

Tension in the South China Sea is once again running high after Washington sent the warship USS Lassen to sail less than 12 nautical miles (22.2km) off the Subi Reef (Jhubi Reef, 礁石) — which Beijing claims — as a demonstration of its intention to keep shipping lanes in the area open.

The US is neither protesting China's claims of sovereignty over the reef, nor asking it to stop the land reclamation work there. The idleness suggests that Washington is trying to tell Beijing that according to international law, artificial reefs do not entail the same territorial claims to maritime waters that natural islands do.

The US' move to assert freedom of navigation is entirely different from the incident early in September when several Chinese naval vessels entered US territorial waters, sailing within 12 nautical miles off Alaska.

It is said that Washington's maneuver was due to US President Barack Obama's dissatisfaction with Chinese President Xi Jinping's (習) response to the questions raised about Beijing's claims in the South China Sea during their meeting in Washington.

The US is getting nervous about China's land reclamation efforts in the Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef (Yongshu Reef, 礁石) and Johnson South Reef (Chigua Reef, 礁石), which not only threaten to circle the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands, 南沙群島), but are a little too close for comfort to the strategically located deepwater ports of the Philippines' Subic Bay to the east and Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay to the west. The US was forced to act.

In another move to project its power in East Asia, the US has finalized the negotiations for the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). With it, Washington has taken the initiative in the region, with Japan taking an active role in seeing the negotiations through, to the extent that some regard the deal as an extension of the US-Japan cooperation.

In September, Japan passed a security bill, laying out new guidelines for the US-Japan alliance, according to which Japan would interpret freedom of passage in the South China Sea as pertinent to its national security. That is, the Japanese government would not be breaking

APEC meet holds vast importance for Taiwan

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the law by cooperating with the US in the South China Sea. This is one of the reasons why Washington could confidently make a show of force to maintain its influence in the region. If Japan were still constrained by the 1997 legislation governing “situations in areas surrounding Japan,” the US-Japan alliance would not have applied to incidents in the South China Sea.

Obama is scheduled to attend the APEC meeting in the Philippines and the ASEAN summit in Malaysia later this month. His presence at the meetings suggests that the TPP and the South China Sea are likely to dominate both agendas, and that some sort of confrontation can take place between China and the US-Japan alliance.

If Taiwan wants to leave a good impression at the APEC meeting, it needs to know that fraternizing with Chinese officials in a show of establishing “mutual trust” to demonstrate Washington that Taiwan is not a troublemaker would not trigger a positive response from the US-Japan alliance. Moreover, it would cause the US, Japan and China to think that Taiwan is not committing itself.

This month’s APEC summit is likely to be a decisive meeting in which strategic decisions are to be made. Trying to keep both sides happy or acting as an intermediary between China and Japan would end in more than tears for Taiwan.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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