

Obama heightens tensions over South China Sea

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US President Obama last week further fuelled tensions with China over territorial disputes with its neighbours in the South China Sea. In comments staggering for their utter hypocrisy, he accused China of not abiding by international rules and “using its sheer size and muscle to force countries into subordinate positions.”

Referring to the South China Sea disputes, Obama told a town-hall event in Jamaica: “We think this can be solved diplomatically,” he said “but just because the Philippines or Vietnam are not as large as China doesn’t mean that they can be just elbowed aside.” His comments followed remarks by the Chinese foreign ministry on Thursday defending its reclamation work in the South China Sea.

Leaving aside the long history of American diplomatic bullying, coups, military interventions and wars around the world—not least in Vietnam, the Philippines and elsewhere in Asia—Obama’s remarks turn reality on its head. As part of his administration’s “pivot to Asia” over the past five years, he has deliberately inflamed what were long-running but relatively low-level, regional disputes in the South China Sea into dangerous flashpoints that risk triggering a broader war.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton set the stage for a confrontation with China when she declared in July 2010 that the US had “a national interest” in securing “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. She called for a “binding regional code of conduct” and declared that Washington would encourage multi-lateral negotiations directly cutting across Beijing’s attempts to resolve disputes bilaterally. Replying in an essay, China’s Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi accused Clinton of carrying out “virtually an attack on China.”

Clinton’s remarks were calculated to encourage China’s neighbours, especially Vietnam and the Philippines, to take a more strident stand on their claims against Beijing. Washington has exploited the tensions to forge closer military ties with countries throughout South East Asia, signing a military agreement last year with the Philippines that provides American forces unrestricted access to the country’s military bases.

Over the past year, US officials have effectively dropped their stance of “neutrality” in the maritime disputes and publicly challenged China’s claims in the South China Sea. At the same time, Washington, behind the scenes, encouraged and assisted the Philippine government, now supported by Vietnam, to mount a legal case against China under the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea—an international treaty that the US itself has refused to ratify.

This is the context of the hue and cry from the US and its allies over China’s reclamation work on disputed islets and reefs under its control in the South China Sea. Late last month Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, condemned China dredging and construction in alarmist terms as “creating a Great Wall of sand, with dredges and bulldozers.”

The US think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), fed the campaign with satellite photos and a report highlighting the extent of China’s reclamation. The CSIS, which has closely integrated into the Obama administration’s broader diplomatic and military “pivot” against China, has created a new project—the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative—dedicated to challenging Beijing’s maritime activities.

Last week in Tokyo, US Defence Secretary Ashton

Carter joined the fray, warning China against inflaming the situation in the South China and East China Seas and declaring that the US took “a strong stance against the militarisation of these disputes.”

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying hit back last Thursday with a detailed defence of its reclamation work. After restating China’s “indisputable sovereignty” over the disputed islands, she said that the construction was necessary to meet various civilian demands such as typhoon centres, meteorological stations, search and rescue centres, as well as necessary military defence requirements.

Hua criticised the “total double standard” applied by “some countries” to criticising China’s activities in the South China Sea while maintaining a silence on “other countries” that have “illegally occupied” islands and reefs claimed by China and “constructed major structures on the islands. Responding Friday to Obama’s remarks, Hua said: “I think everyone can see very clearly who it is in the world who is using the greatest size and muscle.”

In an editorial Saturday entitled “Chinese Mischief at Mischief Reef”, the *New York Times* joined the vilification of China, declaring that it had “moved with alarming speed to dredge huge quantities of sand from around the Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands and use it to create a more substantial land mass.” Justifying Obama’s “pivot,” it concluded: “Increasingly, it seems America must play a vigilant role to discourage China’s attempts to exert its power over weaker Asian states.”

The Obama administration is not simply engaged in a war of words, but is beefing up its military presence and alliances throughout the Indo-Pacific, including in South East Asia, to reassert its dominance in Asia. Last week, the US and Indonesian navies conducted a joint maritime air patrol in waters around Indonesia’s Natuna archipelago in the South China Sea to enhance surveillance capabilities. The US embassy’s defence attaché told the *Jakarta Post* that the exercise was part of the US “Pacific rebalance” or “pivot.”

Next week the US and the Philippines militaries will hold their annual Balikatan war games, which will be double the size of last year’s exercises and include more than 12,000 military personnel, 100 war planes and four warships.

Having exacerbated tensions in the South China Sea,

the US has created a situation in which the war of words can set off a military conflict. Having strengthened military ties throughout Asia, US imperialism is committed to supporting its allies and strategic partners, which compounds the danger of a minor incident in disputed waters escalating into a war between the two nuclear armed powers.

The South China Sea is just one of the potential flashpoints in Asia as well as the Middle East, Eastern Europe and internationally that threaten to trigger an international conflagration. The International Committee of the Fourth International is holding an international online May Day as part of the political fight to build an international anti-war movement of the working class to prevent the eruption of a devastating world war.



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