

Tensions heighten in South China Sea

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Following the failure of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to agree on a final communiqué at its ministerial summit in mid-July, tensions over the South China Sea have continued to rise, in particular between China, Vietnam and the Philippines.

China announced over the weekend that a military garrison would be added to its recently established “city” of Sansha in the disputed Paracel Islands, provoking sharp criticism from Vietnam and the Philippines. The city of just over a thousand Chinese residents is designed as an administrative centre to bolster Beijing’s claims to the Paracel and Spratly groups, as well as the waters around them.

Vietnam condemned the move, saying it “violates international law,” and lodged a formal protest with Beijing. With Hanoi’s tacit approval, about 150 demonstrators gathered in the Vietnamese capital on Sunday for the third time this month to protest China’s claims in the South China Sea. Protesters carried Vietnamese flags and banners declaring, “The Spratly and Paracel Islands belong to Vietnam!” and “Down with Chinese aggression!”

The Philippines summoned the Chinese ambassador to lodge a complaint against the announcement. In Monday’s State of the Union address, President Benigno Aquino belligerently declared that the Philippines would not back down in the two-month stand-off with China over the Scarborough Shoal, known as Bajo de Masinloc in the Philippines.

“There are those who say that we should let Bajo de Masinloc go; we should avoid trouble. But if someone entered your yard and told you he owned it, would you agree? Would it be right to give away that which is

rightfully ours?” the president asked.

Aquino announced a substantial expansion of the Philippine military, urging legislators to pass an Armed Forces modernisation bill allocating 75 billion pesos (\$US1.8 billion) over the next five years to buy additional military aircraft, frigates, armoured personnel carriers and artillery. The funds come on top of the 28 billion pesos spent on the military since 2011.

The US has encouraged and assisted the Philippine military build-up, including the provision last year of a former American coast guard cutter that was deployed to the Scarborough Shoal. A second Hamilton Class cutter is due to arrive soon. However, even with this boost, the Philippines is clearly no match for China and relies heavily on US backing in its dispute in the South China Sea. The Obama administration is in discussions with the Philippines to extend military basing arrangements in the former US colony.

While the US media has blamed China for the heightened tensions in the South China Sea, Washington is centrally responsible for inflaming the dangerous flashpoint. As part of its efforts to undermine Chinese influence throughout Asia, the Obama administration has declared that the US has “a national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation”—that is, free access for its warships—through the South China Sea.

The US has also pushed for ASEAN countries to adopt a joint approach to negotiations with China over disputes in the South China Sea, undercutting Beijing’s insistence that any talks take place bilaterally. This month’s ASEAN summit effectively broke down over calls for a common code of conduct in the South China Sea, and a Philippine demand that the final

communiqué include an explicit reference to the Scarborough Shoal.

For the first time in almost half a century, the ASEAN ministerial meeting failed to issue a final statement. Cambodia, which chaired the meeting and has close ties with China, refused to accept a compromise draft. The gathering effectively divided along pro-US and pro-China lines. A flurry of diplomatic efforts eventually produced a weak joint statement last week that papered over the differences but resolved nothing.

The White House is yet to comment on China's latest announcement. Republican Senator John McCain condemned the move, however, declaring this week: "The decision by China's Central Military Commission to deploy troops to islands in the South China Sea, which are also claimed by Vietnam, is unnecessarily provocative."

In reality, the US has played the main role in stoking up the longstanding disputes. The Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, which began in 2009, has encouraged Vietnam and the Philippines, in particular, to aggressively pursue territorial claims in the South China Sea.

China's establishment of Sansha city follows Vietnam's adoption of legislation last month proclaiming its sovereignty over the large areas of the South China Sea, including the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Hanoi's law requires foreign naval vessels passing through the waters to notify Vietnamese authorities—provoking a protest by Beijing.

Friction between China and Vietnam is being heightened by competing exploration efforts to exploit the large oil and gas reserves believed to be in the area. The China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) recently called for bids for oil exploration in waters claimed by Vietnam. India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corporation last week announced that it had accepted Vietnam's proposal to continue drilling in the South China Sea, reversing a previous decision to pull out after Chinese objections.

As well as having energy reserves and rich fisheries, the South China Sea has strategic shipping lanes that are vital to China's imports of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. The US military build-up in South East Asia is aimed especially at ensuring naval dominance over these waterways, including key "choke points" such as the Malacca Strait. In the event of a conflict with China, the US would be able to mount a debilitating economic blockade.

The Obama administration is recklessly inflaming tensions in the South China Sea, well aware that that it could trigger a war. National Security Council senior director for Asia, Danny Russell, told Saturday's *Sydney Morning Herald* that the standoff over the Scarborough Shoal had "threatened to escalate" and created "a scenario of grave concern to all countries in the region."

Russell pointed to the whipping up of nationalism in both countries, saying: "China and the Philippines found themselves in a difficult situation, facing pressure not to back down and the zero-sum challenge of competing territorial claims threatened to escalate tension." As a result, he warned, the effect was to "underscore the perennial risk in international affairs that one thing can lead to another."

Russell repeated Washington's call for China to agree to a code of conduct in the South China Sea. Far from averting a confrontation, the US demand is aimed at consolidating its support among ASEAN countries and putting further pressure on China to back down. All this only increases the danger that an incident—even a minor one—could escalate into a full-blown conflict that would drag in the major powers.



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