

## Territorial dispute in the South China Sea: The Spratly Islands

By

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### **Abstract**

The Spratly Islands are located in the South China Sea which is rich in such resources as oil, gas, minerals and seafood. This area is the ideal location for military strategies. These islands have been claimed by six countries, namely China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei. There are several historical, political, and economic reasons behind these countries' territorial claims over the Spratly Islands. Economically, the interests of different countries are to acquire fishing area, exploit crude oil and natural gas under the waters various parts of the South China Sea. Strategically, the location of the Spratly Islands becomes a territorial demand from six countries and is important for the control of the shipping lanes. All occupy one or more of the islands backed up with military constructions and bases except from Brunei. This area is a place of frequent tension between these rival countries and eventually makes a cause the conflict. In the context of changing situation in the South East Asia, the relations among ASEAN countries, China and U.S is important in concerning with the territorial dispute of the Spratly Islands in South China Sea. The goal of this research is to examine the important strategic and security position in the Islands and how to maintain the peaceful relations among six claimants in the Spratly Islands.

Key words: Spratly Islands, South China Sea, resources, claimants, ASEAN, China, U.S

### **Introduction**

The Spratly Islands dispute is an ongoing territorial dispute between the six claimant states concerning ownership of the Spratly Islands. A group of islands are located in the South China Sea. The Spratly Islands are important for economic and strategic reasons in which there are a number of small islands, reefs, atolls and rocks in addition to unexplored, reserves of oil and natural gas. It is a productive area for world fishing. The islands occupy a total less than five square kilometer and spread more than 400000 square kilometer of sea. The South China Sea region is the world's second busiest international sea lane. The South China Sea where the

Spratly Islands are found borders many states and, therefore, there is some confusion as to the number of islands, reefs and rocks that the Spratly Islands consist of. The Spratly Islands are claimed in whole or part by China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Brunei. Most of these claims are historical, but some are based on internationally accepted principles 'extending territorial claim offshore to a country' continental shelf as well as the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Although some efforts to prevent conflict had been made, the conflict still exists for realistic interests of all the claimants.

### **Nature of six competing claimants' interests**

Claims to various islands of the Spratly Islands archipelago began in the 1930s. Disputes in the Spratly Islands have revolved around overlapping territorial claims, particularly where potential gas and oil reserves are involved. Continental shelves are abundant in resources such as oil, natural gas, minerals and seafood. According to James Kiras, a contributing editor of the *Peacekeeping & International Relations Journal*, estimated oil reserves in the South China Sea are larger than Kuwait's present reserves. The Ministry of Geological Resources and Mining of China has estimated that the Spratly region, known as the fourth largest reserve bed worldwide, holds oil and gas reserves of 17.7 billion tons as compared to 13 billion tons of Kuwait's reserves.

There are four ASEAN member states which are involved in the conflict of the Spratly Islands through their overlapping sovereignty. Vietnam claims the whole of the Spratly archipelago, the Philippines claiming the major part of it, Malaysia claiming the southern part and Louisa Reef is claimed by Brunei.

Malaysia claims a small a small number of islands in the Spratly Islands as part of its Exclusive Economic zone of 200 miles defined by the UNCLOS. Malaysia case is based on the fact that the islands are part of its continental shelf. At present, Malaysia controls 10 islands. Brunei claims the part of the South China Sea nearest to it as part of its continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Brunei's claims to the reef are based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Brunei does not control practice military control in the sea and the states that the southern part of the Spratly Islands chain is actually a part of its continental shelf and therefore a part of its territory and resources. The position of Brunei in the

South China Sea issue is neutral because it is not influenced by China as its small and wealthy state.

Vietnam claims the islands based on international law on declaring and exercising sovereignty. In the Spratly, Vietnam controls 21 islands, reefs, shoals, and cays. Vietnam's claim had been asserted at an international level, including meetings of the World Meteorological Organization, the 1951 Peace Conference in San Francisco and as part of the Geneva Agreements for the return of Vietnam by France. Vietnam has a legitimate 350 nautical miles continental shelf claim to the western part of the Spratly area, since its continental shelf appears to be a shallow and natural prolongation of the land territory. Geography evidences that the islands are within Vietnam's continental shelf may support its claims.

