

ASEAN defence summit divided over South China Sea dispute

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The United States has suffered a setback in its efforts to obtain backing from the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) for its provocative military interventions directed against China under the banner of “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. A meeting of the 10-member group of ASEAN defence ministers, held in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, broke up in disarray on Wednesday without issuing a final communiqué.

While China and the US are not ASEAN members, representatives of both attended the summit and were reported to have lobbied heavily in support of their respective positions. Other non-ASEAN attendees were India, Japan and Australia. After no agreement could be reached, a planned ceremony to sign a common statement on security issues was cancelled at the last minute.

The US tried to put the best face on the situation, with an unnamed official saying that “the Chinese lobbied to keep any reference to the South China Sea out of the final joint declaration” and that “understandably a number of ASEAN countries felt that was inappropriate.”

The official added: “This was an ASEAN decision but, in our view, no statement is better than one that avoids the important issue of China’s reclamation and militarisation in the South China.”

The US clearly wanted a reference to be included in the communiqué following the recent incursion by the USS *Larsen* within the 12-nautical-mile limit surrounding one of the reclaimed islands constructed by China in the Spratly archipelago.

While Washington was able to win the support of its closest allies, Vietnam and the Philippines, it was not able to obtain a consensus position, which is the tradition for ASEAN statements. It appears that

opposition from Malaysia, which played a key role by hosting the meeting, was a sticking point.

“The decision was made by ASEAN because there is no consensus, so no joint declaration is signed,” Malaysian defence minister Hishammuddin Hussein told a news conference. His remarks made clear that there is a growing fear among the countries of the region that the stand-off between the US and China could lead to a military conflict from which they could suffer major consequences.

“Our considerations are real. Not thoughts on paper,” Hishammuddin said. “What is signed in the joint declaration is not going to resolve the issue of duplicating claims nor is it going to wish the vessels that are in the South China Sea away. Unintended accidents can spiral into something worse.”

A copy of planned remarks by Hishammuddin, which appear to have been issued by mistake to the media and later retracted, said ASEAN sought a “peaceful resolution to the disputes” and “collisions in open seas and skies must be avoided at all costs.”

Indonesia also appears to have advocated a more cautious approach, with reports suggesting that it used the summit to urge China and the US to try to find ways to resolve their differences.

The Chinese responded to the summit by directing criticism at the US and Japan. According to the Xinhua news agency, citing a Chinese defence official, “some individual countries outside the region, attempted to forcefully add into the declaration contents not discussed during the meeting.”

Earlier, the Chinese ambassador to the US, Cui Tiankai, told CNN that the US actions in the South China Sea were a “very serious provocation politically and militarily. It is a clear attempt to escalate the situation and to militarise the region.”

On the sidelines of the meeting, US defence secretary Ashton Carter met with his Chinese counterpart Chang Wanquan on Tuesday. Chang said China would not stand for any infringements of Chinese sovereignty and urged the US to stop “its mistaken words and deeds” and not to “take any other dangerous moves.”

It is not the first time that a major ASEAN meeting has broken up over the South China Sea issue. The July 2012 ASEAN ministerial summit held in Cambodia ended without a joint declaration for the first time in the organisation’s 45-year history. The divisions were stoked by an aggressive push by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for ASEAN to signal support for the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which was officially launched from the floor of the Australian parliament the previous November.

In the three years since then, the US has escalated its pressure on China, both directly and through its closest allies in the region, particularly the Philippines, which launched a US-backed legal action against China’s claims in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.

Washington’s failure to receive endorsement for its actions at the ASEAN meeting is certain to bring further increased pressure against China on the military front. Today, defence secretary Carter is visiting the USS Theodore Roosevelt, an aircraft carrier currently operating in Malaysian waters. During the USS Lassen operation, the carrier reportedly maintained an over-the-horizon presence, ready to intervene if necessary.

The US has stressed that the Lassen incursion was not a “one-off” and will be followed by at least two “freedom of navigation” exercises to challenge China’s claims every three months.

Beijing is also seeking to strengthen its position. Yesterday, it was announced that Chinese President Xi Jinping will meet Taiwan’s outgoing President Ma Ying-jeou in Singapore. It will be the first such meeting since the Chinese revolution of 1949 and will be held as part of a tour by Xi of the South East Asian region aimed at countering US pressure.

The meeting between Xi and Ma, characterised by at least one commentator as a “remarkable surprise,” is expected to focus on maintaining “cross-strait peace.” The issue of the South China Sea could well come up, however.

It is a measure of the long-running character of the

territorial disputes in the sea that the so-called nine-dash line, which forms the basis for China’s claims, was first drawn up by the Chinese Kuomintang regime in 1947. The government of Taiwan is the formal continuation of the Kuomintang’s Republic of China and asserts the same sovereignty rights in the South China Sea as Beijing.



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