
RUSSIA'S SOUTH CHINA SEA CONUNDRUM

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Russias apparent support for China in the SCS territorial dispute presents Moscow with a legal, diplomatic, and strategic conundrum.

An unfavorable ruling on its Arctic claims could encourage Moscow to close ranks with Beijing in attempting to forcibly rewrite the rules on maritime sovereignty by asymmetrically changing the operational landscape.

On April 29, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov held a joint press conference in Beijing during which they strongly opposed the deployment of a THAAD anti-missile defense system in South Korea by the United States as well as outside interference by non-claimants in the South China Sea (SCS) territorial dispute. The Russian foreign minister commented on security developments in the Korean Peninsula, while deferring to his Chinese counterpart on the SCS. Lavrov spoke of a unified position on North Korea; however, there is no unified position on the SCS.

Lavrovs comments in Beijing were constrained and offered little insights into Russias position toward the SCS. More illustrative were previous statements in Ulan-Bator on April 14, where Lavrov asserted the Kremlins opposition to interference from third parties and attempts to internationalize the dispute while insisting that only parties to the conflict can resolve the dispute through direct talks. However, Lavrov also stipulated that Russia was not a party to the conflict and wont interfere in negotiations [] a cautious and hands-off approach should the dispute continue to escalate.

Rather than unconditionally backing Beijings unilateral revision of the status quo, Lavrov pointed to ongoing talks between China and ASEAN members based on the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) [] he described as a fundamental document. He also approvingly referenced the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002 (DOC) that the parties have signed and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) that has languished under negotiations. It is notable that Lavrov referred to UNCLOS as well as multilateral and institutional frameworks rather than Chinas so-called nine-dash line.

Lavrovs ambiguous statements leave a multitude of unanswered questions. What is the nature and scope of Russias support? How will Russia implement and exercise such support? Does Russia support Chinas opposition to UNCLOS as the legal framework for resolving the dispute? What is Russias position toward Chinas efforts to restrict freedom of navigation and overflights in the SCS? If China establishes an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the SCS, will Russia comply or ignore? How will Russia balance its strategic relations with China and Vietnam? To what extent will Russia support China diplomatically if events continue to escalate? Would Russia intervene in a military clash between China or Vietnam or between Chinas and the United States?

By contextualizing Lavrovs comments, insights can be drawn which suggest that Russia will provide only limited diplomatic support to Beijing and avoid entanglements in any potential military clashes. In the meantime, Russia will maneuver to hedge against China in Southeast Asia by deepening its strategic relationship with Vietnam while expanding military and trade ties throughout the region on a bilateral basis as well as multilaterally with ASEAN.

Kaynak/Source: