

US imperialism and the South China Sea crisis

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The Obama administration's aggressive drive to counter China's growing strategic and military influence in East Asia has seen the South China Sea become one of the globe's most dangerous flashpoints.

Washington has made a series of provocative statements over the disputed waters. The latest was an address by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Saturday at an ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) regional forum in Indonesia. She declared that the US was "a Pacific nation and resident power" and had a "national interest in open access to Asia's maritime domain."

This echoed Clinton's comments during last year's ASEAN regional forum in Vietnam, where she said that the US had a "national interest" in the South China Sea and "was back in Asia to stay." Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi called Clinton's remarks "virtually an attack on China."

Clinton's latest remark follows a series of inflammatory statements by US officials. Last month the US Senate unanimously passed a resolution backing "the continuation of operations by the United States Armed Forces in support of freedom of navigation rights in international waters and air space in the South China Sea." On July 14, senators John McCain and John Kerry wrote to Dai Bingguo, China's top foreign policy official, warning that Beijing's conduct could "jeopardise the vital national interests of the United States."

The series of incidents in the South China Sea this year—including confrontations between Chinese and Filipino naval vessels—is the direct result of the Obama administration's aggressive push to get "back into Asia." Washington is inflaming long-standing, previously localised border disputes between China, Vietnam and the Philippines. This is driving an arms race throughout Southeast Asia that will inevitably be

paid for through the further undermining of working people's living standards in the region as well as in the US itself.

The South China Sea contains rich oil and gas reserves and some of the world's most geostrategically vital naval routes.

Beijing's dependence on foreign energy sources is rapidly escalating. It imported 239 million tonnes of oil last year—17.5 percent more than in 2009—and regards the South China Sea as a potential new source of domestic production. A recent article in China's state-run *Daily Times* described the South China Sea as a "second Persian Gulf."

The South China Sea is also the key passageway for China's energy imports. About 80 percent of all oil brought into China crosses the Indian Ocean from the Middle East and Africa, entering the South China Sea via the Straits of Malacca. Other Asian economies, including Japan and South Korea, are similarly dependent on the daily passage of oil tankers through the South China Sea, making the naval route a key strategic choke point.

Washington has dominated many of the world's most critical sea-lanes since 1945, including the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca. This state of affairs is no longer tenable for Beijing. Chinese ruling circles are acutely conscious of the active discussions in ruling circles in the US and Europe of potentially threatening China with an energy blockade in the Indian Ocean.

This makes the South China Sea's oil reserves—which are closer to Chinese territory and easier for China to protect—all the more valuable to Beijing. It is moving to develop a blue-water naval force capable of guarding its trade routes and international investments. Among its main priorities is securing the sea all the way from China's coast to what Chinese strategists refer to as China's "first island

chain.” This area encompasses the Yellow Sea and East China Sea to the north, the Taiwan Strait to the east, and the South China Sea to the south.

This brings it into conflict with US imperialism, which since the end of World War II has sought to control the entire Pacific Ocean, up to China’s eastern coastline. In the final years of the Bush presidency, important sections of the foreign policy establishment were sharply critical of the administration for devoting too much attention to the Middle East and not enough to China and East Asia. The Obama administration has overseen a definite shift, making repeated statements that the US is “back in Asia,” reflecting a determination to maintain the post-1945 status quo in the Pacific.

The decline of American capitalism and the outbreak of the global economic crisis are undermining the economic foundations of the region and threaten to shift the global balance of forces. The US is the epicentre of the global economic breakdown triggered by the financial crash, and the crisis has exposed the contradictions that underlay the previous period of economic growth. These included the influx of Chinese credit, via the purchase of hundreds of billions of dollars of Treasury bonds, to finance cash-strapped American consumers’ purchases of low-cost consumer goods produced by the super-exploited Asian proletariat.

Under these conditions Washington relies ever more openly on its military superiority to advance its strategic and economic interests. This is all the more reckless in that every government involved in the South China Sea dispute is being driven to divert mounting class antagonisms arising from the social and economic crisis along reactionary nationalist lines.

The situation in the South China Sea is fraught with danger. In one of the world’s busiest naval routes there are deepening military rivalries and no coordinated communications between the rival countries’ naval forces. The region is a tinder box, with innumerable possibilities for an accident or misunderstanding—or even a provocation—to trigger a clash that could escalate into a full-blown war between the US and China.

The international working class has to intervene and advance its own independent solution to the crisis. Working people and the rural poor in China and

Southeast Asia have no stake in the rival territorial claims being issued by their governments. The task is to unite with the American and international working class in a joint struggle against US and world imperialism, the profit system, and the destructive division of the world into rival nation states, and for a rationally planned and democratically controlled world economy. This requires an uncompromising struggle against the Maoist ruling elite in China, the Stalinist elite in Vietnam, and the national bourgeoisie in the Philippines.

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