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South China Sea Disputes: Reflecting China's Evolving Political System?

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Synopsis

China growing assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes underscores its nation-state interests and rising global power. There are geopolitical ramifications for Southeast Asia.

Commentary

CHINA'S INCREASING assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) underscores its evolving political system and leadership. China's strategic approach to the SCS disputes has wider geopolitical ramifications.

To begin with, once characterised as "a civilisation pretending to be a state", China is now no longer pretending but legitimating its statehood with its strategic moves in securing the Paracel and Spratly islands and Scarborough Shoal as its "core" national interest.

Though historically never a maritime power, its military assertions in the SCS are a radical maritime shift from its traditional continental geopolitical orientation.

Changing 'civilisation state' and 'tributary' relations

The long historical experience of Southeast Asian kingdoms with China for the most part has been benign. Kingdoms in Southeast Asia recognised China's Emperor and China's rulers developed little colonial interests in the region. Only the Mongol forces made three unsuccessful attempts to invade Pagan (in Myanmar) in the 14th century. In Ming times, the voyages of the Muslim eunuch Zheng He underscored China's 'civilisation state' and 'tributary' relationships with neighbouring cosmic-kingdoms.

Until recently, despite all the Western criticisms of its perceived expansionist moves, China has not been involved in any major military expedition outside its geopolitical sphere like the United States and European powers other than its territorial skirmishes with India, Russia and Vietnam and its proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam.

China's nation-state interests

The South China Sea claim underscores several aspects of the evolving Chinese political system and leadership. Firstly, as a relative new state (1949), Chinese leaders seem hyper-sensitive to territory and borders

– beginning with claims for Hong Kong, Macau and now Taiwan. Since the end of the Second World War, China has been redrawing its maps, renaming islands, redefining borders and challenging and revising colonial history in the light of Chinese history.

Secondly, China's sizzling economy has boosted nationalistic pride. The leadership fans such grassroots patriotism and nationalism by creating the bogey of foreign threats to its sovereignty as a way of deflecting domestic political pressures.

Thirdly, after 30 years of dedicated communist rule and a planned economy, the civilisation shine seems to have rubbed off. Liberating itself from the inward-looking, secretive, xenophobic communist experiment, the new capitalist-communist fusion system is a different political animal in a multi-polar world.

Fourthly, the Chinese see a window of opportunity in expanding its spatial influence in the region at a critical time when Western countries are at its weakest levels economically and politically.

Fifthly, China wants to stake its geopolitical reach over the Southeast Asian region and hopes to deter Western powers from interfering in its strategic enterprise. Southeast Asian states have a love-fear relationship with China. They welcome Chinese aid, trade and economic investments but fear that these economic ties will leave them with less room for diplomatic manoeuvre.

Political fallouts from South China Sea disputes

While much reflection has been centered on the military posturing and strategic negotiations of the South China Sea dispute, the issue has wider geopolitical ramifications nationally, regionally and globally.

At the national level, the way China's leadership handles its territorial South China Sea initiatives will depend on the jostling for power between military hardliners and political moderates. One needs to watch the current leaders who grew up in the time of Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. This group represents young revolutionaries with deep idealism, Marxist indoctrination and deprived childhoods. There will also be political opportunists trying to ride the masses of discontent arising from disparities of wealth as in the recent leftist reverberations by Bo Xilai and Chongqing's city officials.

Regionally, the South China Sea disputes might drive a wedge in ASEAN's regional cohesiveness and make the regional body less Southeast Asia-centric. Clearly ASEAN's regional voice is affected, as is evidenced in July 2012 when the Phnom Penh ASEAN Ministerial Meeting failed to issue a communiqué for the first time.

China operates at two levels in the region: it concludes superb bilateral deals with individual governments which potentially bind them to Beijing's strategic leanings; and it engages in broad regional ASEAN-led initiatives which dilute any opposition to its growing political and economic hegemony in the region.

Dilemma of the Chinese diaspora

China's posture over the South China Sea issue might also put the large Chinese diaspora in the region in a dilemma. While the ethnic Chinese populations have integrated well into the national political fabric of ASEAN countries, there are many recurrent events over the decades when governments have questioned their national loyalty and anti-Chinese riots erupted. The overseas Chinese known as huaqiao remain also as huaren, people of Chinese origin. Huaren have been positive conduits for China-ASEAN trading relationships based on guanxi (network and connections), but their loyalties might be questioned in future if the China-ASEAN relationships deteriorate and if the huaren demonstrate sympathies or affiliations as zhongguoren (people of China).

Globally, the South China Sea seems like an arena for a 'clash of civilisations' unfolding between China and the United States - two highly confident systems, culturally and politically, that are wary of each other's global reach and have little trust in each other's foreign policy initiatives.

This lack of trust makes dialogue difficult. As a rising superpower, China needs to show greater political confidence in dealing with its neighbours and demonstrate territorial magnanimity to augment its 'peaceful rise'.

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