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Malaysia's South China Sea Policy: Contradictions or Domestic Confusion?

By David Han

Synopsis

Contradictory responses from Malaysia towards recent incursions by Chinese ships close to Sarawak waters may point to possible domestic factors shaping its South China Sea policy. They include the lack of coordination and the need to allay public concerns on the incursions.

Commentary

LAST MONTH, Malaysia's national security minister Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim revealed that surveillance by the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) had discovered about 100 Chinese vessels sailing close to Malaysia-claimed Luconia Shoals. This disclosure caused some alarm in the country over China's assertive actions in the disputed waters. However, Malaysian defence minister Hishammuddin Tun Hussein later responded that the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) had confirmed that no Chinese vessels encroached into waters near Luconia Shoals. Subsequently, Malaysia summoned the Chinese ambassador to convey Malaysia's concerns regarding the latest incursions by Chinese ships.

This episode alludes to the fact that Malaysia is not a unitary state actor in its approach to the South China Sea issue. Instead, various actors within Malaysia have conveyed different signals which are contrary to Malaysia's moderate posture towards the disputes. These developments may be a result of domestic factors, namely the lack of coordination inherent within government structure and the need to allay public concerns on the incursions.

Differing Narratives in Malaysia's South China Sea Position

Specifically, there are at least two contrasting narratives which can be observed in Malaysia's position on the South China Sea disputes. The first and dominant discourse focuses on Malaysia's traditional preference to adopt a moderate posture towards the disputes. In response to the latest incursions last month, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak told the Dewan Rakyat that challenges due to conflicting claims cannot "...be addressed through military might but instead through negotiations and solidarity among ASEAN countries and parties who support us [Malaysia]".

This remark from Malaysia's top leadership reflects the dominant narrative which seeks to eschew overtly confrontational, military-centric rhetoric and actions in its South China Sea position. This discourse also highlights that the South China Sea disputes are an ASEAN problem requiring diplomacy, dialogue, and restraint and is not simply a matter of Malaysia's sovereignty.

In contrast to the first narrative, the second narrative has a stronger tone that interprets the South China Sea disputes as primarily an issue of Malaysian sovereignty. For example, during a visit to Borneo in November 2015, Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi reportedly mentioned that Malaysia would not stay silent on China's incursions, and added that "If our country is threatened or being encroached, we Malaysians should rise to defend our country". As for the latest incursions, national security minister Shahidan made it clear that Malaysia would take legal action against foreign ships intruding into Malaysian waters.

Some analysts have sought to reconcile Malaysia's increasingly vocal stance over perceived Chinese assertiveness with its moderate and flexible approach to securing its claims in the South China Sea. Given their close bilateral relations, particularly in the economic sphere, it would be counter-productive to strain bilateral ties.

Thus, even the more vocal protests by Malaysia in recent years have been carefully calibrated to avoid souring relations with China. Other analysts have suggested that the United States rebalancing towards Asia has strengthened Malaysia's hand to adopt a slightly tougher position towards China.

Domestic Sources of Contradictory Responses

While these analyses helpfully discuss external factors shaping adjustments in Malaysia's South China Sea position, domestic factors do not receive much attention in these arguments. Scholarly studies have demonstrated that conflicting messages on a foreign policy issue could be attributed to the fact that a state is not a unitary actor. These studies show that governmental bodies, ministries, and departments could have different goals and operating procedures.

Thus, in Malaysia's case, the recent contradictory messages may involve a lack of coordination between various government bodies in responding to incursions by foreign vessels. In fact, when MMEA and the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) expressed contradictory messages about the incursions by Chinese ships, the Malaysian foreign ministry was still verifying the report of the alleged incursions.

Another factor which could have influenced Malaysia's slightly tougher stance is the current political atmosphere in the country. During this period of turbulence in Malaysia's domestic politics, any rising tensions in the disputes have to be dealt with swiftly. Missteps in handling the South China Sea disputes could be a potential breeding ground for scrutiny and avenues of criticisms by the increasingly sceptical public.

A more nationalistic tone in advocating Malaysia's sovereignty against Chinese encroachment may also placate public perceptions that the state government is ineffectual in handling the disputes and protecting national interests. Thus, Malaysia's stronger rhetoric on its maritime claims is aimed at its domestic audience as much as it is projected towards China.

No More Complacency

Malaysia will more likely continue its non-confrontational style of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in meeting the challenges of the South China Sea disputes. In addition, Malaysia has already augmented this policy by stepping up its security apparatus to safeguard the country's maritime claims and airing stronger rhetoric against incursions. As one Malaysian scholar has noted, recent spats indicate that China has taken Malaysia's friendship for granted. This realisation is a catalyst which has triggered various quarters in Malaysia to call for a firmer position in safeguarding Malaysia's maritime interests.

Although Malaysia's responses to the latest incursions have displayed contradictions, its China Sea policy remains largely unambiguous. Indeed, maintaining good ties with China will remain a paramount objective as any conflict in the disputed waters would be harmful to Malaysia's interests in the region. Notwithstanding the contradictions in Malaysia's response, the signal is clear that Malaysia is no longer being complacent about China's actions in the South China Sea.

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