This article will focus on regional cooperation in East Asia concerning the South China Sea issue. Firstly the authors will review the current progress of regional integration in East Asia and sum up the region’s efforts to resolve the South China Sea issue. Secondly, the analysis will highlight the main reasons for the uncertainty in the South China Sea, especially US’ involvement. Finally the authors try to propose some preliminary policy recommendations concerning the peaceful settlement of South China Sea disputes, making it a host of regional cooperation so as to promote the further development of regional integration in East Asia.

Abstract

The South China Sea is a piece of important marine to connect Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. After the Cold War, through the joint efforts of countries surrounding the South China Sea, peace and stability has been maintained in the region, thus creating an excellent atmosphere for China and ASEAN countries, as well as the East Asian regional cooperation. At present, the process of regional integration in East Asia has made a series of progress, and the relationships between countries in the region have been further improved. The past year, the strong involvement of the US caused a great deal of uncertainty to the South China Sea and the East Asian regional security environment. The South China Sea issue has become the focus of international attention. This process of regional integration in East Asia has, to a certain degree, been negatively impacted. However in fact, direct confrontation and conflict have not occurred between the neighboring countries of the South China Sea.

This article will focus on regional cooperation in East Asia concerning the South China Sea issue. Firstly the authors will review the current progress of regional integration in East Asia and sum up the region’s efforts to resolve the South China Sea issue. Secondly, the analysis will highlight the main reasons for the uncertainty in the South China Sea, especially US’ involvement. Finally the authors try to propose some preliminary policy recommendations concerning the peaceful settlement of South China Sea disputes, making it a host of regional cooperation so as to promote the further development of regional integration in East Asia.
The South China Sea is a piece of important marine to connect Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. In the early days after the Cold War, the South China Sea was considered as sensitive waters where the potential territorial disputes may turn into actual conflicts. In the past two decades, the Chinese government put forward the principle of “shelving disputes and seeking joint development/ putting aside disputes and going in for joint development”, and enhanced security dialogues and cooperation with countries surrounding the South China Sea on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. China and other countries surrounding the South China Sea have made consensus on maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea. The  Declaration on the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea was signed in 2002 between China and ASEAN. Consequently, the distrust between China and ASEAN countries has been eliminated, which promotes the coordination and cooperation among China and ASEAN countries to safeguard security and stability in the region. At present, China and other countries surrounding the South China Sea have been jointly safeguarding peace and stability in the South China Sea, which not only enhances the amity and cooperation among China and ASEAN countries, but also creates a benign atmosphere for the successful development of East Asian regional cooperation. Generally speaking, the South China Sea connects the neighboring countries to safeguard peace and stability in the region, and promotes cooperation and communication among them so as to achieve common development. The article will analyze the role of the South China Sea from the perspective of the East Asian cooperation.

**Shelving Disputes and Promoting East Asian Regional Integration**

After the Cold War, some traditional security issues of East Asia which had been covered by the Cold War mentality were unveiled. Most of the East Asian countries had territorial disputes. Among them, the South China Sea issue was a very significant one. China and other neighboring countries in the area have none specified borders in the sea. As a result, territorial disputes of different levels existed. Western scholars thus predicted that the South China Sea might be the outbreak of conflicts and even wars after the Cold War. However, the relationships of countries in the South China Sea have proved that there is no war or conflict. In contrast, the friendly cooperation among countries has been strengthened and the process of integration of East Asia has been put into agenda.

Immediately after the Cold War, on February 24, 1992, the Chinese government promulgated the “Law of the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone” [1]. In May, China and Crestone Energy Corporation in the United States reached an agreement on oil exploration in the South China Sea. [2] In Western countries, some people with ulterior motives vigorously advocate the “China threat theory”, claiming that a rising
China will “fill” the “vacuum” as superpowers withdraw from Southeast Asia. And the issues in the South China Sea islands and the territorial disputes were rendered as a potential source of major conflict in the Asia-Pacific region.

