

Beyond Territorial and Maritime Disputes: The South China Sea as a Centre of Global Rivalry or Platform for Prosperity?

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Three Alternative Futures

- Treading Water
- Plain Sailing
- Heading for the Rocks/Ship Wreck

Treading Water

- Status quo
 1. Action-reaction dynamic as claimants endeavour to uphold their claims rhetorically and through acts of administration.
 - China's robust policy towards maritime disputes unlikely to change
 - According to Zhiguo Gao & Bing Bing Jia the nine-dash line has “become synonymous with a claim of sovereignty over the island groups that always belonged to China and with an additional Chinese claim of historical rights of fishing, navigation, and other marine activities (including the exploitation of resources, mineral or otherwise) on the islands and in the adjacent waters” (“The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications”, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 107, No. 95, 2013)
 - Nine-dash line *remains the crux of the problem* in the South China Sea.

Treading Water

- Status quo
- 2. Major conflict unlikely but risk of an accidental clash that escalates into a major crisis cannot be ruled out.
- 3. Talks on implementing the DoC and framing a CoC will continue.
 - Will the joint cooperative projects under the DoC reduce tensions?
 - China's lack of enthusiasm for the CoC is clear. At Suzhou in September 2013 China dictated the pace of talks – Dead Slow Ahead.
 - Will the CoC be the comprehensive, binding and credible agreement that some countries seek?
 - Or will it be largely symbolic and does little to constrain the behaviour of the central actors or tamp down tensions?
- How long can the status quo continue?

Plain Sailing

- Best case scenario: claimants finally muster the political will to pursue a peaceful, negotiated settlement.
 1. Claimants submit the dispute to the International Court of Justice.
 2. Claimants resolve the sovereignty dispute among themselves, delimit maritime boundaries and share resources.
 3. Claimants put aside sovereignty claims and jointly manage and develop maritime resources.
- Prospects of Plain Sailing very dim at present.
- What might trigger Plain Sailing? A military clash? A steep rise in energy prices?

Heading for the Rocks

- Worst case scenario in which South China Sea dispute become embroiled in the geostrategic rivalry between the United States and China.
- South China Sea dispute an area of growing contention between Washington and Beijing; the two sides accuse each other of raising tensions and significantly differ on how the problem should be managed and resolved.
- If Sino-US relations continue to trend in a negative direction, the South China Sea dispute will become more complicated and conflict-prone.
- ASEAN unity, relevance and centrality will suffer.
- Ship Wreck: Might China use force to “resolve” the dispute? At present the costs outweigh the benefits, but Beijing’s strategic calculations could change over time.

Conclusions

- The next ten years will likely be a crucial phase in the long-running saga of the South China Sea dispute.
- If the claimants design and implement an effective set of conflict prevention and crisis management mechanisms, provide legal clarity to their claims, and finally muster the political will to pursue a negotiated settlement that resolves the sovereignty question and divides maritime resources in an equitable manner, a bright future beckons.
- But if the status quo continues, and tensions are allowed to fester, the dispute will almost certainly be sucked into the vortex of US-China rivalry, rendering it utterly intractable for at least a few more generations.