

Tensions flare between China and Vietnam in South China Sea

By Peter Symonds
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A dispute between Vietnam and China over the installation of a large Chinese oil rig in waters near the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea has escalated into a confrontation between dozens of Chinese and Vietnamese ships in the area.

The Vietnamese coast guard yesterday accused Chinese ships of ramming its vessels on Sunday and using high power water cannon. Rear Admiral Ngo Ngoc Thu described the situation as “very tense” and said six Vietnamese officers were injured. He claimed that the Chinese flotilla included military ships, backed by aircraft.

Thu warned: “Our maritime police and fishing protection forces have practiced extreme restraint. We will continue to hold on there. But if [the Chinese ships] continue to ram into us, we will respond with self-defence.”

The China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) began setting up the \$1 billion drilling rig, supported by a flotilla of vessels, last week, provoking protests from Vietnamese authorities. The rig is being positioned just to the south of the Paracel Islands, which are claimed by both countries, but controlled by China.

Hanoi formally protested to Beijing on Tuesday, insisting the area is part of its exclusive economic zone and demanding the rig’s removal. Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi declared that “the Paracel Islands are China’s inherent territories” and “China is strongly dissatisfied and firmly opposes Vietnam’s interference.” Chinese authorities announced a three-mile exclusion zone around the oil rig.

While the immediate spark for the confrontation is the CNOOC oil rig, the tensions stem more broadly from the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the

region. Washington has deliberately inflamed low-level regional disputes in the South China Sea into dangerous flashpoints by declaring its “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the area and encouraging countries like Vietnam and the Philippines to press their territorial conflicts with China.

The US State Department quickly bought into the conflict between China and Vietnam, branding the placement of the CNOOC rig as “provocative and unhelpful to the maintenance of peace and stability in the region.” The particular area in dispute overlaps Vietnam’s oil exploration block 143, which Hanoi awarded to the US energy giant, ExxonMobil.

In an utterly hypocritical statement yesterday, US Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Russel called for restraint, saying: “No country should seek to use coercion or the threat of force to advance or to assert its claim.” Through the “pivot,” the US is building up its military forces across the Indo-Pacific as part of a strategy of encircling China and asserting its hegemony throughout the region.

Russel, who is currently in Vietnam, has helped stoke tension in the South China Sea. Formally the US postures as neutral in the various territorial disputes involving China and its neighbours but in February Russel openly questioned China’s claims, declaring that they lacked any “apparent basis under international law.” Behind the scenes, Washington has been providing political and legal support to a Philippine challenge filed in March in the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS).

Last month President Obama visited the Philippines, as part of a four-nation tour of Asia, and declared that the Philippines, a formal ally, had “ironclad” US military backing. During his tour, the US signed a

basing agreement that will allow its military forces unfettered access to Philippine military bases, including those directly adjacent to the South China Sea.

Yesterday, the Philippines detained a Chinese fishing vessel and its 11 crew, near Half Moon Shoal, a sandbar in the disputed Spratly Islands. The Philippine police alleged that the boat was illegally fishing for endangered sea turtles. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs made clear that the seizure had a broader aim, namely “to enforce maritime laws and to uphold Philippine sovereign rights” in the area. China protested against the detention and demanded the crew’s immediate release.

Like the Philippines, Vietnam, with Washington’s encouragement, has taken a tougher stance toward China. Hanoi has parcelled out a number of oil and gas exploration blocks, some of which lie in disputed waters. The deployment of the CNOOC rig on May 1 came just days after Vietnam offered two more blocks to India’s state-run ONGC Videsh (OVL) company.

Through OVL, India has been enmeshed in Vietnam’s dispute with China since 2006, when the Indian company was awarded rights to explore blocks 127 and 128, provoking protests from China, which claimed the area. Beijing issued a formal diplomatic démarche to New Delhi in November 2011. The Indian company eventually withdrew from block 127, which proved unviable, but maintained its right to block 128, despite experiencing technical difficulties there.

Vietnam specifically asked OVL to maintain its interest in block 128, as a means of involving India in its claim against China. In June 2012, China responded in kind via a CNOOC invitation for foreign oil companies to explore in contested areas, leading to protests from Hanoi. Last November, OVL signed an agreement with Vietnam to further expand its offshore exploration.

In December 2012, India’s navy chief Admiral D.K Joshi declared that his naval forces were prepared to protect India’s maritime and economic interests in the South China Sea. “Now, are we preparing for it? Are we having exercises of that nature? The short answer is yes,” he said.

India is boosting its naval presence in South East Asia. Speaking to Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) representatives in March, Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid declared:

“India’s naval footprint is essentially that of a net security provider, even as it is set to expand.”

India, along with Japan, Australia and ASEAN countries, already collaborates closely with the US military as Washington strengthens its posture throughout the region against China. As a result, volatile flashpoints such as the current dispute between China and Vietnam threaten to draw other countries, including the US, into conflicts that could quickly spiral out of control.

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