

The Beting Serupai incident by Tang Siew Mun

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Led by the guided missile destroyer, the *Lanzhou*, a four-ship flotilla of the People's Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN) set sail for the South China Sea (SCS) last month. It would not be the first nor the last time that China puts on a display of its burgeoning military might in the disputed and politically turbulent waters of the SCS.

On March 26, the PLAN ships sailed into the waters of Beting Serupai, which is located 80km from Malaysian shores. The intrusion into the maritime area which is also known as James Shoal was widely reported from Beijing to Washington. Critics bemoaned China's gunboat diplomacy as yet another affirmation of Beijing's assertiveness.

The PLAN's "patrol and training missions" in the vicinity of Beting Serupai may prove too close for Malaysia's comfort. While it is the prerogative and right of China to conduct naval and maritime activities in international waters within the provisions of international law, its increased activities in the area claimed by Malaysia is worrisome and will only serve to heighten tensions in the SCS.

Showing up Malaysia is a strategic mistake as Kuala Lumpur has been one of the most moderate voices in counseling for reason and diplomacy when others pushed for a hard balancing approach. This episode will strengthen the "realist" camp in Malaysian policy circles that has long advocated a more cautious line toward China in SCS disputes.

A prominent Peking University don, however, downplayed the significance of the naval activities. Zhu Feng explained that these actions were "an important, symbolic declaration of Chinese sovereignty intended to show that Beijing will not waver on its territorial claims despite pushback in the region."

Under normal circumstances, China – as well as other sovereign nations – has the right to patrol and deploy military assets within their territorial boundaries. However, in the case of the SCS where the issue of sovereignty is far from established nor recognized, such actions will be contentious at best. Thus, the rationalization for the Beting Serupai "visit" is flawed in two regards.

First, if Beijing maintains the right to assert its sovereign claims in the disputed areas of the SCS, it must also be ready to accept that other parties to the disputes have the same right. It is almost a certainty that China will react strongly to any overtures and actions by other nations that will undermine its purported sovereign rights. As long as the disputes are extant,

Beijing cannot exercise unchallenged rights in the SCS and expect others to acquiesce to its actions.

Consider Beijing's reactions if Kuala Lumpur were to deploy a permanent naval presence in Beting Serupai. If Malaysia were to undertake such action or other options in response to the PLAN's "visit," it would set in motion a vicious cycle of "action-reaction" that would bring the two countries closer to the precipice of an armed conflict, and imperil their erstwhile good relations.

Second, the reference to "pushback," which is an unequivocal admission of Beijing's unease with the increasing US military presence under Washington's pivot strategy, is unfounded and erroneous. It would be a mistake for Beijing to conflate the SCS disputes with its strategic rivalry with Washington. The former centers on China's overlapping claims with four ASEAN states – Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam – while the latter revolves around the inability of China and the US to establish a *modus vivendi* in their bilateral ties.

If a "pushback" does exist, it is the Chinese who have been doing the "pushing" on two counts. On the one hand, the US pivot to Asia can largely be explained as a response to Beijing's success in crowding out Southeast Asia at the expense of Washington's standing and influence in the region. Concomitantly, China must also realize that the expansion of its economic and military power in the last two decades had the effect of "pushing" China to the forefront of regional politics. While the region seeks to understand China's strategic intent, Beijing's growing power and influence is creating an uneasy state of uncertainty.

It also follows that Beijing should recognize that the power relation between China and ASEAN is one of asymmetry weighted heavily in favor of the former. Every time China undertakes measures to reaffirm its sovereignty, it is drawing a line in the sand to deter and warn off ASEAN claimants. These actions are backfiring on China and are detrimental to its long-term strategic interests. Far from being cowed, ASEAN states are responding to what they perceived as Chinese heavy-handedness by moving closer to the US.

Malaysia's preference for quiet diplomacy will mean that the Beting Serupai incident will be handled "off the radar" and without any grand-standing. However, the manner in which Malaysia decides to effect its diplomacy should not be construed as weakness or a lack of resolve to protect its sovereign rights in the SCS. Malaysia firmly believes in the peaceful management and eventual resolution of the SCS and does not subscribe to the vicious cycle of "an eye for an eye." However, in the face of continuing Chinese pressure and "tests," Beijing may have inadvertently sowed the seeds for Malaysia to rethink its China strategy.

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