

Spratlys continue to loom as Asian flashpoint

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The joint summit of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) with Japan, South Korea and China, held in Manila over November 29-30, failed to reach an agreement on a proposed “code of conduct” over the strategic and potentially resource rich Spratly and Paracels islands.

The Spratlys consist of several hundred islands, reefs and sea mountains, with a total land area of less than five square kilometres and scattered across approximately 800,000 square kilometres of the South China Sea. China and Taiwan claim the entire chain. China occupies or has placed markers on seven to 10 reefs in the Spratlys, while Taiwan occupies one of the largest islands, known as Taipung or “Itu Abu”. Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines claim only some parts, based on proximity to their shores. All the claimants, except Brunei, have stationed troops in the area. Japan, which controlled the islands for most of the first half of the century, formally renounced sovereignty claims in 1951.

While guano (used as fertiliser) and fish are the only verified resources, there is long standing speculation that the Spratlys lie above considerable oil and natural gas deposits. Chinese sources in 1995 estimated reserves to be in the vicinity of 17.7 billion tonnes of oil and gas.

Overshadowing other considerations is their geography. The Spratlys occupy the major sea-lanes between East Asia and the Middle East and Europe. The bulk of the oil and gas required by Japan and South Korea, as well as an increasing proportion of China's energy needs, is brought by tanker through the South China Sea. Tens of thousands of container vessels carrying goods to and from Japan, South Korea and China use the same sea lanes.

The code of conduct, drafted by the Philippines, was aimed at securing a regional agreement for “a halt to any new occupation of reefs, shoals and islets in the

disputed area to ensure peace and stability in the region”. Before the ASEAN summit even began, however, China made clear it would not sign an agreement that included the Paracels—which are claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam. It also insisted that the code of conduct be between the claimant states, not China and ASEAN, so that the territorial dispute remained outside of any international body.

China's refusal to sign has been met with unconcealed hostility in Manila. Last Wednesday, the speaker of the Filipino House of Representatives, Riolo Golez, effectively accused China of aspiring to take over the Philippines. Comparing China with the “blob” of Hollywood fame—a slow moving organism that absorbed everything in its path—Golez declared “the China blob is already close to Philippines shores with China's recent territorial claims to Scarborough Shoal” [north of the main Spratly islets].

From the turn of the century, all of the imperialist powers contesting domination of the Pacific—Britain, Japan and the United States—saw control of the South China Sea as strategic. In the aftermath of WWII, with the US fleet based in Subic Bay in the Philippines and the Soviet navy eventually operating out of the all-year port at Can Ramh Bay in Vietnam, the question of the Spratlys and hegemony over the South China Sea was subsumed in the broader context of the Cold War.

With the collapse of the USSR, sharp rivalry has re-emerged. The Chinese regime is seeking to assert influence over sea-lanes vital for its own economic interests and others have responded. Despite an ASEAN declaration in 1992 to “refrain from action that could heighten conflict in the Spratlys,” recent years have seen a steady increase in clashes and confrontations between the claimants.

Only two months ago, the Philippines and Vietnam came into conflict over Pigeon Reef where Vietnam has erected structures alleged by the Philippines to be

military in nature. The Filipino government accused Vietnamese troops of firing on a Philippines airforce reconnaissance plane. Also in October, Filipino and Malaysian warplanes reportedly nearly engaged in the vicinity of Investigator Shoal, where Malaysia has constructed concrete structures.

Mischief Reef is one the main points of contention between China and the Philippines. In 1995 Manila accused Beijing of building what appeared to be naval structures on the outcrop. China claims they are only fishermen's shelters. The most serious recent tensions between the two countries have focused on Scarborough Shoal, a small outcrop some 120 miles west of the Philippines island of Luzon. The Chinese government claimed in October that Filipino naval vessels had chased three Chinese fishing boats off Scarborough Shoal. In an earlier incident in May, a Chinese fishing boat was sunk after colliding with a ship of the Philippines navy. In recent weeks, China has issued demands that a Filipino naval vessel that became "stranded" near the shoal be towed away as its presence constituted a challenge to Chinese sovereignty.

The role of the Philippines is of particular note. There are indications that its increased preparedness to confront rival claimants to the Spratlys, including more powerful China, is being directly encouraged by the United States. At a South East Asian Security Conference held in July 1999, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said in relationship to the Spratlys that "we cannot simply sit on the sidelines and watch". At the same time US Republican congressman Dana Rohrabacher declared more bluntly: "China is claiming the entire area in the South China Sea. This is a blueprint for war on the part of Beijing".

According to Filipino Foreign Undersecretary Lauro Bayo, Pentagon officials informed the Philippines government through its Washington ambassador that in "five years time the Chinese would be projecting even larger naval forces into the Spratlys" and that the "structures built by the Chinese on Mischief Reef are a component of a comprehensive strategy for gaining ascendancy as a regional military power".

This year has seen a marked increase in military co-operation between the US and the Philippines, which closed the US base at Subic Bay in 1991. Philippine Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado stated on July 5:

"Our country is weak, is extremely vulnerable to external threats and needs this alliance (with the United States) in order to protect our national interests". In October, the Philippines government was compelled to issue press statements denying that the first joint US-Filipino naval exercises in four years, scheduled to begin in next February close to Mischief Reef, were directed against China.

Like other areas of geo-political importance, the risk of a conflagration in the Spratlys lies in the multitude of conflicting ambitions and interests. With the islands becoming another potential zone of conflict between China and the United States, any disruption or threat to the shipping lanes could not fail to lead to the involvement of Japan, a major power that has a great deal at stake in the South China Sea.



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