

# US stokes disputes with China at Asian summit

Peter Symonds  
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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton maintained pressure on China over key maritime disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea at Saturday's East Asia Summit meeting in Hanoi. The US attended the gathering in Vietnam, hosted by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), for the first time as part of the Obama administration's concerted push to undermine growing Chinese influence in Asia.

Speaking in Honolulu last week, Clinton referred to her own Asian trip and that of President Obama starting this week as "forward-deployed diplomacy". While claiming this was not directed against China, she said: "Everywhere we go, we will advance one overarching set of goals: to sustain and strengthen America's leadership in the Asia-Pacific region... we've adopted a very proactive footing: we've sent our diplomatic assets—including our highest ranking officials, our development experts, our teams on a wide range of pressing issues—into every corner and every capital of the Asia Pacific region."

At the summit, Clinton reiterated Washington's provocative stance toward territorial disputes in the South China Sea involving China and ASEAN members—Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei. "The United States has a national interest in the freedom of navigation and unimpeded lawful commerce," she said, adding that when disputes arise they should be resolved according to international law.

The declaration that the US has "a national interest" in the South China Sea—close to China and thousands of kilometres from the American mainland—cuts directly across Beijing's strategic concerns over US naval dominance of strategic shipping routes between North East Asia and the Middle East and Africa. Washington also offered to mediate disputes in the South China Sea, giving tacit US backing to ASEAN members and undermining China's efforts to resolve differences through bilateral negotiations. When

Clinton made similar remarks at an ASEAN summit in July, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi declared them to be "virtually an attack on China".

Washington's stance has encouraged other countries take a more assertive stance toward China. Continuing tensions between Japan and China that flared last month over Japan's detention of a Chinese trawler captain in waters near the disputed Diaoyu islets (known as Senkaku in Japan) dominated last week's meetings in Hanoi. Tokyo released the captain after Beijing ended high-level talks and appeared to halt the export of rare earths to Japan, but the underlying issues are unresolved.

At the Hanoi summit, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao called off a bilateral meeting with his Japanese counterpart Naoto Kan at the last minute in protest after Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara publicly reasserted that Japan had sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Clinton intervened to propose that the US host a three-way summit with Japan and China on the dispute and other issues—again intruding into what China would prefer to resolve bilaterally. China was non-committal about the US offer.

While Clinton declared that the US wanted "stable, peaceful relations" between the two countries, Washington's backing for Tokyo has helped to fuel the dispute. At a joint press conference with Japan's foreign minister Maehara in Honolulu last week, Clinton affirmed that the US would support Japan in any military conflict over Diaoyu/Senkaku despite taking no position on which country has sovereignty over the islands.

A meeting in Hanoi between Clinton and Chinese Foreign Minister Yang was clearly tense. The Chinese press reported that Yang had told the US Secretary of State to respect China's sovereignty over the islands and not to make "irresponsible remarks". Chinese Foreign Ministry

spokesman Ma Zhaoxu said China “will never accept any word or deed that includes the Diaoyu Islands within the scope” of the US-Japan Security Treaty.

Clinton reportedly extracted a guarantee from Yang that China would be a “reliable supplier” of rare earths. Currently China has a virtual monopoly—95 percent—of the global market in these materials, which are critical for manufacturing a range of hi-tech products, including electronics. While acknowledging China’s “clarification,” Clinton declared that “the world as a whole needs to find alternatives” to China as a supplier.

At Beijing’s request, Clinton flew to China’s Hainan Island later on Saturday for talks with State Councillor for Foreign Affairs Dai Bingguo, who is senior to Yang in the state bureaucracy. While the content of the discussions has not been made public, Clinton used the opportunity to insist that China prevent North Korea from taking any “provocative” actions during G20 talks due to take place in the South Korean capital of Seoul next week.

As part of Washington’s “forward-deployed diplomacy,” Clinton will visit Cambodia—which has close ties with China—Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Australia over the next week. Her visit to Papua New Guinea is an indication that the US is no longer prepared to leave its ally Australia to manage affairs in the South West Pacific. During last week’s speech in Hawaii, Clinton pointed out that USAID was setting up an office in Fiji next year and providing \$21 million in climate change aid—undercutting efforts by Australia and New Zealand to isolate the Fijian military junta.

Immediately after the November 2 mid-term elections, President Obama heads off on a trip to India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan—but not China—that will include the G20 meeting in Seoul. Obama and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh are expected to sign a deal for the purchase of American military aircraft and to discuss a possible deal for the sale of advanced US fighters to India to strengthen strategic ties between the two countries.

Japan and India are each wooing South East Asian countries with trade agreements and talk of a “circle of democracy”. While both countries deny that such moves are directed against Beijing, the “circle of democracy” is obviously meant to exclude “autocratic” China and its allies such as Burma and North Korea. As Clinton made clear in her remarks in Honolulu, the US is encouraging India to play a greater role in East Asia. She noted that one of the core

issues addressed in talks with New Delhi was “India’s growing engagement and integration into East Asia”. In a bid to defuse rivalry with India, Chinese Premier Wen declared after meeting Singh in Hanoi that there was “enough space” in the world for both countries to develop.

At this stage, Asian countries, concerned about possible economic retaliation by Beijing, are cautious about leaning too heavily toward Washington. As a result of China’s rapid economic rise, it is the largest trading partner of most countries in the region, including Japan, India and South Korea. ASEAN exports to China jumped by a staggering 54 percent from January to August after a free trade agreement came into effect at the beginning of the year.

Nevertheless Washington’s aggressive drive into Asia at China’s expense has altered relations within the region and fuelled regional frictions. Having helped create the conflicts, the US is seeking to exploit the situation by strengthening alliances and forging new ties throughout the region in a bid to contain rival China. This strategy reflects layers of the US foreign policy establishment that were highly critical of the previous Bush administration for involving the US in quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan and neglecting vital American interests in Asia threatened by China’s rise.

In her speech in Honolulu, Clinton made clear that the US intended to demand entry to every significant Asia Pacific forum, effectively thwarting any attempt by China to consolidate its own regional bloc. “Let me simply state the principle that will guide America’s role in Asian institutions,” she said. “If consequential security, political and economic issues are being discussed, and if they involve our interests, then we will seek a seat at the table.”

Washington’s determination to “sustain and strengthen America’s leadership in the Asia-Pacific region” inevitably raises tensions throughout the region and heightens the danger of future conflict between the major powers.



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