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Re-Naming the Waters: ‘Southeast Asia Sea’ or ‘South Sea’?

By Ellen Frost

Synopsis

As Secretary of State John Kerry visits East Asia in search of a solution to the South China Sea imbroglio, analysts debate whether new ways out should be explored. One proposal is to change the name of the contested body of waters.

Commentary

US SECRETARY of State John Kerry’s current trip to East Asia aims to pave the way for an eventual solution to the region’s maritime territorial disputes. As he discussed the South China Sea question with ASEAN leaders to prepare for their summit with President Obama in the United States next month, analysts debated whether alternative solutions should now be explored.

One idea is to rename the South China Sea to “Southeast Asia Sea”, as proposed in an *RSIS Commentary* (South China Sea: Time to Change the Name, 28 April 2015 by Yang Razali Kassim). This idea coincided with, and lent support for a similar initiative by the Vietnamese Nguyen Thai Hoc foundation. It is a refreshing idea; it could also be problematic. East Asia’s new prosperity owes much to the unifying power of oceans and the expansion of seaborne trade as well as cross-border investment. Relabeling the South China Sea the “Southeast Asia Sea” symbolises the opposite.

Revising English language names

In the modern world, geographic names symbolise geopolitical, economic, and strategic relationships between or among littoral states. Pinning the name of one neighbouring country on a body of water connotes influence and even control over

the others. Modern technology has developed to the point where maritime resources can be measured and harvested on a large scale. That is why the time to re-examine the name of the South China Sea is now, before the competition for resources escalates - and before land reclamation goes much further.

Re-naming a geographic entity requires international approval and dissemination. UN peacekeeping personnel, disaster relief teams, and maritime rescue squads from different member states need a shared understanding of where they are going. A committee called the United Nations Conference on the Standardisation of Geographical Names (UNCSSGN) attempts to identify and apply consistent geographic labels. The UNCSSGN has stated explicitly that its purpose is not to settle political disputes between states on the use or non-use of particular geographical names.

Perhaps a “South Sea,” but not a “Southeast Asia Sea”

East Asia’s new prosperity owes much to the unifying power of oceans and the expansion of seaborne trade and cross-border investment. It is true that the South China Sea laps the shores of maritime Southeast Asian countries, but the real purpose of the proposed new name is not to promote cartographic accuracy but rather to rebut and invalidate China’s “nine-dash line”. The UNCSSGN would probably reject the idea (as it did when Korea attempted to re-name the Sea of Japan).

Calling the South China Sea the “Southeast Asia Sea” would meet with intense resistance from China, thereby perpetuating current divisions and escalating disputes. One of the political arguments in ASEAN’s favour is that China’s maritime claims are easily ten times the size of those put forward by ASEAN claimants; the idea of a “Southeast Asia Sea” would erode that advantage.

Except for Vietnam and maybe the Philippines, reactions to the name “Southeast Asia Sea” within ASEAN would probably be negative. ASEAN members have important economic ties to China and are therefore likely to call the idea of a “Southeast Asia Sea” premature, if not counter-productive. They might argue that one wrong (China’s insistence on the validity of the “nine-dash line”) should be resisted but not automatically mirrored by another.

Symbolising the unifying power of the Sea

Hypothetically, Southeast Asians could copy the example set by China in the East China Sea and declare an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). Although Beijing has thus far refrained from establishing an ADIZ in the South China Sea, it could do so—and perhaps even try to enforce it by forcing non-compliant aircraft down.

Would ASEAN follow suit and declare its own ADIZ in a re-named “Southeast Asia Sea?” Not likely. Since ASEAN members have been unable to agree to establish an ASEAN-wide security force for far less controversial purposes (anti-piracy and anti-trafficking, for instance), a proposal to declare a Southeast Asian ADIZ is virtually certain to fail.

Moreover, ASEAN members have no credible capacity to sustain and enforce a vast

ADIZ. The Philippines and Vietnam, breaking ranks with ASEAN, might call for assistance from the US. But since Washington opposes the very idea of an ADIZ in the East China Sea, it would surely refuse to help in the case of the South China Sea. Avoiding this whole scenario is why the US is likely to oppose the name “Southeast Asia Sea” in the first place.

A far better choice would be a name that symbolises the unifying power of the sea and highlights Asia’s vast maritime network. The simplest - and probably most acceptable - name for a re-named South China Sea would be the “South Sea”. This is a direct translation of the centuries-old Chinese-language term (*Nanhai*), so it would be hard for Beijing to argue against it on historical or linguistic grounds. Provided that the re-naming initiative came from ASEAN or an ASEAN member, Chinese hardliners and ideologues could not claim that the choice of “South Sea” revealed a nefarious American plot to “contain” China.

Why “South Sea” is preferred

Probably the strongest argument *against* re-naming the South China Sea is the likely need to avoid insisting on too many concessions during wider negotiations. A comprehensive settlement of maritime claims would require the Chinese to explicitly or implicitly agree that the nine-dash line has no meaning except as a historical vestige. Chinese acceptance of the name “South Sea” or something equally neutral might be too much to expect.

On the other hand, Chinese leaders might quietly decide that the costs of insisting on the legitimacy of the “nine-dash line” and carrying out land reclamation on claimed islets outweigh the benefits. Such costs already include closer security ties between the US and Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, and others. The communique issued by ASEAN foreign ministers in August 2015 stated that land reclamations “have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and may undermine peace, security and stability in the South China Sea”. Harsh Chinese criticism of ASEAN’s concerns will sound increasingly off-key.

Whatever form a settlement takes, a new English-language name for the South China Sea could be incorporated in the text or in the annexes. In the context of a wider settlement, renaming the South China Sea would be timely, but a new and widely accepted name - perhaps the “South Sea” - would signal a small, seemingly technical, but meaningful contribution to peace.

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