



The South China Sea Dispute: Protracted but Warless

By Serafettin Yilmaz / *Issue Briefings*, 2 / 2015

Despite growing tensions in the South China Sea, two reasons suggest that the maritime territorial disputes are unlikely to devolve into armed conflict.

Waters have been heating up recently in the South China Sea over the issues of territorial sovereignty and demarcation. But will it lead to a major regional crisis or military confrontation? This article argues that although the situation can be described as tense and protracted, it is nowhere near escalating into an explosive regional crisis. This is mainly because of, first, the multilayered nature of the issue that involves multiple claims over island groups and EEZs and, second, the lack of policy integrity, which suggests an incongruence between political rhetoric and practice on part of the states involved in the SCS disputes.

At present, the existing disagreements among the various parties preclude the emergence of bloc politics in which the



interests and capabilities of the stakeholders would be aligned across concrete lines or spheres of influence. Furthermore, as far as the disputes over EEZ boundaries and land reclamation activities are concerned, the actors' diplomatic discourses, in which they argue against the other side's island build-up activities, contradict their own historical practice. It is seen that, albeit to varying degrees, all the claimants have been engaged in island reclamation and development efforts, which hinders them from arriving at a consensus on the issue and forming alliances around shared interests.

Multilayered Claims

A particular characteristic of the SCS dispute is the presence of conflicting claims over the maritime features and EEZ boundaries. It follows that, among the stakeholders in the SCS dispute, each party has their own divergent interests and disparate political, economic and military capabilities to protect and promote those interests. ASEAN, in this case, is in no way a unified bloc. For example, Brunei and Malaysia have territorial disagreements with Vietnam, a fellow ASEAN member state; hence, the two nations have not criticized China in the same manner as the other claimants but preferred to approach the issue in a more cautious and moderate manner. In fact, recently, the Philippines asked Malaysia to support its



arbitration case regarding the Spratly Islands dispute with China in return for Manila easing its claim to northern Borneo. However, Malaysia rejected the offer, arguing that the two cases were unrelated to one another. (Chan 2015) Thus, although the tensions between claimants are real and the conflicting nature of their claims is obvious, there is no clear-cut geopolitical bloc formation that would lead to an escalation or head-on confrontation. Literally, each actor is on its own, which appears to be one of the reasons that some disputants have been seeking to reinforce their position by ensuring extra-regional support.

At present, the territorial disputes are concentrated on the Paracel and Spratly island groups. Islands in the Paracels are held by China and claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan. The Spratly Islands and surrounding waters are claimed in whole or in part by Brunei, China, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. Actual control in the Spratlys is more complicated. The parties claim ownership of maritime features held by others, and their respective EEZs overlap several times, making it impossible for any two of the stakeholders to cooperate meaningfully. What then prevents the dispute from turning into a regional crisis that might eventually lead to an armed confrontation is the relatively large number of stakeholders and



their clashing interests. In this case, the existence of a multitude of conflicting interests leads to two major outcomes. On the one hand, it renders reaching a consensus among the parties an almost impossible task, which results in a protracted dispute. On the other hand, it prevents bloc-formation, which helps reduce the likelihood of a war.

Disparity between Political Rhetoric and Action

The dilemmatic situation is further complicated and reinforced by the presence of a disparity between political discourse and actions on the ground. For example, Vietnam has repeatedly called on China to stop land reclamation in the Spratly archipelago and worked to shape international opinion in its favor. However, in a June 2015 statement, Hanoi rejected US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's demand to stop construction in the South China Sea, arguing that the activities were not aimed at expansion. (SI 2015) In fact, according to satellite images released by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the expansion and construction projects in Vietnamese-held Sand Cay and West London Reef in Spratly have continued uninterrupted from 2010 to April 2015, when the new satellite images were taken. (Brunnstrom and Blanchard 2015) Therefore, the relatively weaker parties to the dispute have thus far failed to mobilize a unified international



opinion due to the apparent incongruence between political rhetoric and practice.

Conclusion

It seems that the dispute in South China Sea will be a protracted one, but it will fall short of escalating into a major war for two major reasons. First, there has been no bloc formation in the region because of the nature of the dispute, which involves not a pair of actors but multiple parties with conflicting interests. This ensures that any confrontation remains local and small in scale albeit without any resolution in sight. Second, one can observe an obvious discrepancy between actors' rhetoric and actions, especially as far as overlapping EEZ boundaries and historical island reclamation and development activities are concerned. This takes away most of the legitimacy sought by the parties in the international arena to reinforce their own arguments. Thus, the simultaneous lack of bloc formation and policy integrity have had a conflicting impact on the geopolitics of the SCS by, on the one hand, preventing a quick resolution, which causes the disputes to drag on, and on the other hand, forestalling escalation of the conflict into an armed confrontation in the SCS.



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CITATION:

Yilmaz, Serafettin. 2015. "The South China Sea Dispute: Protracted but Warless," *Issue Briefings*, 2, Taipei: South China Sea Think Tank.

<http://scstt.org/issue-briefings/2015/175/>