

South China Sea disputes heighten danger of conflict

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Tensions over the South China Sea escalated sharply this week as Vietnam and the Philippines, tacitly backed by the US, made further aggressive moves to assert their claims against those of China in the disputed waters.

Despite the growing potential for conflict, Democrat Senator Jim Webb, head of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on East Asia, called for an even tougher American line. He introduced a bill on Monday condemning “the use of force by naval and maritime security vessels from China in the South China Sea.” The bill stated its support for “the continuation of operations by the United States Armed Forces to assert and defend freedom of navigation rights in international waters and air space in the South China Sea.”

Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations on the same day, Webb stated: “I think we in our government have taken too weak of a position on this.” He cited Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s statements last year on the US “return to Asia” approvingly, but added: “We’re going to back up those words with substantive action. It doesn’t mean, you know, military confrontation per se, but we have to make—give clear signals.”

On Tuesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei responded, stating: “The recent situation in the South China Sea has been caused by certain countries making unilateral moves that have harmed China’s sovereign and maritime rights... We hope countries not related to the disputes over the South China Sea will respect the efforts of directly related countries to resolve the issue through direct

negotiation.”

A commentary in the Chinese military journal *Liberation Army Daily* on the same day rebuffed US involvement in less polite terms: “China resolutely opposes any country unrelated to the South China Sea issue meddling in disputes, and it opposes the internationalisation of the South China Sea issue.”

China, Vietnam and the Philippines are each proceeding with plans to drill for oil in the contested waters. China will launch a massive deep water oil platform in July. The platform took three years and \$US900 million to build. Its exact destination has not been disclosed but it will be drilling in disputed waters.

A Chinese ship cut the survey cables of a Vietnamese oil exploratory vessel on June 9, the second such skirmish in two weeks. A confrontation between two Chinese vessels and a Philippine oil exploratory ship, owned by Forum Energy, occurred in late February. Webb’s resolution misrepresented this event in justifying its condemnation of China, saying that “patrol boats from China attempted to ram one of its [the Philippines] surveillance ships.” There was no attempted ramming.

In response to the incidents involving its oil survey vessels, Vietnam conducted a live fire naval drill on Monday. On the same day, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung signed a bill clarifying eligibility for military conscription. A 2009 white paper issued by the Vietnamese government indicates that Vietnam has 450,000 active military personnel. Conscription would call up five million additional troops.

Last weekend, the Vietnamese foreign ministry issued a statement declaring that it would “welcome” efforts by the US and other nations to help to resolve the maritime disputes. The comment will only further infuriate Beijing, which insists that any negotiations should be on a bilateral basis.

The Philippine government has just initiated the bidding on service contracts to drill in the oil fields which it claims, including two in disputed waters. ExxonMobil, Dutch Royal Shell and Chevron are among the 44 bidders. Forum Energy announced today that it is proceeding with drilling in the Reed Bank, where the previous confrontation with China occurred.

The Philippine legislature provocatively passed a bill last week renaming the South China Sea as the West Philippine Sea. All government statements will now refer the disputed waters by the new name. The press eagerly shifted nomenclature to assist in stoking up nationalist sentiment.

A Philippine presidential spokesperson stated in a radio interview last Friday that in the event of armed conflict with China, the Philippine government expected that “the United States will help if ever it reaches that point because of the Mutual Defense Treaty.” The 1951 treaty states: “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on either of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes.”

On Saturday, however, the US embassy issued a statement saying “The US does not take sides in regional territorial disputes.” The following day, the leading Philippine daily, the *Inquirer*, ran a banner headline, “US not coming to PH aid vs. China.” On Monday, Philippine President Benigno Aquino reasserted the Philippines’ right to invoke the treaty in event of conflict and to expect US military aid.

The US ambassador to the Philippines, Harry Thomas, responded in a speech on Tuesday. “I want to assure you, on all subjects, we the United States, are with the Philippines,” he stated. “The Philippines and

the United States are strategic treaty allies. We are partners.” Washington’s public acknowledgment of the treaty will only encourage more aggressive moves by the Philippine administration.

The Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Del Rosario announced that he would be travelling to the United States at the request of Hillary Clinton for a series of meetings with her from June 20 to 24 discussing the “conflict in the West Philippine Sea.”

It was revealed today in the Philippine press that the Philippine navy has been actively removing Chinese markers and buoys in the disputed waters. The annual Philippine-US naval training exercises commenced today as well, but these training exercises are sharply different from previous ones. Rather than joint exercises between the Philippines and the United States alone, these will involve all of coastal South East Asia. Brunei, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines will be participating in exercises that simulate the defense of the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea against enemy ships.

As regional tensions rise, the danger is that the provocative moves by Washington and its allies in the South China Sea will spill over into military conflict.



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