

Will the South China Sea Still Matter for China-U.S. Relations?

Nong Hong

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Nong Hong is the Executive Director and Senior Fellow at the Institute for China-America Studies. She is concurrently a research fellow with the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, China, and China Institute, University of Alberta, Canada. Her most recent publications include *UNCLOS and Ocean Dispute Settlement: Law and Politics in the South China Sea* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2012).

From November 3-14, U.S. President Trump swung through five Asian countries on his first Asia-Pacific trip of his presidency, including attending the 2017 APEC CEO Summit in Vietnam and the 50th ASEAN Anniversary in Manila. This was his longest and, perhaps, most important overseas visit of the first year of his presidency. His visit raises up discussions on various hot topics ranging from DPRK nuclear crisis, U.S-China Relations, U.S. Economic Engagement in the Asia-Pacific, 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' concept, U.S. perception on the China's 19th National Party Congress. Interestingly, the South China Sea, which was predicted by many as one of the hot issues to be discussed at ASEAN serial summits, seemed to draw much less attention than expected. What implication from Trump's visit to Asia Pacific can be drawn on the China-US relations in the context of the South China Sea? What message could be sensed for the future U.S. South China Sea policy?

Two important points are worth noting with regard to Trump's visit and the South China Sea issue. First, little of the visit's focus was dominated by the South China Sea. Though President Xi Jinping had mentioned China's land reclamation activities in the South China Sea in his 19th Party Congress report as a domestic issue that didn't pertain to external actors, President Trump did not offer any pushback. Second, it is also noted how the South China Sea issue has to a certain extent faded from the regional headlines, which might provide a useful opening for China to maintain and strengthen relationships and strategic stability in the South China Sea region.

The discourse of the South China Sea seems to come back to the China-ASEAN arena. In the statement made by Duterte, president of the Philippines as ASEAN Chair in 2017, he listed three major threats faced by ASEAN, terrorism, piracy & maritime armed robbery and illegal drug trafficking. The South China Sea issues was not raised. The Party Secretary of Vietnam Tran Dai Quang made a statement that Vietnam explores to settle its maritime disputes through peaceful negotiation. Li Xianlong, Prime Minister of Singapore as the coordinator of China-ASEAN Dialogue and ASEAN Chair 2018, praised the step taken by ASEAN and China to start the Code of Conduct text negotiation. In the Statement of ASEAN's 50th summit, all parties reaffirmed the importance of non-militarization and self-restraint in the South China Sea, and stressed the

improved relations between ASEAN and China. China and the Philippines in their Joint Statement, noted that the situation in the South China Sea has become generally more stable as a result of joint cooperative efforts between China, the Philippines, and other ASEAN nations, and agreed to strengthen maritime cooperation in areas such as marine environmental protection, disaster risk reduction, and possible cooperation in marine scientific research. The Chairman's Statement of the 20th ASEAN-China Summit reiterated the commitment to the full and effective implementation of the DOC, and adopted the Leaders' Declaration on a Decade of Coastal and Marine Environmental Protection in the South China Sea, which is reflective of the shared commitment to implement the DOC and the desire to transform the SCS into a sea of peace, stability, and prosperity. China and ASEAN have agreed to start negotiations on a code of conduct in the South China Sea in an effort to ease regional tensions over territorial disputes in the area.

All these messages highlight the importance of China and ASEAN in managing the South China Sea in the future. Then, beyond FONOPS [Freedom of Navigation Operations] in the South China Sea, what additional role can the U.S. play to reassure its regional allies and partners of its resolution and long-term staying power in the region?

Trump offered to mediate between claimants to the South China Sea when meeting with Vietnam's President Tran Dai Quang. His offer was cautiously responded to by local leaders. President Quang said Vietnam believed in handling disputes on the South China Sea through peaceful negotiations and on the basis of international laws. Duterte said at a business conference, " We have to be friends, the other hotheads would like us to confront China and the rest of the world on so many issues.... The South China Sea is better left untouched, nobody can afford to go to war. It can ill-afford a violent confrontation."

It is unclear if the U.S. president's remarks signal a more proactive role of the United States in finding a solution in the South China Sea. The outlines of the Trump Administration's South China Sea policy are gradually emerging with two indicators though. First, FONOPs will continue without change. However, in contrast to the Obama administration, which had a policy of publicizing its FONOPs starting in 2015, the Trump Administration will not officially announce these operations. Second, the US is loath to see ASEAN countries getting too close to China and, by stoking tensions there, it may impress its allies and partners with its awesome military presence while pressing China to go along with its policy on the Korean nuclear issue.

During his tour, Trump and his team have repeatedly used the term "Indo-Pacific" instead of "Asia-Pacific" for the region, which some see as an effort to undermine China's role in this region. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in his speech at CSIS on October 18 on "Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century" highlighted the role of India and frequently used the term of "Indo-Pacific". Though US Department of State officials on some occasions attempted to downplay the strategic goal of "Indo-Pacific" and denied this concept aiming to contain China. Many D.C. based analysts do share the view that the US 'Quad' plan with India, Japan and Australia offers options for Asian countries beyond China.

Trump's visit to Asia-Pacific seems to send a message that the South China Sea issue is no longer the driving issue in U.S.-China relations as it had been since 2010 when the then U.S.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton listed the South China Sea as a U.S. national interest at the East Asia Summit in Hanoi. However, Trump's unpredictable comments, such as his offer to mediate these disputes, also the strategic goal behind the concept of Indo-Pacific, might unnerve allies who look for a strong show of commitment from the American president to defend their interests.

China and the US should establish an effective and integrated mechanism to manage potential crisis in the South China sea. Currently, there are mechanisms in place, such as notification of major military activities as well as a military hotline and rules of behavior for the safety of air and maritime encounters. However, those mechanisms are all voluntary and non-binding. And the new reality is that China-US encounter over the US ISR (Intelligence gathering, surveillance and reconnaissance) activities has become a "new normal", and most of them are "not unplanned, unintentional, or even unexpected."

In response to the perceived threats from the US and its allies, China is unlikely to give up military deployment on South China Sea features. Such vicious cycle probably will give rise to miscalculations, contingencies and even conflict at sea. Therefore, in line with establishing "a New Model of New International Relationships," the two sides should seek to establish an integrated mechanism, involving various tracks such as diplomacy, civilian forces, military, just name a few, so as to address those potential problems and crisis effectively.