De-escalation of the Spratly dispute in Sino-Southeast Asian relations

Abstract
The paper argues that the Spratly dispute has shown signs of de-escalation in recent years. This has occurred however in the absence of significant changes in material terms and in the circumstances pertaining to the dispute as well as in the absence of major progress in conflict management and resolution. The paper seeks therefore to understand what explains the de-escalation process. It claims that it derives from a combination of wider domestic and regional developments. These include the lessening of the China threat image, the limited Chinese power projection in the South China Sea, Vietnam joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995, the downplaying of nationalist rhetoric, the limited proven oil reserves in the area, and restrained US involvement in the dispute. These transformations have eased the climate of relations over the Spratlys and made possible the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea by China and the ASEAN members in November 2002. Nonetheless, the situation in the Spratlys remains fragile and possibly volatile. In the absence of actual process toward conflict management and resolution, tension could rise again if any of the factors discussed were to change for the worst.

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conduct seismic research in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, Sino-Philippine relations had entered "a golden age"; her guest graciously concurred. Hu and Arroyo. Throughout the 1990s, Sino-Philippine relations had centered on the contentious issue of ownership of the Spratly Islands, resulting in tense physical and diplomatic stand-offs between the two countries. Recent turbulence in Sino-Vietnamese relations outlined in Part I (China Brief, April 14) together with the scandals associated with Chinese ODA to the Philippines, and questions concerning the legality of joint exploration projects in the South China Sea, underscore the limits of Beijing’s so-called “charm offensive“ in Southeast Asia. He has published extensively on China-Southeast Asian relations. Most Southeast Asian countries have coastlines overlooking or close to the South China Sea. Some would be wary about having to share a common maritime boundary with such a big and increasingly powerful nation as China, or even having it as a very close neighbor. The main idea of the South China Sea dispute is a series of complex, legal, technical and geographic components critical to understanding the dispute. Nonetheless, the issues involving territory and sovereignty are the most pervasive security problems facing the region. In the early 1990s, the South China Sea Conflict and Sino-ASEAN Relations prospect of a rising China was still perceived as a threat in Southeast Asia.