

Containment a profoundly unfriendly act

By Ted Galen Carpenter

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The Obama administration has announced that it is sending additional troops to the Philippines as part of an effort to strengthen military ties with its treaty ally. Those forces will augment the small contingent dispatched to the Philippines shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks when Manila asked for assistance in combating a Muslim insurgency that supposedly had links to al-Qaida. The 2001 deployment ended a decade in which the United States had no forces stationed in the Philippines after the Philippine government declined to renew the leases for Clark air base and the Subic Bay naval base.

It is no secret that ever since the loss of these bases the Pentagon has wanted to re-establish a significant US military presence in the Philippines. Washington insists that this is because of the need to counter the terrorist threat to the democratic Philippine government, and more generally to strengthen the US' ability to preserve peace and stability in East Asia.

But one doesn't have to attend many foreign policy gatherings in Washington to hear quiet — and sometimes not-so-quiet — comments that suggest another motive. To the hawks in the US, troop deployment in the Philippines is merely part of a much broader strategy aimed at containing or encircling China.

An enhanced military position in the Philippines is merely the latest development, other US actions in recent years also show it is trying to contain China. During his visit to Australia in November, President Obama announced that the US was sending an additional 2,500 Marines as well as combat aircraft to that country. In a speech to the Australian parliament, Obama boldly asserted that, "the United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay." He added that, "the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future."

Experts in the US and elsewhere interpreted those comments as sending a message that Washington intended to do whatever was necessary to counter China's growing power and influence.

There were signs that the US was adopting an encirclement strategy during the administration of George W. Bush. The Bush administration strengthened not only the US' economic ties with its former arch-adversary, Vietnam, but there were talks about providing US naval forces access to Vietnamese ports. And, far more than any of its predecessors, the Bush administration sought to forge a strategic partnership with India, including signing an agreement on nuclear cooperation that critics charged was an implicit acceptance of New Delhi's nuclear weapons program.

The US also sought to strengthen and transform its traditional alliances with Japan and South Korea. Previously, the focus of both alliances was on defending the territory and security of those two countries. During the Bush years, though, Washington sought to "broaden" both bilateral pacts to gain more active cooperation from Tokyo and Seoul in dealing with unspecified "regional contingencies." In other words, US officials wanted to integrate Japan and South Korea into an East Asian security apparatus under the direction of the US. However, Japan seemed somewhat ambivalent about the proposed broadening, while South Korea showed no enthusiasm at all for such a change, correctly concluding that it was directed against China.

In addition to such actual and attempted changes in security arrangements, Washington has taken a much more pro-active position regarding the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. That point became apparent with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech at the ASEAN summit in July 2010 and in several subsequent statements by Clinton and other US officials. The US is not only taking a greater interest in the issue, there has been an obvious policy shift in favor of China's rival claimants, especially the Philippines.

All of these actions taken together certainly create the impression of an encirclement strategy aimed at containing China. If that is not Washington's intention, then both the Bush and Obama administrations have engaged in extremely clumsy diplomacy. It would be difficult for leaders in Beijing to interpret the recent US military deployments and other actions as anything other than a hostile containment policy.

It is even worse if Washington is deliberately pursuing an encirclement strategy. It would constitute a profoundly unfriendly act. The peace of the Western Pacific-East Asian region requires a cordial, cooperative relationship between the US and China.

The US has embarked down a worrying, counterproductive path if it regards China as a dangerous adversary that needs containing. China is not the Soviet Union, and replicating a policy used against the latter during the Cold War would be the height of folly.

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