

South China Sea disputes dominate ASEAN summit

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The summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which concluded yesterday in Malaysia, was dominated by rising tensions in the South China Sea fuelled by territorial disputes with China.

Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert De Rosario set the stage over the weekend by accusing “our northern neighbour”—obviously China—of ignoring “all our words of caution” and “clearly and quickly advancing with its massive [land] reclamation” in the South China Sea. “It is poised to consolidate de facto control of the South China Sea,” he declared.

The alarmist warning underscores the role of the Philippine government of President Benigno Aquino as the most aggressive advocate among ASEAN members for the US “pivot to Asia”—which aims to undermine Beijing’s influence and encircle China militarily throughout the region.

De Rosario was echoing the drumbeat from Washington warning that China’s land reclamation on disputed islands under its administration constitute a military threat. Speaking in Australia last month, Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific fleet, accused China of building artificial islands to establish military facilities. “China is creating a great wall of sand with dredges and bulldozers,” he said.

De Rosario told the ASEAN summit that China’s moves would “undermine ASEAN’s very centrality, solidarity and credibility” unless the organisation responded. He appealed for ASEAN members to demand an immediate halt to China’s “destabilising activities” and to “show the world that it [ASEAN] has the resolve to act in the common interest.”

Four ASEAN countries—the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei—have disputes with China over portions of the Paracel and Spratly island groups in the

South China Sea. Indonesia does not formally have a territorial dispute with China but sections of the ruling elite, particularly of the military, have been pressing for the government to more aggressively assert Indonesia’s claims to waters around the Natuna islands.

These festering regional disputes have led to violent clashes in the past. However, in mid-2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton exploited an ASEAN summit to provocatively assert the US “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the waters. The diplomatic ploy was aimed at driving a wedge into ASEAN and encouraging countries like Vietnam and the Philippines to more aggressively assert their claims against China.

For the first time in its 45-year history, the ASEAN summit in mid-2012 ended without a final joint communiqué amid bitter feuding between Cambodia, which has close ties to China, and the Philippines and Vietnam. The Obama administration has added further fuel to the flames by encouraging and assisting Manila to challenge China’s claims in the International Tribunal on the Law on the Sea. China has rejected the court’s jurisdiction.

At yesterday’s ASEAN summit, there were clearly differences over the issue among member states, many of which rely heavily on China economically. In his address yesterday as leader of the host nation, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak appealed for ASEAN to address “developments” in the South China Sea in “proactive, but also in a positive and constructive way.”

Underscoring the Malaysian government’s attempts to avoid a confrontation with China, Najib promoted the “Declaration on the Global Movement of Moderates,” which was adopted by the summit. This cosmetic move, billed as “ASEAN’s contribution to

global peace and security,” will do nothing to halt the deepening tensions in the South China Sea, which are driven primarily by Washington.

Speaking on Monday night, Philippine President Aquino urged ASEAN members to speak as one against China’s “aggressive action” in the South China Sea. “All our efforts at regional community building aim to promote and protect the future wellbeing of our peoples, and this can only be done in a secure and stable environment.”

While ASEAN did not embrace the demands of the Philippines in full, the final statement, as reported by Agence France Presse, did take a more hard-line stand. After noting the “serious” concerns expressed by some leaders, it warned that China’s land reclamation had “eroded trust and confidence and may undermine peace, security and stability.”

The statement, however, stopped short of calling on China to immediately halt its activities. In a conciliatory tone, Najib added: “We hope to be able to influence China that it is also to their interest not to be seen as confronting ASEAN and that any attempt to destabilise this region will not benefit China either.”

At a media briefing on Monday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei reiterated that his country’s reclamation and construction works were within Chinese sovereignty. In a pointed jab at the Philippines and the US, he continued: “The Chinese side is firmly opposed to the loaded criticisms of China made by some countries and the hijacking of the China-ASEAN relationship for their own selfish gains.”

While Philippine President Aquino was accusing China of “aggression,” the Philippine and US militaries were engaged in their annual Balikatan war games, double the size of last year’s joint manoeuvres. US Brigadier General Christopher Mahoney boasted: “Overall assessment of the exercise is way in the success category. We’ve got 11,500 plus people out here, we’ve got more than 75 aircraft, thousands of marines, soldiers, airmen, and sailors.”

Mahoney declared that the Philippine and US forces were teaming up anew to hone their lethal military skills, which was the core elements of the profession of arms.

Over the weekend, Philippine Armed Forces chief of staff Gregorio Catapang announced to the local press that he and US Pacific Command chief Admiral

Samuel Locklear had agreed on eight Philippine bases that would be opened up to US forces under the far reaching Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement signed between the two countries last year.

Most significant was the inclusion of two military bases on the island of Palawan, which is directly adjacent to the South China Sea. These are the Antonio Bautista Air Base and the Naval Station Carlito Cunanán giving US forces rapid access to the disputed islets and reefs. On the pretext of countering China’s militarisation of the South China Sea, the US is engaged in a systematic military build-up throughout the region in preparation for war against China.



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