

# US stokes disputes in South China Sea

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The Obama administration has further inflamed disputes in the South China Sea with a US State Department statement on Friday criticising China for formally establishing the city of Sansha and a garrison in the Paracel Islands.

State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell maintained that the US was not taking sides in the competing territorial claims by China and several South East Asian countries. However, in noting “an uptick in confrontational rhetoric” and “disagreements over resource exploitation”, he singled out China’s upgrading of Sansha City and the stationing of troops as running “counter to collaborative diplomatic efforts to resolve differences and risk further escalating tensions in the region”.

Ventrell also pointed to “coercive economic actions, and the incidents around the Scarborough Reef, including the use of barriers to deny access”—an oblique criticism of China’s actions in the ongoing dispute with the Philippines, a US ally, over the reef. He called for agreement between the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China over a code of conduct in the South China Sea—again cutting across Beijing’s call for disputes to be settled bilaterally, not multilaterally.

The US statement was calculated not to lower, but to raise regional tensions by giving implicit support to ASEAN countries, especially the Philippines and Vietnam, to press their maritime claims in the South China Sea against China. The Obama administration has been exploiting the territorial disputes to drive a wedge between ASEAN and China as part of its broader efforts to undermine Chinese influence throughout Asia.

The US Senate last Thursday called for restraint

between China and its neighbours, but then pointedly added that the US was committed to assisting South East Asian countries in remaining “strong and independent”.

China’s Foreign Ministry issued a formal protest against the State Department statement, summoning the deputy US chief of mission in Beijing, Robert Wang, on Saturday to make “serious representations” about the issue. In a press statement, Assistant Foreign Minister Zhang Kunsheng expressed China’s “strong dissatisfaction and resolute opposition” to the US action, warning that it did not help “to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea or the Asia Pacific.”

In separate remarks, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang pointed to the hypocrisy of Washington’s stance. “Why does the US turn a blind eye to the facts that certain countries opened a number of oil and gas blocks and issued domestic laws illegally appropriating Chinese islands and waters?” he asked.

The Philippines and Vietnam have recently offered energy exploration contracts in disputed areas of the South China Sea. China has done the same. In June, Vietnam passed legislation proclaiming its jurisdiction over the Paracel and Spratly Island groups also claimed by China. Both countries have condemned China’s establishment of Sansha City and a garrison based on Woody Island in the Paracel group.

China’s state-run media also reacted to the US statement. The overseas edition of the *People’s Daily*, the official mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), declared: “We are entirely entitled to shout at the United States, ‘Shut up’. How can meddling by other countries be tolerated in matters that

are within the scope of Chinese sovereignty?” The domestic edition of the newspaper accused the US of “fanning the flames and provoking division, deliberately creating antagonism with China.”

China’s sharp response is a measure of the escalating tensions that the Obama administration has deliberately fuelled. In 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provocatively declared for the first time that the US had a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. Washington’s intrusion into what it had previously been regarded as a regional issue encouraged other claimants, especially the Philippines and Vietnam, to ramp up their maritime disputes with China.

The American Navy routinely asserts its “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea and other strategically sensitive waters near the Chinese mainland. The US is also developing closer military ties with its former colony, the Philippines, including the transfer of two former US coastguard cutters to bolster its naval capacity. The US and the Philippines are also in talks over a basing arrangement similar to that announced with Australia last November. Under that deal, a US marine presence is being built up in the northern Australian city of Darwin and US warships and warplanes will have greater access to Australian military bases.

There is nothing benign about the US strategic focus on the South China Sea. The American military build-up in Australia, the Philippines and Singapore, as well as its strengthening of strategic ties with Vietnam and other South East Asian countries, is aimed at establishing Washington’s ability to deny “freedom of navigation” to China in the event of a conflict. China is heavily dependent on shipping lanes through the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean for importing energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

In a statement last week to the US House Armed Services Committee, David Berteau and Michael Green—analysts from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)—commented: “The central geostrategic uncertainty the United States and its allies and partners face in the Asia Pacific region is how

China’s growing power and influence will impact order and stability in the years ahead.”

Berteau and Green are the authors of “US Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: an Independent Study”. While not government policy, the CSIS study was commissioned by the Pentagon and is broadly in line with the Obama administration’s confrontational “pivot” to Asia. The document makes a number of proposals to strengthen the US strategic position throughout the Indo-Pacific region, especially in South East Asia.

In their testimony, Berteau and Green declared that it was not a matter of preparing to fight China, but then contradicted themselves by adding: “At the same time, US force posture must demonstrate a readiness and capacity to fight and win—particularly in Northeast Asia—even under more challenging circumstances associated with anti-access and area denial and other threats to US military operations in the Western Pacific posed by [China’s] PLA military modernisation.”

The Obama administration’s actions in Asia are of a piece with its reckless interventions in the Middle East in Libya and now Syria, along with its military threats against Iran. The US is attempting to exploit its military strength to boost its political and economic position internationally against its European and Asian rivals. In doing so, it raises the danger of conflicts that escalate out of control and embroil all the major military powers.



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