

Ten Strategies to Stop a War in the Asia-Pacific

By [Dr. Reihana Mohideen](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, May 05, 2023

[Green Left](#) 4 May 2023

Region: [China](#), [East Asia](#), [South-East Asia](#),
[USA](#)

Theme: [Defence](#), [Politics](#)

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*The United States' "Pivot to Asia" was the **Barack Obama** administration's military, economic and political strategy to deploy more than half the US Navy to the Pacific.*

During **Donald Trump's** administration, intermediate-range nuclear missiles freed up by the US' withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019, were stationed in the Pacific.

Under **President Joe Biden**, Washington has brought in ships from NATO allies Britain, France and Germany to join US, Australian, South Korean, Japanese and Philippine vessels to patrol the South China Sea.

The Asia Pacific region has always been an important one for the US and the Global North imperialist bloc. It is where they have waged imperialist wars against liberation struggles in Korea, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. It is where they have stationed military bases and military treaties, as in the Philippines, and organised political interventions to set up, or prop up, dictatorships, such as in Vietnam and the Philippines.

They relied on the newly industrialized country (NIC) economic "development" model of integration, as in South Korea, especially after World War II when the primary motive was to stop the "spread of communism" in the region. Attacking and containing China and Russia was the centre-piece of this strategy.

The central aim of the "pivot to Asia" strategy and Washington's foreign policy today is similar, but contains important differences.

It is aimed at curbing China's rising economic weight and its rapidly increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific. Washington wants to regain strategic balance through direct competition with China. It is also concerned about the alliances China is forming, such as with Russia.

The United States' [National Security Strategy Paper](#), issued last October, which many saw as a declaration of enmity, branded China as the US's main rival.

In launching it, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan asserted that the post-Cold War détente with Beijing "is over". At last October's Chinese Communist Party Congress, [President Xi Jinping](#) warned that "stormy weather" was ahead.

Capitalism's multiple crises

The US' aggressive regional plan comes amid capitalism's multiple crises.

The working class today continues to suffer from the combined systemic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the generalised crisis of capital, the climate emergency and rising inter-imperialist contestations.

These conjunctural crises are pushing the US towards more aggressive path on the world stage.

US imperialism is embarking on a revitalised offensive of economic and defence-based initiatives to guarantee America's pre-eminent standing in the capitalist world order into the latter half of the 21st Century.

A cornerstone of this strategy is the "triad of aggression": AUKUS-IPEF-Quad initiatives: AUKUS — Australia-United Kingdom-United States "trilateral security partnership," under US command, strengthens collective security and represents a willingness to build a strong international counterforce to China.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), with a dozen countries initially joining the US' brand new neoliberal project targeting Asian markets for super-profits, is expected to undermine and outflank China's own expanding economic influence in the region.

The Quad — the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue — involving India, Japan, Australia and the US, issued a strong statement obviously aimed at China to "strongly oppose any coercive, provocative or unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo" in the Asia-Pacific region at its summit last May in Japan.

For the US, the priority on its military offensive is leading to a rapid escalation in the militarisation of the Asia-Pacific region.

The South China Sea dispute

China claims sovereignty over the South China Sea and its estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped [oil](#) and 190 trillion cubic feet of [natural gas](#). The area is also a major trade route.

Competing claimants are Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.

The claimant countries' position is that under the United Nations' Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), they should have [freedom of navigation](#) through exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the sea, and are not required to notify claimants of military activities.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague issued [its ruling](#) in July 2016 on a claim

brought by the Philippines against China, under UNCLOS, in favour of the Philippines on almost every count. The Philippines has renamed the areas it claims as the “West Philippine Sea”.

Walden Bello, the PLM’s candidate for Vice President, described the ruling as a “flawed victory”. “The Hague verdict is not an undiluted victory for the Philippines and, at least in the short term, it will not unlock the door to peace in the region,” he said.

The PLM argues for a two-pronged approach involving both military de-escalation and multilateral agreements.

Unfortunately China has taken to making unilateral moves to secure what it sees as a defensive perimeter, instead of cooperating with other countries to reach multilateral agreements.

[The PLM](#) sees this as “bullying tactics driven by an aggressive nationalist stance”.

China has unilaterally claimed more than 90% of the South China Sea, with its infamous nine-dash line map, that has no historical or legal basis. It has moved to grab maritime formations such as Scarborough Shoal and Mischief Reef that are in the Philippines’ EEZ. There is no excuse for this. China must engage in negotiations with the ASEAN countries that have legal claims in the South China Sea to bring about a peaceful territorial settlement.

However, Beijing’s actions stem from an effort to expand its defence perimeter to protect its industrial heartland in south and south-eastern China from a potential attack from US bases and US ships that are within a striking distance of the Chinese coast.

The US has leveraged the dispute over the South China Sea to its advantage. It is using it to militarise the region, signing various military agreements, including base agreements with the claimant countries.

The Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the US in 2014 ostensibly to secure territorial claims when, in fact, it increases US military access to East Asia and undermines efforts to peacefully acquire territory through the Hague Tribunal.

Vietnam’s ‘Four Nos’

By contrast, Vietnam’s more positive move was shown by Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong reiterating to Beijing, during his visit to China last year, that his government would continue to its “Four Nos” foreign policy approach in the region.

These are that Vietnam would not: join military alliances; side with one country against another; give other countries permission to set up military bases or use its territory to carry out military activities against other countries; and use force – or threaten to use force — in international relations.

Contrast this to Jose Manuel Romualdez, the Philippine Ambassador to Washington (and a relative of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr), who said the new administration might give the US permission to use its bases in the Philippines to support Taiwan in the event of hostilities. This only encourages US military adventurism.

