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<http://atimes.com/2015/06/the-south-china-sea-word-war/>

The South China Sea word war

By Pepe Escobar

6/2/2015

As Cold War 2.0 between the U.S. and Russia remains far from being defused, the last thing the world needs is a reincarnation of Bushist hawk Donald “known unknowns” Rumsfeld.

Instead, the — predictable — “known known” we get is Pentagon supremo Ash Carter.

Neocon Ash threw quite a show at the Shangri-La Dialogue this past weekend in Singapore.

Beijing is engaged in reclamation work in nine artificial islands in the South China Sea; seven in the atolls of the Spratlys, and two others in the Paracel archipelago. Ash virtually ordered Beijing to put an “immediate and lasting halt” to the expansion; accused it of behaving “out of step” with international norms; and capped the show by flying over the Strait of Malacca out of Singapore in a V-22 Osprey.

Washington never ceases to remind the world that “freedom of navigation” in the Strait of Malacca – through which China imports a sea of energy – is guaranteed by the U.S. Navy.

After Shangri-la, U.S. President Barack Obama also felt the need to play ball, stressing China should respect the law and stop “throwing elbows,” even though he admitted, “it may be that some of their claims are legitimate.” So what? When you are a “Pacific power,” you have the right to remain not silent on, well, everything.

Looking at the Big Picture, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at least tried to put on a brave face, insisting the Pacific Ocean is “vast enough” for both Washington and Beijing.

So once again we’re back to two square kilometers of rocks, micro-islands and atolls, nested in a whopping 150,000 square kilometers of literally murky waters, and a thousand kilometers away from the Chinese eastern seaboard.

Beijing claims “undisputed” sovereignty over at least 80% of the South China Sea. It’s not only about at least \$5 trillion in unexplored oil and gas; this is right in the middle of a mega-busy, global economy prime naval highway where Europe, the Middle East, China, Japan, South Korea and many an ASEAN nation exchange energy and a myriad of goods.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry’s rebuttal to Ash Carter was quite detailed. The key point: the code of conduct in the South China Sea should be – and in fact will be — negotiated between China and ASEAN. Everybody knows it across Southeast Asia.

And then the clincher; as Beijing sees it, none of this has absolutely anything to do with the U.S.

Tell it to the neocons of the Ash variety. The neocon undisguised fear is that “Chinese aggression” is transforming these waters into the Mare Nostrum of the People’s Republic of China. Ever since the end of World War II and Japanese capitulation, the “Pacific power” has attributed to itself the mantle of Lord of the Pacific — from Asia to California. It’s easy to see this is not going to end well – as in China’s new assertiveness perhaps heralding the beginning of the end of the hegemon.

So what is Ash to do? If he’s true to his word that the U.S. wants to remain the “prime military power in East Asia for decades to come,” he’s got to dispatch a naval fleet to block a considerable stretch of the Chinese eastern seaboard. Welcome to the South China Sea geopolitical time bomb.

Do the Reclamation

If in the South China Sea we have China opposed by Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan, in the East China Sea we have China opposed by Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. Beijing has been adamant there won’t be an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea for now — as conditions are not “appropriate.” We all remember when the ADIZ in the East China Sea was announced at the end of 2013. The Pentagon dispatched a couple of B-52s for a stroll. The tension was, and remains — relatively — defused. For now.

The notion that China is an evil dragon about to engulf all minions in these waters is bogus. Way before the commander of the Pacific fleet, Admiral Harry Harris, snarled that a “Great Wall of Sand” was being built in the South China Sea, the other regional players were far from paralyzed bystanders.

In fact, for a long time China — alongside Brunei — did not have an airstrip in the South China Sea. The Philippines have it, in Thitu island. Vietnam has it, plus a heliport, in Truong Sa.

Malaysia has it, in Swallow Reef — and that hosts plenty of military aircraft. Taiwan has a military airport in Taiping.

Beijing may surely use the artificial islands to deploy aerial and naval hardware. But it's not only China that is doing reclamation work. Vietnam is doing it in two atolls in the Spratlys.

Washington for its part got access to eight Filipino bases — including the Carlito Cunanan naval base, in the heart of South China Sea action. Manila, as the regional weak link, bets on a two-pronged strategy: Unrestricted Washington support, and full internationalization of all things South China Sea.

Taiwan has been busy investing in a homemade stealth missile corvette; low maintenance, ultra-mobile and heavily weaponized.

Meanwhile, the commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, Vice-Admiral Robert Thomas, is quite enthusiastic about the Japanese exercising the proverbial “more active role” not only in the East China Sea but also between the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

There's no mistake Washington is allowing the remilitarization of Japan. So it's time to launch a South China/East China Sea Watch. As in monitoring them for any dangerous pretext for a *casus belli* between the declining hegemon and the no longer “keep a low profile” re-emerging power.

Cold Won Ton War, anyone?

The stage is set for a tremendous high-stakes game. For Beijing, expansion between the Spratlys and the Paracels means breaking through the geographical limits of Southeast Asia as an anticipation to projecting power through the Indian Ocean all the way to Southwest Asia.

For Washington, it will be all about disturbing the Maritime Silk Road — which is the route through which Beijing imports — via the Strait of Malacca and then the South China Sea — no less than 82% of its oil and 30% of natural gas.

Expect plenty of high-handed homilies about Washington's duty to protect “freedom of navigation” and endless condemnations of “Chinese aggression” — all counterpointed by the expansion of the New Silk Roads, the New Development Bank set up by the BRICs, and the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank boasting other BRICs members, plus Germany and assorted Europeans, on the board of directors; all vectors in a multiple strategy undermining U.S. dollar hegemony.

Gone are the early Obama days when Kissinger and Dr. Zbig “Grand Chessboard” Brzezinski suggested a “special relationship” of sorts between the U.S. and China; a sort of lop-sided G-2 de facto controlled by the exceptionalist hegemon. No wonder Beijing was wary. So now the Obama administration is back to default mode — as in containment. Ash Carter is just taking it one step beyond.

As Cold War 2.0 is far from defused, now we also have to factor the Cold Soy Sauce War — or the Cold Won Ton War. U.S. neocons better beware of tiger prawn indigestion.

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