



China, Confidence-Building Measures, and the South China Sea Peace Initiative

By Gregory Coutaz / *Issue Briefings*, 5 / 2015

Following the launch of the South China Sea Peace Initiative, this brief article looks into the contribution of confidence-building measures (CBMs) in the region and why China should welcome them.

Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou unveiled on May 26 the South China Sea Peace Initiative, calling on all concerned parties to exercise restraint, safeguard peace and stability in the region, and refrain from taking any direct action that might escalate tensions. This new initiative proposes a maritime code of conduct and cooperation mechanisms for a range of non-traditional security issues such as environmental protection, scientific research, maritime crime fighting, and humanitarian and disaster relief. The South China Sea Peace Initiative is similar to the East China Sea Peace Initiative announced in August 2012 by the same Ma Ying-jeou, which also called for shelving disputes (in that case, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands



dispute) through dialogue and consultations, and the joint development of natural resources. Even if both initiatives are unlikely to have meaningful impact on the long-term resolution of these tortuous territorial frictions, one should not reject the significance of diplomatic actions aiming at reducing fear and suspicion among disputing parties. Confidence-building measures (CBMs) offer a first step in lowering the risk of armed conflict. At a time when each country involved in the South China Sea disputes is sticking firmly to its positions, it seems that the need for mutual exchange and common inspiration has never been greater. This very brief article looks into the contribution of CBMs in the South China Sea. Due to the limited space and scope, it does not allow an examination of all the parties involved, but focuses instead on China's position.

Role of CBMs

The general concept of CBMs emerged during the Cold War with the objective of increasing transparency between countries to reduce the risk of nuclear attacks. It has subsequently broadened to include other thematic areas of traditional and non-traditional security issues. CBMs are defined as any set of unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral actions or procedures that act to address, prevent, or resolve



uncertainties among countries. In practice, “they function to make the conduct of countries more calculable and predictable, so that countries can have certain expectations with regard to the behavior of other countries.”¹ CBMs in the South China Sea have the capacity to provide a way to avoid misunderstandings about ambiguous events or perceived threats, and play an important role in instilling a sense of common trust and security. The South China Sea Peace Initiative follows a long list of diplomatic and Track II efforts designed to work out a solution to the territorial disputes in the region. The primary attempt at establishing a security dialogue process to help diminish regional tensions was the Workshop on Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea, initiated in 1989 by former Indonesian ambassador Hasjim Djalal, an expert on the international law of the sea. Since then, other formal approaches such as the Declaration on a Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (2002) signed between China and the member states of ASEAN; the Code for Unexpected Encounters at Sea (2014) adopted by China, US, Japan, and about 20 other nations; and various conferences organized by

¹ Higgins, Holly, “Applying Confidence Building Measures in a Regional Context,” Paper presented at the Institute for Science and International Security, 2002, 109. <http://www.isis-online.org/publications/dprk/higgins.pdf>



the Singapore-based S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (2007, 2009), the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam and the Vietnam Lawyers Association (since 2009) have sprung up in the region.² Although these initiatives have raised hopes of overcoming differences between the parties, they have unfortunately generated limited successes. The lack of tangible achievements of CBMs in the South China Sea can be explained by their unrealistic expectations. The usefulness of CBMs is often overestimated and this advocates a careful consideration of their limitations. CBMs are not a magic wand intended to deal with the root causes of a conflict. They are a prelude to further negotiations eventually leading to more effective agreements. Another challenge comes from the fact that some disputing parties in the South China Sea do not wish to change the status quo or do not see their participation in CBMs as being able to advance their claims. However, this does not mean that CBMs are irrelevant, and despite their limitations, CBMs are certainly worth pursuing. Just because they do not meet their most fundamental objective is not a

² Scott, David, "Conflict Irresolution in the South China Sea," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 52, No. 6, 2012, 1024.



reason to discard them, especially for parties plagued by a negative image internationally.

