

The U.S.-China South China Sea Debate and its Challenges for Taiwan

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The U.S.-China Debate over the South China Sea

In May 2014, China triggered anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam when moving its oil rig Hai Yang Shi You HD-981 to waters near the Xisha Islands in the South China Sea for drilling operations. On July 10, the U.S. Senate passed resolution No. 412 calling for the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In remarks at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Michael Fuchs, deputy secretary of state for strategy and multilateral affairs in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, also laid out the U.S. policy stance. He urged claimants to agree to commit “not to establish new outposts,” “not to seize features that another claimant has occupied,” not to make alterations “that fundamentally change the nature, size, or capabilities of the presence” and to “refrain from unilateral enforcement measures against other claimants.” Fuchs suggested that all claimants return to the status quo before the November 2002 Declaration of Conduct was signed.

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Russel, stated in remarks at the Brookings Institution in early August that Washington will work for regional stability and the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes. He said Washington supports claimants’ efforts to reach diplomatic bilateral agreements or to avail themselves of international legal mechanisms and urged for the rapid conclusion of a binding Code of Conduct between claimant nations. When subsequently attending the ASEAN Regional Forum in Myanmar, Secretary of State

John Kerry also expressed hopes that peace and stability be maintained in the South China Sea and that regional tensions be solved in line with international law. He also noted that it is the joint responsibility of the U.S. and ASEAN to maintain the safety of sea lanes and harbors in the area. Kerry called on all claimants to exercise restraint and refrain from actions that could complicate or escalate disputes based on the 2002 Declaration of Conduct.

Facing Washington’s clear-cut stance, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi advocated a dual-track approach at the ARF to ward off an alliance between the United States and ASEAN. Beijing believes that consultations and negotiations by countries directly concerned are the most effective and viable way to resolve disputes, which also conforms to international law and common practices. Peace and stability in the South China Sea concerns the vital interests of all littoral countries of the South China Sea, including China and the ASEAN countries. It is the responsibility and obligation of both sides to work together to uphold peace and stability in the South China Sea. Wang also pointed out that the international arbitration case initiated by the Philippines contradicts Manila’s own triple action plan for resolving South China Sea disputes because it skipped straight to the third step. He said if the Philippines wish to pursue its 3-step plan it should withdraw its push for international arbitration and return to the first and second step. Needless to say, China refuted the Philippines with its own argument.

Peace and stability remain the greatest

common denominator between ASEAN, China and the United States. They only differ over what role Washington should play in South China Sea affairs. While Washington emphasizes that it has a joint responsibility, China underlines that China and the ASEAN members must solve their disputes themselves. Clearly, China is pursuing its own Monroe Doctrine in Asia. Under its “dual-track” approach, Beijing is treating the South China Sea like its Caribbean Sea. Moreover, the diplomatic overtures that Beijing used in the run-up to the ARF to undermine ASEAN solidarity in South China Sea affairs have already proven somewhat effective.

II. Pressure Faced by Taiwan

Amid this scenario, Taiwan faces pressure from three sides with regard to the South China Sea front: First comes pressure from Washington. The United States hopes that Taiwan takes a formal stance on the U-shaped line in the South China Sea [the maritime boundary line set by the Chinese government also known as the nine-dash line] so that the conclusions from the debate over the said line could be handed to the International Court of Arbitration to directly help the Philippines. However, such a move would offend China. The second pressure comes from Beijing. China hopes that Taiwan will be able to take the same stance as China in South China Sea affairs to jointly protect their “ancestral” rights in the South China Sea. This would allow China to use the South China Sea issue to take Taiwan affairs hostage. The vertical map of China, officially approved by Hunan Province, features a ten-dash line instead of the previous nine-dash line. Given that the tenth dash of the dotted line has been drawn in waters east of Taiwan, we can understand China’s real intentions. Should China and Taiwan cooperate over the South China Sea,

the United States and ASEAN will feel offended. The third pressure stems from Taiwan’s deep-seated fear of being excluded from the ASEAN free trade area. Should the South China Sea issue be linked with trade issues, the ASEAN members will feel wronged. It is also foreseeable that the envisaged free trade agreement between Taiwan and ASEAN would be thwarted. The recent anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam that affected Taiwanese businesspeople there showed that political and economic issues cannot be kept separate from each other.

Therefore, Taiwan must safeguard its own interests. On top of that, the job Taiwan has to do now is figuring out how it could serve as a lever in the current treacherous diplomatic environment in the South China Sea. It is exactly as Wang Yi noted during a visit to the United States in September 2013 that Taiwan should become a “positive asset” for Sino-U.S. ties. With regard to South China Sea affairs, Taiwan should also play the role of a “positive asset” for all sides. As all claimants will try to draw Taiwan to their side, Taiwan will be in an advantageous situation. Any move by Taiwan, such as how to act with regard to the U-shaped line (taking a stance or not) is bound to influence the situation in the legal war in the South China Sea. Here the government of President Ma Ying-jeou is asked to demonstrate a high degree of political wisdom to respond appropriately. **B**

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