

US stokes divisions over South China Sea at ASEAN summit

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25 July 2016

Bitter divisions have emerged over disputes in the South China Sea at the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers' meeting currently underway in Laos, heightening already sharp tensions in the strategic waters.

The summit takes place following the July 12 ruling by the UN-backed Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague, which negated China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. Encouraged by the United States, the Philippines and Vietnam are pressing for the final communiqué to include a reference to the court decision and the need to respect international law.

The US, which has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), supported and assisted the Philippines to make its legal case in The Hague. China refused to take part in the proceedings, insisting that the court had no jurisdiction, and emphatically declared that it will take no notice of the ruling.

Acting in support of China, Cambodia has blocked any mention of the PCA ruling in an ASEAN communiqué and declared its preference for territorial disputes to be settled on a bilateral basis—the stance taken by Beijing. Four of the 10 ASEAN members—Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam—have longstanding disagreements over maritime issues with China.

Over the past five years, the Obama administration has directly intervened in the disputes, declaring that the US has a “national interest” in the South China Sea and insisting on their discussion in multilateral forums such as ASEAN. In 2012, ASEAN was split over the issue, between the Philippines and Vietnam on the one side, and Cambodia on the other. For the first time in the association's 45-year history, that year's summit concluded without issuing a final communiqué.

Washington has ramped up tensions even further over

the past 18 months, denouncing China's land reclamation and alleged militarisation of land features under its control in the South China Sea. Even before any decision by the court in The Hague, the US Navy provocatively carried out three “freedom of navigation” operations (FONOPS), sending destroyers within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-administered islets.

The US military build-up in the South China Sea and the strengthening of military ties with surrounding countries, including the Philippines and Vietnam, is part of a broader “pivot to Asia” to diplomatically isolate China, encircle it militarily and prepare for war.

Having secured the court ruling in The Hague, Washington is intent on driving home its advantage. US Secretary of State John Kerry is due in the Laotian capital of Vientiane where he will take part in expanded ASEAN talks and is likely to meet Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to discuss maritime issues.

An unnamed senior US official told reporters Kerry would encourage the countries involved to “turn to constructively engaging in an effort to find diplomatic ways to peacefully interact in the South China Sea.” In fact, the US is doing everything it can to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours. The official declared it was important that ASEAN members “speak out” and find common ground on the issues.

As Kerry sought to strengthen an anti-China front at the ASEAN meeting, US Vice President Joe Biden was in Australia and New Zealand last week consolidating military alliances. Australia, in particular, is playing a central role in the US military expansion in Asia by opening its bases to American forces and integrating the Australian military with its US counterparts.

Following the PCA ruling, the Pentagon reiterated its determination that the US military would “sail and fly

and operate” throughout the South China Sea. Biden undoubtedly pressed the Australian government to give the green light for its own naval FONOPS inside Chinese-claimed waters, so as to give semblance of legitimacy to Washington’s provocative actions.

US National Security Adviser Susan Rice is currently in Beijing for talks over the South China Sea, supposedly to advance cooperation in a time of heightened tensions. Before the discussions, another unnamed official declared: “We are not looking to do things that are escalatory. And at the same time, we don’t expect they [the Chinese] would deem it wise to do things that are escalatory.”

In the lead-up to The Hague ruling, the US military carried out a number of highly provocative actions, including uncommon naval exercises involving two aircraft carriers and their strike groups in the Philippine Sea—near the disputed waters. Last week, the aircraft carrier, the USS Ronald Reagan, and its strike group of destroyers and cruisers patrolled in the South China Sea. On Friday, the US Navy and Marine Corp began annual maritime warfare exercises with the Singapore Armed Forces, involving 700 personnel and ships, submarines and aircraft from both countries.

Rice’s demand that China refrains from “escalatory” measures is in reality a menacing warning that any Chinese action in the South China Sea will be condemned and exploited to justify further US military expansion in the strategically-sensitive area. While the US claims to be protecting trade routes, its military build-up is an implicit threat both to Chinese bases adjacent to the South China Sea and also to the sea lanes on which China relies to import vital raw materials and energy from the Middle East and Africa.

Washington’s diplomatic offensive on the South China Sea is threatening to fracture the ASEAN grouping. While it is possible that a form of words will be found to paper over deep differences in the final communiqué, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that diplomats in Vientiane were discussing fundamental changes to the way in which decisions are made.

“The frustration [over Cambodia’s veto] is leading to discussion of hitherto taboo ideas about altering ASEAN’s rules to allow a break from required consensus and to enable the creation of smaller coalitions that would allow an ASEAN majority to move forward on contentious issues,” the newspaper

explained.

Such a step could potentially lead to a break-up of the organisation along pro-US and pro-China lines.



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