In that year, *Christian Science Monitor* said, “Southeast Asians are seeking U.S. security assurances,” and openly stated that China “is on the rise as a naval power”; to this end, the prospects for international security in the Asia-Pacific region is to be “worried”.

Later, *the Heritage Foundation Journal Policy* published the article of former Beijing correspondent, the coordinator of current Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia in Asia program Ross Munro’s – “the Awakening of the Dragon - the real danger in Asia is from China”. This article alleges that China has “a new momentum to become a military power”; “aggressive action in the South China Sea,” will “infringe the vital interests of the United States,” and definitely “would infringe on Japan... and Southeast Asia itself.”

Former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski said: “China is destined to become one of the world’s most important economic powers. But its political role in world affairs has not completely specified.” Thus, it is necessary to establish a new security network including Washington, “in order to curb China’s ambitions of the Deng Xiaoping era”.

In 1994, *U.S International Studie*s magazine published a series of articles on China. In an article entitled “the Imminent Hegemony: China is a threat to Security in East Asia,” the author considered China’s rapid economic development constitutes a potential threat to the Asia-Pacific security without a proper reason. He said that “a economically strong China would stimulate Japan to strengthen its military forces, thus would bring everything into a new round of Cold War in Asia”.

However, since the beginning of the 1990s, Chinese government, by peaceful and responsible policies and by coordinative and cooperative actions, gradually solved the widely recognized “China threat theory” in neighboring countries.
Making the rocks of dispute drown in the sea of cooperation: the role of the south china sea in the process of east Asian cooperation, by Su Hao & Ren Yuan-zhe

First of all, China clearly came up with the principle and policy to deal with the South China Sea issues. As early as the first half of the 1980s, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping had officially put forward the “Shelving disputes and seeking joint development/ putting aside disputes and going in for joint development” principle. The first time Deng Xiaoping promoted this principle to neighboring countries was in June, 1986, when Laurel, Vice-President and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines visited China. Deng Xiaoping said, “the Spratly Islands issues could be put aside first. China would not let these disputes stand in the way of friendships with the Philippines or other countries. Facing “disputed issues”, we advocate solving it with peace instead of by force”.

In April 1988, when he met with Philippine President Corazon Aquino, the principle was spelled out even more clearly. He emphasized that “problems could be set aside first based on the friendship of two nations. The two nations should both take advantage of the peaceful environment to develop our own economy by joint exploration”.

Both the Foreign Minster and the President responded actively to this principle. From then on, this principle has become the general principle and policy for China in dealing with disputes with neighboring nations. We can say that if without the Chinese government’s responsible attitudes and cooperative and peaceful principle, South China Sea Region will not be able to maintain a peaceful and stable environment.

Secondly, China established and maintained friendly and cooperative relationships with neighboring nations in the South China Sea. After the Cold War, China quickly brought the relationship with Vietnam back to normal. Soon after that, China established or re-established diplomatic relationships with Indonesia and Singapore. China has established diplomatic relations with all Southeast Asian nations. This set up a sound foundation for China and ASEAN nations to develop friendly cooperation.

Thirdly, China participated in the establishment of the Asia-Pacific regional security cooperation mechanism. China, together with ASEAN nations, established the only official Asia-Pacific security cooperation mechanism – the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994. China participated actively in the mechanism and thus enhanced trust and reduced misgivings. In addition, China also adopted a series of Asia-Pacific security cooperation in the second track of diplomacy, including “Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation Council”, “Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue” “Asia-Pacific security round table”, etc. These greatly enhanced mutual trust and understanding between China and neighboring nations.
Fourthly, China has been active in promoting “track-two” diplomacy to discuss the South China Sea issue. The moment the Cold War ended, China and neighboring countries in the South China Sea held a series of international seminars to specifically discuss South China Sea issue, among which the most significant issue is “dealing with the potential conflict concerning South China Sea”. In the seminars, Chinese scholars and officials clearly and honestly communicated with other participants and clarified China’s real desire and sincere efforts to preserve peace and stability of South China Sea. Especially at the beginning of this century China and ASEAN countries discussed on how to regulate the relevant parties’ actions in the South China Sea and in the year 2002 they signed “Declaration on the Code of Parties in the South China Sea”. China and ASEAN countries agreed to make commitment to preserve peace and stability of the South China Sea.

