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South China Sea: Reconciling Chinese-US Interests

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China is increasingly concerned about US policy in the South China Sea. This is perhaps borne out of a misperception of US intentions towards China. America's role in maintaining stability and the safety of the sea lines of communication will benefit all parties in the region, including China.

MANY CHINESE analysts have deep-rooted suspicions and even apprehensions of American policy in the South China Sea. They believe that America's intention is to check China's rise and drive a wedge between China and Southeast Asian claimant countries. Chinese concern has further grown recently following remarks by two high-level American officials: The first was US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates' reiteration of American policy on the South China Sea at the recent Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore. The second was US ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas' remarks regarding China's intentions in the maritime dispute.

Such remarks may be in response to China's recent statement in March when Beijing defined the South China Sea as one of its "core interests". However, it should be a reminder for China that together with the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea has always been regarded by Washington as a fault line that can affect the stability of the Asia Pacific. It is therefore in China's interest to review its perspective on America's South China Sea policy. Generally, there are two factors that contribute to the American posture towards the South China Sea. The first is the overall direction and climate of Sino-US relations. The second is the US' fundamental interest of maintaining free access to the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the South China Sea.

US South China Sea Policy

In the past, America's attitude toward the South China Sea was a byproduct of its bilateral relationship with China. However, this relationship has evolved.

The absence of a defining ownership over both the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands in the Allied Powers' Treaty of Peace with Japan that officially ended World War Two has constantly been criticised by Beijing. In its view, the US purposely allowed the sovereignty of the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands to be vague due to its hostilities with China when they clashed during the Korean War. Consequently, the antagonism between China and the US in the 1950s and early 1960s resulted in America's opposition to China's landing of its naval force in the Paracels.

Since the late 1960s, however, the US has restrained itself from intervening in the South China Sea, particularly when China was in conflict with Vietnam over the Paracel Islands in 1974 and the Johnson Reef in the Spratly Islands in 1988. America's silence on these issues was favourable to Beijing -- the result of the warming Sino-US relationship.

However, the situation took a turn for the worse after the Cold War ended when the US once again engaged actively in the South China Sea issue. This was welcomed by other claimants as a deterrence to China's ambition in the regional waters. However, the US made a formal statement in May 1995, clarifying that it remained neutral over the issue. This position was subsequently echoed by Secretary of Defence Gates when he was in Singapore in June this year.

Maintaining free access to SLOCs

Gates' remarks on the South China Sea stressed America's intention in preserving navigational freedom in these waters. It is understandable why maintaining freedom of navigation and the security and safety of SLOCs is one of the fundamental interests of the US.

Ever since America made its first commercial trip through the South China Sea from New York to Guangzhou in 1784, the importance of the SLOCs in this part of the world for the US has increased both in economic as well as strategic terms. One of America's main approaches to defeating the Japanese during the Second World War was to destroy Japan's SLOCs in the South China Sea which connected Southeast Asia to China and Japan. After the War, navigational freedom in the South China Sea has been linked to its strategic interest even more closely.

Furthermore, as a waterway astride sea lanes between the Indian Ocean and East Asia, the South China Sea is of great strategic and economic value. Concern over freedom of navigation and security and safety of the SLOCs is growing due to America's long-term strategic connection with Southeast Asian countries and its increasing maritime trade volume through this region.

Implications for China

The US has clearly conveyed that it has no intention to take sides in the dispute and called for a peaceful resolution of the competing claims in the South China Sea. This is in line with the common interests of both China and the regional countries. It is also a more positive approach to maintaining stability in the Asia Pacific. For China, the US is one of the main concerns within its strategic calculations towards the South China Sea. America's concern about the waters is in reality a positive signal for other claimants. However, its willingness to engage in the South China Sea may not be welcomed by Beijing. Nonetheless, America's involvement could benefit all parties in the region, including China.

America's direct or indirect involvement in the South China Sea over more than half a century is a fact that cannot be changed easily. Given this situation, it may be in China's interest to accept the status quo, which would be helpful in building confidence among all claimants and to promote stability in this region. The US has contributed to tackling less-sensitive maritime issues. In the future, it is expected to tackle more common threats in the South China Sea, such as piracy incidents, navigation hazards, natural disasters, marine pollution, and other non-traditional security issues.

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