

The South China Sea Dispute: Cooperation or Conflict?

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The South China Sea is often dubbed as the second Middle East for its potential rich reserve of oil and natural gas resources. At the same time, the sovereignty over the islands and rights over the resources in the South China Sea are intensely contested among China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. Many observers see the South China Sea dispute as a potentially explosive security issue in East Asia. In recent years, tensions and disputes seem to be on the rise among claimant states and some external powers are increasing their involvement in the issue as well. No doubt, the dispute has been one of the major factors that have contributed to the rising defense expenditures and growing military modernization programs in the region.

While the security situation in the South China Sea could become dangerous any time, the experience of peace and stability from the late 1990s to 2008 indicates that there are some significantly positive factors that would sustain the overall tranquility in the South China Sea. First, since the end of the Cold War, political leaders in the claimant states understood very well that maintaining peace and stability in the region would be essential for domestic economic development. Moreover, almost every claimant state desired to expand its trade and economic relations with other states in the region in order to hasten economic growth. This accounts for the strong political will in the parties concerned to downplay the South China Sea issue.

Second, the emergence and gradual development of regional institutions in East Asia since the mid-1990s also played a role in mitigating the disputes in the South China Sea. Despite the fact that there has been no effective multilateral mechanism to manage the South China Sea issue, some of the ASEAN-centered institutions have served as useful forums for exchange of views and expression of concerns over the South China Sea issue.

Third, being the most powerful claimant state in the dispute, China has demonstrated a relatively moderate security posture towards the South China Sea issue from the late 1990s to roughly 2008. This moderate security posture was a significant factor in ensuring stability in the region. China's pursuit of a moderate policy in the dispute was aimed at balancing its multi-faceted and conflicting needs. On one hand, it had to maintain a firm position on sovereignty issues because of the historical legacy of its claim, pressure of domestic nationalism, and the legitimacy of the ruling political party. On the other hand, Beijing had to consider the larger strategic and security context in East Asia: an overly assertive Chinese posture would only further compromise its strategic position in the Western Pacific. Chinese leaders understood the value of ASEAN for their nation's strategic, diplomatic and economic interests.

It was in this context that China and ASEAN signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002. Many observers believe that the DOC has not been very effective in managing the security situation in the South China Sea. But it seems reasonable to say that the DOC has at least served as a moral constraint on all parties to the dispute. In the DOC, all parties pledged to practice self-restraint

and to engage in cooperation in various non-traditional security areas, such as maritime scientific research, maritime search and rescue, and marine environmental protection. But so far, there has been little progress in cooperation. The DOC is an ongoing process which seems to have gained a new momentum for cooperation in the wake of rising tensions and concerns in the South China Sea in recent years. But, will all the parties genuinely implement the DOC and progress towards concluding a formal Code of Conduct (COC) in the near future? This remains to be seen.

Now China and ASEAN have established a deeply engaging and complex relationship, with economic interdependence largely defining their bilateral ties. Given the growing interdependence between China and ASEAN, any open conflict in the South China Sea would, to some extent, incur significant cost to any claimant state and deter it from pursuing a confrontational policy in the dispute.

While acknowledging the positive aspects, we need to be aware that there remain several notable factors that may further destabilize the South China Sea region and even cause regional conflict. First, nationalist sentiment towards the South China Sea dispute seems to be on the rise in most of the claimant states—aided by the rapid popularization of modern communication technologies, for instance the internet. Second, many claimant states are now putting more premium on the energy resources in the South China Sea evident from their strong interest in participating in unilateral exploration and exploitation activities in disputed areas in the South China Sea in recent years. Other claimant parties, in response, have decided to toughen their maritime law enforcement activities to protect what they perceive as their own interests in the South China Sea.

Third, on top of all the entanglements among the claimant parties themselves, it seems that the South China Sea issue has become a focal point of strategic rivalry among major powers in the region. The United States is adopting a policy that is increasingly interventionist. Japan and India have also become more interested in engaging in multilateral discussion on the South China Sea issue. Some regional claimant states seem to be happy to involve external powers in order to gain some leverage against China.

In the short term, it looks like that the factors that favor peace and stability in the South China Sea will continue to prevail. Constant

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bickering and diplomatic tussles notwithstanding, all claimant parties essentially realize that conflict or confrontation serves no one's interest. Thus, the challenge is to manage the South China Sea dispute more effectively. Given the fact that the domestic populations in all claimant states are so sensitive to the territorial dispute and that maritime law

enforcement activities could create friction any time in the South China Sea, it is crucially important for leaders in all the claimant states to come up with bold ideas and demonstrate their political wisdom in setting up a more effective mechanism in the South China Sea for enduring peace and stability.