With joint efforts of China and other East Asian countries, though there are complicated disputes concerning the belonging of islands, continental shelves and sea, for all these years there have not been any confrontation and military conflicts among countries. By contrast, East Asian countries have preserved good relations to establish the healthy foundation for the unification of East Asia. The South China Sea locates in the core position of East Asia, connecting two sub-regions—Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia—from South to North to play a geographical key supporting role in the process of East Asian cooperation.

Under the concept of open regionalism, since mid and late 1990s, East Asian countries began to actively promote regional cooperation in East Asia. In 1997, “10+3” leaders informal meeting was held to mark the process of regional integration in East Asia. Currently, the East Asian countries have constructed a multi-level framework for regional cooperation, including the highest level mechanisms of the country leaders, such as “10+3” summit, the three “10+1” summit, the Ministerial meetings of the regional countries in specific areas, Senior officials (deputy ministers) meeting, the Director-General meeting of the working level, a series of track-two diplomatic policy research and communication networks. In November 2004, “10+3” summit made it clear to establish East Asian Community as the long-term objective of regional cooperation.

At the end of 2005, 10+3 member countries plus Australia, New Zealand, and India launched the 10+3+3 cooperation mechanism. “10+6” is based on “East Asia Summit, parallel to “10+3,” another East Asian cooperation mechanism. East Asia Summit, as an important sign of East Asian regional cooperation mechanism, plays a role of promoting communication, coordination and cooperation with other East Asian countries. During the sixth East Asia Summit, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, under the invitation of Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, participated as special guests. The
meeting decided to invite the United States and Russia to join the East Asia Summit from 2011. With the participation of the United States and Russia, the importance of the East Asia Summit will be further enhanced.

Among East Asia cooperation, the most effective is the cooperation mechanism between East Asia’s “10+1” and China, Japan and Korea respectively, and the cooperation between ASEAN and China is one of the smoothest and most abundant results of the framework. Since 1997, from the start of “10+1”, the relations between China and ASEAN countries have developed rapidly. In a few years the relations have come to a very mature level. On December 16, 1997, for the first time ASEAN-China Leaders Meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and China and ASEAN established a “21st-century good-neighborly partnership of bilateral trust.” On November 4, 2002, on the Sixth ASEAN-China Summit, the two sides signed the “China-ASEAN Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation” so as to build China-ASEAN Free Trade Area by 2010. In October 2003 at the 7th meeting of ASEAN and Chinese leaders, the Chinese government announced to join the “Southeast Asia Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation”, being the first power outside the region to join the treaty. Meanwhile China and ASEAN also signed the “China-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership”, which is the international arena’s first national and sub-regional organization to establish strategic partnerships. In January 2007 at the 10th China-ASEAN Summit, China and ASEAN signed a free trade zone “Agreement on Trade in Services.” On August 15, 2009, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area investment agreement was signed at the 8th China-ASEAN Economic and Trade Ministers Meeting. January 1, 2010 witnessed establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. Through the offshore platform of the South China Sea, China and ASEAN have built a very mature bilateral relationship, and the communication and cooperation between the two sides have been further developed in political, economic, security, cultural cooperation and other exchanges.

