
SOUTH CHINA SEA TALKS SEE AGREEMENT ON NEGOTIATIONS

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Members of Asean have been at loggerheads with China over the territorial rights in the South China Sea. Tensions and clashes have occurred in recent years after China began militarisation of the sea, notably in the Spratly Islands.

Some ministers at their recent annual meeting in Singapore raised concerns about the issue, notably the militarisation, Thailand's Asean Affairs Department's director-general Suriya Chindawongse said.

The Philippines and Vietnam are at the forefront of the conflict and have occasionally faced up to their giant neighbour. In 2013 the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague ruled in favour of the Philippines, rejecting China's claim of historical rights over the territories in the sea. Beijing dismissed the ruling, but showed an intention to solve the issue with Manila on a bilateral basis.

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Asean and China signed a non-binding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002 but the document failed to prevent conflict and tension. Both sides are in the process of drawing up a code of conduct (COC) as a legally binding instrument to control the behaviour of countries in the contentious sea.

No tangible results

While Beijing wants to see the effective and full implementation of the DOC, significant progress to establish negotiation ground-rules for the COC has been made in recent years.

For the first time both sides have agreed to have a single negotiation text, Suriya said, noting that previously every stakeholder had their own text for negotiation.

He said that the process would take time to reach a conclusion and the COC is not an instrument to settle the territorial dispute. That issue would be settled on a bilateral basis.

Since the COC has not yet materialised, China and Asean countries will continue to fully and effectively implement the DOC and endeavour to reach a COC at an early date, said China's Ambassador to Asean, Huang Xilian.

We also hope that countries outside the region could play a constructive role in this process and contribute to peace and stability in the region, Huang said in an interview with The Nation.

The Chinese diplomat appeared to be referring to the United States, which closely monitors militarisation in the area and has called for continued freedom of navigation.

Implementing the DOC while negotiating the COC is an effective platform to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea through enhanced dialogue and cooperation, Huang said.

It is a testament that China and Asean have the wisdom and ability to draft rules and properly manage the disputes for the sake of peace and stability in the South China Sea, Huang said.

With such spirit, maritime cooperation in the region is possible and could yield a good result, he said. To prevent incidents and manage the situation, China and Asean issued the Joint Statement on the Application of the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea and launched a hotline for senior officials of both sides to respond to maritime emergencies.

To strengthen maritime rescues, China and Asean have begun building a hotline platform for maritime search and rescue and plan to hold the first ever large-scale joint exercise on maritime search and rescue, he said.

These measures have played important roles in maintaining safety and stability in the sea, and formed a sound interaction ... as the two simultaneously rotating wheels, Huang said.

China plans to conduct more maritime cooperation programs with Asean. They include the first China-Asean joint maritime drill, the China-Asean marine information technology cooperative research project, a workshop on cooperation on coastal ecosystem health assessment and conservation strategy in the South China Sea, a workshop on ocean acidification training, training on satellite remote sensing of the marine ecological environment, and a workshop on safety of navigation and communication on the South China Sea, he said.

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