

Tensions continue to mount in South China Sea

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Geopolitical tensions have continued to mount over the disputed waters of the South China Sea since the conclusion of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Bali during July.

At the ASEAN gathering, rival claimants to the region signed a document entitled “Guidelines on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.” It was heralded by the mainstream press as a step toward the peaceful resolution of conflicting claims and away from the escalating rhetoric of confrontation. The declaration was a hollow document, founded on abstract declarations of friendship and existing consensus.

Since July, a confrontation has occurred between Chinese and Indian naval ships in the South China Sea. India has concluded a joint oil exploration agreement with Vietnam. Vietnam has signed a deal for joint marine patrols with Indonesia, and the Philippines has made a similar deal with Japan. State-run Chinese newspapers have decried these arrangements and denounced the machinations of the United States in the region.

In late July, an Indian amphibious assault vessel was sailing from the Vietnamese city of Nha Trang to the deep-water harbor of Cam Ranh Bay when a Chinese naval official warned the ship over radio that it was entering Chinese waters. The Indian ship ignored the warnings and continued its course.

The ship was part of the Indian fleet that has been deployed at the \$US2 billion facilities being constructed by New Delhi on the Andaman Islands, guarding the Bay of Bengal and monitoring the western end of the Straits of Malacca—a vital sea lane and strategic naval choke point.

In the aftermath of this confrontation, the Indian state-run oil company Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Vietnam’s Petrovietnam signed a deal to purchase BP’s stake in oil and gas development in the waters off the coast of Vietnam. The Chinese state-run *People’s Daily* denounced the joint deal as an infringement on Chinese sovereignty.

On September 16, China demanded that the Indian and Vietnamese governments stop their joint oil venture in blocks 127 and 128, which it claimed were in Chinese territorial waters. ONGC and Petrovietnam have ignored the Chinese demands.

Two days earlier, on September 13 and 14, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited Indonesian President Yudhoyono in Jakarta and initiated an agreement to “establish joint patrols in the sea area and lines of communication between our two countries.”

Of the claimants to the South China Sea, Indonesia has historically been among the least aggressive in the assertion of its sovereign claims and the most open to the acknowledgement of Chinese rights to the waters. That it would conclude an agreement to jointly patrol the region at the eastern mouth of the Straits of Malacca with Vietnam, an aggressively anti-China claimant, is a significant shift in Indonesian foreign policy.

During the past two months, Philippine President Aquino has travelled to China, the United States and Japan. In the beginning of September, Aquino brought a delegation of over 200 leading Filipino businessmen to China where he met with political and business leaders over several days. He returned to the Philippines with commitments from Chinese corporations to invest \$13 billion in Philippine infrastructure in the next year and

\$60 billion in the next five. The subject of the South China Sea was barely touched upon, and when it was raised it was covered over with the trite statement that the sea was becoming a zone of amity, friendship and cooperation.

On September 18, Aquino visited Washington. He brought a small delegation with him. When he returned to the Philippines he spoke proudly of the business deal he had concluded. US soft drink manufacturers had agreed to purchase \$100 million in coconuts from the Philippines. What was less trumpeted in the press, but of far greater significance, was an arrangement for the Philippines to purchase two Hamilton class naval cutters and several helicopters.

These deals highlight the tenuous balancing act between China and the United States in which each Southeast Asian country is currently engaged. The massive influx of investment from China is dwarfing that coming from the United States. The foreign policy of Southeast Asian nations teeters uncertainly between the rising economic power of China and the political and military might of the United States.

From September 25 to 28, in the wake of his trip to the United States, Aquino visited Japan and concluded an agreement similar to that between Indonesia and Vietnam, for the joint marine patrolling of the disputed waters of the South China Sea. Aquino brought to the proposal the explicit support of the United States.

A *People's Daily* editorial on September 26 denounced the Aquino administration's shifting allegiances. "Just three weeks ago during his visit to China, Aquino stressed his desire for peaceful dialogue over territorial disputes ... Backed by the US, the Philippines now tries to involve more regional players like Japan to collectively check China. But such efforts will be fruitless ... The Philippines does not have the willpower to sacrifice its relationship with China and become involved in an armed standoff."

The Chinese government is serving warning that it will not continue to tolerate what has been standard practice throughout the region until now—concluding massive economic deals with China and then engaging in political and military machinations against China with the backing of the United States.

A *Global Times* ~~commented~~ "to teach those around the South China Sea a lesson" was published on September 29. The *Global Times* commentary represents certain sections of the Chinese military and is often aggressive in tone. This comment, however, was a sharp escalation, even for the *Global Times*.

The article stated: "It is probably the right time for us to reason, think ahead and strike first before things gradually run out of hand. It seems all the countries around the area are preparing for an arms race ... It's very amusing to see some of the countries vow to threaten or even confront China with force just because the US announced that it has 'returned to Asia'."

"We shouldn't waste the opportunity," the commentary continued, "to launch some tiny-scale battles that could deter provocateurs from going further ... Punishment should be restricted only to the Philippines and Vietnam, who have been acting extremely aggressively these days."

The commentary dismissed the idea that a first strike against the Philippines and Vietnam would occasion reprisals from the United States. "US pressure in the South China Sea should not be taken seriously, at least for now given the war on terror in the Middle East and elsewhere is still plaguing it hard."

The United States government played a key role in the Vietnamese opening of Cam Ranh Bay, where the confrontation between India and China occurred. President Aquino's visit to Washington was arranged by the Obama administration immediately after his visit to China was announced. The deal between Japan and the Philippines was struck at the instigation and with the backing of the United States.

As Washington engages in political and military machinations throughout the region surrounding China, the Chinese response is becoming increasingly strident.



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