

Mounting US-China rivalry over South China Sea

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In its public statements and military training exercises, the US continues to play a provocative role in the Asia-Pacific region, deliberately escalating tensions with China in the South China Sea.

Speaking on June 20 at a Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conference on Maritime Security in the South China Sea, Senator John McCain, a prominent Republican and former presidential challenger, laid out an aggressive US agenda.

“The world’s geopolitical center of gravity is shifting to the Asia-Pacific region,” he stated. “The events now unfolding in the South China Sea will play a decisive role in shaping the development of the Asia-Pacific region in this century. And the United States must remain actively engaged in that process...We will not withdraw or be pushed out of the Asia-Pacific region.”

McCain dismissed China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea as “unsubstantiated” and without “basis in international law.” Previous statements by US government officials have argued that the United States did not have a position regarding the various claims made by the rival parties to the disputed waters, and that the United States was only interested in freedom of navigation.

Walter Lohman, director of the Asian Studies Center at the right-wing Heritage Foundation, wrote in an article on the same day: “Positive US-China relations are an important context, not an ‘interest’ in and of themselves. The intersection of US and Chinese interests in the region and beyond is very narrow. Maintaining a positive relationship is not worth jeopardizing America’s real interests at stake: freedom

of the seas, commitment to treaty allies, and peace and security in the Pacific.”

America’s real interests—its economic interests and continued military and political dominance in the region—are what is at stake. Like McCain, Lohman is calling for a further escalation of already tense relations with China, in order to secure these interests.

On Wednesday, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai responded. “Regarding the role of the United States in this [the South China Sea], the United States is not a claimant state to the dispute,” he stated. “So it is better for the United States to leave the dispute to be sorted out between the claimant states.” His rhetoric became very pointed. “I believe the individual countries are actually playing with fire, and I hope the fire will not be drawn to the United States.”

This is a direct warning from China for the United States to stay out of its South China Sea disputes with neighbouring countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines. China has its own vital interests at stake in the sea—a body of water close to mainland China through which the bulk of its energy supplies from the Middle East and North Africa passes. The seabed also has large reserves of oil and gas.

Cui’s words came as he prepared to depart for a landmark meeting with US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell in Hawaii. The meeting is the first co-hosted consultative meeting on Asia-Pacific affairs and was arranged during Chinese President Hu’s visit to the White House in January. Cui stated that the South China Sea was not on the agenda for discussion at the meeting, as the US had no claim to the region.

In a statement to the press yesterday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said: “We are aware of the comments that were recently made by a high-level Chinese official. Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell will be leading the American side in the first Asia Pacific consultation ... this will be certainly one of the most important issues on the agenda.”

On June 23, the United States concluded naval exercises in the South China Sea, conducted with the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. Significantly, the war games simulated encounters with enemy ships in the disputed waters.

While the US was training its Southeast Asian allies for combat, China conducted its own exercises on the northern edge of the sea, near Hainan Island. In the midst of the US training exercises, the Chinese dispatched a naval patrol boat, the Haixun-31, to Singapore, sailing directly through the waters where the US was conducting its war games.

Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario travelled to the United States this past week, meeting first with McCain, speaking at the CSIS conference on the South China Sea and then meeting with Clinton. He is scheduled to meet with US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates as well.

Del Rosario brought with him a position paper written by his department, which stated that in the event of the outbreak of hostilities in the South China Sea, the United States was legally obliged by the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty to come to the defense of the Philippines. While not making any specific statements regarding del Rosario’s claims, Clinton made repeated positive references to the treaty in her public comments after meeting with him.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino has instructed del Rosario to arrange the purchase of weapons and new military equipment from the United States during his visit. Clinton stated that these arrangements would be made during del Rosario’s meeting with Gates.

China, Vietnam and the Philippines are all scheduled

to begin drilling for oil and gas in the South China Sea in the next month. China is launching a massive deep sea drill. Vietnam has contracted with a Canadian oil firm, Talisman Energy, to drill in a quadrant that China has licensed to a rival oil firm. On behalf of the Philippines, Forum Energy is going to begin drilling in an area where several months ago it had a confrontation with Chinese naval patrol boats.

The United States will be conducting joint naval exercises with both Vietnam and the Philippines in the next two weeks. The back-to-back training exercises, themselves a clear instance of sabre rattling, provide a justification for the US ships to remain in the disputed waters as an assertion of US hegemony in the region.



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