

Philippine gunboat rams Chinese fishing vessel in South China Sea

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On October 18, a Philippine naval gunboat rammed into a Chinese fishing vessel in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. The Philippine ship captured 25 smaller boats that the Chinese ship had been towing.

A spokesperson for the Philippine Navy immediately tried to downplay the incident, referring to it as “a minor accident” caused by “large waves.” The 25 boats were captured, the spokesperson claimed, because the Chinese vessel had cut its towing line when it was rammed and hurriedly sailed away.

The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) said the Philippine government would not apologize for the incident. “No apologies are necessary and none will be given,” DFA spokesperson Raul Hernandez stated.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a response on October 20. “We demand that the Philippines return the small Chinese boats unconditionally and as soon as possible, and properly handle related issues.” The Foreign Ministry asserted undisputed Chinese sovereignty over the Spratly Islands and its surrounding waters and stated that “it is completely justified for Chinese fishermen to fish in areas where generations of Chinese have fished.”

The Philippine government has refused to return the boats, claiming that its actions were in accordance with international legal procedures.

In March, when a Chinese patrol boat threatened to ram a Philippine oil exploration ship in the same waters, the Philippine government claimed that it was an action which was perilously close to an act of war.

Behind the confrontation and continually escalating tensions in the South China Sea is the provocative role being played by Washington in the region.

The ramming of the Chinese fishing vessel occurred during two weeks of war games by the United States military in the Philippines. US and Philippine military

personnel have been engaged in a series of training exercises in which China is the clear target. They staged a series of amphibious landings off the coast of Palawan, the westernmost island of the Philippines and immediately bordering the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

US and Philippine military spokespersons denied that China had any significance for the training exercises. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* quoted an official statement saying, “These training exercises have nothing to do with China ... China is not the imagined opponent.”

The claim that training for littoral combat in the South China Sea “has nothing to do with China” is ludicrous. A chain of provocative decisions, bearing the fingerprints of Washington, has been made in the past month in the countries encircling China.

The Taiwanese foreign ministry expressed its support for a proposal in the Taiwanese legislature to deploy Tien Chien I “Sky Sword” missiles on Taiping Island, the northernmost island of the Spratly archipelago. This decision came in the immediate wake of the US \$6 billion arms sale to Taiwan, upgrading its F16 fighter jets.

In early October, Japan announced that it would allow its air forces to refuel American warplanes during joint exercises in the region. Japan has never refueled American warplanes previously, as this was seen as a major departure from the strict self-defense only policy of the Japanese military. Japan will now use its four new Boeing-built KC-767 tankers to refuel US jets in the Pacific.

US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta is currently on his first tour of Asia. He is negotiating the resumption of joint US military exercises with Indonesia, which were discontinued over a decade ago. He will also

travel to Japan and Korea to discuss increased military ties. Assistant US Secretary of State Kurt Campbell is traveling in the region at the same time. He will visit Indonesia and the Philippines.

These visits are part of the Obama administration's preparations for the Asia Pacific Economic Council (APEC) summit in Honolulu on November 12-13 and the ASEAN East Asia Summit in Bali on November 19. The East Asia Summit will mark the first occasion that a United States president has attended an ASEAN summit as a delegate.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in an article entitled "America's Pacific Century" in the November 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy*, outlined the strategy behind these moves on the part of Washington.

American foreign policy had reached what she called a "strategic pivot" where it must move away from a focus on the Middle East and toward the Asia Pacific. "One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region."

The United States would "leverage" its presence in the region, Clinton wrote, through the use of existing "treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand" which "are the fulcrum for our strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific."

Clinton outlined a string of initiatives on which Washington had embarked under President Obama as part of this "pivot." Each of these moves is part of a patent attempt to limit Chinese regional power and access to global markets and sea lanes. Clinton referred to the deployment of a US naval fleet to the South China Sea and new littoral combat ships to Singapore at the mouth of the Straits of Malacca. She wrote of the Lower Mekong Initiative and the US negotiations with countries in mainland Southeast Asia. She mentioned the increasing US military presence in Australia and the training of special forces in Indonesia.

"This kind of pivot is not easy," Clinton concluded, "but we have paved the way for it over the past two-and-a-half years, and we are committed to seeing it through as among the most important diplomatic efforts of our time."

Clinton's article brought together in outline the series of initiatives embarked upon by the Obama

administration in a determined thrust to counter the rising economic power of China. Tensions have dramatically escalated in the region over the past year as each new move by the United States has made increasingly possible the cutting off of Chinese trade routes.

As the provocations mount, so does the threat that an incident such as the ramming of the Chinese fishing vessel in the South China Sea could result in a military clash.



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