

Washington's Intervention Bringing East Asia To A Boil

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BEIJING: The disturbed waters around China reflect how changes in the political landscape between China and the United States are laying the foundation for a future Asian power struggle, analysts say.

“Strategically speaking, China has very limited influence on neighboring countries and keeps a low profile in diplomacy,” said Shi Yinhong, a senior scholar of American studies at Beijing-based Renmin University.

“But the US possesses long-term military advantages and sticks to its hegemonic ideals,” Shi said.

This region will [see] “a tussle between the US and China to be the dominant voice”, the Financial Times said in a recent commentary.

The US boosted its presence in the region after the Republic of Korea accused the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea of torpedoing its warship in March, which the DPRK has denied.

On Monday the US started its second joint military drill in one month with the ROK and has previously announced the two countries will hold military exercises every month this year.

The Pentagon said earlier this month that the US and the ROK would hold joint military drills with the aircraft carrier USS George Washington in the Yellow Sea without specifying a date, prompting protests from Beijing.

The Yellow Sea borders both China and the ROK, and Beijing is within striking distance of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in the Yellow Sea.

Since leaving its base in Japan in June, the carrier has cruised along waters surrounding China, covering nearly 2,000 nautical miles in East Asia during the past two months, including stopping off the coast of Vietnam.

In a regional security forum held in Vietnam last month, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed a US “national interest” in this region, which is a striking symbol “of the diplomatic battle that will define Asia for the next few decades”, the Financial Times said.

Vietnam held joint military drills with its one-time enemy on the South China Sea, where Chinese sovereignty over several islands rich in oil near vital shipping lanes has been

challenged by some countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

US intervention, in which it aims to take a dominating role in the South China Sea disputes, will further complicate this issue, said Su Hao, director of the Center for Asia-Pacific Region at China Foreign Affairs University.

“It is supporting territorial claims of China’s neighbors in order to contain China, but its intervention will have limited impact as long as China sticks to its position,” Su said.

“China must be persistent in regional cooperation, bilateral and multilateral cooperation,” urged Su, “but not have a sensational reaction and fall into the US’ trap.”

Troubled by the war on terror in the past decade, the US became more distant from most of its allies in East Asia before the administration of President Barack Obama that vowed to turn that around.

“But the US’ desperate demonstration of its military strength gives away its fear of weakness deep inside,” Rear Admiral Yang Yi wrote in a commentary published in Tuesday’s Nanfang Daily.

Yang said the US is now provoking ASEAN nations in order to disrupt their relations with China and distract China from competing with the US.

“The US and China must base their relations on ‘common interests’ instead of on the ‘common threats’ mindset left over from the Cold War,” said Yang.

Clinton, urging a multilateral solution, claimed in Vietnam last month that the US was concerned that conflicting claims to the Nansha and Xisha Islands [Spratly and Paracel] were interfering with maritime commerce, hampering access to international waters and undermining the United Nations law of the sea.

But the situation was further complicated last week when the Philippines, a close ally of the US, said Southeast Asian nations did not need US help in solving territorial disputes with China over the South China Sea.

“It’s ASEAN and China. Can I make myself clear? It’s ASEAN and China. Is that clear enough?” said the Philippines Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo, who was ASEAN chairman in 2007.

Su said the Philippines doesn’t want US intervention to further complicate the South China Sea issue.

“Vietnam’s closeness to the US aims to increase its regional influence,” said Su, “but the sea disputes are still within control from turning to a breaking point”, as China is taking a practical way to solve such disputes and “Asian countries need China’s economic support in development.”

Dong Jidong and Wang Haishan contributed to the story.

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