

China steps up moves in South China Sea

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By Global Times



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Editor's Note:

A series of recent China actions, from setting up a military command in Sansha to the announcement by the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) that it would open nine offshore areas in the South China Sea for joint exploration with foreign firms, seem to show a more active stance. The moves came after Vietnam reiterated its claims to the Xisha and Nansha Islands. Can the new moves consolidate China's claims? What will be the Vietnamese response? Global Times (GT) reporter Wang Zhaokun talked to Robert Beckman (Beckman), director of the Center for International Law with the National University of Singapore, and Liu Feng (Liu), a research fellow with China's National Institute for South China Sea Studies, on these issues.

GT: What is your view of these moves? Is China taking a stronger stance?

Beckman: I see China as taking a more assertive position with respect to its claims in the South China Sea. The fact that the Vietnamese law includes a clause stating that Vietnam claims sovereignty over the Xisha and Nansha Islands is not unexpected. It is not a new development. But the CNOOC announcement may be a significant turning point as it seems to confirm that China is also claiming "rights and jurisdiction" to the resources in and under the waters within the nine-dashed lines as well as sovereignty.

Liu: We do not need to over-interpret China's moves. China has been mulling the establishment of Sansha for many years and now it only happened to come against the backdrop of the recent tensions in the South China Sea. Also it is absolutely reasonable and normal for China to set up a military command body and law enforcement agencies in Sansha, because this is the same situation in any other Chinese prefectural-level city.

The offshore areas in CNOOC's bidding are under China's sovereignty and the company's acts are completely legal. I do not think such moves mark a major shift in South China Sea strategy, since China has been consistent in sticking to the principle of peaceful solutions. But I think tactics are getting more active.

GT: The Vietnamese government has objected to CNOOC's statements. Do you think Vietnam is likely to take more steps in response to China's moves?

Beckman: I expect that Vietnam will continue to undertake exploratory activities. The well-worn pattern of rhetorical war among different parties is inconsistent with the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

In that document all the parties agreed to exercise restraint and to refrain from unilateral action which would escalate or complicate the disputes. It will also make the negotiation of a legally binding code of conduct for the South China Sea more difficult. Such pattern does not increase the risk of armed conflicts. But it does further complicate the disputes and makes it more difficult for the parties to move toward what most of us believe is the only viable solution, setting aside the disputes and jointly developing the resources.

Liu: There are already protests in Vietnam against China on these issues, but this does not change the fact that China holds sovereignty over the Xisha and Nansha Islands. And Chinese companies' activities are exactly based upon this fact. The major Chinese exploration and development of oil and gas resources happen in the northern part of the South China Sea.

The offshore blocks offered by CNOOC for bidding are located in the southern central part of the South China Sea, where other countries has been encroaching upon Chinese oil and gas resources for many years.

CNOOC's announcement marks a major step that China is taking to protect and develop its resources. Protection and development of resources there can also help boost economic development in Hainan Province.

It is likely that Vietnam will continue take actions to consolidate their illegally gained benefits. China should ready contingency plan to cope with Vietnam's possible provocations.

GT: US Senator Joe Lieberman has criticized China for offering the nine offshore blocks up for bidding. How do you see the role the US plays in the dispute?

Beckman: I don't believe that the US has very much influence over Vietnam. Vietnam is acting in what it believes are its national interests. The US is simply taking advantage of the suspicions and fears in the region.

Liu: Although US officials have repeatedly said Washington does not take any position on the dispute, the US obviously favors China's neighboring countries. The tensions in the South China Sea serve the demands of the US "back to Asia" strategy.

Since the Taiwan question is now no longer a good card for the US to play, Washington wants to use disputes in the South China Sea to put pressure on China. The US seeks to benefit from confrontations between China and its neighbors.

The existence of tensions in the South China Sea can also help create conditions for the US to sell arms to countries involved.

But Washington knows that it can't go too far in its involvement, which could lead to strong Chinese countermeasures that will finally hurt US interests.