

US sails into dangerous waters

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By Ted Galen Carpenter (China Daily)

Washington needs to be careful in its support of Vietnam, others on maritime matters

For several years the United States has pursued rapprochement with Vietnam, its bitter adversary during the Cold War. Although the establishment of cordial relations should be beneficial not only for both countries but all of East Asia, basing that new relationship on military cooperation threatens to pervert the process and produce greater tensions in the region. Instead, US officials should build a closer relationship with Hanoi primarily on economic, diplomatic, and cultural ties. That approach would not only improve bilateral relations, but more extensive economic links in particular would help draw Vietnam further into the global economy. Such a development would be all to the good.

Instead, a focus on bilateral military collaboration seems to be the Obama administration's objective. Among other drawbacks, emphasizing a de facto strategic partnership between the US and Vietnam will create incentives for Washington to support Hanoi's territorial claims in the South China Sea. That development would cause needless friction with other nations in the region, especially China.

The visit to Vietnam by the US Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, last month highlighted worrisome aspects of the budding partnership. Panetta made it clear that a key goal was to gain access for US warships to the harbor at Cam Ranh Bay, something the navy has not had since the fall of the South Vietnamese government in 1975. Referring to the much touted US "strategic pivot" to East Asia, Panetta told reporters that the US would "work with our partners like Vietnam to be able to use harbors like this as we move our ships from our ports on the West Coast towards our stations here in the Pacific".

With the South China Sea as a visual backdrop for his comments, Panetta added that "access for United States naval ships into this facility is a key component" of the relationship with Hanoi. Lest anyone miss the underlying motive, he went on to stress that "it is very important that we be able to protect key maritime rights for all nations in the South China Sea".

This was not the first time that the US has indicated an intention to become involved in the South China Sea territorial dispute between China and several other countries in the region. In a speech before a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in July 2010, the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, emphasized that Washington had an interest in the issues at stake and proposed a "collective regional solution" that included a US mediation role. Chinese officials interpreted her comments as opposed to Beijing's stance, and the Foreign Ministry said direct US involvement, in a mediation role or otherwise, was unwelcome.

Panetta's comments are the latest indication that US involvement in the controversy is escalating, and that Washington may be inclined to back the claims of its new strategic partner, Vietnam. Until now the Obama administration's position regarding South China Sea issues seemed to tilt toward its long-time treaty ally, the Philippines.

While attending an economic summit in Bali in November 2011, President Barack Obama went out of his way to highlight the importance of the US defense alliance with that country and pledged to strengthen the relationship. His comment followed Clinton's strongly pro-Philippines statements regarding the rival claims in the South China Sea. "Any nation with a claim has a right to exert it," Clinton said during a visit to Manila on Nov 16, "but they do not have a right to pursue it through intimidation or coercion". She added that "the United States will always be in the corner of the Philippines, and we will stand and fight with you". The Obama administration backed up such rhetoric early this year with a decision to deploy additional troops to that country, ostensibly to help the Manila government combat terrorism.

But President Benigno Aquino clearly does not want a feud with China on territorial issues. Manila's decision in mid-June to withdraw ships that had established a presence around Huangyan Island suggested that his government wanted to defuse tensions. Although the ostensible reason for the withdrawal was bad weather, it is more likely that it reflected larger policy considerations. Manila's conciliatory withdrawal received Beijing's immediate praise.

However, Hanoi has taken a very different, more confrontational approach. That is not entirely a new development. In June last year Chinese officials accused Vietnam of "gravely violating" China's sovereignty and maritime rights when a Chinese fishing boat became entangled in cables from a Vietnamese ship that was conducting seismic surveys. Beijing's protest followed Hanoi's accusation that the fishing trawlers had deliberately harassed the survey vessel.

Vietnamese authorities have recently become even more aggressive in pushing their position regarding South China Sea issues. Last month the Vietnamese government enacted a law asserting sovereignty over the Nansha and Xisha islands. Hanoi implemented that legislation by initiating air patrols over the

islands. Asked about China's response, a Defense Ministry spokesman, Geng Yansheng, said China would "resolutely oppose any militarily provocative behavior". Geng added that the Chinese military had already established a "normal, combat-ready patrol system in seas under our control", and that the Chinese military's resolve to defend "territorial sovereignty and protect our maritime rights and interests" was "firm and unshakeable".

Perhaps the timing of Hanoi's bold legislation and provocative air patrols, coming just weeks after Panetta's visit and statements, was coincidental. But it is more likely that the Vietnamese government has concluded that it now has Washington's backing for its claims in the South China Sea. Such a perception could be quite dangerous. It would entail the risk that Hanoi may adopt an even more assertive policy than it has until now. At a minimum, that would damage prospects for an amicable diplomatic solution to the various territorial issues. At worst, it may lead to a military incident between Vietnam and China or some other country.

Although the US, as the world's leading maritime power, has an interest in maintaining maximum international navigation rights in that body of water, and Washington is clearly uneasy about the scope of China's claims, it would be unwise for the US to become a party to the complex territorial controversies. All of the countries involved seem to believe that their claims are valid and that those of other parties are weak or bogus. There is no way for US leaders to avoid antagonizing some, perhaps most, of the governments if Washington becomes entangled in this set of contentious issues.

Such an approach would provide few benefits while creating many dangers for the US. At the top of the list of those dangers is the potential to exacerbate regional tensions and to damage the crucial bilateral relationship with China. The Obama administration needs to exercise far greater caution and restraint regarding its new partnership with Vietnam. The last thing the US should do is inadvertently foment crises in the South China Sea.

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