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No. 087/2014 dated 14 May 2014

China's Oil Rig Move: Casting Doubt on Neighbourliness

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Synopsis

China's recent move to locate its oil rig in disputed territory in the South China Sea has cast doubts about Beijing's overtures for friendship and neighbourliness. What kind of great power does China intend to become?

Commentary

IN THE run-up to the 24th ASEAN Summit in Myanmar, ASEAN member states were mulling over Premier Li Keqiang's proposal for an ASEAN-China Treaty on Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation and to jointly build a peaceful Maritime Silk Road for the 21st Century.

Then, just before the Summit, China demonstrated its friendliness to ASEAN with the most solid present of all: it sent its billion-dollar floating oil drilling platform deep into Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf. It rammed Vietnam's surveillance vessels and fired at them with high-powered water cannon, severely injuring several crew members. At the same time, the Chinese media urged China to teach Vietnam a lesson if they dared protest China's infringement of their "sovereign rights".

Earlier call for cooperation by Chinese leaders

China's actions were completely contrary to the diplomatic steps it had taken since 2013 to improve ASEAN-China relations and bring back confidence in the region, charming its neighbours with promises of restraint and win-win cooperation. China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi's choice to visit ASEAN in his first overseas trip as foreign minister in May 2013 had raised hope in ASEAN that China was giving first priority to regional diplomacy and that China viewed ASEAN as a valuable Strategic Partner.

ASEAN wholeheartedly welcomed the visits of China's President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang to Southeast Asia in October 2013. ASEAN was enthusiastic and hopeful about China's proposals and ideas on the future of the region. They welcomed President Xi Jinping's historic remarks to the Indonesian parliament that ASEAN and China should build "trust and develop good neighbourliness" and "stick together through thick and thin".

ASEAN was further encouraged by Premier Li Keqiang's proposal on the 10th anniversary of the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership to turn ASEAN-China relations from a "golden decade" to a "diamond decade" with a Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation, which advocated adoption of "common and

cooperative security". China also indicated that its "Maritime Silk Road for the 21st Century" initiative was inspired by Admiral Zheng He's peaceful voyages to Southeast Asia in the 15th century, which was not about gaining new territories, but about commerce and extending Chinese civilisation.

As a result of these diplomatic statements by Chinese leaders, ASEAN was hopeful that China was changing its approach to its maritime disputes with its neighbours. ASEAN leaders were closer to becoming convinced that the "China dream" could also be made "Southeast Asia's dream".

ASEAN responded in kind to China's statements, seizing every opportunity to build confidence and cement a good relationship with the new generation leadership in China. ASEAN promptly "noted and appreciated" China's proposal on the new Friendship Treaty, and supported the ASEAN-China Maritime Cooperation Partnership.

ASEAN also agreed to fully and effectively implement the ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), and actively proposed confidence-building measures. Furthermore, ASEAN and China began consultations on the much-awaited binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) which saw progress during the consultations.

Shock by oil rig move into disputed waters

Thus, for the first time in years, the overall situation in the South China Sea was calmer, with both sides exercising restraint. There were fewer incidents, despite China issuing the new Hainan fishing regulations and Chinese officials making statements about the prospect of China introducing an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea.

Given the encouraging diplomatic developments since 2013, it was a complete shock to ASEAN and the international community when China sent its biggest oil rig into its neighbour's backyard, claiming the maritime area as its own. China attempted to intimidate Vietnam with an overwhelmingly large fleet of both military and para-military vessels. At the same time, it dismissed calls to resolve the dispute through dialogue and other peaceful means.

China's escalation of assertiveness in the South China Sea includes vessels from various agencies and provinces in China. This suggests that its actions were deliberate, well-planned and coordinated from Beijing.

What China's leaders should consider

These activities threaten regional peace and stability. They are not only inconsistent with international law; they also disregard China's own pledge to fully and effectively implement the DOC. Furthermore, they are totally contrary to friendly gestures made to ASEAN by Chinese leaders since 2013.

China's latest highly provocative actions in the South China Sea prove that China is no longer a status quo power, but is actively seeking to re-establish a China-dominated regional order in Southeast Asia.

Chinese leaders must ask themselves what kind of a great power they want China to become. Is it really in China's long-term interests to undermine its own credibility and image by acting completely contrary to its own leaders' pledges to the region and the world? Is it in China's interests to stir up regional tensions and jeopardise the peaceful and cooperative environment that was being developed after 2013?

China's leaders often say that a peaceful and cooperative environment in the region is a prerequisite for China's development because it will allow China to focus on domestic issues, in particular on economic restructuring and reform, and to seize the "strategic opportunity" to catch up economically with the United States and the West.

China must consider that ASEAN has been serious about building good neighbourliness, friendship and cooperative relationships with China. If China loses ASEAN's trust and friendship, it will be the first country in history to seek great power status with no true friends among its neighbours.

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