

China and US clash over South China Sea

Ben Bland in Kuala Lumpur

China and the US clashed over the South China Sea at an annual meeting of Asia-Pacific leaders at the weekend, blaming each other for "militarising" the region as tensions over longstanding maritime disputes continue to simmer.

China's intense programme of reclamation on reefs in the contested waters, and the construction of airfields and other military facilities has sparked concern in Southeast Asian capitals as well as Washington and Tokyo.

The US responded last month by sailing a warship within 12 nautical miles of a man-made island in the South China Sea controlled by Beijing, angering China with what Washington called a "freedom of navigation operation".

Speaking before a meeting with leaders of the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Kuala Lumpur this weekend, Barack Obama, US president, called on the rival claimants to "halt reclamation, new construction, and militarisation of disputed areas" for the sake of regional stability.

Beijing hit back, insisting that its actions were "beyond reproach," that it was only building military installations on the islands to protect its civilian facilities and that the recent US naval mission was a "political provocation" designed to "test China's response".

Beijing lays claim to almost the entire resource-rich South China Sea, while Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also maintain full or partial claims.

China's ever more assertive stance has upset rival claimants, while the US and Japan, which has its own territorial dispute with Beijing in the East China Sea, have become increasingly concerned about the threat to regional stability and freedom of navigation.

Speaking after a meeting between Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, Mr Obama and 16 other regional leaders, Liu Zhenmin, China's vice foreign minister, attacked the "false argument" that it was militarising the South China Sea.

He told a press conference that the reclamation, which was completed in June, and ongoing construction efforts were intended to reduce the "hardship" of those living on the islands and to develop facilities to help distressed fishermen and commercial ships.

Mr Liu added that "as those islands and reefs are far from China's mainland, it is necessary to build and maintain military facilities" but he said that "one should never link such military facilities with efforts to militarise" the South China Sea.

Ashley Townshend, a security researcher at the University of Sydney, said the real concern was "a much more significant militarisation," including any deployment of military aircraft, large artillery or short-range missile batteries on a permanent basis. "China would do well to clarify what it intends to deploy, in defence of what threats it believes exist, in order to be transparent," he said.

Gary Li of Beijing-based consultancy Apco Worldwide said that while China had always stressed that the new facilities were for civilian use, "everyone knows and China has never denied that the garrisons on these islands are military in nature."

Shinzo Abe, Japan's prime minister, also raised concerns at the Kuala Lumpur summit about China's behaviour, criticising "unilateral acts" that had heightened tensions in the South China Sea.

Japanese officials said Tokyo supported the US navy's freedom of navigation operation but there was confusion over whether Japan would join its ally by sending in its self-defence forces, as its military is known.

One Japanese official briefed the media that Mr Abe told Mr Obama last week that he would consider such a move "with regard to the effect on Japan's national security".

But other Japanese diplomats downplayed this, saying there were "no plans" to do so. Analysts believe Japan is unlikely to take such a course of action at present although US military officials would be glad if they did.

Additional reporting by Robin Harding in Tokyo and Charles Clover in Beijing