

Obama forces discussion at Bali summit on South China Sea

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American President Obama's relentless push against China last week over a full range of economic and strategic issues culminated on Saturday at the East Asia Summit in Bali where, despite China's resistance, the US managed to force talks over the South China Sea.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao had opposed such a discussion. He told leaders of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) on Friday that rival territorial claims in the South China Sea should be "resolved through friendly consultations and discussions by countries directly involved." In a pointed reference to the US, he added: "Outside forces should not, under any pretext, get involved." China has previously insisted that disputes should be settled bilaterally, not multilaterally.

Beijing is clearly angered by Washington's intrusion into the regional maritime disputes. The US intervention began last July when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared at an ASEAN meeting that the United States had "a national interest" in ensuring "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. China has not only staked a large claim over the sea, which contains substantial energy reserves, but is reliant on its sea lanes to transport huge imports of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

"Freedom of navigation" is a cynical US pretext to justify a build-up of naval forces in South East Asia, accompanied by closer ties with ASEAN countries. Prior to the Bali summit, Obama announced that the US military would station troops and make greater use of ports and airbases in northern and western Australia. Over the past two years, the US has strengthened naval ties with Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Saturday's summit was held behind closed doors, but details leaked to the *New York Times* by an unnamed American official revealed that the discussion on the South China Sea was tense. Having encouraged ASEAN leaders to

assert their claims over the past year, Obama was able to let them take the lead—Singapore, the Philippines and Vietnam spoke first, insisting that the issue had to be discussed multilaterally.

Under President Benigno Aquino, the Philippines has adopted a confrontational approach over what it now calls the West Philippine Sea. Despite Washington's claim that it takes no side in the territorial disputes, Clinton visited the Philippines last week and clearly signalled Washington's support, announcing that the US would supply another refitted coast guard ship to bolster the Philippine naval forces.

In an article on Friday entitled "Old U.S. Foe Proves Useful in Asia," the *Wall Street Journal* commented that "Washington's warming relationship with Hanoi perhaps illustrates America's full-court press in the region across a spectrum of fronts." It noted that in August the US navy had used Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay naval base for warship repairs for the first time since the US defeat in the Vietnam War.

Washington's "full-court press" stretches from Japan and South Korea, which are both formal US allies hosting large American military bases, through South East Asia, including Burma, which has close ties to China, and the Indian subcontinent. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh publicly backed the US at the Bali summit, calling for "all issues" to be discussed. Singh also told Chinese Premier Wen that the Indian oil company ONGC Videsh would continue its explorations in the South China Sea despite China's opposition.

According to the *New York Times*, Obama addressed the East Asian Summit after other leaders had spoken, putting Washington's firm stamp on the region. After repeating the claim that the US was not taking sides, he declared: "We have a powerful stake in maritime security in general, and in

the resolution of the South China Sea specifically—as a resident Pacific power, as a maritime nation, as a trading nation and as a guarantor of security in the Asia Pacific region.”

In response, Wen repeated China’s stance that the summit was not the forum to discuss the issue. He also took aim at the US claim that it was only concerned about “freedom of navigation,” declaring “that China goes to great pains to ensure that the shipping lanes are safe and free.” China, clearly put on the back foot by Washington’s sustained diplomatic offensive, attempted to accommodate to ASEAN leaders.

A comment published by the Xinhua news agency on Friday underlined the anger in Beijing. “If the United States sticks to its Cold War mentality and continues to engage with Asian nations in a self-assertive way, it is doomed to incur repulsion in the region,” commentator Wei Jianhua warned.

The Chinese *Global Times*, which often adopts a more aggressively nationalist line, called on China to use its economic muscle to pull ASEAN countries into line. Noting the relative economic decline of the US, an editorial posted Saturday counselled: “China should learn to use this to protect its political interests. Any country which chooses to be a pawn in the US chess game will lose the opportunity to benefit from China’s economy.”

A statistic presented by Wen in talks with ASEAN leaders underlined China’s economic importance. China’s trade with ASEAN is expected to surpass \$350 billion this year, more than 40 times what it was two decades ago, and eclipsing US trade with ASEAN.

By forcing a discussion on the South China Sea, the Obama administration clearly feels that it had something of a victory over China at the summit by securing the backing of most regional countries. That sentiment was reflected in the American media, with an editorial in the *New York Times* on Saturday declaring that it was “a good thing” that Obama had “sent a clear message that this country is not ceding anything in the Pacific.”

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial entitled “Asia Pushes Back Against China” supported Obama’s efforts to forge an anti-China alliance. “The region’s best chance of heading off Chinese adventurism is a united front,” it declared. “If other countries don’t defend the principles of international law at stake here, China will be encouraged to make greater

demands. Beijing still has a long way to go up the learning curve of how a great power should behave.”

The newspaper’s reference to “the principles of international law” underlines the hypocrisy of Washington’s stance. Regardless of the relative legal merits of the competing maritime claims in the South China Sea, the US is appealing to a law—the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—that it is yet to sign. Obama’s repeated call over the past week for China to “play by the rules” means that Beijing has to abide by the international framework as determined in Washington.

The implications of US diplomatic bullying go well beyond the Bali summit. By intervening directly into what has been regarded for decades as a troublesome, but limited regional dispute, Obama has transformed the South China Sea into another dangerous flashpoint in Asia. As in the Middle East and Central Asia, the US is seeking to use its military might to undermine its rivals and offset its economic decline.

All the steps by the US military to strengthen its forces in South East Asia are aimed at controlling what American naval strategists have long regarded as vital—the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok straits connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans. These waterways are known in naval jargon as “chokepoints,” precisely because they could be exploited to cut off essential supplies to a rival power—previously Japan, now China.

Obama’s diplomatic intervention in Asia and sharpening tensions with China recall the bitter rivalry between the US and Japan in the 1930s that led step-by-step to a breakdown of relations and ultimately to war in the Pacific.



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