

Clinton stokes up tensions with China on tour of Asia

Peter Symonds
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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton concluded her latest Asian tour with a cynical appeal for an easing of tensions throughout the region over various maritime disputes. Far from being a voice of moderation, Clinton used every leg of her 10-day trip to further the Obama administration's efforts to undermine and isolate China, deliberately stoking disputes, particularly over the South China Sea.

Speaking to reporters last weekend at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Vladivostok, Clinton declared: "Whether we're talking about the South China Sea or the East China Sea, my message has been the same to everyone. Now is the time for everyone to make efforts to reduce the tensions." She promised to work closely with countries in Asia to help ensure that territorial disputes did not mushroom into more serious problems.

The US has done precisely the opposite over the past three years. Clinton has been the diplomatic spearhead of the Obama administration's so-called pivot to Asia. In mid-2009, she told an ASEAN ministerial summit that the US was "back in South East Asia." In the middle of the following year, Clinton provocatively announced that Washington had "a national interest" in ensuring "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Her intervention into what had previously been a regional issue prompted Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to describe Clinton's remarks as "virtually an attack on China."

In the course of her latest tour, Clinton repeatedly called for ASEAN countries to unite to press China for an enforceable "code of conduct" to regulate disputes in the South China Sea. The US proposal cuts directly

across China's insistence that its conflicting maritime claims with South East Asian countries be negotiated bilaterally. Clinton again raised the issue in Beijing, provoking hostile comments in the state-owned media. The *People's Daily* accused the US of "attempting to sow discord in order to fish for advantage."

While the Obama administration has declared itself "neutral" in the various disputes, its intervention has encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam to push their maritime claims more aggressively. Washington's "neutrality" is just window dressing. Last November, Clinton stood on the deck of a US warship in Manila, reaffirmed strong military ties between the US and the Philippines and provocatively referred to the South China Sea by its newly-coined local name, "West Philippine Sea."

As part of its military build-up throughout the region, Washington is providing defence assistance to the Philippines, especially aimed at boosting its navy. The two countries are also discussing new basing arrangements, potentially similar to the deal signed last November during President Obama's visit to Canberra that involves stationing Marines in Darwin and expanding the US use of Australian air and naval bases. The Pentagon is also stationing warships in Singapore and seeking to access bases and ports in Thailand and Vietnam. These moves are part of a broader strategy to ensure American domination over vital shipping routes through South East Asia on which China relies to import energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

The South China Sea is not the only dangerous flashpoint that the US has intentionally inflamed. The

Obama administration has encouraged Japan to forcefully assert its territorial claims against China, resulting in heightened tensions over the disputed Senkaku Islands (known as Diaoyu in China). A major diplomatic row erupted in August 2010 when Japan detained the captain of a Chinese fishing boat that had allegedly collided with a Japanese coast guard vessel. While declaring Washington's "neutrality" in the territorial dispute, Clinton told her Japanese counterpart that the US would nevertheless come to Japan's assistance under the US-Japan Security Treaty in the event of war with China.

The issue again flared last month when a group of Hong Kong-based Chinese nationalists landed on one of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets, prompting right-wing Japanese activists to do the same. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda has compounded the friction with China by provocatively declaring that his government would buy the Japanese controlled islands from their private owner—a move that has been denounced by Beijing. Noda and Chinese President Hu Jintao held a brief informal meeting at the APEC summit, but resolved nothing.

It is no surprise that Clinton made no effort to moderate these disputes. The only easing of tensions that interested Clinton was between its two military allies in North East Asia—Japan and South Korea. She urged Noda and South Korean President Lee Myung Bak to "lower the temperature and work together in a concerted way" to resolve their disagreement over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands. Lee deliberately stirred up tensions last month by making a presidential visit to one of the islets.

Both Lee and Noda have seized on the issue to whip up nationalist sentiment at home in order to divert opposition to their unpopular domestic policies. But the heated exchanges between Seoul and Tokyo have cut directly across Washington's efforts to get its two allies to work more closely as part of American efforts to contain China. The US had encouraged the two countries to sign an intelligence-sharing agreement, but Lee abandoned the deal in July after it led to nationalist protests. Clinton met with Lee and Noda in Vladivostok to try to patch up relations.

Clinton's latest foray into Asia underscores the incendiary character of the Obama administration's foreign policy, which is premised on the use of America's overwhelming military might to offset its economic decline and maintain global dominance. Obama's "pivot" from the Middle East and Central Asia, where the US has waged neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to Asia and a confrontation with China carries great dangers for humanity. By exploiting regional flashpoints such as the island disputes for its own diplomatic ends, the US is setting the stage for a potentially catastrophic conflict between two nuclear-armed powers.

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