The Philippines has claimed the territories in the South China Sea on the basis of geographical proximity. In the alternative, if the Tribunal was to find that China has sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, Philippines argues that the islands in the South China Sea are merely rocks and reefs, which means no EEZ rights are conferred on them in accord with the Part III, Article 212 of the 1982 UNCLOS, and thus China has only limited rights to surrounding resources. Among the claimants, the Philippines is the weakest state in term of economic and military power although it is the most vocal opponent against China. The Philippines' early strategy has two tracks. The first is that drawing the issue on the ASEAN Platform and the second is making full close ties with the U.S under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. The legal action itself had added the Philippines' bargaining power with China in bilateral negotiation, assuming that Chinese claim, in accordance with the UNCLOS, is weaker than the Philippines' claim.

China claims all islands in the Spratly region. China's claim to all islands in the Spratly archipelago stems from its historical presence in the region, dating as far back as the Han dynasty of the second century, BC. China's historical claim is dubious and neglects similar historical claims by Taiwan, Vietnam and Malaysia. Moreover, China's historical interpretation of its sovereignty rights ignores current international law. However, Chinese claim on the historical basis is relatively weak due to lack of geographical proximity. Apart from the interest in accessing to natural resources and in securing maritime lane, China aims to protect the country from the external and internal threat as well as eventually achievement of great power status in Asia and beyond. Economic exploration efforts appear to ignite the tenuous stability in the

Spratly region. China granted oil exploration rights to foreign oil firms in territories with overlapping claims. In 1992, China National Offshore Oil Corp signed a joint exploration contract with Crestone Energy Corp for a disputed area in the Spratly Islands. Aside from granting foreign firms exploration rights in the disputed waters and conducting military exercises in the Spratly area, China has committed itself to the build-up of its navy and air force. Therefore, the islands are particularly strategic to China. At present, China controls 14 islands.

Since 1946, Taiwan and its Kuomintang government took formal possession on one of the Spratlys. Taiwan announced its claims to largest island of the Spratlys, Itu Aba in 1974. In case of Spratly, China and Taiwan do not appear to compete directly with each other and had explored cooperation to advance common claims. However, Taiwan wants to distinguish its claim from that of China. Its main concern is that only China or China and Vietnam will gain control and thus, have a monopoly on the South China Sea.

### **Geopolitical and strategic importance**

The Spratly Islands located in the South China Sea consist of more than 100 small islands or reefs surrounded by rich fishing grounds and potentially by gas and oil deposits. The Spratly connects the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. All its islands are coral, low and small, about 5 to 6 meters above water, spread over 180,000 square kilometers of sea zone. Moreover, they are located South of China, Southeast of Vietnam, West of the Philippines, and north of Malaysia. The Spratlys are part of the great sweep of archipelago Southeast Asia of more than 30,000 islands and reefs and complicate geography, governance and economics in the region. As there are so small and remote, there would not be much interest in the area-however, Spratly Islands are more significant as territorial makers than as places of habitation. Therefore, the islands are still considered strategic, economic and political assets for littoral states in the South China Sea. The South China Sea region is the world's second busiest international sea lane and much of the world's trade passes through it. More than half of the world's supertanker traffic passes through the region's waters. In addition, the region contains oil and gas resources strategically located near large energy consuming countries. Further to this, the South China Sea is a militarily important passage; countries controlling the Spratlys could potentially prevent enemy navies from passing and the Spratly Islands themselves represent important observation ports.

### **Security situation in the South China Sea**

The security atmosphere in the Spratly Islands depends on spreading the tension of multilateral territorial disputes, on the safety of the sea-lanes of communication, and on the distribution of resources among competing claimant states. The distance of each claimant nation from the Spratlys figures into accessing whether they have adequate resource to provide security to the area and maintain their claims. The South China Sea is one of the world's busiest international sea lanes. Over half of the world's merchant fleet sails through the South China Sea every year. Over half of the top ten container shipping ports in the world are located in or around the South China Sea which is also the strategic maritime link between the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. For major naval powers, freedom of navigation through the sea lanes of the South China Sea is of paramount importance for their naval fleets. Countries with major shipping and naval interests such as the United States and Japan mainly want to maintain freedom of navigation through the straits and sea lanes of the South China Sea for their oil tankers, container ships, and naval vessels. The U.S sends its warships, including aircraft carriers from its Pacific fleet, through the South China Sea in support of its military missions in the Arabian sea and Persian Gulf.

