

Anti-China 'Spratly group' not likely

Li Mingjiang & Wendy Wang
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An international alliance targeting China is in the works, claims a Kuala Lumpur Security Review commentary that appeared on July 2.

Entitled 'The emerging Spratly Group that China fears most', the piece - written in Chinese - asserts that some South-east Asian countries with territorial claims in the South China Sea are likely to form a 'Spratly group' with the United States and Australia to contain China's regional ambitions.

The piece cites a few interviews with Indonesian, Singaporean and Australian defence and military leaders, as well as a brief remark by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates during his visit to the Philippines early last month. Apparently, these leaders all claimed or stressed that it was in their national interest to maintain free and open shipping in the South China Sea. The commentary concludes that these states are paying more attention to the South China Sea.

It says that some South-east Asian disputant countries are gradually forging better coordination on the South China Sea issue against China. Two specific examples are given: First, Vietnam and Malaysia's joint proposal to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf; and some breakthrough in the negotiations between Malaysia and Brunei concerning their maritime disputes. The author contends that this emerging solidarity has been largely triggered by growing Chinese power.

Finally, the author asserts that the annual maritime and landing military exercises between the US and various South-east Asian countries are being carried out in preparation for crises in the Spratlys, likely to be caused by Chinese aggression.

Although the commentary stresses that the ultimate realisation of a 'Spratly group' depends on a few factors, most notably China's posture and actions, the suggestion that a 'Spratly group' is emerging is alarming. If it were true, it would signal a dramatic change to the status quo.

Over the years, some South-east Asian countries and external powers have, to some extent, acted in concert to deal with China on shipping freedom in the South China Sea. The US, Australia and Singapore have long expressed these concerns.

Similarly, US joint maritime exercises with various South-east Asian countries are not new. It is not clear that these exercises are specifically targeting China.

The commentary claims that Indonesia is also focusing more on the South China Sea issue, and cites as proof a series of symposia it has held on the subject since the 1990s. This is absurd.

Firstly, those discussions ended a few years ago. Secondly, Chinese scholars participated in most of the discussions. Furthermore, Indonesia did not play an essential role in them and the funds came from elsewhere. In addition, the symposia focused mainly on cooperation in the South China Sea and had little to do with sovereignty disputes.

Apart from over-emphasising the cooperation among the South-east Asian claimant

countries, the commentary fails to acknowledge that, for years, these states have also disagreed on how to deal with China. They may coordinate their stances in relation to China in the future but it is hard to imagine a scenario where they can genuinely develop a united front, let alone a 'Spratly group'.

Finally, the commentary does not take into account the growing trends in ties between China and South-east Asia. Though disputes over fishing, the exploration of resources, and symbolic actions to demonstrate sovereignty exist, as they have for decades, relations are improving, in the military and security fields inclusive.

The countries in South-east Asia are cognisant of not only the challenges China's rise brings but also the opportunities it offers. The South China Sea dispute continues to complicate international relations in the region but is unlikely to hijack them. The current situation yields little to suggest that a 'Spratly group' targeting China is in the process of being formed.

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