

# US-China tensions over South China Sea

By John Chan  
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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's provocative stance at the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) security forum last month, where she voiced opposition to China's claims in the South China Sea, has inflamed another global flashpoint. Her comments came just after the Obama administration announced it would proceed with a major US-South Korean naval exercise off the Korean Peninsula, despite strong protests from China.

At the ASEAN forum in Vietnam on July 23, Clinton rejected China's territorial claims. "The United States has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea," she said. "We oppose the use or threat of force by any claimant." She called for a binding "regional code of conduct" in the South China Sea—a move that would undercut China's attempts to assert its interests in what Beijing regards as a strategically sensitive zone.

Clinton was well aware that she was stirring up a diplomatic hornet's nest. China has been at loggerheads with Vietnam, as well as the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei, over the control of the Spratly and Paracel islands in the South China Sea for decades. The Obama administration is exploiting the issue to foster divisions in ASEAN and undermine China's growing regional influence. Clinton's proposal was rejected by China, but welcomed by a number of ASEAN states.

The Japanese media reported that Beijing had told senior US officials in March that it regarded the South China Sea as one of its "core interests," along with Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. The US delegation was in China to enlist its support for tough UN sanctions against Iran over that country's nuclear programs. Beijing insisted that non-interference by the US in China's immediate periphery was a key condition for its support for the UN resolution, and also for Chinese President Hu Jintao's participation in Obama's Nuclear Security Summit.

Clinton's move at the ASEAN forum, together with US naval exercises with South Korea, not far from the Chinese mainland, make clear that Washington has no intention of abiding by China's strategic sensitivities. Clinton told last year's ASEAN summit that the US was "back in South East

Asia". Having passed the UN resolution on Iran, the US is now demonstrating that it is back with a vengeance—flexing its military muscle in a bid to counter China's rising economic strength and influence.

Clinton's statement on the South China Sea is calculated to exacerbate the dilemma facing Asian nations, which are caught between their growing economic dependence on China and, in many cases, longstanding strategic ties with the US. The disputes in the sea have always been a sore point in relations between China and ASEAN, which has ruled out bilateral negotiations with Beijing in favour of a collective response. In 2002, China agreed to ease tensions over the disputed territories as part of free trade talks with ASEAN. By backing the claims of ASEAN countries in the South China Sea, Washington is seeking to drive a wedge between ASEAN and China, undermining Beijing's efforts to cultivate closer ties in the region.

The US is playing a reckless high stakes game. A third of world's maritime trade, including vital energy supplies for China and Japan, pass through the South China Sea. Of China's 39 sea lanes, 21 pass through the region and account for 60 percent of Chinese foreign trade. About 60 percent of ships passing through the neighbouring Strait of Malacca are Chinese, carrying 80 percent of China's imported oil from the Middle East and Africa. China is well aware of the Pentagon's longstanding strategy of controlling key naval "choke points" as a means of depriving a potential enemy of vital supplies.

China has begun to build up its own blue water navy to protect its key trade routes. It has a submarine base on Hainan Island, adjacent to the South China Sea, where it houses its ballistic missile submarines—a major component of its nuclear arsenal. China's first aircraft carrier, which is now under construction, will reportedly be deployed as part of its South China Sea fleet. The sensitivity of the area was highlighted in March last year when a flotilla of small Chinese vessels confronted the US naval spy ship *Impeccable*, which was stationed near Hainan Island, monitoring Chinese submarines and mapping the sea floor.

The incident reflected the interests at stake in the debate over the law of the sea. China insists that foreign military

vessels must obtain its permission to pass through its declared Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The US claims its “right” to “freedom of navigation” through the “Asian commons”—even though the Impeccable was provocatively positioned to monitor a sensitive military base. If China were to take a similar stance—placing a spy ship in “international waters” just off a major US naval base in Hawaii or San Diego for instance—there would be outrage in the US political and media establishment.

The South China Sea also has significant reserves of oil and natural gas, estimated at 35 billion tonnes. Several hundred wells have been developed by Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei around the Spratly Islands, many within waters claimed by China. The US call for “free access” to the South China Sea is also aimed at backing American corporations, such as Exxon Mobil, that are developing energy projects with Vietnam. At a regional security forum in Singapore in June, US Secretary of State Robert Gates accused China of “intimidating” US corporations. In 2007, China demanded that US firms stop exploration in the South China Sea. “Our policy is clear: it is essential that stability, freedom of navigation and free and unhindered economic development be maintained,” Gates said.

Clinton’s aggressive stance at the ASEAN forum was welcomed by Daniel Blumenthal from the right-wing American Enterprise Institute. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* last week, he hailed Obama for standing up to “China’s bullying” and supporting a “collective response” of ASEAN nations that would put an “end to China’s divide-and-conquer strategy in Southeast Asia”. Blumenthal advocated putting “US military might behind diplomatic efforts” and the establishment of an Asian Regional Partnership to unify US allies in Asia against China.

Significantly, in its diplomatic efforts to isolate China, the US is relying heavily on Vietnam. Far from being “socialist” or “communist”, the Stalinist regime that emerged from the US defeat in Vietnam in 1975 has evolved into a mini-version of Chinese capitalism—a cheap labour sweatshop for global corporations. Hanoi has no compunction in siding with the very same imperialist power that the Vietnamese people bitterly resisted for decades.

An important aspect of the US rapprochement with China in 1972 was to seek Beijing’s support to contain the impact of the imminent American military defeat in Vietnam. During the final stages of the Vietnam War, China seized the opportunity in 1974 to occupy the Paracel Islands. Five years later in 1979, China launched a war against Vietnam, with tacit US support, aimed at crippling the fledgling regime in Hanoi, which had toppled Pol Pot, China’s ally in Cambodia. Rivalry over control of the Spratly Islands led to

a military clash in 1988 over the Johnson Reef, with China sinking two Vietnamese vessels and capturing one.

The economic rise of China in the 1990s led to a shift. The US normalised relations with Vietnam in 1995 in a bid to counter China. In recent years, US has sent warships to visit Vietnam, raising fears in Beijing of a US naval presence in ports such as Cam Ranh Bay, which is adjacent to the South China Sea. Major US corporations have increasingly invested in Vietnam. At the same time, Japan, a US ally, and India, a US strategic partner, have boosted their security ties with Vietnam as a means of countering growing Chinese influence.

The potential for conflict over the South China Sea was highlighted by China’s reaction to Clinton’s remarks. Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, who was caught by surprise, wrote an essay accusing the US of carrying out “virtually an attack on China”, by internationalising the disputes in South China Sea. “It will only make matters worse and the resolution more difficult,” he warned. China conducted its largest-ever naval exercises in the South China Sea shortly after the ASEAN meeting.

An editorial in China’s *Global Times* on July 26 issued a blunt warning to ASEAN countries: “Few Southeast Asian countries would like to get in the middle of Sino-US tensions, but like many other regions, they are caught in a dilemma: economically close to China yet militarily guarded against China.” It added: “Southeast Asian countries need to understand any attempt to maximise gains by playing a balancing game between China and the US is risky. China’s long-term strategic plan should never be taken as a weak stand. It is clear that military clashes would bring bad results to all countries in the region involved, but China will never waive its right to protect its core interest with military means.”

By openly siding against China at the ASEAN security forum, the Obama administration has added another contentious issue that will further compound the already tense relations between the two powers.

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