

Washington's gunboat diplomacy in Manila

Joseph Santolan
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In the lead up to the APEC summit in Manila, US President Obama deliberately stoked tensions over the already explosive territorial dispute in the South China Sea, committing over a quarter of a billion dollars in US military aid to funding “maritime security” in the region.

US President Obama arrived in Manila from the G20 summit in Turkey on Tuesday, a day before the two-day Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. APEC is a trade summit of 21 countries from the Asia Pacific region. Political disputes and questions of regional security are generally reserved for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) East Asia Summit (EAS) meeting, which is scheduled to be held later in the week in Kuala Lumpur.

Washington is using Obama's visit to Manila, however, to provoke confrontation and escalate tensions with Beijing.

The USS Fitzgerald, an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer of the 7th Fleet, transited the South China Sea, where it staged a live fire exercise in the fiercely contested waters, before anchoring in Manila Bay on Monday. It will remain anchored in the bay for the duration of the APEC summit, under the absurd pretext of “providing security” for the gathering.

On Obama's arrival in Manila he traveled to Manila's South Harbor where he boarded the Philippine Navy Frigate BRP Gregorio del Pilar. The Gregorio del Pilar was purchased by Manila from Washington in 2011 and is the lead ship in the Philippine military defense of its territorial claim in the South China Sea.

Having toured the ship, Obama delivered a speech on board to leading members of the Philippine military, including the defense secretary and the chief of the armed forces.

Obama stated, “My visit here underscores our shared commitment to the security of the waters of this region

and to the freedom of navigation ... Today, I can announce that we intend to transfer two additional ships to the Philippine Navy, a research vessel to help map its territorial waters, and another US Coast Guard cutter to bolster the Navy's ability to conduct long-endurance patrols. It's part of our larger plan to increase maritime security assistance to our allies and our partners across the region—\$250 million over the course of two years.”

The White House clarified that the maritime security assistance fund announced by Obama would total \$259 million divided into two payments, \$119 million would be provided during the remainder of this financial year, and another \$140 million was earmarked for the following 12 months. Of this amount, the largest portion, \$79 million, was allotted for the Philippines. Vietnam was slated to receive \$40 million; Indonesia, \$20 million; and Malaysia, \$2.5 million. How the remaining funds would be allocated was not specified.

All of the quarter of billion dollars promised by Obama are earmarked for “maritime security,” i.e., the escalation of the threat of war in the South China Sea, through the funding of gunboat patrols and surveillance of the disputed waters.

Obama concluded his speech by stressing that “more capable navies and partnership with the United States are critical to the security of this region.”

Washington's basing deal with the Philippines, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which was signed in April 2014, is still pending before the Philippine Supreme Court. EDCA authorizes the United States to base an unlimited number of forces in the country at undisclosed locations free of charge. It grants extraterritorial immunity to US forces and contractors within the country.

The heart of the two cases filed against EDCA before the Supreme Court is that the Mutual Defense Treaty between Washington and Manila does not legally obligate the United States to go to war against China in

the South China Sea in the event of an armed conflict between Manila and Beijing.

Obama responded to this argument in his speech, claiming that the United States has “a treaty obligation, an ironclad commitment to the defense of our ally, the Philippines. You can count on the United States.”

The Supreme Court was prepared to hand down a decision drafted by the Chief Justice approving EDCA on the day of Obama’s arrival in the country, according to reports in the *Manila Times*. At the last minute, the court announced that it would be convening again in December to reach a final decision.

Chinese President Xi Jinping is in Manila as well for the APEC summit. Xi agreed to attend the summit after a public agreement was reached with Philippine President Aquino that the Philippines would not raise the subject of the South China Sea during the APEC summit, as this was not deemed the appropriate forum.

Xi’s visit marks the first visit to the Philippines by a Chinese president in 10 years. In April 2005, then President Hu Jintao visited the country. The Philippines, Vietnam and China had just signed the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU), an agreement that provided for the cooperative exploration of the South China Sea and the joint exploitation of its resources by the three countries.

Washington has over the course of the last five years, under its so-called pivot to Asia, so escalated tensions in the South China Sea that it has turned the region into a flashpoint that could trigger a third world war. In the past month, Washington has sailed a destroyer within the territorial waters claimed by China and has flown B-52 bombers near islands occupied by Chinese forces.

Under the baton of Obama, the chorus of militarism is swelling throughout the region.

Indonesia threatened on Monday to file a case against China’s nine-dash line before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, contesting specifically the Natuna islands even though China accepts these islands as Indonesian territory. Washington is providing Indonesia \$40 million to militarily patrol its waters.

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi delivered a speech over the weekend in which he stated that for China to “claim this part of the South China Sea as theirs due to historical narrative is invalid.” Malaysia has previously tended to avoid courting public controversy with China over territorial claims.

In meetings on the sidelines of the APEC, the Philippines is scheduled to sign an agreement with Vietnam over the South China Sea which will “intensify military exchanges, port visits, information-sharing and joint activities.” Manila is also slated to sign a deal with Japan for the purchase of marine security hardware from Tokyo.



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