

Chance to calm South China Sea

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Asia's security diplomacy faces a crucial test today when foreign ministers from 27 countries meet in Phnom Penh.

China has warned that the annual meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum is not the "appropriate" place to discuss differences over the South China Sea. These include recent confrontations over territorial claims, fisheries and energy deposits.

Yet silence on these issues would be deeply damaging to the forum's credibility as well as to longer-term prospects for managing conflict in a changing Asia. After all, the forum was invented so countries could air security concerns before they reached crisis point.

Its membership is a roll-call of nations that matter in Asian security, including the Southeast Asians, China, India, Japan, the Koreans, Australia, the US and Russia and the EU.

This is a logical place to discuss the strategic problems of Indo-Pacific Asia, a grand region that has the South China Sea as its geopolitical hub and vital economic artery.

China's sensitivities are hardly surprising given Beijing claims most of the South China Sea as its territorial waters in one way or another.

This clashes directly with the claims of several other states, most notably Vietnam and The Philippines, as well as with the surveillance activities of the US navy off the Chinese coast.

Tensions have risen in recent years, with more than 20 incidents involving everything from fishing boats and oil exploration craft to law-enforcement units and armed patrol vessels. All sides have raised the stakes with naval exercises and assertive rhetoric.

It is not as if China alone can be accused of stirring the waters. Vietnam and The Philippines may well have felt emboldened in pushing their own claims by the US strategic "pivot" back to Asia.

To be sure, there are mildly hopeful signs this week that the 10 ASEAN nations are close to agreement on the rudiments of a code of conduct to somehow manage maritime security differences with China.

But, even if this is true, the really hard part will be when they sit down with Beijing to negotiate the final document, especially if anyone expects it to be binding or to include some means of managing disputes.

After all, the same parties signed a high-sounding declaration a decade ago, but this has hardly stopped the worsening troubles.

The bottom line is that no end is in sight for the basic territorial differences in the South China Sea, driven by nationalism and resources rivalries and in turn propelling military modernisation.

Facts on the ground or, more precisely, in the water will be more telling than any sweet talk in Cambodia. For instance, Vietnam is enacting new laws to reinforce its claims while China is creatively redefining its claimed rocks and islets as nothing less than the Middle Kingdom's least populous city, with a population of all of 444.

The state-owned China National Offshore Oil Company has gone further, inviting bids for oil exploration in areas claimed and already leased by Vietnam.

And, despite some calibrated backdowns after a two-month fisheries standoff between the forces of China and The Philippines, patrols are being renewed in earnest.

With the long-term risks of conflict rising, letting the South China Sea slip from deliberations at the region's annual security meet would be a dangerous precedent.

And, despite its reputation for consensus at all costs, the forum this time can contribute more than talk.

At the moment there is not even a clear or agreed picture of what is happening in the region's most contested and congested sea lanes.

Concerned nations such as Australia could urge the forum to establish a regional information centre as a neutral venue for sharing data on incidents at sea and the steps that nations are taking to prevent them from escalating to conflict.

The South China Sea is a critical part of the Indo-Pacific commons. All maritime trading nations have stakes in its security.

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