

US-China talks as sea row rumbles

China has heaped more criticism on the US after a weekend confrontation between the two countries' vessels in the South China Sea.

The US ship had behaved "like a spy" and China's action was "totally within our rights", state media quoted senior naval officials as saying.

The US said on Monday that five Chinese vessels had manoeuvred dangerously close to its surveillance ship.

The row comes ahead of talks between the US and Chinese foreign ministers.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will meet Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi in Washington later on Wednesday for talks aimed at preparing the way for a meeting between the two countries' presidents at the G20 meeting next month.

Correspondents say Mrs Clinton and Mr Yang will try to tone down the dispute and build on the goodwill from Mrs Clinton's recent visit to Beijing.

But there are also tensions over Tibet, in the wake of Tuesday's 50th anniversary of the uprising in Lhasa that forced the Dalai Lama into exile.

A Chinese spokesman urged the US "to stop using the Tibet issue to interfere in China's internal affairs", AFP reported, after the White House said it was "deeply concerned" about human rights in Tibet.

'Violated'

The row erupted after the naval confrontation on Sunday.

The US said five Chinese ships harassed an unarmed US navy surveillance vessel, the USNS Impeccable, while it was on routine operations in international waters 75 miles (120km) south of Hainan island.

But China rejected the US complaint as "totally inaccurate" and accused it of breaking international law by operating in its Exclusive Economic Zone.

SOUTH CHINA SEA TENSIONS

- Territorial claims from China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Brunei, Vietnam and Malaysia overlap in resource-rich sea
- Hosts some of the world's busiest shipping lanes
- China says the US was in its Exclusive Economic Zone - but the two sides disagree on what activities are allowed in an EEZ

"What was the ship doing? Anyone with eyes can see and our navy can see even more clearly," the China Daily quoted Vice Admiral Jin Mao, former vice-commander of the navy, as saying.

"It's like a man with a criminal record wandering just outside the gate of a family home. When the host comes out to find out what he is doing there, the man complains that the host had violated his rights."

The newspaper also quoted Rear-Admiral Zhang Deshun, the navy's deputy chief-of-staff, calling the US vessel a spy ship.

China views most of the South China Sea as its territory - but the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan also lay claim to islands there.

Under international law, Chinese territorial waters extend 12 nautical miles (22km) off its coast and its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extends 200 nautical miles.

The boundaries of China's EEZ remain disputed, while Beijing and Washington differ on which activities are permitted by law within a nation's EEZ.

China says that any intelligence data gathering by foreign governments within its EEZ is illegal - but the US does not agree with this.

The Impeccable is used to map the ocean floor with sonar. The information is used by the US navy to steer its own submarines or track those of other nations.

There is a large Chinese submarine base on Hainan island.



Story from BBC NEWS:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/7936468.stm>

Published: 2009/03/11 09:16:32 GMT

© BBC MMIX