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South China Sea Manoeuvrings: More of the same in 2015?

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Events in 2014 further contributed to the turbulence in the South China Sea. These included the stronger presence of naval, fisheries, and law enforcement vessels in areas of overlapping maritime claims, the enactment of new laws and regulations in overlapping competing countries jurisdictions, and the increased number of routine patrols, surveillance, and combat readiness exercises. In January 2014, Malaysia-China maritime matters took a major “turn” when the PLA Navy was reported to have conducted patrols in the vicinity of Beting Serupai or James Shoal. The accuracy of the Chinese media’s report was unclear since Malaysian authorities had not reported seeing the Chinese flotilla in the area. Furthermore, Beting Serupai is located in the southernmost parts of the Spratly Island and 80km from Bintulu, Sarawak and is within Malaysia’s 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Notwithstanding the importance of trading and strategic partnerships with China, Malaysia may need to relook its approaches on activities that impinge on her sovereignty over features claimed in the Spratly Island.

The more provocative activities and exercises by China that created the media buzz was China's presence in areas claimed by Vietnam and the Philippines. China had been conducting land reclamation activities to expand its military structures in the Spratly Island including on Johnson South Reef, Cuarteron Reef, Hughes Reef, Gaven Reef, and Eldad Reef. For example in February 2014, China conducted a land reclamation project at Johnson South Reef for the construction of a new PLA military airfield. These activities complement China's fortification strategy around the South China Sea. China clarified that the land reclamation was for improving working and living conditions on these islands. The reclamation alarmed regional and extra regional countries because it was seen as an attempt by China to control the region's strategic sea lanes in the South China Sea.



Chinese reclamation work on Johnson South Reef

Source: The Diplomat <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/why-is-china-building-islands-in-the-south-china-sea/>

The Chinese navy routinely holds high-sea training exercises in the South China Sea which it argues do not infringe international laws and common practices. However, China acknowledges that its live-fire exercises are meant to strengthen preparations against naval and air attacks in the contested waters, meaning they are prepared to use force in South China Sea disputes. A case in point was the March 2013 combat-readiness exercise where a Task Force from the South Sea Fleet comprising an amphibious dock-landing ship the *Jinggangshan*, a guided missile destroyer *Lanzhou*, and two guided missile frigates, the *Yulin* and *Hengshui*, as well as helicopters and hovercraft conducted combat-readiness patrols and high-sea training in the South China Sea. The military exercises are targeted at “testing combat capability and improving real-combat training

levels and military preparation for China”. The problem with such an exercise is that it provides an advantage to PLA in familiarizing itself with the sea area, and enhances navigational planning during crises and weather conditions. Such routine exercises interfere with the normal activity of the navy and enforcement vessels of coastal states. Furthermore in June 2014, amendments were made to laws to improve the security of military stations to include temporary facilities for carrying out military missions. These include moving oil rigs into disputed areas and providing provincial governments to build coordination mechanisms to jointly protect military facilities.

PLA sea training includes elements such as command-post establishment, maritime maneuvering operations, maritime rights protection, high-seas escort, rapid response to support operations, and political work. This is part of the South Sea Fleet series of actual-combat confrontation drills with the objective of “being able to fight and win battles”. In addition, China has cautioned ships and aircraft from other countries not to interfere with the training in any form. This was indeed difficult as the area of the training encompasses the Exclusive Economic Zones of other claimants including Malaysia.

Nevertheless such training on the part of the PLA signals that claimant countries including Malaysia should be wary of future PLA exercises. An analysis of PLA’s activities in the South China Sea shows a pattern since 2013. For instances, the PLA Navy claimed to have conducted an oath-taking ceremony in March followed by a similar ceremony at the end of January 2014. Both events took place immediately prior to or after the Chinese New Year and are perhaps aimed at increasing PLA’s popularity in China’s domestic context. This can be interpreted as part of China’s psychological warfare strategy aimed at justifying its actions and to create doubts among the countries that have stakes in the disputes. More pertinently China may deem the trend as a form of *effectivité*. In preparing for 2015, the Navigation Guarantee Department (NGD) of the Chinese Navy Headquarters published a Notice to Mariners which indicated several “platforms” in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam territory. In actual fact, such platforms exist and belong to Malaysia and Brunei pursuant to their joint arrangement in the area. One such feature included in the Notice is south of Beting Serupai (James Shoal) which indicates a possible southward shift of China’s nine dashed line. It is pertinent to highlight that Beting Serupai and areas south of this maritime feature encompass maritime space claimed by Malaysia.

China's neighbors are wary of its recent actions because any new activities can be counterproductive in ensuring effective management of the dispute. How China will act in 2015 remains to be seen but recent patterns indicate that South China Sea states can expect more of the same or even more provocative behaviour from China. Should China continue such a trend it might complicate progress towards achieving a code of conduct in the South China Sea. ASEAN-China relations and issues on the South China Sea have been on the forefront of discussions, including attempts at achieving an early conclusion of a code of conduct of the parties in the South China Sea. As such, the repeat of unfriendly activities in disputed areas should be avoided by all claimants.