In addition, ASEAN’s self-construction can not be ignored. ASEAN has determined to build the fully completed body with political/ security community, economic community and social/cultural community to form the “ASEAN Community” in 2015. China took the positive and supportive attitude to this grand objective. In all, in East Asia “open regionalism” concept, the pace of progress of regional integration in East Asia is very fast: it has formed a multi-level and broad, complex network structure including the ASEAN and China, Japan and Korea respectively, “10+1”, “10+3”, “10+6” and East Asian Summit. These types of mechanisms are interrelated and interacted as a whole, constituting the general framework of regional cooperation in East Asia. In this framework, the South China Sea plays a central role in connecting the geographic platform. It should be said that without the preservation of peace and stability of the South China Sea, the East Asian regional cooperation cannot be carried out.
The development of East Asian Regional Integration is closely related to the stability of its regional situation. With China's advocating the policy of “shelving differences and seeking joint development”, peace and stability has been maintained in the South China Sea, an area which was thought to be prone to conflicts. Countries within the region reached consensus on the issue of peaceful exploitation of the South China Sea resources, which creates favorable regional environment for East Asia Regional Integration. Countries within the region started a series of cooperation.

Maintenance of Peace and Stability in the South China Sea

The issues of the South China Sea are a series of disputes which exist among China and other maritime neighboring countries. Since the sovereign disputes are difficult to be solved in a short time, China proposed the policy of “shelving differences and seeking joint development”, so as to maintain a long term peace and stability in South China Sea area. China's proposal has received understandings and recognition from concerning countries. Since 1995, ASEAN countries and China started to incubate a set of code of conduct in the South China Sea, which was based on The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and the consensus of common interests and principles of action. In August 1995, the Sino-Philippines Joint Declaration of cooperation in South China Sea and other fields agreed to the eight principles concerning the code of conduct in disputes. In 1999, China approved to hold talks with ASEAN countries over the issue of maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea and started consultation in the next year. Although there had been differences in both sides’ understanding, consensus was quickly made afterwards.

In July 2002, in the 35th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, ASEAN countries indicated, “The code of conduct in South China Sea will further promote peace and stability in this area, and it is concurred to draw up Declaration on the code of conduct on the South China Sea.

At this point, in order to pass the declaration, we agree to establish close cooperation with China. “ Leaders from ASEAN countries and China signed Declaration on the code of conduct on the South China Sea in the 8th ASEAN Summit Meeting in November, 2002. The declaration acknowledged that China and
ASEAN are committed to enhancing good neighborly partnership of mutual trust, and to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea. The declaration emphasized on resolving the South China Sea disputes through peaceful means, friendly coordination and negotiation. Before the disputes are solved, all the parties are committed to exercise self-restraint, not to take actions which would complex or amplify the disputes, and to try to establish approaches of mutual trust under the spirit of cooperation and understanding, including the cooperation of marine environmental protection, searching and rescue, combating transnational crimes.

The declaration was the first political document between China and ASEAN on the issue of the South China Sea. It is important and positive in protecting China’s sovereign rights and interests, in maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea area, and in promoting mutual trust between China and ASEAN. So far, China and other neighboring countries in the South China Sea area still regard this declaration as the fundamental document in maintaining peace and stability of the South China Sea.

**Joint Exploration of Resources in the South China Sea**

Although there exists territorial disputes in South China Sea, China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei have worked together on developing resources in this area. In September 2004, when the president of the Philippines Arroyo was on her visit to China, leaders of the two countries have reached consensus on “intensifying coordination and communication, jointly developing resources in South China Sea through peaceful means”, and signed an agreement on exploring resources in this area together. Also in September 2004, Bolkiah, the Sultan of Brunei visited China and signed an agreement on petrol and natural gas exploration cooperation, expressing the candid desire to reinforce cooperation with China on developing South China Sea. In October 2004, Chinese Premier paid a visit to Vietnam, putting forward an active proposal to “strengthen cooperation on South China Sea from a broader scope, transforming this tumultuous sea into a peaceful, stable, cooperative one”, which resulted in Vietnam’s positive response. Vietnam expressed its wishes to accelerate cooperation on South China Sea and speed up the process of the land border demarcation. Shortly after, in December, the two sides initiated the negotiation on jointly developing South China Sea.
Making the rocks of dispute drown in the sea of cooperation: the role of the south china sea in the process of East Asian cooperation

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