

**CHINA'S CIVIL-MILITARY
STRATEGIES FOR SOUTH CHINA
SEA DISPUTE CONTROL**

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Executive Summary

1. The South China Sea (SCS) has been a hotbed for disputes since 2010. The Sino-Vietnamese clash over the 981 Oil Rig is an example. A dispute control mechanism is thus urgently needed.
2. China under Xi Jinping has become more assertive on its sovereignty claims. Such a change has long been campaigned by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), illustrating PLA's role in SCS affairs. Such a change also shows a civil-military convergence in guiding Beijing's strategic policy to deal with SCS challenges.
3. Along with this convergence is a number of policy guidelines for Beijing. First, there would be a need for Beijing to strike a subtle balance between confrontation-aversion and being firm on China's core national interests embodied in its sovereignty claims.
4. Second, pre-emptive measures, which have to be proportionate to well pre-designed "red lines" to deescalate tension in times of exigencies, are needed to prevent further moves by other claimant states in the SCS.
5. Third, PLA's guiding principles are to avoid provocative moves, but it should be responsive enough to react in an asymmetric way to achieve some gains. Although Beijing's preference for SCS dispute is still status-quo oriented, it would seemingly not reject a tactical change in the status quo when opportunity arises.
6. Fourth, Beijing has been careful not to initiate any moves that may trigger collective ASEAN response and decisive intervention from outside the region. On the other hand, Beijing can take advantage of US reluctance to confront China militarily and ASEAN division on SCS dispute to gain from a position of strength as a "big power" vis-à-vis other small claimants.
7. Ultimately China has to pursue a SCS policy and strategy that is not irredentist, military oriented and zero-sum. It should serve China's domestic political need

(leadership legitimacy) and national interests while addressing regional concern with Chinese behaviour.

8. Beijing has seemingly observed these dialectical and even self-contradictory policy options with some gains. However, the 981 oil rig deployment was a tactical misjudgement with strategic complications. Xi's decision to withdraw the ship has boosted people's confidence that his SCS policy will not be influenced by any nationalist impulse.