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South China Sea: Beijing's 'Salami Slicing' Strategy

By Darshana M. Baruah

Synopsis

The South China Sea is seeing increasing tension amongst the claimants. The Second Thomas Shoal is the latest addition to Beijing's 'Salami Slicing' strategy of slowly acquiring small reefs and islands to consolidate its contested claim.

Commentary

THE MOST recent tension in the South China Sea over the Second Thomas Shoal indicates a rising Chinese assertiveness in its maritime claims as well as inviting Washington's criticism of Beijing's behaviour in the disputed waters.

On 9 March 2014, China's coast guard vessels stopped two Philippine boats carrying supplies to their troops stationed in the shoal since 1999, claiming that Manila was trying to build structures on the reef in an attempt to fortify its claim.

The Second Thomas Shoal

The shoal known as the Ayungin Shoal in Philippines, Ren'ai Reef in China and the Second Thomas Shoal in the west, is home to the *BRP Sierra Madre* - a former US tank landing vessel which ran aground on the shoal as a Philippine navy ship 15 years ago. Manila has stationed a handful of its marines aboard the rusting ship which is believed to be part of its strategy in the larger geopolitics of the South China Sea. The reef, which is within the disputed Spratly Islands, lies inside Manila's 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone, but is contested by China in its entirety.

China claims most of the South China Sea as marked by its nine-dash line which is contested by five other claimants: Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan. Beijing's move to block the boats has led to protests from Manila which is being supported by Washington.

The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs released a statement that "Ayungin Shoal is part of the continental shelf of the Philippines and therefore, the Philippines is entitled to exercise sovereignty rights and jurisdiction in the area without the permission of other States". Furthermore, it said the civilian vessels contracted by the Philippine Navy were only conducting rotation of personnel and resupply operations.

The statement also addressed the issue as an “urgent threat to the rights and interests of the Philippines under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)”.

Explaining its move, Beijing issued a statement saying that according to the China Coast Guard, its vessels which were on routine patrol in waters off the Ren'ai Reef on 9 March spotted two Philippine-flagged ships. “These ships which were then approaching the Ren'ai Reef, were loaded with construction materials”. Beijing's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang reiterated China's “sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and their surrounding waters, including the Ren'ai Reef”.

He accused the Philippine ship of being illegally ‘grounded’ on the Ren'ai Reef in 1999 on the pretext of ‘malfunction’. Besides refusing to tow away the ship, he said, the Philippines was now attempting to carry out construction work on the Ren'ai Reef, which “blatantly violated the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) signed by China and ASEAN countries”.

Earlier, on 27 January 2014, the Philippines had accused China of firing water cannons at fishermen to prevent them from the entering the disputed waters of the Scarborough Shoal. In 2012 Manila and Beijing were in a heated standoff over the Scarborough Shoal. The incident drew much attention to the disputes in the region which was followed by then Defence Secretary Leon Panetta's speech in Singapore on the US rebalance to the region. While Manila withdrew its forces from the shoal, China continues to maintain armed maritime vessels in the region, treating it as its territory.

China's ‘Salami Slicing’ strategy

Beijing's provocative behaviour seems to be part of its larger strategy in the South China Sea, where it does not use any kind of force which would have serious consequences but enough to bully the smaller disputing nations into submission. The strategy of ‘salami slicing’ as used by Robert Haddick, means “the slow accumulation of small actions, none of which is a *casus belli*, but which add up over time to a major strategic change” – which Beijing seems to be doing.

China is slowly taking control of the smaller reefs and islands within the South China Sea, increasing its presence and consolidating its claims. Beijing has refused to adhere to the UNCLOS and brushed away Manila's attempt to solve the matter at an international tribunal. Even though Washington is increasingly voicing its concerns in the region it really cannot do much about Beijing's refusal to abide by international law given that the US itself is not a signatory to UNCLOS and is often seen breaking international rules and norms when it comes to its national interest.

Hence, until there is an actual military conflict between China and one of Washington's allies, nobody can stop Beijing's slow accumulation of the reefs and islands of the South China Sea. Indeed, China is beginning to behave like a great power.

Need for ASEAN solidarity

Following the blockade by the Chinese coast guard the Philippines air-dropped its supplies but it will have to send back the boats to provide the next round of supplies to its marines aboard the *Sierra Madre*. A Philippine naval officer in a statement to Reuters said that “we have no plans to expand or build permanent structures on the shoal... Since last year, we've been resupplying our troops using civilian ships to avoid confrontation and this was the first time China blocked them”. Washington has reacted strongly to the Chinese action calling it a “provocative move that raises tensions”, calling for all parties to maintain status quo.

Although most of the disputing nations are wary of Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea, ASEAN is divided in its view toward the disputes given the strong economic relationship its member-states enjoy with Beijing. China is also trying to mend ties with other nations such as Vietnam and Malaysia but has left out Washington's allies - the Philippines and Japan - in its ‘charm offensive’.

As Beijing's ‘salami slicing’ strategy is gathering speed it is more important than ever for ASEAN to show it solidarity and stand up to its bigger neighbour, China. As it is unlikely that the disputes will be resolved in the near future, all countries should now vigorously push for a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea to avoid any miscalculations and military confrontations.

Darshana M. Baruah is a Junior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi and the Associate Editor of the ORF South China Sea Monitor. She contributed this article to RSIS Commentaries.