

Clinton stirs tensions with China ahead of ASEAN summit

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An Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) ministerial summit that begins today in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh will be dominated by tensions deliberately stirred up by the Obama administration as part of its concerted drive to undermine China's political and strategic influence throughout the region.

On the eve of the meeting, the Japanese and Chinese foreign ministers held emergency talks in Phnom Penh yesterday after a dispute over a group of islands, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, erupted again this week. Tokyo summoned the Chinese ambassador to lodge a formal protest yesterday after three Chinese fishery patrol vessels cruised near the Japanese-controlled islands in the East China Sea.

“It is clear that the Senkaku islands are inherently Japanese territory from a historical point of view and in terms of international law,” Japan's chief cabinet secretary, Osamu Fujimura, told the media. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin responded in kind, declaring that Japan had no grounds for complaint. The Chinese vessels, he said, were “performing patrolling operations in waters administered by China.”

A major diplomatic row between the two countries blew up in 2010 when the Japanese coast guard detained the captain of a Chinese fishing vessel after an alleged collision. At the time, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton fuelled tensions by declaring that the US would be obliged to come to the aid of its ally, Japan, in the event of any conflict. The five small uninhabited rocky outcrops are strategically located between the Japanese island of Okinawa and Taiwan, and the surrounding waters are thought to contain significant energy reserves.

The latest dispute did not emerge accidentally. On

Saturday, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda provocatively suggested that his government was considering purchasing the Senkaku islands from their private Japanese owner. Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, a right-wing nationalist, launched a fund in April to buy the islands. Not surprisingly, Beijing reacted angrily to Noda's remarks, with the foreign ministry issuing a statement declaring that China would not allow the islands to be purchased by anyone.

Clinton arrived in Tokyo on Sunday at the start of a tour through Asia before the ASEAN meeting. Despite a claim by Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gamba that the Senkaku issue was not discussed with Clinton, there is no doubt that the Obama administration has given tacit support to Noda's comments.

While she has rarely mentioned China by name, every leg of Clinton's trip—to Japan, Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia—has focussed on strengthening Washington's ties at Beijing's expense. She chose Mongolia, on China's northern border, to hypocritically extol the virtues of democracy, criticising governments that “work around the clock to restrict people's access to ideas and information, to imprison them for expressing their views, to usurp the rights of citizens to choose their leaders, to govern without accountability...”

Quite apart from the dictatorial and autocratic regimes that Washington backs and has backed in the past—including in Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan, the Philippines, South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore, the US has made deep inroads into democratic rights under the banner of the “war on terror.” The Obama administration is currently working around the clock to put WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on trial for exposing US war crimes.

The US is cynically exploiting the banner of “democracy” to consolidate support for its diplomatic push against China. That was on display in Vietnam, where Clinton only perfunctorily raised the issue of “human rights.” The focus of her visit was on strengthening economic and strategic relations with the Stalinist regime. She hailed the growing trade between the two countries and expressed the hope that the US would become the no. 1 investor in the country in the near future.

Clinton also commended Vietnam for its “contribution to a collaborative, diplomatic resolution of disputes and the reduction of tensions in the South China Sea.” In fact, the direct opposite is the case: Vietnam and the Philippines, encouraged by Washington, have taken aggressive moves in their maritime disputes with China in these strategic waters. For the past two months, the Philippines has been engaged in a standoff with China over the disputed Scarborough Shoal. Last month, Vietnam provocatively approved a new maritime law, proclaiming its sovereignty over the disputed Spratly and Paracel island groups in the South China Sea.

The heightened conflicts in the South China Sea are a product of the Obama administration’s intervention. In 2010, Clinton declared at an ASEAN summit that the US had a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” through the area. She also supported a multilateral solution to maritime disputes, directly cutting across China’s calls for bilateral negotiations. At last November’s ASEAN summit in Bali, President Obama backed South East Asian countries to force a discussion on the South China Sea despite China’s strong objections.

This issue will undoubtedly be another source of tension at the ASEAN ministerial meeting today. The Philippines is pressing for a strong ASEAN statement on a regional code of conduct for activities in the South China Sea, including a reference to the Scarborough Shoal, despite opposition from countries such as Cambodia, which is closely aligned to Beijing. In Vietnam, Clinton expressed her support for ASEAN leaders to develop such a code of conduct.

China’s state-run Xinhua news agency urged ASEAN ministers to be “wary” of letting the South China Sea “distract” them, as the summit was “not a proper

platform” for discussing the issue. A foreign ministry spokesman described discussions of the South China Sea as “deliberate hype” designed “to interfere with the relationship between China and ASEAN.”

Before arriving in Phnom Penh, Clinton made a brief visit to Laos, becoming the first US secretary of state to do so since 1955. The purpose of the trip was obvious—to begin the process of undermining China’s close relations with the country. The Obama administration has already put out feelers to Vientiane, clearing the way for the country’s entry into the World Trade Organisation. Laos is also part of the Lower Mekong Initiative established by the US in 2010 to cover all countries along the Mekong River, except China.

The Obama administration’s aggressive diplomacy in South East Asia has been particularly marked in relation to Burma (Myanmar). Over the past three years, the US has encouraged a shift by the Burmese military junta to open the country to foreign investment and ties with the West. Washington has hailed the bogus elections inside Burma and re-established diplomatic relations with the regime. Clinton announced plans yesterday for a further easing of US economic sanctions on Burma as the new US ambassador arrived in the country.

This forceful offensive by American imperialism across Asia over the past three years has been complemented by a major US military build-up. Last month, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta told a regional strategic forum in Singapore that over the next decade the US navy would have 60 percent of its forces in the Asia Pacific region. While Panetta denied that China was the target, the US has been strengthening strategic ties with virtually every other country in Asia.

By recklessly ratcheting up tensions with China, the Obama administration is turning Asia into a dangerous powder keg that could be ignited by any one of a number of regional flashpoints, such as the South China Sea and the Senkaku islands.



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