China and CBMs

A combination of bilateral partnerships and multilateral engagements has traditionally constituted China's approach to achieving its foreign policy objectives. After its WTO accession, China began to be active in developing good relations and cooperative partnerships with neighboring countries. Economically, South East Asia has benefited remarkably from China's integration and cooperation. The recent launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) extends China's inclination to the future development of the region. With the exception of Taiwan, whose application has been turned down, all countries that have territorial disputes with China across the South China Sea signed the Memorandum of Understanding recognizing the establishment of the bank. However, on security issues, China does not proceed with the same enthusiasm towards regional mechanisms and international dialogue as it does on economic matters. In fact, China's default response to proposed CBMs has been one of extreme caution. China fears that negotiated CBMs could be diverted from their original purpose and used by other countries to press their territorial claims. The risk for



China is that under the pretext of solving non-traditional security issues, other disputing parties seek to draw attention to what they consider as China's extensive and illegal claims in the South China Sea. Despite the risk of manipulation, it may well be in Beijing's best interest to actively engage in regional CBMs. China's relative inflexibility on the dispute combined with the growing presence of the PLA in the region has alarmed other concerned parties and drawn international criticism. The latest satellite pictures of China's land reclamation in the Spratly Island chain posted by the media worldwide have convinced the general public of China's aggressive posture. Views of China have deteriorated sharply over the last decade. Among the 20 countries polled in 2004 and 2014, the number rating China positively has dropped from 13 countries in 2004 to eight in 2014, while those rating it negatively have risen from three countries to seven. On average, positive ratings of China have dropped nine points. If China receives positive reviews from African, Latin American, and Muslim countries, important majorities give China a negative rating in Vietnam and the Philippines, where 78% and 58%, respectively, have an



unfavorable opinion of the country.³ China's negative image is inconsistent with Chinese President Xi Jinping's efforts to build a positive national image around the world. At a session of members of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee in January 2014, Xi Jinping insisted on the necessity of enhancing China's soft power and improving the way the country handles its image abroad.⁴ Due to its status, China is expected to participate in CBMs dealing with regional non-traditional security issues such as environmental protection, scientific research, maritime crime fighting, and humanitarian and disaster relief. CBMs offer a unique opportunity for China to restore its tarnished image and lay the foundation for regaining the trust of the populations of Southeast Asian countries, namely Vietnam and the Philippines.

Conclusion

CBMs are an important tool for building confidence between disputants in a relatively low-cost and low-risk manner. They can improve relationships, signal positive intentions, and serve

³ Poll conducted by the BBC World Service. For more details on China's image, see <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-2-chinas-image>

⁴ Zhang, Lihua, "Beijing Focuses on Soft Power," Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, 2014 (April 28). <http://carnegietsinghua.org/2014/04/28/beijing-focuses-on-soft-power>



as a tangible demonstration of commitment to avoiding escalation. The goal of CBMs in the South China Sea is to prevent current disputes from developing into an armed conflict. The South China Sea Peace Initiative is a step in that direction, and therefore constitutes a chance to initiate a favorable environment that encourages future constructive negotiations. In that sense, it could have received a warmer welcome by the concerned parties. China, in particular, has everything to gain by participating in such operations. Diplomatic and Track II actions or procedures can contribute to the reduction of the perception of a China's threat. The rapid modernization and increasing capacity of the PLA provoke regional anxiety about China's ambitions. It is no coincidence that in an independent poll released on June 19, eight in 10 Filipinos are now worried about possible armed conflict with China⁵. In recent time, the PLA has been able to engage in international anti-piracy measures in the Gulf of Aden, or to provide medical services with its navy hospital ship the Peace Ark after natural disasters in Haiti, Pakistan and Indonesia. These operations bring benefits to China's image. With the

⁵ "Filipinos Fear Armed Conflict with China over Sea Row," *The Straits Times*, 2015 (June 19). <http://www.straitstimes.com/news/Asia/south-east-Asia/story/filipinos-fear-armed-conflict-china-over-sea-row-poll-20150619>



South China Sea Peace Initiative, China has missed a chance to act as a responsible major power committed to the peaceful development of the region. Fortunately for China, there is no shortage of non-traditional security issues in Southeast Asia. China will have again the occasion, through CBMs, to persuade other disputing parties that it can be an asset for regional security and not only a source of anxiety.

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