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China's Rising Maritime Aspirations: Impact on Beijing's Good-Neighbour Policy

By Li Mingjiang

Synopsis

The proceedings at the recent political congresses in Beijing indicate an emerging consensus in China on the need to safeguard and expand its maritime interests. This may defeat the government's policy goal of improving relations with neighbouring countries.

Commentary

THE RECENT annual sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) – two of the most important political events in China - demonstrated the country's elite's aspiration and resolve to safeguard China's interests in the East Asian seas. At the same time, Premier Wen Jiabao, in his report to the NPC, vowed to give priority to improving relations with neighbouring countries in China's foreign affairs.

Experiences in recent years indicate that these two sets of policy objectives may not be mutually reconcilable and is extremely difficult to maintain a balance between the two.

Proposals for tighter maritime policies

China's elite seized the opportunity during the political congresses to demand for more effective protection of Chinese maritime interests. Wang Zhuwen, president of Dalian Ocean University and also a deputy to the NPC, pointed out that the lack of maritime awareness has constrained the development of China's maritime cause. Hence, he proposed that maritime education should be included in the primary and middle school curriculum.

At the NPC session Liu Cigui, Director of the State Oceanic Administration, indicated that China is serious about carrying out law enforcement activities in the seas. He said China's regular patrol activities now cover all the maritime zones under Chinese jurisdiction. These extend to the estuary of the Yalu River in the north, Okinawa Trough in the east, and Zengmu Reef (James Shoal) in the south, as well as features including the Suyan Islet (Socotra Rock), Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands, Huangyan Islands (Scarborough Shoal) and the Nansha Islands (Spratlys).

Chen Mingyi, a member of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC, suggested that China should establish a National Maritime Commission to coordinate China's maritime policy. He further proposed that China should formulate a long-term comprehensive plan to transform China into a maritime power by 2020 to better protect

China's interests in the three million square kilometres of maritime zones.

Major General Luo Yuan, a deputy in the CPPCC, attracted much attention when he proposed that China should integrate its maritime law enforcement forces to form a national coast guard to safeguard China's marine rights and interests in the face of growing challenges in the South China and East China seas. Luo suggested that China make efforts in five policy areas in the South China Sea, including consolidating administrative jurisdiction, strengthening the legal grounds of its claim, enhancing its military presence, promoting economic activities, and improving its capability to shape international opinion.

Luo also proposed that China publish a white paper on the South China Sea issue to provide a comprehensive account of the historical and legal grounds of China's claim in the South China Sea.

At a CPPCC session Wang Zhifa, the Deputy Director of the State Tourism Administration, announced that it is working with Hainan Province and other central government agencies to promote tourism in the Paracels. He noted that doing so would be advantageous for securing China's sovereignty claim and border security.

Some CPPCC members proposed that China should step up efforts to protect the Diaoyu Islands following the recent official publicity of the names of the islands to underscore China's sovereignty claim over them. For instance China Central Television should include Diaoyu Islands in its weather forecasts to further demonstrate China's sovereignty over them. This proposal was endorsed as feasible by Zheng Guoguang, the Director of the State Meteorological Administration and also a deputy in the CPPCC.

Ambition and Confusion

Nevertheless China's aims and ambitions for the coastal seas are not entirely clear. The Chinese media and many Chinese analysts have described China's ambition in the East Asian seas in very loose terms. For instance, they have asserted that China is entitled to three million square kilometres of "water territory", "ocean territory", "maritime territory" or "territorial seas". At recent political meetings in Beijing, Wang Dengping, the Political Commissar of the PLA Navy's North Fleet, noted that China's possession of an aircraft carrier is justified because China owns a large maritime area - in his own words, three million square kilometres of *haiyang guotu* (ocean territory). Presumably the three million square kilometres would include most of the East China Sea and the maritime zone within the "nine-dotted line" in the South China Sea.

But many Chinese experts on maritime affairs, particularly the maritime lawyers, would probably not support the usage of these terms to describe China's ambition in East Asian seas. Even officials in the foreign policy community would not subscribe to such an expansive definition of China's maritime interests. On the South China Sea claim, for instance, there is at least one official view that does not accord with the ambitious mindset of some members of the Chinese elite.

For example, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei made the following observation on February 29: "The core of the South China Sea dispute is the sovereignty disputes over some Spratlys islands and reefs and the demarcation of some maritime zones in the South China Sea. It is necessary to point out that no country, including China, makes a sovereignty claim over the whole South China Sea."

Although many Chinese analysts claim that Beijing has not developed a clear maritime strategy, there seems to be no doubt that China's interests in the maritime arena are growing fast. The discourse at the recent political congresses in Beijing clearly exudes a sense of urgency in China to employ tougher policies in the maritime domain and step up efforts to transform itself into a maritime power.

Going by experiences in the past few years, Premier Wen's foreign policy goal might fail if regional maritime disputes are not handled properly.

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