

Washington Stokes Conflict with China at ASEAN Summit

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Leaders of the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have gathered in Brunei for the 2013 US-ASEAN, China-ASEAN, and East Asian Summits. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and South Korean President Park Geun-hye are in attendance.

US Secretary of State John Kerry is representing the United States, as President Barack Obama canceled his scheduled visit late last week in order to deal with the government shutdown in Washington.

Tensions between the United States and China, which were palpable at the APEC summit in Bali over the past days, intensified dramatically in the first day of the ASEAN summit in Brunei, stoked at every opportunity by Kerry.

There is concern globally and especially in the Asia-Pacific that political wrangling in Washington may cause the United States to default on its debts. Obama's absence at the APEC and ASEAN summits has also stoked fears in a number of regimes in the region that as they pursue a provocative course against China, they will not be able to rely on the full military and political support of US imperialism.

Beijing has seized upon Obama's absence to push what is being termed a "charm offensive." At the APEC summit, it presented a host of regional trade commitments and announced the formation of a US\$50 billion Chinese infrastructure bank to facilitate investment in the region.

In Brunei, Premier Li announced that China and ASEAN would aim to expand their free trade area and increase two-way trade to US\$1 trillion by 2020. Trade between China and ASEAN totaled \$US500 billion in 2012. Li also announced that Beijing "supported Hong Kong in conducting free trade negotiations with ASEAN as a separate customs territory."

Kerry has attempted to offset Beijing's temporary advantage by escalating Washington's already provocative rhetoric. He pointedly directed all summit discussions thus far to the contentious subject of the South China Sea, aiming to divert attention from Obama's absence by fomenting further tensions over the disputed waters.

During a US State Department press briefing en route to Brunei, a senior State Department official said that Kerry would stress America's role "as an advocate for the rule of law, peaceful resolution of disputes, freedom of navigation, and the principle of unimpeded lawful commerce." He added that Kerry would call on Beijing to accept a binding code of conduct (COC) governing the South China Sea.

This is a long-standing US demand, used to pressure China to accept multilateral negotiations, conducted within ASEAN and mediated by Washington, over access to the vital waterways of the South China Sea. Beijing has consistently responded that disputes over the South China Sea should be settled through bilateral negotiations between China and each of the separate rival claimants.

The State Department official then dramatically escalated Washington's demand, stating: "the United States and ASEAN are now in violent agreement on the principles of freedom of navigation and negotiated settlements to the territorial disputes."

"I'm sorry," a reporter interjected, "silent agreement?"

"No," the official responded, "violent agreement."

Later in the press conference, another reporter questioned the use of the phrase. "Check the official transcript," the official responded. The official transcript reads "violent agreement."

The phrase is both an incendiary provocation and a lie. Last year's ASEAN summit failed to negotiate a joint declaration, the first time that this had happened in the history of the organization, precisely because of internal dissension between member countries over US pressure to insist that Beijing agree to a code of conduct. That year's host country, Cambodia, pointedly opposed this demand.

The first day of meetings in Brunei saw the leaders of the ten member countries hold both a US-ASEAN summit and a China-ASEAN summit.

Beijing responded to Kerry's words with an attempt to smooth tensions. Li called for a "South China Sea of peace, friendship and cooperation ... A peaceful South China Sea is a blessing for all."

Li said that China had formulated a draft Code of Conduct agreement in a meeting in Suzhou in September. Were this COC presented to ASEAN, it would doubtless differ dramatically from that demanded by Washington.

Li insisted that the focus at the Summit should be on economic ties and stated, "We must not let the question of the South China Sea affect the overall China-ASEAN relations."

Kerry and Li held bilateral talks, during which, according to State department officials, Kerry called on Beijing to step up pressure on Pyongyang. At the press conference held after the talks, Li stated: "I am sure that we are committed to living with each other in harmony."

During the China-ASEAN summit, Li clearly indicated that Beijing was persisting with its position of bilateral negotiations over the South China Sea. He presented a "seven-pronged proposal on the framework of bilateral cooperation in the coming 10 years."

The proposal called for increased military cooperation, economic integration, financial exchange in the form of a currency swap arrangement, and establishing the South China Sea as a "21st century Maritime Silk Road."

Philippine President Benigno Aquino, whose administration has been responsible for some of the provocative moves against Beijing over the South China Sea at Washington's behest,

responded: “Clearly, our development as a region cannot be realized in an international environment where the rule of law does not exist. Thus, the recognition of the rule of law ensures that every member state’s interest is upheld and respected. At the Asean-China meeting, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang emphasized anew China’s preference for bilateral discussions with claimant countries of the South China Sea.”

Though he used less aggressive language than Kerry, Aquino was stressing Washington’s call for a multilateral Code of Conduct.

The antagonisms on the first day of the ASEAN summit, entirely the work of the US delegation, have real potential to find even more explosive expression at the East Asian Summit taking place today in Brunei.

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