

CHINA US Focus

Growing Ties with Hanoi May Draw U.S. Deeper into South China Sea Dispute

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During his visit to Vietnam in early June, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta displayed eagerness to have the U.S. military return to the bases it once occupied at Cam Ranh Bay. The Pentagon lost its foothold there when South Vietnam fell to communist forces in the mid-1970s, and military officials have longed to regain access. Once Washington established diplomatic relations with Hanoi in 1995, that objective seemed to be an attainable goal rather than a hopeless wish.

The Vietnamese government, worried about China's growing power in the region, may now be receptive to a renewed U.S. military presence at Cam Ranh Bay. The Obama administration for its part seems to view rapprochement with Hanoi as a key component of the U.S. "strategic pivot" to East Asia—and as part of an implicit containment policy directed against China.

There is some danger for the United States, however, in basing improved relations with Vietnam on enhanced military cooperation. In particular, the return of U.S. air and naval units to Cam Ranh Bay is likely not only to antagonize Beijing, but may well draw the United States deeper into the territorial dispute between China and several of its Southeast Asian neighbors regarding the South China Sea.

Washington has already displayed an inclination to involve itself in the controversy, despite repeated protestations of neutrality. China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan all have made claims to various rights in the South China Sea. China's claims are especially broad, asserting an exclusive economic zone that covers well over half of the area. U.S. officials worry that such a vast exclusive economic zone would be a half-way house to converting the South China Sea from international waters to Chinese territorial waters.

That move would have major economic implications. Experts believe that there are extensive oil and gas reserves (and possible valuable mineral deposits as well) throughout the area. Beijing's position also has important strategic implications. Many of the crucial oceanic routes leading to Japan, South Korea, and other countries in East Asia run through the South China Sea. Chinese control of that body of water would give Beijing a grip on the economic jugulars of all of those nations and might cause Washington's East Asian allies to reassess the wisdom of having close ties to the United States.

As the world's leading maritime power, the United States is concerned about the territorial dispute. In July 2010, the Obama administration injected itself into the controversy when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed a meeting of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In that speech, Clinton emphasized that Washington had an interest in the issues at stake and proposed a "collective regional solution" that included a U.S. mediation role. Chinese officials interpreted her comments as a tilt against Beijing's stance, and the Foreign Ministry curtly responded that any U.S. involvement in the dispute, in a mediation role or otherwise, was most unwelcome.

Washington has not backed off, however, and over the past year, appeared to adopt a distinct preference for the claims made by the Philippines. While attending an economic summit in Bali in November 2011, President Obama went out of his way to emphasize the importance of the U.S. defense alliance with the Philippines and pledged to strengthen the relationship. His comment followed a blunt statement from Secretary Clinton regarding the rival claims in the South China Sea. "Any nation with a claim has a right to exert it," Clinton stated during a visit to Manila on November 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 that rhetoric in early 2012 with a decision to deploy additional troops to that country.

President Benigno Aquino's recent actions, though, have weakened the incentive for Washington to support Manila's position. In particular, Aquino's decision in mid-June to withdraw ships that had established a

presence around Scarborough Shoal suggested that he had no stomach for waging a feud with China. Although the ostensible reason for the withdrawal was “bad weather,” the growing presence of some 28 Chinese naval vessels likely played a role in the retreat.

Manila always seemed a poor choice for Washington to back in a controversy with China. The Philippines lack the economic strength, the military capability, and perhaps most important, the determination to engage in such a contest. Even before Manila’s humbling retreat in June—which drew immediate praise from Beijing—Washington may have been looking for an alternative candidate to stand up to China.

Vietnam is the logical candidate. There has never been any love lost between Hanoi and Beijing, even during the Cold War when the two countries were supposedly the closest of allies. The long-time historical animosity surfaced with great clarity in the late 1970s when Chinese forces invaded Vietnam—and found the task far more daunting than anticipated.

More recently, Vietnam and China had a nasty confrontation in the South China Sea itself. In June 2011, 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 and interfered with its work by trying to use a cable-cutting device.

Washington needs to be careful about involving itself in the South China Sea controversy on behalf of Vietnam or any other claimant. The Chinese are very sensitive about the matter, and U.S. backing of Vietnam would likely be deemed even more provocative than supporting the Philippines. In the latter case, U.S. leaders at least had the fig leaf of the Cold War era formal defense treaty with Manila. Establishing a de facto military partnership with Hanoi, especially if it is followed by greater U.S. diplomatic support for Vietnam’s claims regarding the South China Sea, could do major damage to America’s crucial relationship with China. Although Washington has some legitimate interests in wanting to preserve unimpeded international access to waters in the region, that is too high a price to pay. Greater caution is needed regarding the ongoing rapprochement with Hanoi.

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