

US diplomatic offensive tightens strategic encirclement of China

John Chan**13 November 2010**

Washington's aggressive diplomatic campaign in Asia over the past two weeks has amounted, in the words of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to "a full court press" against China, with the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean emerging as potential future theatres of war.

President Barack Obama's visits to India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan, and Clinton's trips to Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Australia, sought to either strengthen existing alliances or create new partnerships for a US-led strategic encirclement of China.

Obama fervently courted India, China's regional nuclear-armed rival. He urged New Delhi to become a "world power" and backed its bid to become a UN Security Council permanent member. Clinton twice reiterated that Washington could invoke the US-Japan Security Treaty to militarily support Japan against China in the conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. Vietnam announced it was ready to hire out its strategic Cam Ranh Bay port in the South China Sea "to naval ships from all countries"—with Washington the most likely client. Canberra agreed to provide greater US access to its military facilities, especially those in northern Australia.

The American offensive aims to prevent China from controlling the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and key connecting waterways, such as the Strait of Malacca and the Sunda/Lombok straits of Indonesia. Since China depends on ships to transport one third of its oil consumption and 70 percent of its foreign trade, these sea lanes have become its "lifelines". Some 60 percent of the ships passing through the Strait of Malacca every day are Chinese.

Since World War II, retaining the ability to cut off vital oil supply shipments to rival powers by controlling such "choke points" has been a key US naval strategy. This task looms ever larger for Washington today, with the accelerating decline of American economic power and the rapid rise of China, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Since the China-Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) free-trade zone came into effect last January, Sino-ASEAN trade has increased by nearly 50 percent, whereas rising protectionism in the US is stalling any free trade agreement with Asian states.

Far from accepting a diminishing role, the US is determined to retain its dominant position in Asia through its residual military might. In an interview with the *Australian* newspaper on Monday, Clinton recalled that when Chinese officials first told Washington, earlier this year, that Beijing viewed the South China Sea as a core Chinese interest, "I immediately responded and said, 'We don't agree with that'." What followed was Clinton's aggressive announcement at the ASEAN meeting in July that Washington would intervene into disputes between China and ASEAN members, such as Vietnam and Philippines, over the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. China angrily responded by warning that "outsiders," i.e., the US, should keep out of South China Sea affairs.

Clinton's subsequent statement that the US had a "national interest" in "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea was even more provocative. More than 40,000 ships freely pass through the sea each year. The "freedom of navigation" that Washington demands is the freedom of American surveillance vessels and warships to sail the waters near the Chinese coast, and to collect intelligence on Chinese military operations, including the

deployment of submarines, in the region. If China likewise were to send spy ships to international waters just off the coast of Hawaii or San Diego to monitor the US naval bases there, the American media and political establishment would respond with outrage over what would, legitimately, be interpreted as acts of provocation.

By establishing or strengthening military ties with Vietnam, India, Australia and Indonesia, the US is seeking to counter China's "string of pearls" strategy. The aim of this strategy is to build port facilities in Burma, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka for the deployment of Chinese warships into the Indian Ocean in order to protect the shipping lanes that carry oil and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa to China.

Herein lies the importance of Indonesia, which was the second stop on Obama's trip. The US think tank Stratfor noted: "It [Indonesia] straddles the Strait of Malacca, a global shipping choke point, as well as the Sunda and Lombok straits, making it critical for sea-lanes between the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the Pacific, and Australia and China. These sea lanes supply China with critical raw materials; any power controlling this area accordingly has enormous leverage over Beijing."

These considerations also apply to East Timor, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, which sit astride other vital sea lanes. There is concern in Washington that over the past decade, China has established economic and even military ties with Pacific island states, and the Obama administration is determined to reassert US "leadership" in the region.

Thus Clinton visited Papua New Guinea and discussed the Asia-Pacific region in her meetings with key officials in Australia and New Zealand.

The centrality of the South China Sea in Washington's thinking was expressed by Robert Kaplan, who wrote recently in the *Washington Post*: "The geographical heart of America's hard-power competition with China will be the South China Sea, through which passes a third of all commercial maritime traffic worldwide and half of the hydrocarbons destined for Japan, the Korean Peninsula and northeastern China. That sea grants Beijing access to the Indian Ocean via the Strait of Malacca, and thus to the entire arc of Islam, from East Africa to Southeast Asia."

Kaplan is among those within US ruling circles who

have criticised the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq for diverting the focus of the former Bush administration, and allowing China to expand its geopolitical influence throughout Asia. Kaplan's basic ideas can be seen in the Obama administration's "back in Asia" policy.

The anti-China coalition being assembled by the US directly conflicts with China's quest to build a blue-water navy to protect its sea lanes and oil supplies. A bestseller published in China last year, *China Sea Power* by Zhang Wenmu, summed up Beijing's view of the present great-power struggle for global hegemony as a giant "cheeseboard". Zhang wrote: "All cheese manuals are focusing at one aim, the control of the Indian Ocean."

Beijing will not allow Washington to undermine the gains it has made in Asia. Just days after Clinton told Cambodia not to become "too dependent" on a single country—i.e., China—the Chinese government gave Cambodia \$1.6 billion for infrastructure projects and announced a \$590 million loan for the development of mobile phone services. Less than a day before Obama arrived in Jakarta, a Chinese delegation came with \$6.6 billion in infrastructure projects. In the words of the *New York Times*, Beijing "laid down a not-so-subtle challenge to Mr. Obama: Show your Indonesian hosts the money".

Driven by the deepening global economic crisis, the escalating rivalry between the US and China is yet another sign that the world capitalist system is hurtling towards a major catastrophe. Unless the international working class intervenes to overthrow the profit system and the outmoded system of rival nation-states, these great-power tensions must inevitably lead to a new world war.

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