

China Slams Western Involvement in S. China Sea Issue

Scott Stearns

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WASHINGTON — China is responding to accusations that it scuttled Southeast Asian unity over the South China Sea by lashing out at what it calls Western meddling among rival claimants. The Obama administration, though, says China should not pursue a "divide-and-conquer" strategy in the maritime standoff.

Chinese patrols in waters also claimed by Vietnam and the Philippines are deepening animosities in the South China Sea.

"What we're most concerned about at the moment is that tensions are going up among the stakeholders. So we want to see a commitment to a deal that meets the needs of all," said U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland.

Engagement through ASEAN

Washington believes that deal should come through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN.

But Beijing says the South China Sea is an issue for rival claimants to decide among themselves. On a trip to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said ASEAN should focus on broader goals.

"Peace, stability and development in East Asia is our common aspiration," said Yang. "In a complicated international situation, we need to maintain regional stability, promote mutual trust, and boost economic growth."

When ASEAN foreign ministers last month failed to agree on a unified approach

to the maritime dispute, China was roundly criticized for dividing the group.

Following Yang's trip, however, China's official Xinhua news agency lashed out at those accusations, saying ASEAN unity was undermined by Western "meddling" meant to "smear China's positive role."

Nuland says ASEAN countries want to protect their larger security interests.

"They came at it from different perspectives, and rather than whitewashing that problem and having a weak communiqué that didn't say much, they chose to continue to talk about it," she said.

Yang said ASEAN members value their friendship with China, since the bloc has become Beijing's third-largest trading partner.

Determining China's agenda

Justin Logan, who directs foreign policy studies at the U.S. Cato Institute, said Chinese contracts remain a lucrative incentive for ASEAN members without claims to the South China Sea.

"I think the chances for a code of conduct that meant something, at the outset, were low," he said. "And so I think that what this might do is create a clearer distinction between ASEAN countries and their position on China."

Nuland said a divisive strategy by China would not be good.

"If bilateral diplomacy can be supportive of an ultimate, multilateral framework, then that will be fine; but we don't think that cutting deals with these countries individually is going to work, let alone be the expedient way or the best way under international law to get this done," she said.

Yang said China backs ASEAN's leading role at the East Asia Summit and at next month's meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Russia.