The large volume of shipping in the South China Sea region has created opportunities for attacks on merchant shipping. Over the past two decades, more than half of the world's reports of piracy took place in or around the South China Sea. In case of pirate attacks, Vietnam, China and the Philippines had cooperated to protect the Spratlys and common interests from pirating and smuggling. Coastal countries have many other security concerns, including the frequent conflicts involving fishing vessels competing for dwindling fish stocks, as well as trafficking in drugs, refugees, and forced labor. China and Taiwan are situated approximately 100nm and 120nm respectively and are the furthest claimants in these disputes. Vietnam is about 250nm away and Malaysia and Brunei are 10nm from the area. The Philippines is about 100nm to its nearest coast. China has been the most aggressive nation in militarizing the Spratlys. China's advances in the South China Sea will bring closer ties between the Philippines and the U.S. Meanwhile, Malaysia, China and Vietnam's purchase of various aircrafts and fighting ships further enhance their capabilities and provide the security needed to maintain each country's claims in the Spratlys. Therefore, the Spratlys have been a sore point in the relationship between China and the Southeast Asian claimants for decades. The entry of outside powers is another alarming

development. As a result of all these security concerns, coastal states are modernizing their naval and coast guard forces and patrols to secure their sea lanes as well as their maritime resources. Consequently, military and intelligence gathering activities by several countries are more becoming intensive, intrusive and controversial.

### **Relations among ASEAN, China and U.S**

In the South China Sea, China faces a group of ASEAN nations- including Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Maritime issues are becoming a key concern among countries in Southeast Asia. China is currently involved in territorial disputes with Southeast Asian nations over maritime delimitation and the sovereignty of offshore islands, namely the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. These issues are all more important due to the rise of China as an economic and military power. Control of these islands and seas is key to securing the rights of resource exploration, the safety of sea channels of communication and regional naval power projection. China has land disputes with Laos and Vietnam. In a dispute that began in the 1970s, six governments claim all or some of the Spratly Islands and the surrounding maritime area in the South China Sea. These areas are valuable due to their proximity to shipping lanes, the believed presence of oil and natural gas resources and abundant fishing areas in these waters. In addition to these multilateral maritime disputes, China has bilateral disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines. China engaged in military combat with Vietnam and the Philippines during 1970s and 1980s. China's steps toward solving these disputes are motivated by its own interests. China signed a border agreement with Laos in 1991 and with Vietnam in 1999. In 2000, China and Vietnam also signed an agreement regarding maritime boundaries and fishery cooperation in the Beibu Gulf. China's military occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995 was the first time that China had challenged a member of ASEAN militarily over a territorial dispute –in the case, the Philippines. In October 1998, China violated the spirit of the code of the code of the conduct it had signed with the Philippines by building new structure on Mischief Reef including a ground satellite station. In the late 1990s, however, China moderated its behavior toward the south China Sea, seizing no more territories and committing itself to multilateral discussions on establishing a code of conduct. After several years of discussion on a code of conduct, the claimants signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea at the November 2002 APT Summit in Phnom Penh. In discussions on the implementation of the Declaration, the parties were continuing to move toward signing a formal code of conduct. In

May 1999, a Chinese fishing vessel sank after colliding with a vessel of the Philippines Navy. Building trust in the Sino-ASEAN has reduced the changes of regional instability in general and the Declaration on conduct has reduced the threat of war in the South China Sea which would threaten the sea lanes.

