

# Obama heightens antagonisms with China at East Asia Summit

Joseph Santolan  
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US President Barack Obama intervened during the final day of the three-day Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Laos to inflame regional antagonisms and escalate the danger of war. Obama provocatively insisted that the summit acknowledge the July ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which declared Beijing's territorial claim in the South China Sea to be illegal—a topic the ASEAN member countries had carefully avoided.

The summit's final day consisted of the expanded East Asia Summit (EAS), which incorporated eight other countries in the discussions, including the United States, China, Russia, Japan and Australia.

Obama singled out China, saying Beijing could not ignore the PCA ruling. He stated: "The landmark arbitration ruling in July, which is binding, helped to clarify maritime rights in the region."

The US president continued: "I recognize this raises tensions but I also look forward to discussing how we can constructively move forward together to lower tensions and promote diplomacy and stability."

Obama's insistence on the ruling's binding character was a rejection of China's legal right under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to opt out of binding arbitration. Along with China, other countries have also opted out, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Italy, France, Canada and Spain. Washington, which is using the PCA to tighten a military noose around China, is not even a signatory to UNCLOS.

Customarily Washington would have relied on a proxy member of ASEAN to articulate its geopolitical interests at the summit. Obama would have then expressed strong "US support" for this ally's position.

From Washington's perspective, the country that should have raised the PCA ruling was the Philippines.

Under former President Benigno Aquino, Manila filed a case against China that was drawn up and argued by Washington-based attorneys.

New Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, however, has taken a more conciliatory tack toward China. Until recently, he avoided mentioning the PCA ruling in an effort to secure enhanced diplomatic and increased trade ties with Beijing.

Washington has begun raising the specter of human rights accusations against Duterte's murderous anti-drug crusade as a means of pressuring Manila into line with the agenda of the "pivot to Asia." Duterte responded with an angry tirade during a press conference before the ASEAN summit, mouthing nationalist denunciations of US crimes as a means of justifying his own criminal policies. The White House announced it was calling off Obama's planned meeting with Duterte during the summit.

On Wednesday, Duterte expressed his "regrets" over having offended Obama. Manila announced on the same day it had evidence that China was engaged in island construction on the disputed Scarborough Shoal, in violation of the PCA ruling. It released photographs to the press that it claimed documented this construction activity.

Washington responded by announcing it would give two surveillance planes to the Philippine coast guard, so the country could better assess the state of its territorial claims and protect against intrusions into Philippine-claimed territory. Japan announced on the same day it would provide Vietnam with new patrol boats to defend that country's territorial claims in the disputed waters.

Duterte and Obama met briefly and amicably on Wednesday evening. Duterte's entourage supplied the *Wall Street Journal* with a copy of the speech he

planned to deliver during the East Asia Summit. The draft speech raised the question of Chinese violations of the PCA ruling and would have made the South China Sea dispute the center of the EAS.

Duterte, a volatile political figure stung by Washington's muted human rights criticisms, instead delivered what Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay called an "impromptu speech." In the closed-door session, Duterte showed the delegates, including Obama, photographs of carnage from the 1899–1902 Philippine-American War and stated "This is my ancestor they killed. Why now [the Americans] are talking about human rights?"

Unable to enlist the Philippines or a reliable proxy from the other ASEAN members, Obama was compelled to directly intervene in the summit to assert the US stance.

Japan followed Obama's suit. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said the PCA ruling was "legally binding." He added: "I am seriously concerned with the continuing attempts to change unilaterally the status quo in the East and South China seas."

The reference to unilaterally changing the status quo was a direct attack against China and its alleged island-building activities in the South China Sea.

China responded by denouncing the US provocation. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin told the press that "a couple of extra-regional countries"—meaning the US and Japan—"still wanted to use the occasion of the East Asia Summit to talk about the South China Sea, particularly to press on the regional countries to abide by the arbitration, which is untimely and inappropriate."

During the recent G20 summit in Hangzhou, Russian President Vladimir Putin expanded the geopolitical scope of the conflict. He told the media: "The intervention of third-party non-regional powers, in my opinion, is harmful and counterproductive."

Putin continued: "We stand in solidarity and support of China's position on this issue—not to recognize the decision of this court... This is not a political position, but purely legal. It lies in the fact that any arbitration proceedings should be initiated by the disputing parties, while the arbitration court should hear the arguments and positions of the disputing parties. As you know, China did not address The Hague arbitration and no one listened to its position there. How can you recognize

these decisions as fair?"

The EAS Summit official communiqué has not yet been released, but according to Reuters, a draft of a statement "tiptoed around the regional strains caused by competing claims to areas of the strategically important sea." The delay in releasing the communiqué was doubtless the result of ongoing contentions over its character.

Manila has now assumed the role of ASEAN chair for the coming year. Foreign Affairs Secretary Yasay will travel to the United States next week, with the clear intent of attempting to patch up relations with Washington. He will speak on September 15 at the influential think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The ominous reality facing the ruling elite of every Asian country is that US imperialism has transformed the South China Sea into a powder keg. The US Navy announced on Thursday it was considering conducting a joint patrol with the Philippine Navy to the Scarborough Shoal—a reef claimed by China as well. This raises the possibility of an armed standoff between US and Chinese vessels in the disputed waters. Russia and China are slated to hold joint military exercises in the South China Sea this month.

Obama's direct intervention in the East Asia Summit reflects the desperation of Washington. As the economic and diplomatic weakness of the United States becomes increasingly pronounced, Washington is responding by the direct militarisation of every global dispute, raising at every turn the danger of world war.



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