

Washington steps up confrontation with China in the South China Sea

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As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton prepares to meet with Chinese and Southeast Asian foreign ministers in Bali for talks at the ASEAN Regional Forum, Washington is stepping up its aggressive assertion of its interests in the South China Sea.

On July 14, US Senators John McCain and John Kerry wrote a letter to Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo. They stated that the “assertive measures taken by China against foreign vessels in the South China Sea, coupled with expansive claims of ‘indisputable sovereignty’ over those waters” could result in an escalation of future incidents. They added that this would “jeopardize the vital national interests of the United States.”

The claim made by McCain and Kerry that China’s actions “jeopardized the vital national interests of the United States” is a sharp escalation of the confrontational rhetoric which Washington has been deploying in regard to the disputed waters. At the ASEAN Regional Forum in July of last year, Clinton asserted, “The United States, like every other nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea.”

The assertion of a US national interest in the South China Sea has been ratcheted up to become a vital national interest which McCain and Kerry are accusing China of jeopardizing. This terminology is quite ominous, as “vital national security” interests are those that a country will go to war to defend. The threat of US armed intervention lurks not far behind such words.

The South China Sea is a vital sea lane. Two-fifths of the world’s sea traffic travels through it, including most of Northeast Asia’s oil supplies. It is a rich fishing ground, and China imposes an annual unilateral ban on Vietnamese fishing in the northern portion of

the contested waters.

The seafloor of the South China Sea contains vast untapped resources. In the past six months, China, the Philippines and Vietnam have begun drilling for oil and natural gas—each denouncing the other for violating their national sovereignty. The state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) estimates that the seafloor holds “over 50 billion tons of crude oil and more than 20 trillion cubic meters of natural gas.” CNOOC is scheduled to invest \$US30 billion in deep-water oil drilling in the South China Sea, in keeping with the initiative set for expanded drilling by the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2016).

An article published on July 19 by the influential foreign policy think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) stated: “Clinton has decided that Southeast Asia, specifically ASEAN, will serve as the fulcrum for a long-term Asia strategy. That is not to say that ASEAN—anchored by its largest member country, Indonesia—is more strategically important than India, China, or Japan, but it is the focal point where the most important geostrategic chess games of the twenty-first century will be played.”

Chinese economic ties with Southeast Asia have dramatically eclipsed those of the United States. According to the Office of the US Trade Representative total trade between ASEAN and the US totaled \$US 178 billion in 2010. The China ASEAN free trade agreement went into effect in January 2010 and total trade for that year was \$US 298 billion. China ASEAN trade has grown 25 percent in the first quarter of 2011.

Washington is seeking to reassert its hegemony in the region through diplomatic and military machinations. The South China Sea is a crucial bottleneck for Chinese trade and access to petroleum. In the past month, the United States has conducted military training exercises

with Vietnam, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea.

In June, outgoing Secretary of Defense Gates announced that the US would be forward deploying its new Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore, guarding the vital straits of Malacca. The Littoral Combat Ships are the first permanent deployment of US ships in Singapore.

The ships are designed to operate rapidly and stealthily in shallow coastal waters. Gates stated they would be deployed against those who would “deny US forces access to key sea routes and lines of communications.”

In light of statements by the US government, this is a transparent reference to China. In late June the US Senate passed a resolution “deploring” China’s use of force in the South China Sea and calling for continued US military operations in the region. On July 15, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs introduced a similar resolution into Congress, condemning China for its use of force and accusing it of “making overt threats” and engaging in “gunboat diplomacy.” It called for continued US military operations in the South China Sea.

Clinton is scheduled to speak at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Bali tomorrow. It is widely speculated in the press that her remarks will be a provocative and aggressive assertion of US interests in the region.

In an attempt to preempt the rhetoric of the US delegation, Chinese diplomats met with ASEAN foreign ministers the day prior to Clinton’s arrival and signed a document entitled Guidelines on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. In 2002, ASEAN adopted a resolution for the peaceable conduct of parties in the South China Sea. For nine years the resolution has languished, having no framework for its implementation. China and the ASEAN secretariat in Indonesia have hailed the new document as ‘historic’ and a major step forward. It is nothing of the sort.

The original 2002 declaration was a hollow document. A section of the guidelines released to the press stated, “the decision to implement concrete measures or activities of the DOC should be based on consensus among parties concerned and lead to the eventual realization of a Code of Conduct.” Unfortunately, as tensions mount between the US and

China, it is precisely consensus that is missing. This means that any “Code of Conduct” to be based on consensus will be an empty document attempting to hide the growing differences between the major powers.

The guidelines also, at the request of the Philippine delegation, declared the South China Sea to be a Zone of Peace, Freedom, Friendship and Cooperation, oddly designated as ZoPFF/C.

Neither Vietnam nor the Philippines were appeased. Philippine foreign secretary Albert del Rosario stated that China’s claims to the South China Sea undermined the ASEAN Declaration of Conduct.

Washington has given open diplomatic and military support to Vietnam and the Philippines in their disputes with China, egging them on in their increasingly provocative assertions of territorial sovereignty.



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