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Drifting Into Trouble in the Western Pacific

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Despite her best efforts to placate Beijing, Secretary of State Clinton has once again managed to ruffle China's diplomatic feathers ^[3]. The latest incident occurred at the annual East Asian Summit that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) conducted this past weekend in Hanoi.

Clinton actually tried to adopt a low-key approach on several issues that the Chinese government considers sensitive. In her address to the ASEAN conference [4], she avoided mentioning most of the main policy differences between the United States and China, including the North Korean nuclear issue and the controversy surrounding Beijing's alleged manipulation of its currency.

Secretary Clinton did weigh-in on the issue of maritime disputes, stating that “the United States has a national interest in the freedom of navigation and unimpeded lawful commerce.” But in her prepared remarks, she did little more than stress that such disputes needed to be resolved peacefully.

However, the ongoing spat between China and Japan over the status of a chain of islets (called the Senkakus in Japan and the Diaoyus in China) intruded in the proceedings and managed to undermine the secretary's efforts at conciliation. That quarrel erupted again at the summit, with the Chinese foreign ministry accusing Japan of “damaging the atmosphere” when Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara brought up the issue at the diplomatic gathering.

Rather than staying out of the controversy, Clinton waded in, offering to host a tripartite meeting in which the United States would attempt to help resolve the dispute. Beijing immediately interpreted her move as support for Washington's treaty ally, Japan, and made it clear that U.S. involvement was not welcome [5]. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu stated bluntly: “The territorial dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu islands is the business of the two nations only.”

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the diplomatic brouhaha was at least partly motivated by Tokyo's desire to gain more explicit support from its U.S. ally. Clinton's clumsy attempts [6] to have Washington become a participant in the bilateral dispute as a de-facto mediator was bad enough. But she made matters worse by asserting that the islands fall within the scope of the U.S.-Japanese defense alliance. That is not an entirely new position, but highlighting it in a high-profile setting was not at all prudent.

Her stance undoubtedly heartened ardent nationalists in Japan, but it again created tensions with China. Ma Zhaoxu tried to be restrained and diplomatic when he asserted merely that such a position was “extremely wrong” and that the United States should immediately “rectify” such a misinterpretation of the treaty.

Clinton's broad and provocative interpretation of the treaty's coverage not only antagonizes Beijing, it does not serve America's best interests in any respect. It is one thing to pledge to risk war to protect Japan from unprovoked aggression and possible conquest—although even a commitment on that level should not be undertaken lightly. It is quite another matter to put America's security on the line because of a dispute involving some obscure, uninhabited rocks.

U.S. leaders need to take greater care so that this country is not manipulated by East Asian nations that have parochial territorial squabbles and self-serving diplomatic and political agendas. Japan seems well into an effort at such manipulation. So, too, are the ASEAN members. It was likely not coincidental that ASEAN formally invited the United

States this year [7] for the first time to be a full participant in the organization's East Asian Summit. That invitation came on the heels of China's recent bold territorial claims in the South China Sea—an area in which several ASEAN nations have competing claims.

It is not wise for America to become entangled in such disputes. Our legitimate interests in the region are limited in nature, but we are incurring the risk of increased tensions with China and, perhaps, even a dangerous confrontation. Washington's policy is drifting into troubled waters in the western Pacific, and a prompt course correction is needed.

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