



China Versus South China Sea Security

by Professor Ji Guoxing

From my perspective, China's policy towards the South China Sea consists of two parts. On the one hand, as China claims that the Spratly (Nanshu) Islands have been a part of Chinese territory since ancient times, the South China Sea relates to the defense of China's territorial integrity and to the security of China's southern flank. China is duty-bound to defend its territorial sovereignty and its maritime rights and interests there. On the other hand, China wants to maintain good-neighborly relations with Southeast Asian countries. In view of the existing disputes in the Spratlys, China has sought to adopt a conciliatory and flexible attitude, which includes "shelving the disputes and working for joint development" and the peaceful settlement of these disputes in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

These two component parts are contradictory, but coexist in a singly entity. According to materialist dialectics, of the two contradictory aspects, one must be principal and the other secondary, with the principal aspect playing the dominant role in the contradiction. On these grounds, China's pursuance of good-neighborly relations with Southeast Asian countries is the principal aspect which is determinant, as reflected by the repeated statements by Chinese officials that China is focusing on the overall interests of maintaining peace and stability in the region. At different times and in different cases, China might express itself differently in its actions, and different people might lay stress on different needs. The basic factor, however, remains that China wants to have a peaceful environment for the realization of its modernization.

China stands for the settlement of the disputes in the Spratlys in accordance with international law and the UN Convention of the Law of Sea. When ratifying the U.S. convention, China stated it would negotiate with its neighboring countries "for the delimitation of each others' maritime jurisdiction on the principle of equity in accordance with international law." Now that the countries concerned have a common basis and a unified criterion for the settlement, they could engage in friendly negotiations, taking the related stipulations in the Convention for an equitable, objective and workable formula of settlement. In seeking an equitable solution to the disputes, all relevant factors such as historic title, island entitlements, continental shelf rights, proportionality, geomorphological features, and economic interests should be balanced in the delimitation.

China hopes that political will among all relevant sides could be fostered for the peaceful settlement in a spirit of mutual accommodation. It is untrue that China wants to use force to resolve conflicting claims. China's self-interest argues against military action to resolve conflicting claims.

As to the Vanguard Bank, China has acted with restraint, while Vietnam has been stepping up its exploration with some Western oil companies in overlapping areas. In the case of Mischief Reef, China has withdrawn most of its naval ships from the reef, and has invited Philippines fishermen to use the building structures in the reef. Regarding the test drilling in March 1997, China's exploration rig worked for less than one month and then withdrew. As to the patrol by Chinese naval units in April 1997, they left the relevant sea areas when the Philippines protested. All these have reflected the Chinese sincerity in maintaining friendly relations with Southeast Asian countries.

Some Western media has cited some Chinese actions in the South China Sea as expressions of "China's new nationalism." This is in fact a highly complex issue. In the past centuries, China's nationalism was a combination of national pride at being the Middle Kingdom and national inferiority owing to foreign aggression. China's new nationalism has been rising since the early 1990s. Two factors have caused this tendency. The first is the growing national strength along with economic achievements. The Chinese feel they should be allowed to play their due role in world affairs. The reversion of Hong Kong and Macao to China certainly augment this nationalist feelings. The second factor is the growing pressure exerted on China -- mainly by the USA -- on issues such as human rights, most-favored nation status, membership in the World Trade Organization and weapons sales. The Chinese feel they are being humiliated and are treated politically as an outcast nation, and thus they should rise to resist.

Aware that Chinese nationalism has extreme, xenophobic, and strident elements, China's leaders have adopted a cautious attitude. They fear that such developments might affect domestic, social, and political stability and foreign relations. For example, in the case of the Diaoyudao/Senkaku disputes between China and Japan, the Chinese authorities have acted rationally to control the domestic developments among the mainland people in the face of "Protect Diaoyudao Movements" prevalent in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

China's growing nationalism will not affect its policies towards the South China Sea. China would not behave in an assertive fashion and would not embark upon a chauvinistic road in the future. The maintenance of good-neighborly relations will continue to be the paramount factor in the official policy of China.

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