

US, China trade diplomatic blows over South China Sea

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American and Chinese leaders clashed over the South China Sea last weekend at summit meetings convened in Kuala Lumpur by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). While the Paris terrorist attacks figured prominently in discussions, US President Barack Obama ensured that territorial disputes between China and neighbouring countries were high on the agenda, compounding tensions in the region.

As part of the US “pivot to Asia” aimed against Beijing, Obama has targeted Chinese land reclamation on islets in the South China Sea. Last month, the US navy directly challenged Chinese territorial claims by sending a destroyer, the USS Lassen, within the 12-nautical-mile limit of its reefs. Washington is deliberately exploiting the issue to drive a wedge between Beijing and its South East Asian neighbours.

Speaking before a meeting with ASEAN leaders on Saturday, Obama reiterated the US demand for claimants to “halt land reclamation, new construction and militarisation of disputed areas.” While nominally directed at all claimants, Obama’s comments were clearly targeted against China. He repeated the same message throughout meetings in Kuala Lumpur and at last week’s Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Manila.

Obama sealed an ASEAN-US strategic partnership, of which “maritime cooperation” was a key element. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei all have claims in the South China Sea that put them at odds with China. Indonesia is threatening to mount a legal challenge to China, even though Beijing recognises Jakarta’s sovereignty over the Natuna islands.

In the name of regional “peace and stability,” the US and ASEAN leaders reaffirmed the importance of

“ensuring maritime security and safety, and freedom of navigation including in and over-flight above the South China Sea.” The joint statement effectively endorsed US further intrusions into Chinese-claimed territory. In Manila last week, Obama announced that the US was providing a quarter of a billion dollars in military aid to ASEAN members to boost “maritime security.”

Having attempted to keep the South China Sea off the agenda, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang lashed out in a closed-door session yesterday of the ASEAN-sponsored East Asia Summit, at which Obama was present. Li told the gathering that countries “from outside the region” should stop inflaming tensions over maritime disputes.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin, who reported Li’s remarks, told the media that it was false to maintain that China was militarising the South China Sea. He insisted that Beijing’s actions were “beyond reproach” and branded the USS Lassen’s intrusion last month as a “political provocation” designed to “test China’s response.”

China has been placed under mounting pressure not only by the US, but Washington’s allies, including the Philippines, Japan and Australia. Philippine President Benigno Aquino reportedly told the East Asian Summit that “the world is watching” to see if Beijing would behave as a “responsible global leader.” With US support, the Philippines is currently engaged in a legal challenge to Chinese claims in the South China Sea.

Japan also backed the US to the hilt. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with Obama last Thursday on the sidelines of the APEC summit and announced that his government would “consider dispatching its Self-Defence Forces (SDF) [military] to the sea while examining the impact of the situation there on its security.”

Defence Minister Gen Nakatani denied that Japan was planning to join the US military in challenging China's claims. However, speaking yesterday in Sydney at Japan-Australia ministerial talks, Nakatani accused China of "attempting to change the status quo by force" in the South China Sea, "based on self-righteous assertions which are incompatible with international law and order."

Japan's threat to engage in naval operations in the South China Sea is particularly provocative, given its history of aggression, colonisation and war crimes in Asia during the 1930s and 1940s. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei responded to Abe's comments by declaring that Beijing would be on "high alert for intervention by Japan in the South China Sea issue."

During his talks with Obama, Abe pledged that Japan "will support the countries concerned through such efforts as defence equipment cooperation and assistance by the SDF in building up capabilities." Tokyo is already providing patrol vessels to the Philippines and Vietnam. After reaching a defence equipment agreement with Aquino last week, Abe said he would consider a Philippine request for Japan to supply "large patrol vessels."

In Sydney yesterday, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop reaffirmed Australia's complete commitment to US actions in the South China Sea. She declared that the "land reclamation and construction activity that's undertaken by China and other claimants raises tensions in the region." In fact, Washington's actions over the past five years have deliberately inflamed long-running disputes, posing the danger of war between two-nuclear armed powers.

In a meeting with Premier Li in Kuala Lumpur, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull told his Chinese counterpart that Beijing's actions in the South China Sea were "counterproductive" and risked starting a war. He urged Li not to "fall into a Thucydides Trap"—a reference to the wars in ancient Greece between a rising Athens and Sparta, an established power.

While Washington and its allies repeatedly point the finger at Beijing, the US "pivot to Asia" is aimed at ensuring continued American dominance in Asia and the subordination of China to US interests. Over the past two decades, the US has repeatedly used military

force to offset its historic decline, waging wars of aggression in the Middle East and Central Asia. Washington's latest diplomatic offensive at the Asian summits goes hand-in-hand with a military build-up throughout the region to prepare for war with China.

While declaring it is for "peace and stability," the US has already made clear that it intends to continue its provocative challenges in the South China Sea. On the eve of the summits, two US B-52 strategic bombers, capable of delivering nuclear weapons, flew missions close to Chinese-claimed territory. Last Friday, a US navy official told the media that the next so-called freedom of navigation operation would likely take place in December, again placing the entire region on a dangerous knife-edge.



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