The Marcos regime has also increased the number of US bases in the Philippines from five to nine.

Currently, the Philippines is hosting the largest ever military exercise with the US with 17,000 troops: 12,000 from the US, 5000 from the Philippines and 111 from Australia. This has been described as the “[recolonisation of the Philippines](#)”.

China could stop building military bases in the South China Sea, while the Philippines should scrap EDCA.

The process would build on previous ASEAN initiatives, such as the treaty which makes ASEAN a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and the agreement setting up the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone (SEANWFZ).

The bilateral talks should focus on military de-escalation, not resolving the territorial conflicts.

ASEAN and China should schedule multilateral talks on a code of conduct to govern the maritime behaviour of all parties with claims in the South China Sea.

Should these confidence-building measures prove successful, then ASEAN and China could begin to multilateral negotiations on exclusive economic zones, continental shelves and other sovereignty issues.

Washington’s decline, Taiwan

Washington’s aggressive approach to addressing its decline as a hegemonic power is fraught with danger.

Although Russia’s war in Ukraine is the leading trouble spot today, the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea is a close second.

Taiwan is increasingly becoming a key piece in the US’ militarisation plans for the region.

Washington’s bellicose mood was underlined by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan last year, followed by [Biden’s explicit commitment to assist Taiwan “militarily”](#).

While Beijing considers its sovereignty over Taiwan non-negotiable, its strategy has been to promote cross-straits economic integration as the main mechanism that would eventually lead to reunification.

China’s overall defensive position in the region has, some argue, more changed to a “tactical offensive” position over the last two decades.

The trigger for this was Taiwan.

China launched missile drills in 1995 as payback following then President Lee’s US visit. It did so again in 1996 after Taiwan held its first democratic presidential election.

The Clinton administration responded by sending the USS Independence and the USS Nimitz to the Taiwan Straits in March 1996. This was the biggest display of US power in the region since the Vietnam War and it was intended to underline Washington’s determination to defend Taiwan by force.

Washington's intervention revealed just how vulnerable the coastal region of east and south east China, the industrial heart of the country, was to US naval firepower. It was this realisation that prompted the change in China's strategy, which has been unfolding since.

The PLM recognises Taiwan's national sovereignty. At the same time we oppose the US plan to use the unresolved status of Taiwan to pursue war plans against China.

Mass anti-war movement needed

The US' war plans will have a disastrous impact on the peoples in the region. It will also have a disastrous impact on the climate crisis.

We know that the Global North imperialist bloc is prepared to fight China to the last Filipino standing, with no concern for the destruction of the region's ecology.

Some governments are no better: the Marcos regime is willing to be used as a US proxy in this war.

Building mass anti-war movements, based on regional and international solidarity, is key. We must use every platform, every arena of struggle to do this.

In the Philippines it took a peoples-power revolution to get rid of the two major US bases in the country — the Clark and Subic bases. On September 13, 1991, the Filipino Senate voted to reject a lease extension on the bases, ending almost a century of US military presence.

This only came about because of the large mass movement pressuring the senate and individual Senators (despite Cory Aquino reversing her position and campaigning to keep the US bases).

The left played a crucial role in this movement. Today, as a recolonisation takes place, this is our challenge: we call it the "continuing revolution".

The experience of the anti-Vietnam War movement in Australia, that won its key demand to pull out troops, is important to reflect on as well.

The PLM is campaigning for:

1. All US and British imperialist troops, together with other foreign military forces, be immediately withdrawn from Asia. All US military bases and facilities across the Asia-Pacific region must be shut down.
2. Close down Five Power Defence Arrangements bases as well as all other foreign military bases in the region.
3. Dismantle Asia-Pacific-based physical forces and intelligence interception infrastructure of the imperialist-controlled Five Eyes intelligence alliance and the Echelon intelligence network.
4. Firmly uphold the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty to urgently demilitarise the area and advocate and campaign for a broader Asia-Pacific-wide nuclear weapon-free zone treaty and regime.
5. Advance a common security policy by promoting progressive regional peace initiatives to

foster a more peaceful and cooperative global order, especially for the Asia-Pacific region.

6. Support worldwide moves to boost the Non-Aligned Movement, especially its historically progressive principles to decrease and deescalate great power contentions.

7. Popularise the idea of a Shared Regional Area of Essential Commons, with a progressive code of conduct for the South East Asian Sea.

8. Intensify the struggles to dismantle authoritarian, ultra-rightist and fascistic regimes in the Asia-Pacific region that serve to support US imperialism. Replace them with working-class states that will advance and build socialism.

9. Reject the US' AUKUS, IPEF and Quad (the "Triad of Aggression"). Push ASEAN, its member-states and other non-ASEAN countries in the Asia-Pacific region, to adopt an actively neutral and non-aligned stance concerning inter-imperialist rivalries, while rejecting any efforts to join the Triad of Aggression.

10. Expand and consolidate working-class solidarity and internationalism to resist and defeat US imperialism's global manoeuvres. Renew all efforts to bolster anti-imperialist/anti-fascist united fronts for militant mass struggles at national-regional-international levels.

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Dr Reihana Mohideen is National Council member of the Party of the Laboring Masses and the head of the party's international work. The above was abridged from a presentation to a Socialist Alliance-Green Left forum on resisting AUKUS in Naarm/Melbourne on April 18.

Featured image: Philippine Marines join with US Marine Corps during an exercise at Naval Base Camilo Osias in the Philippines last year. Photo: US Marine Corps

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