

Washington continues to escalate tensions in South China Sea

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On Monday, the US Senate unanimously passed a resolution “deploring” the use of force by China in the South China Sea and backing “the continuation of operations by the United States Armed Forces in support of freedom of navigation rights in international waters and air space in the South China Sea.”

The resolution, drafted by Senators Jim Webb and James Inhofe, the chair and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations East Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee, marks another step in the rapid heightening of tensions over the disputed waters.

On Tuesday, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hong Lei responded: “The resolution was groundless. It distorted the truth... We oppose intervention from countries outside the region, and condemn any action that would exacerbate the issue.”

Yang Yi, spokesperson of China’s Taiwan Affairs Office, speaking in Beijing on Wednesday, reiterated China’s claim of “indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and their surrounding waters.”

The escalated rhetoric between China and the US came in the immediate aftermath of meetings in Hawaii over the weekend between US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai. At the end of the talks, Campbell gave a press conference where he repeatedly refused to answer any specific questions on the South China Sea, stating simply that the dialogue was “open, frank, and constructive.” Cui refused to make a statement.

The mainstream US press is marching lockstep with the US government in intensifying the tensions with China. In an editorial on June 30, the *Wall Street Journal* described

the Philippines and Vietnam, which have rival territorial claims in the Sea, as expressing “barely bridled anger” at China. The editorial cited with approval Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s statements last year that the US had a “national interest” in the South China Sea and “was back in Asia to stay.”

The *Wall Street Journal* opined: “That was a strong stand at the time. But as China continues to ratchet up tension it may be time for something stronger.” What that “something stronger” could be became clear in the next paragraph, which discussed Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario’s recent visit to the United States and Clinton’s declaration at a joint press conference of continuing US support for the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines. Del Rosario repeatedly stated last week that in the event of armed hostilities between China and the Philippines, the treaty obliged the US to come to the aid of its ally.

“The real news,” the *Wall Street Journal* crowed, “is that the Philippines is coming back into the US orbit.” The editorial concluded that Washington should give “less ambiguous indications ... that it will be a willing partner.”

In an editorial on June 27, the *Washington Post* stated that the Beijing’s “menacing language makes clear why the United States needs to exert its influence.” How would this influence be exerted? By military actions through Washington’s proxy, the Philippines. The editorial ended with this sentence: “If Mr. del Rosario’s government wishes to shift its long-standing defense cooperation with the United States from counterterrorism to the patrol and defense of its territorial waters, the Pentagon should be ready to cooperate.”

On June 28, the Lowy Institute, a leading Australian think tank, issued a report entitled “Crisis and Confidence: Major Powers and Maritime Security in Indo-Pacific Asia.” The report, which received wide press coverage, warned of the rising danger of war emerging out of the conflicts over the South China Sea.

“The sea lanes are becoming more crowded, contested and vulnerable to armed strife,” the report stated. “Naval and air forces are being strengthened amid shifting balances of economic strategic weight. As the number and tempo of incidents increases, so does the likelihood that an episode will escalate to armed confrontation, diplomatic crisis or possibly even conflict.”

A similar likelihood for conflict exists between Japan and China in the East China Sea, the report argued, warning that the “possibility of confrontation leading to conflict between Japan and China in the East China Sea is a distinct possibility ... In the past 12 months, an understanding appears to have developed between Washington and Tokyo that, under the US–Japan security treaty, the United States would come to Japan’s assistance in the event of such a conflict. Were Washington to do so, it would be in direct conflict with China, with the risk of a wide and protracted war between the two powers.”

Both China and the US are stepping up their activities in the South China Sea. China is preparing to launch its first aircraft carrier in the area. During the first week of July, China is scheduled to begin a massive deep sea oil drill, with the exact location not yet declared.

The United States is currently conducting military training exercises with the Philippines in the South China Sea. The US military has just concluded joint exercises involving most countries of littoral Southeast Asia. When its exercises with the Philippines end on July 4, the US military ships will go to Vietnam to conduct training exercises there. The exercises escalate the possibility of open conflict, as well as providing a justification for the continued stationing of US destroyers and patrol boats in this potential global flashpoint.

The Philippines is playing a leading role as Washington’s proxy and wedge in the region. Washington is currying favor with the President Benigno Aquino’s administration through every possible

diplomatic and political avenue. In the past week, legislation was introduced in the US Senate at the request of Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary del Rosario to allow garments produced in the Philippines with US-made textiles to enter the US duty free. Another piece of legislation was introduced to grant benefits to Philippine veterans of the Second World War. At Aquino’s request, the United States extradited to the Philippines a man charged with murder in a case in which one of Aquino’s leading political opponents is implicated.

In a thoroughly cynical move, US Secretary of State Clinton announced that the Philippines had been removed from the State Department’s Human Trafficking watch list, based on what she described as a “sea change” in policy under Aquino. The removal of the Philippines from the list enables the Aquino administration to receive \$434 million from the Millennium Challenge Corporation, funding which was otherwise jeopardized.

On June 30, Aquino’s government announced it was opening up 15 new quadrants to bid out to oil corporations for drilling. Many are in the contested waters. This is in addition to the ongoing bidding for quadrants that Aquino opened two months ago.

Following a meeting between US Defense Secretary Robert Gates and del Rosario at the end of last week, it was announced that the Philippines would lease new military equipment from the US and that Washington would fund Philippine intelligence operations in the South China Sea. The exact amount of funding and the type of equipment to be leased is not yet clear, but the provocative and confrontational role of the United States is making armed conflict an increasing likelihood.



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