

Vietnam and Philippines escalate maritime disputes with China

Mike Head
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More than a week of clashes between Vietnamese and Chinese vessels continued yesterday over a Chinese oil rig installed on May 2 near the Chinese-controlled Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.

Colonel Pham Quang Oanh of Vietnam's Coast Guard said that as many as 15 Chinese ships sprayed a Vietnamese patrol boat near the site with water cannons on Monday. The Vietnamese state media reported that the vessel used water cannons to fire back, setting off an exchange.

China's foreign ministry did not mention the incident yesterday but last Thursday it accused Vietnam of dispatching 35 vessels that had rammed Chinese ships as many as 171 times from May 3 to 7. China was "deeply surprised and shocked" by Vietnam's actions, Yi Xianliang, a foreign ministry representative, said at a press briefing.

Yi said the drilling operations undertaken by the China National Offshore Oil Corporation were only 17 nautical miles from the Paracels' Zhongjian Island, which China has controlled since 1974, and were a normal follow-up to previous Chinese commercial exploration operations in the area over the past decade.

Once again, however, as it did last week, the US government immediately sided with Vietnam yesterday. Secretary of State John Kerry accused China of "aggressive" action. He asserted that China's conduct was causing deep concern to the US and other nations involved in navigating in the South and East China Seas.

Vietnam took several steps over the weekend to escalate the dispute with China. On Sunday, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung accused Beijing of "dangerous and serious violations" in the territorial dispute, "directly endangering peace, stability, security, and marine safety."

On the same day, his government allowed small demonstrations, involving several hundred people, outside Chinese diplomatic offices in Vietnam. Protesters bore placards backing the Hanoi government and accusing China of "imperialism." State media reported enthusiastically on the protests, which were the first such events since 2011, during a previous maritime clash. Hanoi sanctioned those protests for a few weeks, then broke them up when they threatened to become a forum of anti-government sentiment.

Dung's comments on Sunday were addressed to the leaders of the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) attending a summit meeting in Myanmar. The leaders did not, however, mention the dispute in their final communiqué on Sunday. Myanmar then released a statement that expressed "serious concerns over the ongoing developments in the South China Sea," but did not mention China.

The Chinese foreign ministry accused the US, without naming it, of stoking tension in the South China Sea. "China is opposed to a certain country's scheme of spoiling the atmosphere of friendly cooperation between China and ASEAN by making use of the issue of the South China Sea," it stated.

The Vietnamese regime appears to have shifted to a more confrontational stance against China, despite understandings that it struck with its Beijing counterpart in 2011, and again last year, on a framework for discussing maritime issues. The two countries had also reached agreements on their shared land border and on maritime rights in the Gulf of Tonkin. Just six months ago, during a visit of Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang to Hanoi, the two governments announced that they would find ways to jointly develop oil and gas fields.

Vietnam's more aggressive stand against China

coincides with US President Obama's recent tour of Asia and a developing campaign by the White House and American media to demonise Beijing over its claims in the South China Sea. Prominent US media outlets in the US, notably the *New York Times*, have accused Beijing of erecting the oil rig in order to test President Obama's "resolve" following his Asian tour last month.

A *New York Times* editorial last Friday declared: "China has dangerously increased tensions in the South China Sea by deploying an oil rig for the first time in a disputed area claimed by Vietnam. The move is certain to make countries in the region feel even more threatened by China's expansionist territorial claims."

Obama's visit occurred as his administration abandoned its previous pretences at neutrality in the maritime conflicts in the South China and East China Seas between China and its neighbours. During his tour, Obama committed to defending Japan and the Philippines in any conflict with China over disputed territory. The *New York Times* urged Vietnam to follow the Philippines in pursuing a case against China in an arbitration tribunal in The Hague.

Washington has provided political and legal support to the Philippine challenge, which was filed in March in the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). In fact, Manila's legal case was drafted and will be argued by the US law firm, Foley Hoag, which has close ties to the Obama administration.

For years, Beijing has maintained that disputes in the region must be resolved on a bilateral basis and not through multilateral talks or international adjudication, with Washington muscling in as a participant. Washington has aggressively asserted that China's territorial claims threaten "freedom of navigation" in which it has a "national interest."

After signing agreements with Washington, during Obama's tour, to allow US military basing in the Philippines, President Benigno Aquino's administration has further stepped up its conflict with China.

A week ago, the Philippines seized a Chinese fishing boat and its crew in the Spratly Islands, which are also claimed by China, as well as Brunei and Malaysia. The arrests, allegedly for hunting sea turtles, occurred while Philippine and US forces were conducting joint exercises. China denounced the Philippines' actions as

illegal, saying the boat was in Chinese waters.

Despite China's demands for their release, a Philippine prosecutor yesterday filed cases against nine of the 11 crew and set bail at 70,000 pesos (\$US1,600) for each of them. The remaining two crew members were to be released as minors.

Last week, the Aquino administration also offered 26 new coal and oil exploration areas—including five in disputed areas of the South China Sea—claiming that all were within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. Energy Secretary Jericho Petilla ruled out negotiations with China, saying that if other claimant countries, such as China, protested the award of offshore contracts, the matter would be referred to the United Nations.

Increasingly, it is clear that Washington's "pivot" is fomenting previously minor or dormant territorial disputes with China into flashpoints that could embroil the entire region, and the US, in potentially catastrophic military conflicts.



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