INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea has long been regarded as a major source of tension and instability in the East Asian region. Over the years, numerous attempts to manage the South China Sea, prevent regional confrontation, and foster cooperation among concerned States have been recorded, but minimal progress has been observed. Since 2009, an upsurge in tension has sparked concern that the area may become a flashpoint with the potential for global consequences. The chapter examines the underlying issues complicating and intensifying the South China Sea disputes, and analyses the implications of the ongoing tension for the region.

The chapter first explains the significance of the South China Sea’s natural resources, strategic position and international navigation routes, and provides a portrait of the competing claims. Then the chapter illustrates the intensified competition triggered by the continental shelf submissions of some claimants, the involvement of non-regional States, leading particularly to Sino-United States spats, and unilateral actions and maritime conflicts in disputed areas. This is followed by an evaluation on China’s undefined claims in the South China Sea represented by the commonly known ‘U-shaped line’ and related issues. Finally, the paper offers some general considerations for China to take effective steps to secure its claims and recommendations for all the claimants to reduce the prospects for conflicts and to resolve the South China Sea disputes.
The Significance of the South China Sea

The South China Sea is a large semi-enclosed marginal sea with a total area of 3.5 million square kilometers and an average depth of over 2,000 meters. It hosts four groups of archipelagoes: Dongsha Islands (Pratas), Zhongsha Islands (Macclesfield Bank), Xisha Islands (Paracels), and Nansha Islands (Spratlys). Lying between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea serves the function of a “maritime super highway” and “vital international passage.” Indeed, it is “one of the world’s most important and densely used straights for international navigation.”

The States bordering the South China Sea vary greatly in size, geography, social and cultural structures, and economic and political systems. Many of them have contested claims to different parts of the South China Sea, particularly islands. Of the disputed claims, the status of the Spratlys have been the most contentious and resulted in several military clashes in the past decades, particularly between China and Vietnam. The widely established EEZ regime has intensified these claims and made the disputes more complex and demanding to seek for solutions.

Bordered by the world’s rapidly industrialising countries and growing economies, the South China Sea also functions as a central component of the Southeast Asian region and world economic attraction. These features are therefore of significance to both regional and global economies. Consequently, the intensive

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4 Ibid.
5 Besides China (including Taiwan), countries bordering the South China Sea include: Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, Laos (the only land-locked state), and Indonesia. For a brief account on these states see, Valencia, “The South China Sea: Prospects for marine regionalism,” 87.
8 For China’s claims in the South China Sea see, Greg Austin, China’s Ocean Frontier: International Law, Military Force and National Development (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998).