

Clinton pressures Beijing over South China Sea

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During her trip to Beijing this week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton again exploited regional maritime disputes between China and its neighbours to enhance Washington's influence in Asia at Beijing's expense. The blunt reactions of Chinese officials and the media point to deepening resentment at the Obama administration's aggressive intervention into the region.

Clinton used her joint press conference with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to repeat her call for a formal code of conduct between China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to regulate disputes in the South China Sea. While Clinton called for a negotiated solution to ease tensions, the US intervention in the disputes has only encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam to take a tougher stance and led to growing frictions.

Before her arrival in Beijing, Clinton visited Jakarta where she encouraged the Indonesian government to urge ASEAN to press for a "robust code of conduct" with China. The US call for an ASEAN-China agreement cuts directly across Beijing's insistence that any disputes be resolved bilaterally, not multilaterally.

Washington's stance has opened up divisions within ASEAN that were evident at a ministerial summit in Phnom Penh in July. The meeting failed, for the first time, to issue a joint communiqué, amid rancorous disagreements over the issue of the South China Sea between the Philippines, a US ally, and Cambodia, which has close ties to China.

China's foreign minister Yang on Tuesday rebuffed Clinton's call for a code of conduct, reasserting that

"China has sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and their adjacent waters." He undercut Clinton by declaring that "freedom of navigation"—the banner exploited by the US to stake its "national interest" in the disputed waters—was assured and would never be an issue in the future. He said the disputes in the South China Sea should only involve those "directly concerned"—that is, not the US.

In her meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao yesterday, Clinton declared that the "US-China relationship is on a strong and solid base." The pair exchanged platitudes in front of the media, but the growing tensions between the two powers were underlined by the last minute cancellation of Clinton's meeting with Vice President Xi Jinping, who is due to take over as president this year. While officially described as a normal "adjustment of itinerary," the decision can only be interpreted as a diplomatic snub designed to register China's displeasure with the Obama administration's policies in Asia.

Clinton also pressed China over its blocking of UN Security Council resolutions aimed at strengthening the US-led intervention in Syria to oust President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Clinton expressed disappointment over China's stance, while foreign minister Yang repeated his government's opposition to outside interference in Syria.

The dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku islets (known as Diaoyu in China) in the East China Sea flared again while Clinton was in Beijing. Japanese news reports indicated that the government in Tokyo had reached an agreement to buy the islands from their private Japanese owner. The Chinese foreign

ministry reacted to the provocative move by declaring: “Japan single-mindedly pushed forward the island purchase process, which severely harmed China’s territorial sovereignty and hurt the feelings of the Chinese people.”

As in the South China Sea, the Obama administration has encouraged its ally Japan to take a more aggressive position toward China. A sharp diplomatic row erupted in 2010 after Japanese authorities detained the captain of a Chinese fishing boat that allegedly collided with a Japanese coast guard vessel. Last month a group of pro-Chinese activists from Hong Kong landed on the disputed islands, again raising diplomatic tensions.

The US claims that it does not support either side in the South China Sea and East China Sea territorial disputes. However, as tensions between Japan and China mounted in 2010, Clinton affirmed that if war broke out between the two countries over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands the US would be compelled to come to the defence of its ally.

While the exchanges between Clinton and Chinese officials were relatively muted, the state-owned media was openly critical of the US.

The *People’s Daily*, the Chinese Communist Party’s official mouthpiece, declared in a front-page comment prior to Clinton’s arrival: “The United States’ recent conduct concerning the Diaoyu islands and South China Sea issues cannot but create the suspicion that it is attempting to sow discord in order to fish for advantage.” It warned: “In the long term, this kind of adjustment in the United States’ Asia-Pacific strategy will not bring gains, and could even backfire.”

The state-run Xinhua news agency warned on Tuesday that the “US position on the Diaoyu islands is very dangerous and not conducive to the security and stability of the Asia Pacific region.” Referring to the Obama administration’s focus or “pivot” to Asia since 2009, the article criticised the US for “intervening into other countries’ issues overtly or secretly, sowing discord among Asia-Pacific countries, flaring up regional tension, and even toughening the settlement of disputes by holding a joint military drill and enhancing

front-line military deployment.”

The tone of these articles is significant. Previously, openly critical comments have tended to be found in the more hard-line media such as the *Global Times*. That newspaper yesterday challenged Clinton over her previous public warning to China against “coercing” countries with which it has territorial disputes. The *Global Times* declared: “If China could really deal with the Philippines and Vietnam through ‘coercion’, these two countries would not have acted as provocatively in recent times, and the South China Sea issue would have been much simpler, because the parties involved would have simply prepared for war.”

The *Global Times* reflects the view of a layer of the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy, especially in the military, which believes that the Hu Jintao leadership has compromised China’s strategic interests by not taking a tougher stand against the US. It concluded yesterday’s comment by declaring that “China should not let the US have any doubt or other misjudgements regarding its determination.”

The media commentary in China underscores the reckless character of US foreign policy, which is stoking tensions throughout Asia as a means for reasserting American hegemony in the region. Unsurprisingly, the Obama administration’s initiatives have produced a reaction in Beijing and raise the danger that any one of the region’s numerous flashpoints could become the trigger for conflict and war.



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