

## **US to Assure ASEAN on China During Meetings**

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U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton travels to Southeast Asia next week to attend the ASEAN regional forum in Cambodia and the foreign ministers meeting of the East Asia Summit. The meetings come amid rising tensions between ASEAN members and China over the South China Sea. While the issue is likely to get a lot of attention during Secretary Clinton's visit, the U.S. is also looking to strengthen its ties with allies and boost its economic engagement in the region.

In Vietnam, protesters recently rallied against China's claims in the South China Sea, outraged with Beijing's recent actions there -- including a decision to open bids for oil and gas development in waters Vietnam says are clearly its own.

Vietnam is not the only country that has had flare-ups with China in recent months.

Still, that has done little to deter Beijing, which recently began sending surveillance vessels to patrol the disputed waters.

Justin Logan, at Washington's Cato Institute, says that as anxiety grows in the region over China's rising naval might, many are looking for progress on a long-promised effort by ASEAN and China to set down rules for avoiding future disputes in the area.

"There's going to be some pressure particularly on the United States, since we were the ones who were talking about this code of conduct, but also on ASEAN more generally to come up with something that appears to be amenable to all parties," Logan said.

However, few analysts are optimistic that a code of conduct will do much to change the situation. Logan says what could help is for China to take a different approach.

"I think the Chinese would be well served to not act, to not sort of bow down to the United States, or simply get out of the way. But just to dial it back a little bit. To allow countries in the region, to pursue what they really want, which is to have a good relationship with China on the one hand and a good relationship with the United States on the other hand," Logan said.

For their part, U.S. officials say they are going to make it clear during the meetings that Beijing and Washington are committed to working together.

"This is a very important message to send, because I think too often, in ASEAN, there is a concern that Southeast Asia or other parts of Asia will become some area of dangerous strategic competition between the United States and China," said Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell.

And Campbell says economic engagement with ASEAN countries will also be a crucial part of Secretary Clinton's trip..

"It's going to be critical for the United States to lay out some specific economic initiatives that will be aimed at Southeast Asia, and that will also highlight, a substantial American commitment to business," Campbell said.

After meetings conclude, the U.S. will lead one of its largest business groups ever to Siem Reap, Cambodia, to discuss expanding American business in Southeast Asia. U.S. officials say a number of regional ministers and leaders will also attend.

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