In the Post-Cold War World, most ASEAN states have tried to maintain cordial relations with all of the major powers, allowing them to benefit from all and not become too dependent on any one state. Therefore, ASEAN states do not want to choose sides between the United States or China, but rather hope to maximize benefits by maintaining good relations with both. Southeast Asian nations have shown in the past that when they have felt threatened such as in the mid- 1990s when China was behaving aggressively in the South China Sea and in the Taiwan strait, they have taken steps to move in the direction of balancing against that threat by improving relations with other outside powers. Overlapping claims resulted in several military incidents since 1974 and in countries awarding foreign companies exploration rights in the same area of the South China Sea. Regional nation-states not directly involved in the Spratly dispute became concerned about regional stability and established a regional forum to discuss the peaceful solution of the disputes. Sovereignty and exploration disputes were solved with the drafting of ASEAN's 1992 declaration which committed to resolve disputes peacefully and to consider joint exploration of the territory.

In 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Hanoi that the US had a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea. She expressed support for a collective diplomatic process regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In response, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLAN) carried out manoeuvres in the South China Sea. Control over the South China Sea was seen as a way for China to seek living space for its population and achieve a position of great power through exploration of oil, gas, fisheries and other resources.

At present time, the South China Sea issue reaches a peak among the claimants, especially between China and the Philippines. At the end of the special meeting, China had sought to release a 10-point consensus document with the association of Southeast Asian Nations, but the bloc rejected it due to its wording, according to the ASEAN sources. The sources quoted part of the China-proposed agreement that the countries directly concerned shall

resolve through friendly consultations and negotiations their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means. Ahead of the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, China is believed to have aimed for more international support over its position on the disputes by announcing the list of agreements with ASEAN. One of the 10-points was calling on countries outside to play a constructive role for peace and stability in the region according to the sources. China's massive reclamation of islands in the contested waters in recent years and building of military facilities in them have caused widespread concerns, not only among the claimants. Among non-claimants, the United States and its allies in the region, including Australia and Japan, as well as some European countries have seen China's actions in the South China Sea as going against ruled-based order. Of those ASEAN countries that have no claims in the internationally important waterway, rich in fish and potential oil and gas reserves, Indonesia and Singapore have become more vocal in expressing their opposition to any unilateral action to change the status quo in the region. ASEAN issued a tough-worded joint statement that said the group cannot ignore what is happening in the South China Sea. However, countries that have very close ties with China, including Cambodia and Laos, were opposed to issuing a joint statement of ASEAN Foreign Ministers according to diplomats with knowledge of the situation.

In the year 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a tour of the three countries namely Brunei, Cambodia and Laos to develop substantial backing within the region. After following the visits, the Chinese foreign ministry published a four-point consensus with the three countries. The consensus states that first is that disputes over the Spratly Islands are not an ASEAN-China issue and should not have any implications on China-ASEAN relations. Second is that every sovereignty is free to choose their own way to resolve rows and no unilateral decision can be imposed them. Thirdly, dialogue and consultations under Article 4 of the DOC are the best way to solve the South China Sea disputes. Fourth is that China and ASEAN together can effectively maintain peace and security in the region. By supporting China's four-point consensus, three countries have expressed that they will neither join Vietnam and the Philippines in their fight against China's assertiveness in South China Sea nor seek multilateral dispute resolution China and these three countries do not want the involvement of outside powers like the United States in the dispute of South China Sea. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang is expected to play a key role in mediating China's disputes with Southeast Asian neighbor as the



chair of ASEAN in 2016. So much so that China's assertive diplomacy in Southeast Asia has raised questions about Laos's ability to promote unity and open dialogue across ASEAN in 2016.

During Myanmar's tenure as chair of ASEAN in 2014, the smaller economy had to face the challenge of considering the interests of Vietnam and Philippines on the one hand and China on the other. At that time, Myanmar stood for neutral in the dispute of the South China Sea issue. At the present time, according to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we attach great importance to developments in the South China Sea although Myanmar is not a claimant state. Myanmar has been consistent in calling for and supporting all endeavors to promote a peaceful resolution of disputes through friendly consultations and negotiations, in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law including the 1982 UNCLOS. Moreover, Myanmar urges all parties to exercise restraint with regard to activities that could increase tension and to refrain from threats or use of force. As a member of rules-based ASEAN, Myanmar is committed to the principle of rule of law in the conduct of foreign relations throughout the international community. Myanmar will continue to work with ASEAN Member States and China for the full and effective implementation, based on consensus, of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the early conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC).

