

Naypyitaw, Aug 9 (AP) - U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is in Myanmar seeking to calm tensions in the South China Sea between China and its smaller neighbors.

Amid concerns about recent provocative steps taken by China and others regarding several disputed territories in the sea, Kerry arrived in Myanmar early Saturday for a Southeast Asian regional security forum, at which the conflicting claims are expected to be high on the agenda.

U.S. officials with Kerry said he would be urging the Chinese and others to take voluntary steps to ease the mounting discord, while they continue to work on a binding code of conduct for activity around disputed areas. The U.S. and others fear that an escalation in tension could hamper international shipping and lead to conflict. Washington has said for years that maintaining calm in the South China Sea is a U.S. national security interest to the annoyance of China.

The U.S. is calling for a freeze in actions that change the status quo, such as seizing unoccupied islands and land reclamation.

Washington says it is neutral in the disputes, and one U.S. official said Kerry "is not looking for a showdown" with the Chinese, arguing that the issue "is not a superpower battle." The official was not authorized to be identified discussing the issue.

Yet Beijing has reacted negatively to any American involvement in the past, and in fact Chinese officials have already made clear they don't support the proposal.

China says it has a historical right to most of the South China Sea and resents what it sees as U.S. meddling, viewing it as an attempt to contain its growing power.

Kerry's participation in the annual Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum comes after China angered Vietnam by deploying a deep-sea oil rig for two months near islands claimed by both countries.

The top U.S. diplomat for East Asia, Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel, told reporters earlier this week that China's withdrawal of the rig in mid-July had removed an irritant but left a legacy of anger and strained relations with Vietnam and likely raised serious questions among China's other neighbors about its long-term strategy.

Secular violence is perhaps worst in Rakhine state, where Buddhist mobs are accused of attacking Rohingya Muslims, a phenomenon that has spread to other parts of the country, sparking fears that nascent democratic reforms in the predominantly Buddhist nation of 60 million people, which emerged from a half-century of military rule with an election in 2010, could be undermined by growing religious intolerance.

In addition, U.S. officials have accused Myanmar authorities of backsliding on pledges of democratic transition, including the recent sentencing of five journalists to 10 years at hard labor for a disputed story about a weapons factory.

After Myanmar, Kerry will travel to Australia to join U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and Australian officials for security talks.