

# US-China tensions flare over South China Sea

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11 October 2013

Tensions over the South China Sea flared again at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Brunei yesterday, as US Secretary of State John Kerry sought to exploit maritime disputes to drive a wedge between China and members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The EAS followed ASEAN talks on Wednesday and a two-day Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit on Monday and Tuesday.

Kerry, who was standing in for President Obama, insisted that all countries had an interest in the South China Sea to ensure freedom of navigation and the principle of unimpeded lawful commerce. His remarks echo those of his predecessor Hillary Clinton who told an ASEAN summit in 2010 that the US had a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation.” Clinton’s comments, which provoked an angry reaction from China, marked a direct intervention into what previously was a regional issue.

Over the past three years, the Obama administration has repeatedly used ASEAN forums to push for multilateral discussions between China and South East Asian countries, in opposition to Beijing’s insistence that the disputes be resolved bilaterally. The US actions encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam to take far more aggressive stances toward China, resulting in a series of maritime incidents and a divided ASEAN. For the first time in its existence, ASEAN was unable to issue a joint communiqué for a summit last year, amid bitter exchanges between the Philippines and Cambodia, which has close ties to Beijing.

The new Chinese leadership of President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang attempted to defuse the issue by conceding multilateral talks with ASEAN on a joint Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. The two leaders have been on a diplomatic offensive throughout South East Asia: Xi visited Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as attending the APEC summit, and Li will visit Thailand and Vietnam after taking part in the Brunei

talks.

Without naming the US, Li pointedly told the East Asian Summit yesterday: “Countries that are not parties to the disputes should not get involved. Freedom of navigation in the South China Sea has never been an issue and will never be one.” A joint statement issued after Li’s meeting with ASEAN leaders declared that all sides would “work towards the conclusion of a Code of Conduct... based on consensus.”

In his remarks to the summit, Kerry deliberately fuelled the on-going dispute between China and the Philippines, tacitly backing the latter’s decision to take its claims to the UN for non-binding arbitration. “All claimants have a responsibility to clarify and align their claims with international law. They can engage in arbitration and other means of peaceful negotiation,” Kerry declared. Beijing has opposed the Philippine legal case, declaring that it would never agree to cooperate with it.

US ally Japan also intervened in the South China Sea conflicts. Right-wing Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told ASEAN leaders that the maritime disputes should be resolved in accordance with international law and pledged Japan’s continuing cooperation with ASEAN in what he described as a “common problem.”

Since assuming office last December, Abe has ramped up tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, boosted the military budget and moved to modify the country’s constitution to allow aggressive military action. Abe has also made a deliberate orientation to strengthening Japan’s ties in South East Asia, at China’s expense, making visits to every country except Cambodia and Laos. His government has pledged to boost the Philippine coast guard with new vessels and, along with the US, is seeking to establish military basing arrangements in the country.

The effort by the US and its allies to inflame tensions

over the South China Sea was a rather reckless attempt to counter what the media termed the “charm offensive” by the Chinese leaders, who have emphasised the importance of trade and economic ties, and urged the negotiated resolution of territorial disputes. Xi announced the formation of a \$50 billion regional infrastructure bank and signed a raft of investment and currency deals in both Indonesia and Malaysia.

Obama’s decision to cancel his Asian tour, amid the continuing government shutdown in Washington, has only underscored the inability of the US to match China’s economic promises. In talks with Kerry, Premier Li again voiced Chinese concerns about “Washington’s debt ceiling problem,” which raises the danger of a potential US default. While underlining the US economic weakness, Li’s comment also expressed fears in Chinese ruling circles about the impact of a default that would threaten the \$1.28 trillion worth of US bonds that China currently holds.

The US government shutdown and possible default has raised questions throughout the region about the Obama administration’s commitment to its “pivot to Asia.” Over the past four years, the US has ramped up a diplomatic offensive and military build-up in Asia aimed at undercutting China’s strategic, political and economic influence.

The nervousness about Washington’s plans is particularly evident among its closest allies, who fear they will be left high and dry. Although assuring reporters that a US default was unlikely, Philippine President Benigno Aquino posed the question: “[If] the world’s biggest economy turns belly-up, how can you actually protect yourself? But I don’t think that will happen.”

In his speech to the East Asian Summit yesterday, Kerry again stressed Washington’s “continued commitment to the region.” He has repeated the same phrase again and again over the past four days, but the message rings hollow to those seeking reassurances. As well as failing to appear at APEC and the East Asian Summit, Obama had to cancel trips to Indonesia—for the third time—Malaysia, where he would have been the first US president to visit since 1966, and the Philippines. In the case of the Philippines, Manila’s disappointment has been compounded by yesterday’s decision by Obama’s stand-in, Kerry, to call off his

own trip, ostensibly to avoid a tropical storm.



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