

US push on South China Sea falls short at ASEAN summit

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President Barack Obama concluded the first-ever summit with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders to be held in the United States with a press conference yesterday that elaborated no major initiatives. While the two-day gathering at Sunnylands, California took place against mounting US tensions with China over the South China Sea, the final declaration made no specific reference to the maritime disputes, despite Washington's wishes.

Over the past year, the Obama administration has ramped up pressure on Beijing, demanding a halt to land reclamation activities and alleged militarisation in the South China Sea. The US Navy has twice mounted so-called freedom of navigation operations, deliberately intruding within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese-administered islets, most recently at Triton Island on January 30.

The meeting also came in the wake of last November's ASEAN summit in Malaysia, at which Obama reached a strategic partnership with ASEAN members. During the trip, he announced in Manila that the US would provide \$250 million in military aid to ASEAN members to boost "maritime security."

The US was clearly pushing for a tough joint statement from this week's summit, aimed against China over the South China Sea. However, the final declaration of "Sunnylands principles" made only general references to a "shared commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes, including full respect for legal and diplomatic processes" and to "ensuring maritime security and safety, including the rights of freedom of navigation and overflight" in the region.

Unnamed American officials complained to the media that China put pressure on countries such as Cambodia and Laos not to sign up to a stronger statement. Cambodia, which has strong economic ties

to Beijing, has previously blocked US efforts to align ASEAN against China in the territorial disputes. In 2012, the ASEAN summit for the first time in its history broke up without issuing a final communiqué, amid bitter arguments between Cambodia and the Philippines over the South China Sea.

US accusations of Chinese pressure and "bullying" are utterly hypocritical, however. The Obama administration has deliberately exploited the maritime disputes to drive a wedge between China and its ASEAN neighbours, encouraging the Philippines and Vietnam in particular to take a more confrontational approach. The US has backed and assisted the Philippines in mounting a legal challenge to Chinese claims at the arbitral tribunal in The Hague under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The Obama administration is preparing to exploit the tribunal ruling, due next month, to step up the pressure on China. A comment in the latest edition of *Foreign Affairs*, entitled "Confronting China in the South China Sea," advised the White House to use "the unprecedented opportunity for a US public diplomacy campaign to rally regional support for the rule of law. The State Department should start preparing for such a campaign in advance. The Department of Defense, meanwhile, should conduct FONOPS [freedom of navigation operations] that reinforce the decision once it occurs."

The author was Mira Rapp-Hooper, an analyst with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which last month published a report commissioned by the US Defense Department setting out an accelerated military build-up throughout the Asia Pacific against China.

In reality, the US has nothing but contempt for the rule of law. While demanding that China accepts the

ruling in The Hague, the US itself has not ratified UNCLOS. Moreover, the provocative US military intrusions into Chinese-claimed territory are taking place before the arbitral tribunal has even handed down a decision on the Philippines case.

The Obama administration's interventions in the South China Sea are part of its broader "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia, which is aimed against China and at ensuring American dominance within the region. Obama also used this week's summit to press ahead with the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) sealed last October. The TPP is the economic arm of the "pivot." It seeks to ensure, as Obama has declared, that the US, not China, sets the economic rules of the 21st century.

At the talks, Obama urged those already involved in the TPP—Vietnam, Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia—to implement its agenda, and pushed for other ASEAN members to sign up. The US is currently ASEAN's fourth largest trading partner—behind China, the European Union and Japan.

As well as boosting trade, the TPP aims to increase US investment in South East Asia, where it is currently leading China. Between 2012 and 2014, American corporations invested \$32.3 billion in ASEAN countries, as compared to \$21.3 billion from China. The CEOs of American corporate giants, including IBM, Cisco and Microsoft, were in attendance at Sunnylands.

The "Sunnylands principles" included a commitment to "strengthening democracy" and "promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms." The US, however, is notorious for exploiting "human rights" selectively to justify diplomatic provocations, interventions and war.

At the summit, "human rights" received short shrift as Washington sought to ensure close ties with the Stalinist police-state regimes in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, the Thai military junta, the autocratic governments of Malaysia and Singapore, the so-called "developing democracies" of Indonesia, the Philippines and Burma, and the absolute monarchy in Brunei.

Only Cambodia was singled out for special mention. US Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes last week expressed concern over the intimidation of opposition lawmakers in Cambodia in recent weeks. The Obama administration has no interest in democratic rights in Cambodia, other than as a means

for pressuring the regime to distance itself from China. While his official chided Cambodia over human rights, Obama announced on Monday that he will visit Vietnam in May to strengthen economic and strategic ties.

The lack of any joint declaration on the South China Sea from the Sunnylands summit will not halt Washington's determination to confront Beijing. Obama is under pressure within US military and foreign policy circles to escalate the "freedom of navigation operations" to challenge Chinese claims and will undoubtedly do so, heightening the danger of a conflict between two nuclear-armed powers.



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