

Obama demands China halt South China Sea activities

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In a provocative performance, US President Barack Obama overshadowed today's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' summit in Manila by denouncing China's land reclamation activities in the South China Sea and declaring that they must stop.

Significantly, Obama's aggressive remarks were made in a joint media conference yesterday with this year's summit host, Philippine President Benigno Aquino, whose government has been the most vociferous ally of Washington in challenging Beijing's territorial claims in the sea.

Obama's remarks cut directly across Chinese President Xi Jinping's efforts to prevent any mention of the South China Sea territorial disputes at the annual APEC gathering, which is supposed to focus on issues of economy and trade.

"We discussed the impact of China's land reclamation and construction activities on regional stability," Obama told the media briefing. "We agree on the need for bold steps to lower tensions, including pledging to halt further reclamation, new construction, and militarisation of disputed areas."

By specifically naming China, Obama further escalated the confrontation over the South China Sea, which Washington has fueled by sending a naval warship within the territorial waters of Chinese-controlled islets and flying B-52 bombers nearby. In the past, Obama avoided direct references to China's construction work, instead referring to land reclamation activities in general.

Obama made no mention of the similar activities being conducted in the strategically vital sea by other claimant countries, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, which this week signed a military partnership with the Philippines. In the Spratly islands, Vietnam has 27 occupied outposts and the Philippines

9, while China has 6.

Obama claimed that "disputes need to be resolved peacefully." But his language was more indicative of preparations for war. He reiterated that his administration had just increased "maritime security assistance to the Philippines to record levels."

On his arrival in Manila, Obama boarded a Philippine Navy Frigate, announced the US would transfer two ships to the Philippine navy and committed over a quarter of a billion dollars in US military aid to its partners for "maritime security" in the region.

At the media briefing, Obama bluntly linked this aid to a drive to Washington's military and strategic "pivot to Asia" to confront China. "Now, our rebalance to the Asia Pacific is rooted in our treaty alliances, including with the Philippines," he said.

Obama declared that his government's Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines, "when implemented, will bring our militaries even closer together." This treaty, signed last year, allows the United States to base an unlimited number of forces in the country.

The EDCA is currently before the Philippine Supreme Court, but Obama arrogantly brushed aside a journalist's question about the legal challenge, stating: "The broader point is, is that as a treaty ally we have a rock-solid commitment to the defence of the Philippines ... And we think that the enhanced defense cooperation agreement is going to help us do that."

Aquino, who has aligned Manila closely with the US, was just as belligerent. Once America "gets the use of our bases," it would "project its own power within the region in an effort to help in the stability and the orderliness and the defusion of the tension within the region."

China responded sharply. Hong Lei, a foreign

ministry spokesperson, accused the US of interfering in the region. “The United States should stop playing up the South China Sea issue, stop heightening tensions in the South China Sea and stop complicating disputes in the South China Sea,” he said at a regular press briefing in Beijing.

“No country has the right to point fingers at” China’s construction activities, Hong added. He said China’s sovereign ownership claims on the disputed islands were in line with international law.

Sharpening economic tensions also overshadowed the APEC summit. Obama ratcheted up the pressure on China by convening a separate meeting in Manila of the leaders of the 12 members of the recently-signed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Falsely portrayed as a “free trade” deal, the TPP excludes China and is designed to assert US hegemony. It requires the breaking up of state-owned enterprises and the dismantling of all regulatory barriers to the predatory operations of financial, IT, pharmaceutical, media and entertainment conglomerates, above all those of the United States.

At the meeting, Obama reiterated his insistence that the TPP would help “write the rules of global trade for the 21st century.” At his appearance with Aquino he underlined the connection between the TPP and the broader US strategy against China, describing it as “a pillar of America’s rebalance in the region.”

Chinese President Xi sought to counter this offensive by urging APEC leaders to finalise the Beijing-backed Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP). This pact has been on APEC’s agenda for years—and was initially pushed by the US—before being sidelined by Washington’s pursuit of the TPP.

“With various new regional free-trade arrangements cropping up, there have been worries about the potential of fragmentation,” Xi said. “We therefore need to accelerate the realisation of FTAAP and take regional economic integration forward.”

Under the headline, “US, China Intensify Trade Competition on APEC Stage,” the *Wall Street Journal*, the mouthpiece of US finance capital, yesterday drew attention to the mounting tensions. Its report noted that the remarks by Obama and Xi showed “how the US and China are vying for commercial as well as military influence in one of the most important corners of the global economy.”



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