



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

30th ASEAN Summit: Easing up on the Disputed South China Sea

Junaid Ashraf, Young ISSI Professional*

May 10, 2017

* Mr. Junaid Ashraf has done M.Phil. in Government and Public Policy from National Defence University, Islamabad, in year 2014. He is currently working under Young ISSI Professional Corner at the ISSI. His area of interests include China, CPEC, and Governance.

The ASEAN countries met on April 29 in Manila, Philippines for the 30th ASEAN Summit and, interestingly, it aimed to soften up its tone on the South China Sea. The summit in Manila reverted back from its hard stance on China by avoiding references to China's increasing naval presence in the waters of East Asia.



The Chairman's statement dropped the mention of "land reclamation and militarization,"¹ while the previous statements of ASEAN summits have condemned Chinese presence in South China Sea.² Importantly, not a single leader raised questions on it.³ The People's Republic of China is not a member of the ASEAN bloc and did not attend the Summit; however, it has paid great attention about the content of its statements.

China has welcomed the move and said that it depicts effort to ease the tensions between China and the South East Asian bloc. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said that, "the relevant situation at this ASEAN summit again fully shows the positive changes in the situation in the South China Sea, and that the joint wish of countries in this region is to seek stability, promote cooperation and seek development, and this should be respected and supported by all sides."⁴ This is a landmark achievement considering that ASEAN summits have always been dominated by controversies surrounding the South China Sea, as many South East Asian countries have competing claims over the sea and also get infuriated by increasing Chinese maritime advances.

China has been assertive in the South China Sea; this has enraged Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Philippines and Vietnam as they also have claims over islands in South China Sea. Furthermore, the sea

¹ <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/world/329780/asean-keeps-pointedly-silent-on-south-china-sea>

² <http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/ChanakyaCode/asean-meet-acceptance-of-south-china-sea-as-a-chinese-lake/>

³ <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/155892/south-china-sea-issue-not-raised-asean-leaders-summit-envoy>

⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-summit-china-idUSKBN17Y0SL>

is assumed to house 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, further intensifying the claims over the sea; the conflict can be dated back to 1970s.⁵ Moreover, the United States has strong naval presence in the South China Sea and South East Asian countries have been allies to America and have always looked towards the US support over the disputes. On the other hand, China wants to counter the US presence as Beijing considers the South China Sea's locality important for Chinese influence, and also sees its control as a way to assert its will over the region.

President Trump's inward looking policies like backing out of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) might have mitigated the assertion of claim on the disputed territory by the ASEAN countries. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), an agreement with sixteen countries including those from South East Asia, has become significant after Trump's backing out of TPP.⁶ Importantly, since the change in the US's administration, East Asian countries like Singapore and Malaysia have shown a tilt towards China and the RCEP. Furthermore, the Chairman of ASEAN, Rodrigo Duterte, the President of Philippine, also seeks to bury the hatchet with China after years of squabbling over overlapping claims.

It seems like the former US President Obama's pivot to Asia has gone down the drain and Asian countries have started to look for new allies for trade in shape of China. President Trump's "America First" slogan is pulling Asian countries closer to China's orbit which can be clearly seen in the Manila summit as countries focused more on cooperation rather than conflict. Furthermore, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has leaned Asia towards China because BRI advocates joint contribution and shared benefits. China should seize upon on this changing heart of Asia, especially ASEAN countries, to solve the lingering dispute of islands in the South China Sea. This could greatly help China to establish and enhance its naval presence and extend its global economic presence.

China is pushing itself in the economic realm in order to consolidate the gains and stretch its outreach, on other hand. This tinderbox scenario in the East China Sea has taken a new direction for the time being, and the way the situation develops can potentially have huge ramifications for the status of China in the entire Pacific region, and potentially, in the global arena.

⁵ <http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/territorial-disputes-in-the-south-china-sea>

⁶ <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/asean-wants-stronger-ties-with-china/article18349151.ece>