

A dangerous dispute in the South China Sea

John Chan
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For more than a month, Philippine and Chinese vessels have been confronting each other near the Scarborough Shoal—a triangular chain of disputed reefs in the South China Sea. What began as minor incident involving a warning by a Philippine gunship to 12 Chinese fishing boats has escalated into a diplomatic row that risks military conflict.

The Philippines recently held joint military exercises with thousands of US troops, provocatively involving an amphibious operation and an assault on an oil rig. Pro-government groups have staged inflammatory anti-Chinese protests in the Philippines and outside Chinese consulates in other countries. China reacted by blocking Philippine banana imports and issuing travel warnings to Chinese tourists. The Chinese navy has held its own exercises, including landing drills, in the South China Sea, amid warmongering in the state media.

The dangerous standoff over the Scarborough Shoal is above all the responsibility of the Obama administration. Its confrontational stance towards China has encouraged South East Asian countries to press their territorial claims in the South China Sea. It is unthinkable that the Philippines, which is militarily and economically far weaker than China, would have acted so recklessly without the political and military backing of Washington.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made clear Washington's support for the former American colony when she was in Manila last November. Amid rising tensions with China, she reaffirmed the 1951 US-Philippines mutual defence treaty, declaring that "the United States will always be in the corner of the Philippines." Clinton also pointedly referred to the South China Sea as the "the West Philippines Sea"—the new name invented by chauvinists in Manila.

The sea lanes through South East Asia are central to the Obama administration's so-called strategic "pivot"

to Asia that is aimed at containing China militarily and undermining its influence throughout the region.

At a summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2010, Clinton proclaimed that the US had "a national interest" in preserving "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Thousands of ships routinely pass through these waterways unhindered. What Clinton was signalling was Washington's determination to maintain naval dominance in the South China Sea, including through the deployment of US warships close to the Chinese coastline.

Clinton also intervened diplomatically, offering to help broker international talks to resolve longstanding maritime disputes involving China and South East Asian countries. Her remark was a signal to ASEAN countries to press their disputes with China, which insists that claims be resolved bilaterally. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi reacted by branding the remarks as "virtually an attack on China."

Vietnam has also been establishing closer ties with Washington in order to consolidate its control over some of the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Even India has made a tentative intervention, forming joint ventures with Vietnam to explore oil in the South China Sea before backing off. All these moves have angered the Chinese regime.

Beijing regards the South China Sea as one of its "core interests", that is, part of its territory that it would defend by force if necessary. China is heavily dependent on these sea routes for trade, especially for energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East, as well as manufacturing exports to Europe and other regions. The South China Sea by some estimates is believed to contain 23-30 billion tonnes of oil—or 12 percent of the global reserves.

By strengthening its control over South East Asian shipping lanes, especially key "choke points" such as the Malacca Strait, the US maintains the threat of a

crippling naval blockade in the event of conflict with China. As part of its “strategic focus” on Asia, the Obama administration has signed an agreement with Canberra in November to station Marines and access bases in northern Australia near these waters. The US is not only building up the Philippine military capacity, but stationing its latest littoral warships in Singapore and boosting military ties with Vietnam.

The Chinese regime has responded to the “dilemma of Malacca” by seeking alternative land trade routes, including through Pakistan and Burma, with which Beijing has longstanding ties. The Obama administration, however, is seeking to undermine this strategy. In the case of Burma, the US has dramatically improved relations with the military junta, resulting in Clinton’s visit in December—the first by a US secretary of state in half a century. As a result, Beijing’s plans for energy pipelines and rail lines connecting southern China to Burmese ports on the Indian Ocean are being called into question.

More broadly, the Obama administration is strengthening its military alliances in Asia with Japan and South Korea as well as Australia, and its strategic partnership with India. As a result, South Korea has adopted a more belligerent stance towards China’s ally North Korea, Japan has more aggressively asserted its claims against China over the disputed Senkaku Islands, and India has pressed its border dispute with China. Fearing encirclement, Beijing has responded by forging closer strategic ties with Russia, resulting in large-scale joint war games, including a major naval exercise in North East Asia last month.

The driving force behind the Obama administration’s reckless confrontation with China is the historic decline of US imperialism. Over the past two decades, Washington has repeatedly resorted to wars of aggression, especially in the Middle East, exploiting its military dominance in an attempt to shore up its economic and strategic position. The “pivot” to Asia has dramatically raised the stakes. By seeking to stamp its hegemony over Asia, the US risks triggering a catastrophic war between nuclear-armed powers.

Despite its economic dependence on China as the world’s premier cheap labour platform, US imperialism cannot tolerate any potential challenge to its dominant position within the existing global strategic and economic framework. By deliberately

raising tensions throughout Asia, the Obama administration has inflamed the numerous regional flashpoints that extend from the Korean Peninsula to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and to rivalries in South Asia. An insignificant clash over Scarborough Shoal can rapidly become an international trial of strength as China defends its “core interests” and the US militarily backs its Philippine ally.

The very real dangers of war cannot be overcome by protests and appeals to governments. Its root causes lie in the worsening global crisis of the capitalist system and the resulting intensifying clash of strategic and economic interests. The only means of ending the rise of militarism and war is a unified revolutionary movement of workers in China, the US, Asia and around the world to abolish the profit system and its reactionary division of the world into rival nation-states, and to establish socialism internationally.

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