of the defense authorization bill, he said, but there are others that are more challenging, such as reworking Tricare. He noted the House bill does not allow another BRAC, but does require DOD to come up with an updated assessment of its infrastructure and what is “excess or insufficient,” rather than relying on the 20 percent figure that dates back to the 2005 BRAC. “I don’t pretend in any of these areas we have done enough. ... It is a start,” Thornberry said. ☛