US Senators escalate tensions in Southeast Asia

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US Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman concluded a week-long tour of the Philippines, Vietnam and Burma on January 20, meeting with heads of state and opposition leaders. Each stop was a calculated and marked escalation of US military and political machinations against China in the region.

Every meeting saw the assertion of the interests of US imperialism against its geopolitical rival China. McCain and Lieberman repeatedly stressed Washington's stake in the vital waterways and oil resources of the South China Sea. Seven countries have claims to the disputed waters, with the most heated confrontations recently occurring between the Philippines and Vietnam, on the one side, and China, on the other.

McCain is the ranking Republican member of the Senate Armed Forces committee and Lieberman a committee member. While not part of the Obama administration, their speeches and discussions carry significant weight with regional powers.

In the Philippines, the senators met with President Benigno Aquino, Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario and Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin. They made arrangements for bilateral maritime security talks to occur in Washington on January 26 and for meetings to take place between del Rosario and Secretary of State Clinton, Gazmin and Secretary of Defense Panetta, and for a meeting in the White House between President Obama and Aquino in May.

During their press conference at the US embassy in Manila, the Senators consistently referred to the South China Sea as the West Philippine Sea. This shift in nomenclature was legislated in the Philippines in June 2011, and was a provocative step designed to support the Philippines' claim to the disputed waters and to stoke nationalist fervor over the conflict. McCain and Lieberman's adoption of this name is tantamount to an acknowledgement of the validity of the Philippines claim.

McCain went an extra step. The January 19 edition of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* quoted McCain during his press conference as calling for US involvement in the South China Sea to "go further." The US should let other countries know "which claims the US accepts, which ones we do not, and what actions we are prepared to support." This is an aggressive escalation of Washington's involvement in the region.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's announcement at the ASEAN summit in 2010 that the US had a "national interest" in the South China Sea and was "back in Asia to stay" was regarded as a bombshell. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi described Clinton's remarks as "virtually an attack on China." Prior to Clinton's declaration, Washington had taken no official position on the South China Sea. Clinton's statement laid the foundation for Washington to offer to 'mediate' between the rival claimants—a move bitterly opposed by Beijing.

While declaring the US had a 'national interest' in the South China Sea, the Obama administration maintained that did not have a position regarding the rival claims to the disputed waters. De facto, however, Washington's stance encouraged Vietnam and the Philippines to more aggressively assert their claims against China.

McCain is now calling for Washington to indicate which claims it regards as valid, which it thinks are not, and how it would be prepared to enforce these claims. The only possible outcome would be for Washington to insist that Beijing reduce or eliminate its claims in the South China Sea.

On January 19, immediately after McCain and

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Lieberman's visit, Philippine Lt. Gen. Juancho Sabban, head of the Philippine Western Command, announced that the United States and the Philippines would conduct war games in March. US and Philippine marines, he stated, would storm an oil rig off the coast of Palawan. These are waters claimed by both the Philippines and China. Repeated official statements that China is not the target of these joint training exercises strain credulity to breaking point.

Responding to the announcement, the Chinese state-run Xinhua news agency stated, "One can't help but raise questions about the real intentions behind Washington's pivot to the Asia-Pacific region."

McCain announced that the United States would be supplying the Philippines with two new warships in the coming months, in addition to the one supplied last year.

McCain's visit to Vietnam was equally provocative. Washington has had an arms embargo on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam since 1984. During a visit to Vietnam in August 2011, US Senator Jim Webb, also a member of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, called for the lifting of the embargo. McCain and Lieberman began to lay out the concrete steps whereby this lifting could occur and the US could begin supplying Vietnam with weapons.

Lieberman announced that Vietnam had presented a "long laundry list of weaponry" that it wished to acquire from the US, especially anti-aircraft systems. He said: "There are certain weapons systems that the Vietnamese would like to buy from us or receive from us, and we'd like to be able to transfer those systems to them …But it's not going to happen unless they improve their human rights record."

Lieberman's statement makes clear that in exchange for Hanoi making token gestures at 'improving their human rights record,' Washington would lift its arms embargo. That this announcement came not just from Lieberman but from McCain, a former US POW in Vietnam, seems calculated to make the announcement palatable to the American public.

Lieberman and McCain carried out a similar agenda in Burma. They held a photo op with recently released opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, where McCain announced that the United States would lift its economic sanctions against Burma if the Burmese government conducted "fair and free" by-elections in March. This move is part of Washington's campaign to wean Burma away from its economic and political ties with China.

The thawing of relations with Burma accelerated in late 2011 with the abrupt cancellation by the Burmese government of a joint dam project with China. When the Burmese junta released some political prisoners, Clinton pointed to this as the evidence that Washington might soon begin lifting economic sanctions. As Burma moves away from China's political and military orbit, Washington is looking for a justification for restored economic and political ties. McCain's announcement indicates that the March by-elections may be used as that justification.

Neither McCain nor Lieberman are political allies of President Obama. That McCain, a leading Republican and former presidential candidate, is carrying forward the claims of Washington in the region indicates that the Obama 'pivot to Asia' is a move supported by the US ruling elite as a whole. McCain and Lieberman's visit is yet another step in the renewed assertion of the interests of US imperialism in the region.

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