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South China Sea: Time for US-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation

By Richard Javad Heydarian & Truong-Minh Vu

Synopsis

China's accelerated construction activities in the South China Sea reveal the paucity of existing measures to manage the ongoing maritime disputes. It is high time to consider novel, decisive options, namely the proposal for the establishment of a multilateral peacekeeping force, composed of ASEAN members, with American backing.

Commentary

CHINA'S ACCELERATED [construction activities](#) in the South China Sea have further intensified the ongoing maritime disputes between Beijing and its Southeast Asian neighbours, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam. More than just complicating the nature of the ongoing disputes at the expense of other claimant states, China's land reclamation activities signal its growing military assertiveness, as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) moves towards "[peripheral defence](#)" and consolidation of its strategic depth in the area.

China's man-made islands fortify its already expansive presence in the contested areas, fulfilling Beijing's broader grand strategy of dominating adjacent waters, particularly vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) such as the South China Sea. The ongoing construction activities could very well [pave the way for the establishment of a Chinese Air Defence Identification Zone \(ADIZ\)](#) in the area, as Beijing completes a network of airstrips and military garrisons across the Parcel and Spratly chain of islands. There are real implications for freedom of navigation and flight in the area.

Multilateral naval force

There are growing fears -- especially in Manila and Hanoi -- that China would increasingly interfere with activities of other littoral countries when it comes to marine surveillance and research, fishing activities, as well as hydrocarbon exploration and development in the South China Sea. Most fundamentally, China's actions represent a direct challenge to the sovereignty claims of neighbouring states, undermining their ability to lawfully exercise jurisdiction, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), within their Exclusive Economic Zone and continental shelf.

What is at stake is no less than the vital interests of a number of ASEAN countries as well as the US' naval primacy in the Pacific. The situation demands no less than a more robust American counter-strategy, given the limited capabilities of Southeast Asian claimant states to rein in China's territorial assertiveness on their own.

But America need not act unilaterally, nor should its response be primarily military. The best way forward is a cooperative approach, with Washington utilising its unique 'convening power' to assemble a coalition of forces to ensure maritime stability in the region.

In a recent meeting with ASEAN naval leaders, [Vice Admiral Robert Thomas](#), commander of the US Pacific Fleet, called for Southeast Asian nations to form a multilateral naval force in order to carry out cooperative patrols in the South Sea. This proposal resembles existing practices in the area such as the joint anti-piracy [patrols in the Malacca Strait](#), carried out by Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand.

South China Sea operations centre

Apart from a joint patrol force, the US has also proposed the establishment of a [South China Sea International Operations Centre](#) in Indonesia. The proposal was forwarded by Commander Harry B. Harris of the US Pacific Command (PACOM) in a Congressional hearing at the end of 2014.

The Centre was proposed to be established in Jakarta, the capital of ASEAN's informal leader, which has no direct claim in the South China Sea but has repeatedly expressed its willingness to mediate the disputes between Beijing and ASEAN countries. The proposed Centre would represent a vital element of broader international efforts to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The above proposals reflect Washington's preference for a cooperative strategy to manage emerging threats to regional security. American emphasis on cooperative security and multilateral approaches to maritime security has been reflected in a number of [policy papers since 2007](#), namely the American Sea Services, which includes the Navy, the Marine Corps and the Coast Guard.

Such a cooperative strategy rests on two principles: Firstly, the necessity for comprehensive collaboration among all concerned nations to manage a specific threat. The ongoing construction activities in the South China Sea represent a threat to regional security. Secondly, a growing emphasis on burden-sharing and multilateralism in light of America's fiscal woes and defence budget constraints.

Protecting the relevance of ASEAN

It is time for ASEAN to consider the US' proposals in order to manage the brewing conflicts in the South China Sea, [lest the very relevance](#) of the regional body will come under question. After all, ASEAN and China have barely moved beyond their largely symbolic but inconsequential non-binding Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002.

Obviously China prefers to settle the disputes through purely bilateral channels, where it has the upper hand. But China has also shown its willingness to maintain stable ties with the ASEAN and avoid complete estrangement of its Southeast Asian neighbours, as evident in its decision to sign the 2002 DOC; emphasise the importance of ["peripheral diplomacy"](#) with neighbours on its fringe; and advocate the ["2+7 cooperation framework"](#), which calls for, among other things, a two-point political consensus on a Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation between ASEAN and China and seven proposals for cooperation.

In short, China will have to engage ASEAN on important issues that affect their two-way relations. ASEAN as a whole and/or key regional states such as Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, which share similar concerns vis-à-vis threats to freedom of navigation and the increased militarisation of the South China Sea disputes, can push ahead with joint patrols. At the very least, they could collectively leverage the prospect of joint patrols to convince China to revisit its

current policy and consider necessary de-escalation mechanisms such as a freeze on ongoing construction activities and the negotiation of a CoC.

What is important is for ASEAN members to explore all possible multilateral options, which can contribute to the management, if not resolution, of the disputes. With sustained and unequivocal international support, including from the US, ASEAN may achieve greater collective resolve to address worrying trends in the South China Sea and re-assert its relevance.

For almost seven decades, Washington has stood as the anchor of stability in the region. But as we move towards a more multipolar order in the region, the US will no longer be in a position to unilaterally dictate events on the ground. This is precisely why the best way forward is to adopt a multilateral, cooperative security approach, which will involve and empower ASEAN as the engine of integration and dispute-management in the region. The South China Sea is the best place to start.

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