



## Cooling South China Sea Competition

by Brad Glosserman

The Sino-U.S. spy-plane crisis is a reminder of the ever-present potential for confrontation in the South China Sea. The world has been lucky so far. Despite a stream of provocations by the various claimants to the area, there have been no recent clashes. But as the EP-3 incident makes painfully clear, there are countless opportunities for just such an incident either in the air or on the sea.

Efforts to prevent a crisis have bogged down; while technical and nongovernment specialists agree on a need for multilateral action, politics has proven a formidable obstacle. A change of emphasis - from a strategic to an environmental focus - might get cooperative efforts moving again. Ironically, the spy-plane incident, by reminding claimants of the stakes involved and the dangers of miscalculation, could prove helpful.

It doesn't take more than a glance at a map of the South China Sea to understand the grim possibilities. It's a semi-enclosed sea surrounded by nine states; 90 percent of it is rimmed by land. It stretches across 800,000 sq. km., with hundreds of features - outcroppings of rock and coral, islets and islands - that dot the surface and provide a lifetime of work for cartographers and legal specialists who have to sort out the competing claims to the area.

The sea's strategic importance is hard to underestimate. The critical sea lanes that link Northeast Asia and the western Pacific to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East traverse the South China Sea. More than half the world's shipping tonnage sails through the South China Sea each year. More than 80 percent of the oil for Japan, South Korea and Taiwan flows through the area; two-thirds of South Korean energy needs, and more than 60 percent of that of Japan and Taiwan, transit the region annually. Jose Almonte, former national security adviser to the Philippine government, is blunt about the importance of the area: "The great power that controls the South China Sea will dominate both archipelagic and peninsular Southeast Asia and play a decisive role in the future of the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean - together with their strategic sea lanes to and from the oil fields of the Middle East."

South China Sea claimants are not oblivious to the region's explosive potential. There have been several minor clashes between regional security forces, some of which have resulted in deaths of soldiers and marine personnel. Fishermen are routinely arrested and their equipment confiscated by patrolling coast-guard authorities. China's increasing assertiveness and its apparent claim to the entire South China Sea has set off alarm bells from Jakarta to Tokyo. Yet progress toward a political solution has been elusive, despite dozens of official and unofficial "Track 2" meetings between various claimants.

The primary obstacle has been Beijing, which has tried to head off multilateral efforts to settle the various claims. (Beijing isn't the only holdout, but its obstinacy and its single-mindedness has made it the most prominent target of criticism.) China believes that it can out-muscle any rival claimant in a bilateral setting. Only in a multilateral forum can governments band together to balance Beijing. For that reason, China has opposed discussing the issue in such settings, acquiescing only when it believed that those rivals threatened to proceed in its absence. The result has been a frustrating stalemate, the continuing creep of the Chinese presence across the sea as it tries to achieve a fait accompli, and periodic clashes.

The frustrations were on full display at the recent Fourth South China Sea Workshop, a Track 2 meeting conducted by the Institute of Strategic and Development Studies (Manila) and the Pacific Forum CSIS (Honolulu), and hosted by the Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University in Taipei in late April. As participants recounted the history of multilateral initiatives and proposed various ways forward, the inevitable rejoinder from seasoned veterans was that virtually all of them had been tried and all, despite initial progress, had bogged down.

"There is always good cooperation until we touch sovereignty, and then we get stuck," said one expert, who has shepherded the process along since its inception. "Structural solutions don't go anywhere."

The lack of progress on the most obvious front has policymakers and analysts casting about for new avenues to build confidence and create the momentum for efforts elsewhere. At the Taiwan meeting, attention focused on environmental initiatives.

Experts agree that the environment in the South China Sea "is under severe stress." A United Nations Environment Program concluded that more than 80 percent of the region's coral reefs are at risk, mostly from human activities. Only a third of the region's mangrove forests, the shoreline swamp-land that serves as a nursery for marine life, remain. Rising levels of sedimentation and nutrients, and destructive fishing practices, have devastated sea-grass communities, another key breeding ground.

Fish nursery areas and breeding grounds are being degraded, and two-thirds of the waters' major fish species are being over-exploited. Over 5 million tons of fish are pulled from the South China Sea each year, 10 percent of the global fisheries catch, and five of the world's eight top shrimp producers border the sea.

"This is the real issue," said one workshop participant. Since the South China Sea provides 25 percent of the protein needs for 500 million people - 80 percent of the protein in the Philippine diet alone - and a livelihood for some 270 million, "this is a human security concern of enormous significance."

Shifting the focus to environmental issues could alert the public, which could then be used to pressure governments to take action. Most people don't care about abstractions such as sea-lanes of communication or the U.N. Conference on the Law of the Sea, or even sovereignty. Protecting species and threatened areas - safeguarding our collective heritage - could be a rallying point.

There are already legal frameworks for concerted action. The document produced at the 1992 Summit on Environment and Development, the so-called Rio Conference, requires all governments to protect biodiversity. Some propose that that be used as a starting point. South China Sea governments have already begun small projects to catalog marine species and create biodiversity databases. One participant at the Taiwan workshop proposed an annual environmental white paper on the South China Sea, written by a panel of experts and aimed at the general public, to help raise awareness and generate support.

"We need to learn to cooperate," said one exasperated workshop participant. "We have a long history of confrontation. Now we need to learn to work together." Collective action to protect the environment could provide the foundation.

*Brad Glosserman is a Staff Writer with The Japan Times and incoming Director of Research at Pacific Forum CSIS.*