China, the fastest growing economy in Asia and the second biggest economy in the world, claims almost the entire energy rich South China Sea waters because of its energy demand. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has raised tensions with its neighbors and with the United States, which is the dominant security partner of the Philippines and Taiwan. At the end of Special ASEAN and U.S leader Summit, the South China Sea issue is mentioned in the Sunny Lands Declaration. Mentioned in the joint Declaration are as follows: Mutual respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, equality and political independence of all nations by firmly upholding the principles and purposes of the charter of the United Nations, the ASEAN Charter and International law. They Shared commitment to peaceful solution of dispute including full respect for legal and diplomatic process, without resort to the threat or use of force in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

As China has set up air fields and built artificial islands and now deployed missile system in the South China Sea, the U.S states that it will go on flying and sailing wherever international

law allows, emphasizing freedom of air-flight and navigation. At the 12<sup>th</sup> senior Officials' meeting on the Implementation of DOC held in Vietnam, all parties vowed to continue to fully and effectively implement the DOC, deepen practical maritime cooperation and jointly safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea. All parties reaffirmed their aspirations for an early conclusion of the COC on the basis of consensus and vowed to boost prosperity and development in the region. Singapore and Indonesia call softly on ASEAN and China to continue working together to maintain peace and stability of the South China Sea. In a case of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague brought about by the Philippines over the claims of China in the South China Sea, China has refused to recognize the case and says all disputes should be resolved through bilateral talks. For the Philippines, international law is the only way to know who the Spratly Islands belong to. At a press conference in Mongolia, U.S Secretary of State John Kerry warns Beijing for the establishment of air defense zone over the South China Sea. However, China has neither confirmed nor denied its plans. Rising tensions have been fuelling increasing security spending in the region. Japanese Defense Minister said that Japan would help Southeast Asian nations building their security capabilities to deal with what he called unilateral, dangerous and coercive actions in the South China Sea. During the visit of U.S Secretary of Defense Ash Carter to the Philippines, there was a new agreement between Washington and Manila which is allowing U.S rational military forces on Pilipino bases spread across the archipelago. Carter visited Antonio Batista Air Base which is one of five bases where U.S troops would be stationed, located just 160 kilometers from the disputed Spratly Islands. Moreover, U.S Defense Secretary Carter said that the U.S opposes any change to the status quo in the South China Sea. China's actions are a frontal challenge to the U.S position in the western Pacific.

At the G-7 Summit held in Japan 2016, U.S President Barack Obama called on China to resolve maritime disputes peacefully and the United States was simply concerned about freedom of navigation and over flight in the region. Although China asserts that most of its buildings are civilian purposes, it has now rattled nerves with its military and construction activities on islands it occupies in the South China Sea. Two Chinese jets carried out an unsafe intercept of a U.S military reconnaissance over the South China Sea. Therefore, a U.S Navy ship sailed close to a disputed reef in the South China Sea. Moreover, the U.S accused China of militarizing the South China Sea after creating artificial islands while China, in turn, has criticized increased U.S naval

patrols and exercises in Asia. The Foreign Minister of Singapore told that Singapore cannot accept that might is right and it has vital interest in seeing territorial disputes in South China Sea settled peacefully as a small nation. China's assertive posture in the South China Sea could risk harming China's international ties. One of the changes in the Southeast Asian context, the U.S lifted an embargo on sales of lethal arms to Vietnam. Besides, Vietnam has become a critical part of that strategy amid concerns about China's growing military might and its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea.

