

**TAIWAN: A QUIET CLAIMANT IN THE
SOUTH CHINA SEA ISSUE**

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Executive Summary

1. Taiwan's South China Sea (SCS) policy is influenced by its domestic party politics and cross-strait relations with China. The two major parties, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), generally adopt opposing stands on the SCS issue.
2. KMT's SCS policy mainly focuses on the island's historical rights claim, while the DPP emphasizes on Taiwan's de facto control of the Spratly Islands. The only convergence between the two parties is in the joint development and peaceful settlement of the disputes.
3. Before the 80s, the claims of the two Chiang administrations in Taiwan resembled that of the mainland Chinese. Both Taiwan and China reiterated territorial sovereignty over the SCS and the islands but avoided challenging the other's position to prevent further confrontation.
4. Taiwan has stationed navy troops in Itu Aba (太平島), the biggest islet in the Spratly Islands since 1956. In the late 90s, the navy troops were replaced by personnel from the Coast Guard Agency. The Agency regularly maintains around 110 officers on the island.
5. In the first half of the 90s when Lee Teng-Hui served his first term of presidency in Taiwan, he pursued a multi-dimensional approach. Taipei then still based its claims on the historical rights arguments and promoted joint development as an important policy goal.
6. However, Lee tried to water down these claims by taking a low-key approach to other claimants' challenges. Lee also sought to enhance economic cooperation between Taiwan and ASEAN to rebalance China's influence in cross-strait trade relations.

7. In the second half of the 90s, cross-strait relations turned sour due to Lee's private visit to the US in 1995. Cross-strait talks were halted along with cross-strait joint development cooperation. In 1998, the two sides tried to resume regular exchanges.
8. These exchanges were put on hold after Chen Shui-Bian came into power in 2000. Cross-strait talks and joint development cooperation of the SCS only resumed after Ma Ying-jeou was sworn in as president in 2008.
9. Ma adopts a low-key approach to SCS issues, though his stand is a return to the KMT route. Since 2008, Taipei has reiterated several times its sovereignty claims over the SCS and the islands. However, Taipei did not confront either China or ASEAN countries in recent disputes.
10. In July 2011, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement, claiming that Taipei is committed to safeguarding navigation freedom and peaceful settlement of the disputes. Ma hopes to assure ASEAN and the US that Taipei will maintain a balance while pursuing cross-strait rapprochement.