

BEIJING BANANAS OVER CLINTON/SPRATLEYS

CHINA DISPLEASED...having had a chance to chat with folks who are not speculating when they discuss the US-China and Asia policy situation, we need to clear up a couple of mis-conceptions:

First, Secretary Clinton at ASEAN did not offer to "mediate" the various Chinese territorial and resource claims with Vietnam and most of its Pacific Rim neighbors...rather, the US is offering to work with interested ASEAN members and China on a "code of conduct" for peaceful navigation in international waters.

Avoiding "bad behavior", in other words.

The US is not dipping its toe into the disputed claims issue precisely as it would look to the PLA/PLAN as justification for more military spending and aggressive activity to "deter" the US.

Having said that, there is no way on god's earth the US or any Asian country is going to accept China's absurd "1000 mile" jurisdictional claims, and its clumsy efforts to "enforce". Period. Just look at the map if you don't understand that.

Second, media accounts are wrong on how Beijing has characterized the S. China Sea claims. Beijing has not officially called these disputes by the very specific code word "core interests", except in some passing, emotional conversations...although the People's Daily blast noted in the Summary gets pretty close to it, talking about "cardinal questions of right and wrong".

(Taiwan is the clearest example of "core interest"...meaning China will fight, if it feels it has to.)

Third, the US isn't seeking "Soviet Cold War" style international waters rules of the road with China, due to concern that an increasingly aggressive PLAN might see them as defining acceptable levels of risky behavior.

Rather, the core of the US proposal is aimed at consolidating strong regional support so China grasps the necessity of accepting and implementing the long-established, peaceful international rules of the road which form the center of US policy, and have for the past 150 years.

Increasingly, China uses military shows of force to try and intimidate Vietnam, the Philippines, and most recently Japan, and there are apparently far more incidents, including some shots fired, than ever appear in the media...and the numbers seem to be rising.

Even so, clearly the Chinese had no inkling of what was coming last week. Their diplomats and negotiators, who have been reported as increasingly self-confident, arrogant and demanding throughout the region in recent years, apparently utterly failed to warn Beijing of what was coming.

China apparently genuinely believed it had isolated each country in bilateral, one-on-one "negotiations" where the massive imbalance of forces would, eventually, "win" concessions.

It sounds like what happened at ASEAN last week was the product of months of bilateral consultations with the US by the individual ASEAN states...as seen by the fact that more than half of the members on Friday rose to speak on behalf of the Clinton initiative.

This is especially the case with Vietnam, China's traditional "enemy"...the "little bear" in Deng Xiaoping's phrase.

We will not repeat the by-now universally accepted intel and analysis on China's "blue water" naval actions and ambitions, and trust you will stipulate both the intel and the concerns throughout the region.

So...while we wait on "what's next" with the Clinton ASEAN initiative, let's take a quick look at some larger, background concerns...

(All characterizations are your Editor's, we should stress...so don't attribute any of our "color words" as veiled quotes, please!)

A potentially huge strategic difference between US-China under Jiang Zemin, and the current regime of Hu Jintao, is that the previously tight, incestuous relationship between the PLA/PLAN and the top political leadership no longer exists.

Nearly all of the major military figures who "came up" with Hu have either died or retired, and the current senior PLA/PLAN leaders, while perhaps confirmed by him, are not "political" and indeed often seem to act in reaction to, if not defiance of the professional political and foreign policy leadership.

You remember this was starting to get dangerous under Jiang, during the 2001 Hainan Island incident, which took him nearly a month to bring the PLA to heel.

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Now, this is seen as the principle impediment to resumption of useful, intelligent, dare we say sophisticated mil/mil relations which would be critical to any meaningful resolution of what Sec. Clinton is talking about in the ASEAN region.

But perhaps even more critical in Korean and Japanese "Yellow Sea" waters, airspace, and any chance of risk-avoidance planning for N. Korea contingencies....as per China's month-long "warnings" about dispatching the nuclear carrier Geo. Washington and its task force west of Korea in the current exercises.

There is some sense that these problems need to be addressed soon, as situation after 2012 may see an even bigger pol/mil "disconnect", as the likely successor, Xi Jinping, has even less military connection than Hu.

In the meantime, that is to say, in the absence of real mil/mil tied to the political leadership of both countries, at the ASEAN meeting shows, there is genuine concern over China's increasingly belligerent attitude and behavior about "interests".

How "strong" ASEAN members are prepared to be is just one question.

Many observers fear Chinese belligerency means the US, Japan, the ROK and our allies are going to have to choose between coping with rising levels of tension, across the board, or compromising on our own "core interests" on freedom of navigation in international waters.

Interestingly, it's felt that firm US policy on Taiwan Strait navigation, reinforced by then-Pres. Clinton back during the 1996-97 "missile diplomacy crisis", has produced a workable US-China modus vivendi...but you have to wonder how this may be affected by rising Chinese rhetoric over arms sales to Taiwan, backed up by continuing to boycott mil/mil under Obama and Gates.

And of course on the rising trade tensions this Report has been covering in depth since last year.

So...enough for today, except to note the obvious, the old Chinese curse of "interesting times" is upon us!