

Clinton speech underlines US-China tensions

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A keynote speech by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Hawaii on Tuesday again underscored the rising rivalry between the US and China in the Asia-Pacific region and internationally. Clinton was in Hawaii to start a trip to Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Australia, where China would have been a major topic of discussion. The trip was called off following the Haitian earthquake.

In the lead-up to her visit, the Obama administration approved the sale of advanced Patriot-3 surface-to-air missiles to Taiwan. Although it was part of a package agreed by the Bush administration in 2008, the White House decision to proceed with the sale provoked protests from Beijing. China tested an anti-ballistic missile on Monday, destroying a missile in outer space. Clinton denied that the Chinese test was connected to the Taiwan arms deal, but Beijing was clearly sending a message about China's growing military capability.

In another move that irritated Beijing, Obama recently announced his intention to meet the Dalai Lama, reversing a decision last year not to do so. Speaking to the media, Clinton justified the meeting by saying that while the US recognised China's sovereignty over Tibet, "we support the legitimate desire for cultural, religious respect and autonomy".

US-China relations over trade have also worsened, with Washington imposing anti-dumping tariffs against Chinese goods ranging from tyres to steel products. During Obama's visit to China last November he pressed Chinese leaders to revalue the yuan against the dollar, but was bluntly turned down. In late December, the US announced a 15-percent tariff on Chinese steel pipes as a penalty for allegedly unfair subsidies.

In a statement, Clinton seized on Google's current threat to pull out of China over Beijing's tight control over the Internet. She expressed her "serious concerns" over the issue, saying: "We look to the Chinese government for an explanation." Her statement indicates that Washington intends to ratchet up its rhetoric on human rights in China, including over Internet censorship—issues that it had played down.

In this context, Clinton's speech to the East-West Centre in

Hawaii highlighted the Obama administration's determination to counter China's growing influence in Asia. She declared: "I don't think there is any doubt, if there was when this administration began, that the United States is back in Asia, but I want to underscore, we are back to stay." She underlined earlier comments by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates that the US is "not a visiting power in Asia, but a resident power".

Clinton criticised the Bush administration's failure to participate in Asia-Pacific regional bodies, especially the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The "lack of respect and a willingness to engage" with South East Asia had effectively allowed China to increase its influence in the past decade. "And that is why I made it very clear upon becoming Secretary of State that the United States would show up," she said. (See: "Clinton's ASEAN appearance signals US 'back in Asia'")

US fears about China reflect changes in their relative economic strength. While the US has been at the centre of the global financial crisis, China has continued to grow. China's GDP is still well below that of the US, but it is set to overtake Japan this year as the world's second largest economy. Moreover China is in a stronger position to offer economic incentives to potential allies. A China-ASEAN free trade agreement came into effect on January 1, creating the world's third-largest free trade bloc, further undermining US influence in South East Asia.

In her speech, Clinton signalled the Obama administration's intention to make more aggressive diplomatic moves. She declared that the US would seek to "actively participate" in all key regional forums, including ASEAN+3 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. ASEAN+3 is an exclusively Asian body involving the ASEAN countries plus China, Japan and South Korea. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was formed by Russia and China in 2001 to counter growing US involvement in Central Asia.

The secretary of state emphasised that the "future of this region depends on America". It was in the interests of Asian countries to have the US as "a dynamic economic partner and a stabilising military influence". She highlighted Washington's

formal defence treaties with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines as the cornerstone of US policy in Asia.

These remarks sought to send a message that the US would not allow Beijing to use its economic power to exclude the US from the region, and would contain China militarily. Clinton was more explicit in comments to reporters on Monday, declaring: “Everyone’s aware that China is a rising power of the 21st century. But people want to see the United States fully engaged in Asia, so that as China rises the United States is there as a force of peace.”

Far from being a “force for peace,” the US military build-up raises the dangers of conflict between the two powers. As its economic power has waned, Washington has increasingly used its military might to further its interests. Its alliances in Asia form part of a longstanding US strategy of encircling China with allies, strategic partners and military bases. As planned in 2006, the US will deploy 6 of its 11 aircraft carriers and 60 percent of its submarine fleet in the Pacific this year, shifting from its previous strategic focus on the Atlantic.

The Pentagon is acutely aware of China’s rising military strength. A recent assessment by the US Office of Naval Intelligence estimated that China’s naval expansion would be at its height in the next 10–15 years, with “one or more aircraft carriers” and 75 submarines operating beyond Taiwan and South China Sea to protect China’s vital sea lanes, particularly to the Middle East and Africa.

The growing rivalry between the US and China is reverberating throughout the region. Every government has been compelled to try to balance economic relations with China against concerns to maintain relations with the US. Those issues would certainly have dominated Clinton’s discussions in Australia, which relies heavily on exports of minerals and other raw materials to China, but depends on its military alliance with the US, not least to back its interventions in neighbouring island states.

Even Japan, which has been a cornerstone of US strategy in Asia since the end of World War II, is torn by this dilemma. While in Hawaii, Clinton met with Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada in an effort to patch up relations with the Democratic Party government that took power in September. Unlike the previous Liberal Democratic Party governments, which rested on Japan’s Cold War alliance with the US, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has advocated that Tokyo play a greater role in Asia, especially by establishing firmer relations with Beijing.

Japan too has become more reliant on trade with and

investment in China, which is now Japan’s largest trading partner. The global economic crisis has battered its export industries. According to official statistics, Japan’s GDP contracted by 5.1 percent in the third quarter of 2009 from the same period in 2008. The Hatoyama government has already reached an agreement with China and South Korea to establish a currency swap scheme to stabilise Asian currencies.

At the same time, Hatoyama has indicated that he wants to refashion Japan’s strategic alliance with the US, leading to tensions over the large American military presence in Japan. His government has called for a renegotiation of a 2006 agreement to relocate a US marine air base in Okinawa, but Washington has refused to revise the pact.

Clinton failed to convince Okada to abide by the 2006 agreement. She had to tell reporters she “respected” Hatoyama’s decision last December to wait until May to decide upon the issue. Previously Hatoyama effectively snubbed Obama, when he refused to settle the issue prior to the US president’s visit to Tokyo last November.

Hatoyama, who is facing an upper house election by mid-year, is appealing to widespread concerns in Japan about the continued US military presence and opposition to Washington’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The government will release a report this month that is likely to expose a secret treaty signed by Washington and Tokyo in the 1960s that allowed nuclear-armed US warships to dock in Japan without disclosing their armaments. The disclosure will place further strains on the US-Japan relationship.

As the Obama administration pursues its “back in Asia” offensive, tensions with China will only continue to rise, further exacerbating the dilemmas facing countries throughout the region.



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