

Tensions at ASEAN summit over South China Sea

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South China Sea territorial disputes between China and its South East Asian neighbours have been centre stage at summit meetings organised by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Cambodia this week.

Tensions flared after Philippine President Benigno Aquino disputed a statement by Cambodia, the summit host, on Sunday that ASEAN countries had reached a consensus “not to internationalise the South China Sea from now on.” The statement was in line with China’s insistence that the maritime disputes be resolved bilaterally. Cambodia is closely aligned with Beijing.

During a meeting of ASEAN leaders with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda on Monday, Aquino objected to the statement that a consensus had been reached, declaring: “For the record, this was not our understanding. The ASEAN route is not the only route for us. As a sovereign state, it is our right to defend our national interests.”

With the support of the Obama administration, the Philippine government has taken a more strident stance over its territorial claims in what it now calls the West Philippine Sea, resulting in a dangerous standoff this year with China over the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Noda also intervened to challenge efforts by Cambodia to limit the discussion. A Japanese statement reported: “Prime Minister Noda raised the issue of the South China Sea, noting this is of common concern for the international community, which would have direct impact on peace and stability of the Asia Pacific.”

Japan’s involvement in the dispute, for the first time,

further cuts across China’s efforts to strictly limit the issue to South East Asian countries. Noda’s intervention was also aimed at a domestic audience. With an election due next month, all the parties, including Noda’s ruling Democratic Party of Japan, are stirring up nationalist sentiment, focussing on Japan’s own dispute with China over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands in the East China Sea.

Philippine President Aquino subsequently offered to host a meeting of the four countries involved in territorial disputes with China—Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines. “Our position has always been that a multilateral problem does not lend itself to a solution on a bilateral basis,” he declared.

In July, sharp disagreements between Cambodia and the Philippines over the South China Sea at an ASEAN meeting of foreign ministers resulted, for the first time, in the organisation being unable to issue a final communiqué.

President Barack Obama yesterday attended the East Asian Summit organised by ASEAN as part of his three-nation trip to Thailand, Burma and Cambodia. According to US deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes, Obama’s message was that “there needs to be a reduction of the tensions... There is no reason to risk any potential escalation, particularly when you have two of the world’s largest economies—China and Japan—associated with some of those disputes.”

Obama’s posturing as a voice of moderation is completely hypocritical. The Obama administration is directly responsible for inflaming all the territorial disputes involving China by indicating support for its

allies—Japan and the Philippines—in taking a tougher stance. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provocatively declared at an ASEAN summit in 2010 that the US had “a national interest” in securing “freedom of navigation” through the South China Sea and offered to mediate negotiations over the issue.

Subsequently, while declaring the US neutral on the territorial issues, American officials have publicly stated that Washington would support Japan in any conflict with China over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands, and hinted it would do the same in relation to the Philippines. The Obama administration has exploited the maritime disputes as a convenient device to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours, put pressure on Beijing and justify a US military build-up in the region.

Control over the shipping lanes through South East Asia is a key component of the Obama administration’s broader “pivot to Asia”—a diplomatic and strategic offensive aimed at containing China by strengthening US alliances and military ties across Asia.

Obama held his own separate meeting with ASEAN leaders, again calling for an “early conclusion” to establishing a regional code of conduct in the South China Sea. Beijing, however, is still pushing for bilateral arrangements. While Chinese and ASEAN leaders agreed on Sunday to further negotiations on a code, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson declared that the process would “take some time.”

These territorial disputes are not the only issue being exploited by Washington to undermine China’s influence in South East Asia. Obama took time out at the summit for a photo opportunity with the leaders of countries involved in the Lower Mekong Initiative—Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. Launched in 2010, the Lower Mekong Initiative is a mechanism for exploiting differences between this grouping and China over water use and dam building in the upper Mekong river.

US-China rivalry also spilled over into trade and economic issues.

Obama used the summit to promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—a regional trade grouping being pushed by Washington, strongly biased toward US corporations and financial institutions. The TPP foreshadows an across-the-board reduction of tariffs and other forms of protectionism, and is aimed in particular against state-owned enterprises. While the TPP does not include most Asian economies, the US is pressing key allies such as Japan and South Korea to join up. Washington’s aim is either to exclude China, or force it to open up new areas of its economy to US investors.

The TPP currently only includes four ASEAN countries—Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam. Obama outlined a new initiative, known as the US-ASEAN Expanded Economic Engagement, to expand trade and investment ties with all 10 ASEAN countries and encourage them to join the TPP.

The US proposal was one of several competing trade plans under discussion on the summit’s sidelines. These included a proposed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between ASEAN countries and its current Free Trade Agreement (FTA) partners—Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand. Notably, the US would be excluded.



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