

US warns China against flexing its maritime muscles

Geoff Dyer on board the USS Theodore Roosevelt

Teddy Roosevelt, who more than a century ago was the first to define the Pacific as a core US interest, once urged his countrymen to "speak softly and carry a big stick".

On Thursday, America's understated defence secretary Ashton Carter used a visit to the US aircraft carrier named in the former president's honour to deliver a highly symbolic warning to China.

Speaking from the deck of the USS Theodore Roosevelt - nicknamed "The Big Stick" - in the South China Sea, Mr Carter said there was "a lot of concern about China in the region".

"Many countries in the region are coming to the United States and asking us to do more with them so that we can keep the peace out here," Mr Carter said, as he warned of "extravagant claims and the militarisation, principally by China" in the South China Sea.

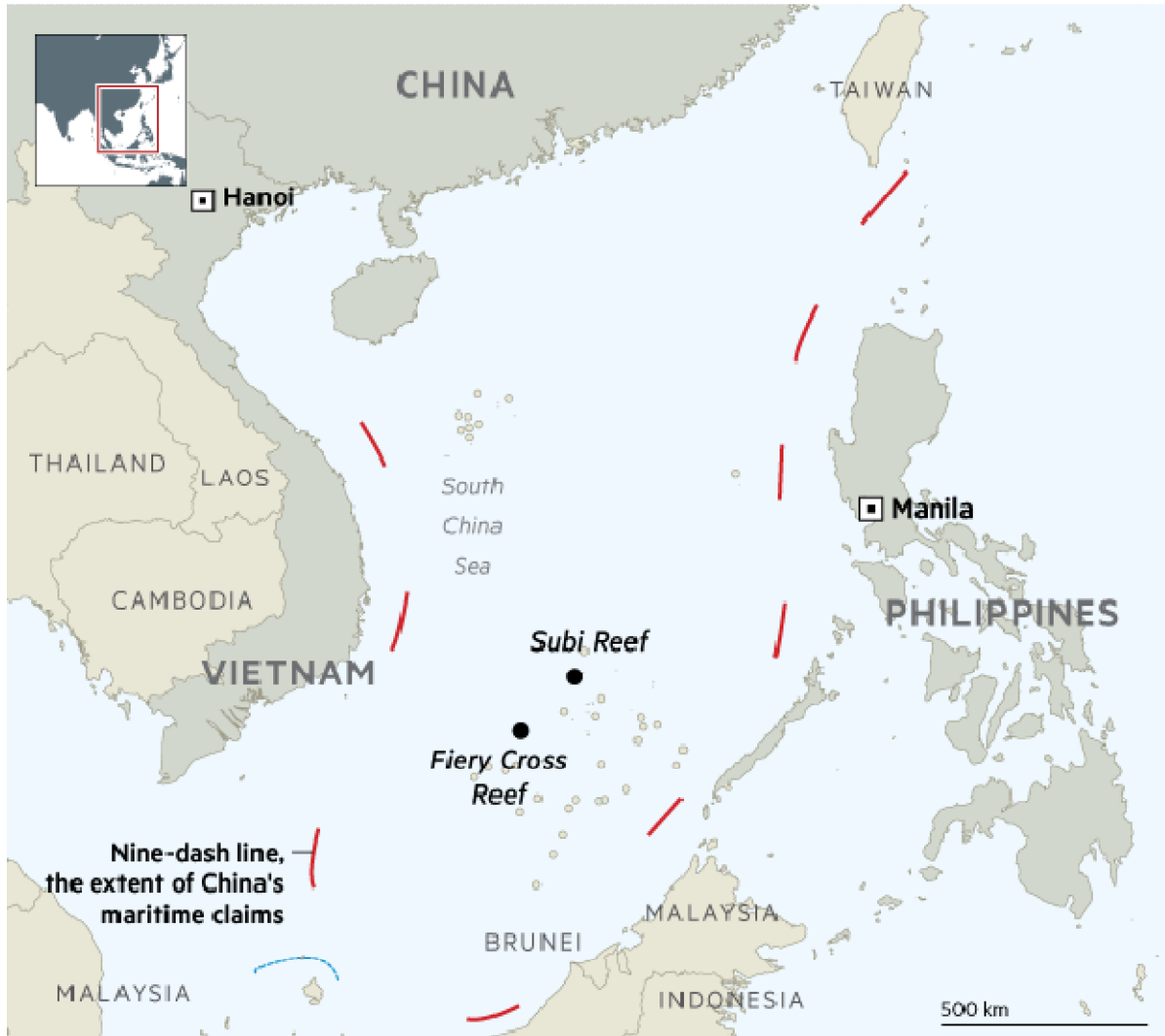
As he spoke, the USS Theodore Roosevelt was 150-200 nautical miles south of the Spratly Islands, the contested areas of the South China Sea where China is building a number of artificial islands.

