

# A tense visit by Chinese president to the White House

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Behind the formalities, tensions between the United States and China were evident when Chinese President Xi Jinping met with President Obama at the White House yesterday. Both leaders paid lip service to the need for greater cooperation, but the lack of agreement on key issues, especially on the South China Sea, highlights the danger of confrontation and conflict between the two countries.

Since the beginning of the year, Washington and its allies have ramped up pressure on China over its land reclamation activities on small atolls and reefs under Chinese administration in the South China Sea. The Pentagon has provocatively carried out so-called “freedom of navigation” operations, sending military aircraft and naval vessels close to islets under China’s control. The US is using alleged “Chinese expansionism” as a pretext for its own military build-up in the Indo-Pacific as part of its so-called “pivot to Asia” aimed against Beijing.

In their joint press conference, Obama declared that in “candid discussions” he had “conveyed to President Xi our significant concerns over land reclamation, construction and the militarisation of disputed areas” and reiterated that the US “will continue to sail, fly and operate anywhere that international law allows.” While acknowledging that the US had no claims, Obama declared that “we just want to make sure that the rules of the road are upheld.”

In reality, the Obama administration has deliberately raised the political temperature in the longstanding territorial disputes in the South China Sea by encouraging rival claimants, in particular the Philippines and Vietnam, to adopt a more aggressive stance against China. US objections to Chinese land reclamation do not extend to its South East Asian neighbours with which Washington is seeking to

strengthen military ties.

Xi made a slight concession to the US by declaring that China would uphold freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. He also declared that Chinese construction activities “do not target or impact any country, and China does not intend to pursue militarisation.” At the same time, however, Xi insisted that “islands in the South China Sea since ancient times are China’s territory” and that China would uphold its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.

The lack of any resolution will only heighten demands by Republicans and within the American military for the Obama administration to confront China over the issue. Head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, told a congressional hearing last week that China’s building of runways on atolls in the South China Sea “gives me great concern militarily.” He declared that such facilities gave China “de facto control over the South China Sea in any scenario short of war.”

At the same hearing, Republican Senator John McCain responded by insisting that the US should send naval vessels within the 12-mile nautical limit around the Chinese islands. Criticising the Obama administration’s failure to do so, he said: “This is a dangerous mistake that grants de facto recognition of China’s man-made sovereignty claims.”

*Foreign Policy* was informed by a Pentagon official this week: “Administration officials are now seriously studying the option of sailing inside the 12-mile limit... Those deliberations come after the current and former heads of Pacific Command recommended resuming patrols inside the 12-mile boundary around key areas in the South China Sea.”

Such reckless US military operations could lead to miscalculations or mistakes that could trigger a far

broader conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers.

At yesterday's press conference, Obama also declared that he had raised "our very serious concerns about growing cyber-threats to American companies and American citizens" and announced that the two countries had reached an agreement not to engage in or knowingly support the hacking of commercial secrets and theft of corporate intellectual property.

The Obama administration has mounted a concerted campaign against China, accusing it of cyber espionage and commercial spying. The hypocrisy of Washington's condemnations is underlined by Edward Snowden's revelations of massive spying operations inside the United States and around the world, including in China, on individuals, companies, governments and the military.

In the lead-up to Xi's visit, Obama branded China's cyber activities an "act of aggression" that had to stop and warned that the US would take "countervailing actions" to ensure that it did. Xi reiterated that his government did not engage in or support commercial espionage and underscored the agreement reached with Obama to establish a high-level joint dialogue mechanism to fight cybercrime.

Obama, however, reinforced his previous threat, declaring that words had to be followed by actions. "We will be watching carefully to make an assessment as to whether progress has been made in the area," he said.

Obama and Xi announced a series of measures on climate change, tourism and student exchange and declared their meetings constructive. During his visit to Washington state earlier in the week, Xi sought to woo important sections of the American corporate elite with new prospects for investment and profits as China further opens up its economy.

In answer to a question yesterday, Xi tried to allay fears concerning China's economic slowdown and turmoil in the stock markets. He again emphasised the economic interdependence of the US and China, stating: "People should move ahead with the times and give up on old concepts of 'you lose, I win' or 'zero-sum game' and establish a new concept of peaceful development and willing cooperation."

While sections of the American business elite clearly want to pursue opportunities in China, the ruling class

as a whole is determined to maintain the global pre-eminence of US imperialism against any potential rival. That is the driving force, amid a deepening global economic breakdown, behind the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at reasserting American dominance and undermining China through every means: diplomatic, economic and military.



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