

South China Sea: Indonesia Finally Sheds Strategic Ambiguity

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Indonesia finally shed its strategic ambiguity in March 2014 on the China-generated South China Sea conflicts by Indonesian officials asserting that China's Nine Dash Line is in conflict with Indonesia's maritime sovereignty around the Natuna Inlands in response to increased Chinese military activities in the Southern Segment of the South China Sea.

This possibly portends China's initiation of military adventurism to enforce its Nine Dash Line claim-lines.

Indonesia has all along for the past few years vainly attempted through various Track II processes to bring around China to some sort of negotiated settlement and conflict resolution of its South China Sea conflicts with its ASEAN neighbours, despite itself being an affected victim of China's dubious Nine Dash Line claim line in the South China Sea. Indonesian efforts seem to have been stymied by an obdurate China and China thereby signalling that it has no time for any conflict resolution or conflict management processes pertaining to its South China Sea claims except on its own terms.

Indonesia's reticence in making critical references to China's propensity for conflict escalation in the South China Sea region was perceptually visible at international conferences on the South China Sea conflict attended by me. It intrigued one as to why such a reticence dominated Indonesian projections and thoughts on this vital issue affecting ASEAN security and stability especially from one of the leading and powerful nation of the region.

Presumably the above approach of Indonesia seems to have been determined by a combination of factors. The most benign attributable reason being that Indonesia genuinely believed that in terms of ASEAN stability and security, bringing about China to some sort of conflict

resolution negotiations was an effort worth making. The other reason may have been to persuade China to enter into discussions to adhere to a Code of Conduct with ASEAN as a grouping since China's conflicts on South China Sea encompasses the majority of ASEAN members and thereby the centrality of ASEAN must be maintained. The last reason can be said that Indonesia's reticence on critical references to China on the South China Sea conflicts may have been determined significantly by the fact that up to recently China had confined its conflict escalation and aggressive brinkmanship in the Northern Segment of the South China Sea, namely with Vietnam and Philippines and refrained from casting its covetous eyes on the Southern Segment of the South China Sea and thereby not alarming Indonesia.

Indonesia seems to have been rattled by China's increasing military activities in recent months in the Southern Segment of the South China Sea region in close proximity of Indonesian maritime sovereignty with special reference to the Natuna Islands which form part of the Indonesian province of Riau. Indonesia's hitherto fore reticence in not coming out strongly in terms of repudiating the illegally contrived Nine Dash Line may have tempted China to enlarge its military activities to the southern-most limits of its so-called Nine Dash Line.

Indonesia seems to have finally shed its strategic ambiguity on not questioning the legality and validity of China's Nine Dash Line which incorporates the entire South China Sea region into Chinese sovereignty. By officially asserting that China's Nine Dash Line overlaps Indonesian maritime sovereignty, Indonesia has broken out of its reticent shell. China has now been put on notice by Indonesia that it is now in line with the other ASEAN nations disputing China's Nine Dash Line and in other words opposing China's irredentist claims in the South China Sea region.

In anticipation of China escalating tensions in the Southern Segment of the South China Sea reports are forthcoming that Indonesia is reinforcing its military garrison on Natuna Islands besides reinforcing its military capabilities including air force and naval capabilities to meet any Chinese escalation in Indonesian waters of South China Sea.

Indonesia finally shedding its strategic ambiguity on China's Nine Dash Line and China's claims in the South China Sea is a significant milestone and possibly a game-changer in that ASEAN's most powerful regional player has now chosen to dispute China's Nine Dash Line. It will be a step surely to be hugely welcomed by Vietnam and Philippines who have been subjected to China's military and political coercion and also military aggression. Indonesia's firm stand could now add more ballast to ASEAN'S efforts to make China negotiate the South China Sea conflicts in an ASEAN-China configuration as opposed to the bilateral format that China obdurately insists on.

It is a measure of Indonesia's patience that despite Indonesian persistent attempts to request China to publicly spell out the precise coordinates of its Nine Dash Line claims China has been reluctant to do so especially in the Southern Segment of the South China Sea which has a direct bearing on Indonesian maritime sovereignty. This by itself is a clear indication that Chinese intentions are suspect. It needs to be membered that China has been greedily eyeing the Natuna Islands and the surrounding waters as these contain some of the richest and readily exploitable energy deposits.

Significant is the historical fact that Indonesia-China relations were in a deep freeze from 1967 to 1992, that is for nearly twenty five years and this will be a crippling overhang on the future of Indonesia's relations with China in the coming years when viewing the perspectives in from 2014 onwards contextually in light of China's escalating its military activities in the Southern Segment of the South China Sea.

With China refusing to budge from its illegal Nine Dash Line claim lines and Indonesia shedding its strategic ambiguity on the said issue and reinforcing its military capabilities to thwart any Chinese military adventurism in the southern waters of the South China Sea, one could possibly and logically expect increased military tensions in South East Asia. This could also be possibly a yet one more wake-up call for those ASEAN nations who are not the active disputants of China's Nine Dash Line to join ranks with the rest of ASEAN nations to oppose China's increasing claims in the South China Sea and China's propensity to enforce its Nine Dash Line claim line by use of military force and brinkmanship.

Strategically, it needs to be pondered whether China can afford to offend Indonesia by its Nine Dash Line claims being enforced regardless of the strategic costs where Indonesia alone offers China a strategic way-out of China's "Malacca Dilemma".

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