The aircraft carrier visit was the culmination of 10 days of high-stakes military and diplomatic action by the US which Mr Carter hopes will dissuade China from expanding its military presence in the South China Sea and will reassure nervous allies about the durability of a US presence in the western Pacific.

But the demonstration of naval strength runs the risk of provoking China and sparking a more intense competition in the South China Sea between the world's two biggest militaries.

Although the US is facing more immediate military crises, from the resilience of Islamist militants Isis in Syria and Iraq to the conflict in Ukraine, it is the emerging competition in the western Pacific with China that over the next two decades will do more than anything to determine the global balance of power and America's ability to remain the central nation in the international system.

Last week, the US sent the USS Lassen, a destroyer, within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef, an artificial island built by China in the South China Sea to demonstrate that the US does not recognise any Chinese claim to the surrounding seas.



Commander Robert Francis, captain of the USS Lassen, said that his ship had been followed by a Chinese destroyer for about two weeks, including the day it conducted the "freedom of navigation operation" in the South China Sea.

He said the Chinese vessel has issued a warning that the USS Lassen was entering Chinese territorial waters but had behaved in a "professional" and "courteous" fashion.

China has reacted angrily to the US operations in the South China Sea, accusing Washington of violating its sovereignty. In the short term, the main question will be whether China continues to send more military equipment and personnel to the islands it has developed in the Spratly Islands over the past 18 months.

Beyond that, US officials are worried China could try to establish an air identification zone in the South China Sea — which would amount to an attempt to claim control of the airspace in the region.

Having sent the USS Lassen close to Subi Reef, US officials say they continue to make the same point by conducting further such operations in the South China Sea — potentially about two every quarter.

The other factor that Washington hopes will restrain China is the growing support for a strong US military presence in the region from China's neighbours as a result of Beijing's behaviour.

Over the past two years, the US has agreed to closer military co-operation with Japan, the Philippines and Australia. The latest Asian nation to move closer to Washington is Malaysia, which has its own territorial dispute in the South China Sea with China and which has become much more critical of Beijing over the past year.

Mr Carter flew to the USS Theodore Roosevelt from an air base in Malaysia accompanied by Hishammuddin Hussein, the country's defence minister. Next week US Marines will take part in a military exercise in eastern Malaysia and the two governments have been discussing further joint training exercises.

A senior US official said: "There has been much greater interest [from Malaysia] in developing defence ties with the US in the last couple of years.

"China does itself a disservice when it puts pressure on other countries to not offend it because that sends a signal to the entire region that China is a country they need to be careful about."

Mira Rapp-Hooper, an Asia expert at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington think-tank, said China would push more countries towards the US if it continued with its military build-up in the South China Sea.

"If the trend moves in the direction of more rapid militarisation of the islands, then the likes of Malaysia and Vietnam will be more in play," she said.

Mr Carter insisted that China's growing naval power would not prevent the US from maintaining its role as the anchor of regional security. "America has long been a stabilising force here," he said. "That has allowed all the Asian miracles to occur over the last 70 years."