

No maritime agreement at ASEAN meeting

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In another sign of mounting tensions fuelled by the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," China ruled out any immediate commitment to a "Code of Conduct" in the South China Sea at a meeting with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers meeting in Bangkok last week.

Senior US officials, including Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State John Kerry, have renewed calls for such a code, cutting across China's proposal for bilateral talks to settle maritime disputes with its neighbours.

Last week, Biden, after visiting India and Singapore, declared: "It's in everyone's interest, including China's, to have it happen that way, through negotiating a settlement." Without directly naming China, he added: "What we want to see is that there's no use of threat, intimidation or force."

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton deliberately inflamed the issue at an ASEAN summit in 2010, declaring that the US had a "national interest" in ensuring "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Washington's direct intrusion into what had been a regional issue was aimed at driving a wedge between China and its neighbours. With US encouragement, Vietnam and the Philippines have taken a more aggressive stance in their territorial disputes with China, transforming the South China Sea into a dangerous flashpoint that could lead to conflict.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi was visiting Thailand, Malaysia, Laos and Vietnam. It was his third trip to the region since his appointment as foreign minister in March, underscoring Beijing's concern over US interventions in South East Asia. Wang's diplomatic forays sought to counter Obama's "pivot" strategy, which is aimed at undermining China diplomatically and encircling it with a network of US military bases and alliances.

In Bangkok last Friday, Wang emphasised that China

was not a threat, but an opportunity for South East Asia. He pointed out that Beijing was the first country outside the region to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and has now established the "largest free trade zone among developing countries." Since the China-ASEAN free trade zone came into effect in 2010, the trade between them has expanded rapidly, reaching \$210 billion in the first half of this year, making China ASEAN's largest trading partner.

Referring to the South China Sea, Wang stressed the need for the "joint exploitation of mineral resources." He added: "It will also send signals to other parts of the world that countries in the region are willing to solve their disputes in a cooperative way."

On the same day, the US Senate passed a Resolution 167, condemning China over dangerous maritime incidents in recent years and reiterating Washington's demand for a Code of Conduct. It stated: "With a long history of engagement in the region, the United States has a vital interest in working with all nations in developing, institutionalising, and sustaining a rules-based order for the area."

The Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a strong protest over the Senate resolution, stating: "We urge the relevant senators to respect the facts and correct their mistakes in order to avoid further complicating the issue and the regional situation."

Neither the Philippines nor Vietnam responded to Wang's appeals for cooperation. Top officials from both countries met in Manila last week, before the China-ASEAN meeting in Bangkok, and agreed to work together on their territorial disputes with China. Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh publicly supported the Philippines' provocative move to take its maritime dispute to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

While Beijing is seeking to woo Hanoi, it has effectively shunned Manila. Wang has deliberately not

visited the Philippines during his three trips so far to South East Asia. Philippine President Benigno Aquino has taken a particularly confrontational stance toward China, leading to a tense standoff over the Scarborough Shoal last year and over the Second Thomas Shoal earlier this year.

The US is seeking to boost military ties and basing arrangements with the Philippines, including US navy access to the former US base at Subic Bay. Washington has increased military aid to the Philippines, with a 60 percent rise this year to \$50 million. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe also visited Manila on July 27 and promised to supply 10 maritime patrol vessels.

Wang's stance at the ASEAN meeting reflected a tougher line in Beijing. President Xi Jinping declared last week at a Communist Party Politburo meeting that turning the country into a "maritime power" was now a key national policy. "No way will the country abandon its legitimate rights and interests, nor will it give up its core national interests," Xi stated. That means, as Xi explained, China will build a stronger military to "safeguard" its maritime interests.

Although Xi called for "joint development" with other countries to harvest ocean resources, he added that there were areas where "China has sovereign rights." His policy has already led to sharper tensions. Last month, Beijing unilaterally decided to begin drilling for undersea gas in disputed waters in the East China Sea, provoking a protest from Japan.

Among the first measures that Xi adopted after being installed as president in March was to consolidate law enforcement agencies, including the Marine Surveillance and Fishery Administration, into a paramilitary "China Coast Guard." Two days after the Coast Guard's establishment last month, Beijing sent four of its ships to the waters of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in dispute with Japan, and an early warning aircraft into the international airspace near Okinawa. Japan reacted by scrambling fighter jets.



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