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Title	South China Sea : time to change the name
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Citation	Yang Razali Kassim. (2015). South China Sea : time to change the name. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 102). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2015
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/26000
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South China Sea: Time to Change the Name

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The latest ASEAN summit has not thrown up any significant sign of an early resolution to the South China Sea disputes. As leaders pursue the necessary path of diplomacy, more decisive actions may be needed, including a change of name to the “Southeast Asia Sea”.

Commentary

ASEAN LEADERS held their 26th summit this week to sort out critical issues confronting the region. One urgent issue in their official talks in Kuala Lumpur and their retreat on Langkawi Island was the South China Sea where potential flashpoints for conflict over contending territorial claims showed little sign of abating. Indeed, it is hard to be optimistic about a resolution anytime soon - or at all – with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noting its growing seriousness in the past year.

China, as the most powerful claimant, is increasingly adversarial despite years of patient diplomacy by ASEAN. Several of Beijing’s recent moves to assert its claim have raised tensions further. Its relocation of an oil rig in waters claimed by Vietnam, sparking unusually harsh protests from Hanoi; the ramming of rival fishing vessels; and the ‘accidental’ cutting of cables of a seismic ship reflected the growing pattern of muscular response from China which was troubling the whole region particularly the Philippines and Vietnam.

From jaw-jaw to pour-pour

The latest and most provocative of China’s activities is the rapid land reclamation on submerged reefs in the Spratlys to create man-made islands - some big enough for airstrips for fighter jets. China is clearly preparing to project its hard power from the heart of the contested waters. This highly controversial build-up shown in satellite images goes against the spirit of the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) of Parties in the South China Sea which requires claimants not to engage in activities that would raise tensions. The DOC, signed in 2002, is to pave the way to a binding Code of Conduct (COC) but this key over-arching treaty seems elusive or glacial at best, as Beijing continues to drag its feet in negotiation.

With continuing landfill on some of the disputed outcrops, it appears that China is shifting its stance –

to paraphrase Churchill – from “jaw-jaw” to “pour-pour”. ASEAN’s secretary-general Le Luong Minh described it this week as a move to change the status quo. This is a game-changer which will doubtless complicate the search for a resolution to the South China Sea disputes.

In the meantime, China will grow stronger economically and militarily while Southeast Asia could become increasingly fragile, and quarrelsome, as the pressures on their sovereignty create internal fissures. This had already happened in 2012: ASEAN for the first time in its history failed to issue a joint communique at its annual foreign ministers meeting in Cambodia. Since then, fears of a repeat of Cambodia 2012 has clouded ASEAN.

The South China Sea disputes have exposed ASEAN’s vulnerabilities. The once impressive image of ASEAN unity and cohesiveness has been punctured. As China plays to its strength, some ASEAN member-states will again be tempted to prioritise their national interest over ASEAN solidarity rather than pursue them in tandem.

This scenario should not be ruled out as China shifts towards cheque-book diplomacy – leveraging on its massive reserves to win friends and some say – buy influence. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is a classic case of this turning point in China’s diplomatic game. Southeast Asian states, or ASEAN as a collective, are now facing this two-front push by China – a smiling dragon on the economic track dishing out AIIB-linked infrastructure funding, even as it whips a nasty tail on the South China Sea disputes. It will be tough for some member-states to face such a carrot-and-stick approach from China, especially the economically weaker ones.

What can be done: Three challenges

ASEAN has to think hard as it faces at least three critical challenges to Southeast Asia. The first is how to preserve ASEAN unity and solidarity over the South China Sea disputes such that these are resolved without undermining ASEAN cohesiveness.

To this end, a proposal by Carl Thayer, a long-time observer of the South China Sea issue, may be worth considering as a first step to the long-delayed COC with China. Thayer has proposed that ASEAN signs its own “Code of Conduct Treaty for Southeast Asia’s Maritime Commons”. Individual member-states should resolve their territorial and maritime disputes with other members, thus strengthening ASEAN solidarity.

The second challenge is how to deter future aggression by China in the seas while the region pursues deeper economic ties with Beijing. It would be timely to promote ASEAN’s maritime cooperation with trading partners that have stakes in the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.

Such maritime cooperation can begin with the United States and possibly expanded later to include others, such as Japan and South Korea. A recent article in *RSIS Commentary* by Richard Javad Heydarian & Truong-Minh Vu proposed such maritime cooperation in the form of ASEAN joint patrols in the South China Sea.

From South China Sea to Southeast Asia Sea?

The third challenge is how to defuse, on a long-term basis the South China Sea disputes at the mindshare level. Perhaps the time has come for the South China Sea to be renamed. One appropriate alternative - is to call it the *Southeast Asia Sea*. The South China Sea was previously called the Champa Sea after the seventh century kingdom of Champa in today’s Vietnam. The point is, it was not always known as the South China Sea. Apparently, a petition to change the name to the Southeast Asia Sea has already been started.

The Philippines has also taken a similar step by calling it the West Philippine Sea. “When people keep referring to the South China Sea, there is a subliminal message that this sea belongs to a country whose name appears in the name,” says a Philippine Armed Forces spokesman. The online petition, by a Vietnamese foundation, kicked off in 2010 with at least 10,000 supporters from 76 countries, addressed to the presidents and prime ministers of 11 Southeast Asian states as well as the United Nations and several international organisations.

A people-driven initiative like this is in keeping with the region's vision – emphasised by current Chairman, Malaysia – of a “people-oriented, people-centred ASEAN”. It would be most appropriate if this initiative grows to become a collective aspiration of the 600-million people of ASEAN and not just the ten governments.

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