

South China Sea disputes flare up

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Territorial disputes in the South China Sea between Beijing and its South East Asian neighbours have erupted again over media reports last week that China's Hainan province had approved new regulations to board and search foreign ships in Chinese waters. The province is directly adjacent to the South China Sea and administers islands in the area under Chinese control.

The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on Saturday demanding that Beijing "immediately clarify" the reported regulations. It branded China's action as "illegal" and declared that China's claim "over virtually the entire South China Sea is not only an excessive claim but a threat to all countries."

Manila, with Washington's support, has taken a more aggressive stance in its territorial dispute with Beijing over the past year. Last Thursday, the Philippines demanded that China withdraw three vessels from the area around the Scarborough Shoal and accused it of breaching an agreement, struck in April, to end a standoff over the disputed waters.

On Monday, Singapore also expressed "concern" over China's plan to board and search ships, implying that it could affect international sea lanes where about one third of the world's shipping activity takes place. Singapore is not a claimant to territory in the South China Sea.

Chinese authorities deny that the new regulations apply to all of the South China Sea claimed by Beijing, or cover international shipping routes. Wu Shicun, director general of the foreign affairs office of Hainan Province, said the regulations, which take effect on January 1, only covered waters within 12 nautical miles of the islands for which China has announced baselines.

Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a baseline is the low-water mark along a coast, from which countries define their territorial waters. China announced baselines for the mainland coast and the Paracel Islands in 1996, but has not done so in areas in dispute with the Philippines, Malaysia or Brunei.

China's new measures appear to be directed against Vietnam, which also claims the Paracels. On Monday, the state-run Vietnam Oil & Gas Group accused Chinese fishing vessels of cutting the cables of a Vietnamese ship carrying out seismic oil exploration in disputed areas of the South China Sea. China and Vietnam have issued conflicting offshore exploration licences in zones believed to hold large reserves of oil and gas.

Yesterday, Vietnam condemned the cable cutting as well as the new regulations, saying it had issued a diplomatic note calling on China "to respect Vietnam's sovereignty, to immediately stop such wrongful acts and not to repeat similar actions."

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said yesterday the government was investigating Vietnam's allegation, but added: "To our initial knowledge, the incident took place in the overlapping areas by China and Vietnam. China's fishing boats were engaging in normal fishing activity in that part of the sea."

The tensions are further highlighted by a recent controversy over new Chinese passports, which feature a map that includes disputed territories, not only in the South China Sea but on the border between China and India. Although the new passports were introduced in May, Vietnam and the Philippines have belatedly objected and refused to stamp the documents, instead

issuing separate visas.

The increasingly heated nature of these exchanges has been fuelled by the Obama administration's intervention—as part of its so-called “pivot” to the Asia Pacific—into what had previously been regional territorial disputes. Over the past three years, the US has waged a campaign aimed at strengthening US diplomatic and strategic influence throughout the region at China's expense.

In 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) ministerial meeting that the US had “a national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. Her remarks cut across China's insistence that territorial disputes had to be resolved bilaterally with its neighbours, not multilaterally, and sparked an angry reaction from China's foreign minister.

The US has exploited the issue to undermine China's influence in South East Asia. At last month's ASEAN summit in Cambodia, US President Obama again pushed for multilateral talks on a binding code of conduct in the South China Sea, opening up sharp differences between the Philippines and Vietnam, on the one side, and Cambodia, which has close ties with China, on the other.

Having inflamed regional tensions, the Obama administration continues to needle China and encourage rival claimants, while posturing as the voice of calm and reason. In comments directed against Beijing, US State Department spokesman Peter Velasco on Saturday called on “all concerned parties” to “avoid provocative unilateral actions that raise tensions” and undermine a peaceful, diplomatic resolution.

In an interview last week with the *Financial Times*, outgoing ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan warned that “the South China Sea could evolve into another Palestine” if countries did not try harder to defuse, rather than inflame, tensions. He noted that South East Asian countries were being squeezed between the US and China as Washington responded to a rising China by refocussing its foreign policy on Asia.

India has also stepped into the territorial disputes. On Monday, navy chief Admiral D.K. Joshi said that while India was not a claimant in the South China Sea, its main concern was “freedom of navigation in international waters.” He said the Indian navy would make its presence felt in the region to protect Indian interests, pointing in particular to the Indian company, ONGC Videsh, which is involved in oil and gas exploration in blocs offered by Vietnam.

Joshi declared that the modernisation of the Chinese navy was “a major, major cause of concern” and India would develop its strategies in response. After noting that the Indian navy could be required to go to the South China Sea, he said: “Now, are we preparing for it? Are we having exercises of that nature? The short answer is yes.”

Asked yesterday what China would do if the Indian navy entered the South China Sea to protect its energy interests, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman said: “China opposes unilateral oil and gas development in disputed waters... We hope that concerned countries respect China's position and rights.”

Having stirred up these tensions, the US has created a situation where a relatively minor incident could quickly spiral out of control into a major regional and international conflict.



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