

Report on  
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND PROSPECTS FOR  
JOINT DEVELOPMENT by Ana Placida D. Espina

The paper argues, persuasively enough albeit not without problems, that joint development in the South China Sea (SCS) is possible because (1) China wants access to oil and gas resources in the SCS area to feed its own energy demands, (2) it is economically interdependent to other SCS claimants and the region as a whole, and as such would prefer to avoid conflict if possible, and (3) the growing presence of other major powers such as the US in the SCS area, and the US's apparent readiness to engage in conflict if necessary, are a key deterrent to military aggression by the Chinese. The paper is comprehensively researched. It covers the relevant existing literature on the SCS disputes quite well, such as the economic, legal and other reasons behind joint development, while discussing at length the political and security considerations.

My comments are as follows.

First, the Author may wish to introduce the central argument of the paper in the Introduction. As things stand, we only get a sense of the full argument in the Conclusion of the paper. Because of the length of the project (at 16,800+ words excluding notes), it helps to have the argument at the front just so your readers do not get lost in all the detail without a sense of where the paper is arguing and where it is going.

Second, and more crucially, the paper's argument hinges on speculations on what the Chinese would likely do so far as their security perceptions, calculations and actions are concerned. In that regard, there is little discussion in the paper on what and how the Chinese are actually thinking vis-à-vis about their SCS options, whether in the form of official statements or perspectives of influential Chinese security analysts. In other words, can we be certain that the Chinese calculation would be to avoid conflict rather than employ it, if only selectively? Of course, a key element in all this is US strategy in the SCS. Accordingly, the Author argues: "U.S. participation in the event of military conflict is inevitable" (pp 35-36). Granted, the US has begun rebalancing its force distribution, post-Afghanistan, to Asia, with all the implications of that for the SCS region. It has beefed up its alliances, especially with the Philippines. (Author failed to mention the transfer of littoral combat ships to Singapore.) But is it abundantly clear the US would step in should a conflict emerge? Bear in mind this is a war-weary US which has undergone significant cuts to its defense budget. War with China could be the last thing on Washington's mind. Moreover, on a more speculative note, should Obama lose the presidency to Romney, would that change, if at all, extant US policy vis-à-vis the Asian region and the SCS? And if so, would it change the Author's assumption regarding US policy and action?

Third, related to the above point, the argument focuses specifically on what China might or might not do, while assuming the US would enter the conflict if one arises. What about the Southeast Asian claimants? If, as the Author suggests, the SEA claimant states have been emboldened by the security support shown by the US, could not an overconfident

Philippines or Vietnam decide to take things into its own hands and initiate an action that might make the Chinese decide they have no choice but to respond aggressively? Prospect theory implies that when states and decision-makers feel they are being cornered and there is no way out, they tend to risk it all even if it means they might end up on the losing end. On the other hand, it may not even require a deliberate action on anyone's part. Even accidental actions could provoke retaliations. In other words, the Author seems to have privileged the great powers as the key actors in the SCS disputes, while ignoring the agency of smaller or local players, if only inadvertently.

Fourth, the paper briefly touches on the impact of China's domestic politics on its SCS policy. Is the policy the consequence of effects of the ongoing leadership transition? How, if at all, might that policy stick or be revised after the transition is over and done with?

Fifth, the paper offers a useful discussion on UNCLOS and its implications for the SCS disputes. It would help if UNCLOS is briefly introduced instead of assuming readers know what it is. It might also help just to mention whether all parties to the SCS disputes are signatories to UNCLOS. Given that the US figures so prominently in the paper's analysis, at least from the security standpoint, what might the Author's views be on the US as a non-UNCLOS signatory vis-à-vis the disputes? Would, for example, the US signing UNCLOS pressure China to take seriously an UNCLOS-based solution for the SCS?

Sixth, the paper offers some interesting discussion of various existing joint development enterprises as possible models for SCS joint development. In particular the Timor Gap Treaty is identified as a model. How so? In general, the paper doesn't show specifically how precisely those extant enterprises matter as models to the SCS situation. In that respect, what about the pan-Beibu (Tonkin) cooperative venture between China and Vietnam, or the land border settlement between those 2 countries? Do these joint development ventures serve as possible models on which China and Vietnam can bilaterally build their SCS cooperation?

Seventh, any chance the Author could include works by scholars like Ralf Emmers and Sam Bateman, who have contributed significantly to the SCS joint development debate? Also, the Robert Beckman citation in the endnotes is incomplete.

Finally, the paper has a tendency towards long convoluted sentences. Breaking up some of that and shortening them could help.