

South China Sea disputes intensify

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Tensions continue to rapidly mount in the South China Sea, as China, Vietnam and the Philippines confront each other over territorial rights in disputed waters. The United States has asserted its interests in the region and is openly encouraging the increasingly provocative stances being taken by the Philippines and Vietnam.

Further confrontations occurred between China and Vietnam and the Philippines during the week following the regional Shangri-La dialogue defense summit in Singapore. The international media largely depicted the summit as a non-event, with conciliatory and measured speeches being made by China and the United States. But this was not the case.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates outlined an aggressive agenda for US imperialism in Asia and gave explicit support to allies in their territorial claims against China. The confrontational postures adopted by Vietnam and the Philippines over the past week are in line with Gates's speech.

On June 9, the Chinese ambassador to the Philippines, Liu Jianchao, told all rival claimants in the South China Sea to "stop searching for the possibility of exploiting resources in these areas where China has its claims." Vietnam, the Philippines and China are all starting to drill for oil in the disputed waters, while China has laid claim to mineral rights in the sea bed of the entire South China Sea.

On the same day, a Chinese vessel confronted and then allegedly cut survey cables being laid by a Vietnamese oil exploratory ship, Viking 2, which is conducting pre-drilling surveys for the Vietnamese state oil company, PetroVietnam. A nearly identical event occurred two weeks earlier on May 26.

PetroVietnam is carrying out surveys on behalf of ExxonMobil and the Canadian oil firm, Talisman energy.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung responded by stating that Vietnam would protect its sovereignty over islands in the South China Sea. President Nguyen Minh Triet declared: "We are ready to sacrifice everything to protect our homeland, our sea and island sovereignty."

Yesterday, Vietnam announced that it would be conducting live-ammunition naval drills in the South China Sea. This is a further escalation of the confrontation in the region. Live ammunition exercises are rare, and when they have been conducted in the past, they have taken place unannounced. This is the first time that the Vietnamese government has made a public statement announcing impending live-fire military drills.

In the wake of the Singapore summit, the Philippine government issued several statements denouncing China's intrusion in Philippine waters. On June 7, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hong Lei, dismissed the statements saying, "China does not accept the groundless accusations from the Philippines ... China urges the Philippines to stop unilateral actions that impair China's sovereignty as well as maritime rights and interests and expand and complicate the South China Sea disputes, and to stop making erroneous and irresponsible remarks."

Over the past several weeks, the Philippine government has alleged repeated instances of conflict and Chinese aggression in the region. These revelations have been made in a calculated and carefully timed manner. During the visit of the US Carrier Strike Group

1 to the Philippines in May, the Philippine military stated that two Chinese MiG 29a fighters had harassed Philippine jets. China does not have any MiG 29a fighters. After the US ships left Philippine waters, the allegation was quietly dropped.

When Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie visited the Philippines two weeks later, the local press declared that Chinese ships had taken supplies to unoccupied and disputed islands in the Spratlys and were beginning construction. At the time, President Benigno Aquino dismissed the reports, saying that the construction was old and that the media was guilty of hysteria and fear-mongering. As soon as Liang departed, however, Aquino reversed his position and said the Philippines was going to file a protest with the UN regarding the construction, which was the “worst violation” of Philippine sovereignty in the South China Sea in over a decade.

As Aquino made this denunciation, the US dispatched the guided missile destroyer Chung Hoon from Pearl Harbor to the Philippine edge of the South China Sea. The ship would participate in joint military exercises with the Philippines in the near future, a US embassy spokesperson stated. But for now, it would simply patrol the contested waters.

CIA director Leon Panetta has been nominated to take Gates’s place as US Secretary of Defense. In response to questions posed to him during the Senate Armed Services committee confirmation hearing, Panetta declared: “China appears to be building the capability to fight and win short duration, high-intensity conflicts along its periphery.” China was preparing for contingencies, he said, which included “possible US military intervention.”

The Chinese English-language daily *Global Times* published an article on June 9 claiming that Panetta’s statements had exaggerated the military threat from China in order to “exacerbate frictions between China and its neighbors.” There was nothing exaggerated or inaccurate in Panetta’s statement, however. In response to Washington’s increasingly provocative stance in the region, China is clearly preparing for possible US military intervention.

China announced on June 9 that it would conduct naval training drills in the Western Pacific later in June. The Japanese government immediately expressed its displeasure at this, as getting to the Western Pacific waters would involve the Chinese navy sailing through Japanese waters past Okinawa. Okinawa is home to several large US military bases.

Like the Philippines and Vietnam, US ally Japan is being encouraged by Washington to play a more assertive role in containing China. By seeking to use its present military muscle to maintain its predominance in waters close to the Chinese mainland, the US is deliberately heightening tensions with China and the danger of confrontation and conflict.



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