Cooling down the Spratly Disputes: Force Building Down and Confidence Building Up

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The U.S. FON as a Game Changer in Maritime Militarization

Spratly disputer among region claimants

Major power rivalry

Geo-strategic strife

The SCS as a new geopolitical venue for China-US competition
Cat-and Mouse game: U.S. FON in Spratlys

- To challenge China’s sovereignty claim

  - Depicting China as a strategic adversary

- 12 nautical miles entry
Cat-and Mouse game: U.S. FON in Spratlyss

- 12-NM entry directly shortens the physical contact of warships.
- 12-NM entry increases likelihood of military standoff

**Chinese warship came within 45 yards of USS Decatur in South China Sea: US**

By Luis Martinez
Oct 1, 2018, 7:21 PM ET
US FONOPs raise the levels of militarization, even a visible level of combatization, as FONOPS entails war drills with 12 NM that the island occupiants have to response with shadowing actions.

“Fight tonight”, if an accident takes place with loss of lives and destruction of warships.
China’s policy shift: from “strategic patience” to assertive protection of sovereignty

- The case of Island reclamation
- Island fortification and defense

**Island reclamation changed the Spratly status quo? Not really.**

What status quo?
Reclamation: all have done so, not a cause for war

**Tactical change**
Change of the appearance of the Spratly holdings

**Strategic change**
Change of Map of occupation

*China’s Island reclamation*
Reclamation: increased militarization?

- An confusing and ambiguous definition: much politicized.
- China’s not beyond the scope of **fortification: non-deployment of offensive weapons systems.**
- **Without new occupation and new legal status claims**
- Beijing doesn’t announce the territorial base line and base points on the reclaimed islands
Strategic necessity for being assertive

- Being passive is no longer a rational choice to Xi Jinping
- Timing is important as the external environment is fast changing
- The price may be high
- Strategic steadiness
The on-going SCS policy re-adjustment

- A five-year cycle from sovereignty assertion back to Strategic patience
- Summit diplomacy, improved China-Philippine and China-Vietnam relations in regard to SCS dispute
- Addressing ASEAN concerns
The COC initiative

- Demilitarization through restraints of joint war drills by the claimant states and outside powers: *Parties shall not hold joint military exercises with countries from outside the region, unless the parties concerned are notified beforehand and express no objection.*

- Vietnam proposes a number of dos and don’t’s, including construct on any artificial island, militarize features, blockade vessels carrying provisions or personnel for rotation, declare an Air Defense Identification Zone. Beijing’s policy adjustments converge many of these proposals, e.g., committing to building no facilities in any Spratly features that do not have any human inhabitation.
New policy emphases

- Erode connection between SCS claimants and outside powers as a way to limit the geo-political impact of Sino-US rivalry in the SCS
- Continuing the three-Nos, the strategic status quo will be retained.
- Beijing’s current SCS objective is oriented towards crisis management rather than a major expansion of occupation.
Thank you!