China's growing assertiveness has already alarmed the Philippines, Vietnam and other claimants. It has increased U.S-China tensions with the two heavy weights trading accusations of militarizing the vital waterways. It downplayed two naval exercises conducted by China in 2013 and 2014 at James shoal, less than 50 nautical miles off Sarawak. In 2015, concerns raised by Malaysia fishermen in Miri about alleged bullying by armed men aboard Chinese Coast Guard vessels were ignored. In the Parliament, Malaysia's deputy foreign minister reiterated that like other ASEAN countries, Malaysia did not recognize China's controversial Nine Dash line. Economically, China is Malaysia's top export destination and Malaysia is the biggest importer of Chinese goods and services in the 10-member ASEAN group. Seeking to balance its economic and national security interest, Malaysia is pursuing various strategies including bolstering its surveillance and defense capabilities while promoting a code of conduct between China and ASEAN countries signed in 2002. A more sensitive option is to seek closer military ties with the U.S. Moves to secure closer U.S. military ties could be twinned with soft diplomacy to try to convince China to be less assertive on its claims. According to Chinese Vice- Foreign Minister, the deployment of China will not threaten any country. In dealing with the South China Sea, Cambodian Defense Minister said that the dispute should be resolved peacefully through negotiations by parties concerned and outsiders should not meddle in the issue. Activities that caused destabilization, altered the status quo, violated international laws have undermined the confidence and increased tensions. Therefore, Vietnamese President demanded countries in the world respect international laws in the South China Sea region.

At a news conference in China 2016, Director -general of the Department of Treaty and Law of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that no country would accept compulsory arbitration when core interests were at stake. Moreover, he added that China had always been a firm defender and practitioner of international law. The U.S is expanding its military exercises near the

South China Sea in response to China's growing assertiveness in the area while Japan has carried out a joint drill with the Philippines. In the most recent clash, the Philippines' naval forces intercepted eight Chinese fishing vessels in the Scarborough Shoal in 2012. Annual fishing bans and arrests of fishermen are a convenient proxy for sovereignty claims since they can be presented as legitimate attempts to enforce marine resources protection according to a report by the International Crisis Group. The U.S. pivot to the area raises concerns about the future of U.S. interests in Southeast Asia. The Obama administration has not only worked to strengthen ties with ASEAN but has also forged tighter relations with individual countries like Myanmar, where it has developed a new focus and strategy of engagement. The United States has ramped up security cooperation with Vietnam, while Malaysia and Singapore have signaled desire for increased security cooperation. The failure of Chinese and Southeast Asian leaders to resolve the diplomatic means could undermine international laws governing maritime disputes and destabilizing arms buildups. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague is hearing a claim brought by the Philippines against China. On 12 July 2016, a UN-backed tribunal ruled that there was no legal basis to China's claims in the South China Sea. Besides, the Hague Tribunal has ruled China has caused irreparable harm to the ecosystem of the Spratly Islands and breached the Philippines' sovereign right.

### **Conclusion**

The Spratly Islands dispute reaches a peak at the current time due to not only strategic and geographical positions but also the decision of the Tribunal Court. ASEAN states are concerned for their security because China has built artificial islands and are willing to expand military force to settle dispute within its atmosphere of its influence. As far as China is concerned, it should follow a peaceful development policy and restrain from any threat or use of force. In terms of the disputes in the South China Sea, all states do expect that China as a rising power respects the DOC and work together with others to achieve a COC. From a regional perspective, China's claims have challenged sovereignty of four ASEAN members, namely Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. From an international perspective, China's claims can potentially hamper freedom of navigation and access to maritime commons where more than US dollar 5 trillion worth of marine trade passes annually and hence elicited strong protests from major powers including the U.S, Japan, India and Russia. From a systematic perspective, China's claim challenged the U.S, the sole super power, and raised a question of

possibility of accelerated arm races leading to war. The upgrade of the Chinese army was perceived as a threat to the security of the region by neighboring countries. For realists, nation-states live in a world of self-help. Material power and military strength are the decisive forces which shape relations among states. The Spratly Islands dispute lies in question of territorial sovereignty. Thus, China's action in the Spratly Islands may form one part of China's plan to exert greater control in the Southeast Asian region. Therefore, the relations among ASEAN, China and U.S are based on their interests and some ASEAN countries and the U.S intend to power balance with China in the region. So much so that, it is hard to predict whether the tension of the Spratly Islands dispute will rise more or not in the future.

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