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The South China Sea Disputes: Singapore as an “Honest Broker”?

By Daniel Wei Boon Chua

Synopsis

Singapore has talked about being an honest broker between China and Southeast Asian claimants of the South China Sea. Can and should Singapore play such a role?

Commentary

DURING THE recent ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, Singapore’s Foreign Minister Mr K Shanmugam spoke with the media regarding the South China Sea disputes involving China and ASEAN members. Because Singapore is not a claimant of the disputes, Shanmugam suggested that Singapore could be an “honest broker”. But is it even possible for Singapore to be an honest broker, and would playing such a role contribute to Singapore’s interests?

Although Singapore does not claim any part of the South China Sea, it has strong interests in the stability of the region. Singapore’s economy depends heavily on trade and is highly sensitive to hindrances to the freedom of navigation in all international sea lanes. Stability in the South China Sea, which is a maritime area close to Singapore, is therefore vital to Singapore’s economic interest.

Can Singapore be an “honest broker”?

As a small state, Singapore places great value in the collective voice of ASEAN in its engagement with major powers and international forums. Intra-ASEAN hostilities have the potential to split the Association. Furthermore, having developed close diplomatic relations with China, Singapore will inadvertently be affected if the disputes do not reach a peaceful settlement.

Singapore does not favour one claimant state over the other, but urges disputants to resolve their differences in a peaceful manner. In Mr Shanmugam’s words, “from Singapore’s perspective..., it doesn’t matter who owns which islands, but where there are disputes, we want it to be dealt with in a way that doesn’t lead to ships confronting each other, shots being fired, increasing kinetic conflict”.

It is important to emphasise that Mr Shanmugam’s remarks do not imply that an invitation has been extended to the disputants of the South China Sea. In the first place, he has not elaborated on what an honest broker role might look like. Across a spectrum of possibilities, an honest broker’s role could

range from offering a venue for negotiations to arbitrating between opposite sides. There is, of course, a variety of possible measures such as joint economic projects and joint studies on resource extraction in the South China Sea. There have not been official statements made on this issue.

Qualities of an honest broker

Nevertheless, earlier this year, Mr Shanmugam briefly explained the qualities that make Singapore a suitable mediator between China and other claimants. Singapore is seen as both Asian and “westernised”. Singapore is small, not a threat to anyone and is able to “speak freely and frankly”. But do the claimants in the South China Sea disputes share the same view of Singapore?

Whether Singapore possesses the qualities of an honest broker depends on the interpretation and assessment by other countries. In a way, an invitation to mediate has been offered, and it is unsure whether China and the ASEAN claimants see Singapore as indeed a neutral mediator.

Although Singapore is a non-claimant state in the South China Sea disputes, its interests in the region already cast questions on its neutrality. The party that presents the best chance of stability and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea potentially influences the attitudes of Singapore. There are merits to the argument that a small state like Singapore does not threaten the larger claimants, and can bring them to the negotiating table. Yet being small limits Singapore’s ability to ensure that claimants do not stall the process once the outcome veers unfavourably for them.

To make matters worse, playing the role of an honest broker in the South China Sea may work against Singapore’s interests. Firstly, a result that favours any one side of the dispute will raise doubts about Singapore’s neutrality in the disputes – an accusation that Singapore will be happy to avoid. Secondly, mediating in a dispute involving ASEAN members puts the principle of non-interference to the test.

It will be an endeavour that depends on how the process is being interpreted by other ASEAN states, as well as the domestic audience in the claimant states – a matter of how the message is being controlled.

Why Singapore should still attempt to mediate

Having close to 50 years of experience in active diplomacy, both in regional and international arenas, Singapore is known to often “punch above its weight”. To protect its vital interests, it has taken risks at appropriate times, and prevailed through sheer commitment and skillful diplomacy. To passively watch as the South China Sea disputes spiral into a full blown maritime conflict will severely damage Singapore’s economic development and diplomatic relations.

ASEAN’s ability to stay together in the event of conflict revolving around the disputes will also be greatly challenged. Singapore does not have to be the sole “honest broker” in the disputes; non-Asian countries have less or no interests in the South China Sea and will therefore fit into the role well.

Hence, Mr Shanmugam’s proposition for Singapore to be an “honest broker” should not be brushed aside as wishful, and even arrogant, thinking on the part of Singapore. It points towards a necessary step that reflects the continuity of Singapore pragmatic commitment to regional stability that benefits all Southeast Asian nations.

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