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CHINA

Russia backs away from supporting China over the South China Sea dispute

After being excluded from an anti-terror alliance China is seeking to establish in Central Asia, Russia has responded tit-for-tat by reaching an agreement with ASEAN countries which includes controversial references to maritime navigation and militarisation of the South China Sea.

Russia's unprecedented engagement with the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations comes as US President Barak Obama is due to visit Vietnam to strengthen ties with Hanoi a week after the US sent a warship to the disputed sea.

According to the agreement ASEAN countries and Russia are committed to "ensure maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation and overflight, unimpeded commerce" and to pursue "the resolution of dispute through peaceful means in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law."

The parties also agreed to "support the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and early conclusion of an effective Code of Conduct in South China Sea (COC) on the basis of consensus."

Three nations, notably China, Vietnam and the Philippines, have overlapping territorial claims to the South China Sea and a few ASEAN countries have called for a multi-party solution to the problem while Beijing has said it will only engage in bilateral talks with the obvious aim of preventing the formation of a united front against its declared sovereignty over the sea.

Moscow was Beijing's most prominent supporter on the issue. On a visit to China in April, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Russia is against any interference from outside parties in the South China Sea — a reference to the US. — “or any attempts to internationalise these disputes.”

Yet now Russia has backed away from supporting China and is advocating the application of the principles of international law thus hindering China's unilateral position.

ASEAN has been trying for years to achieve diplomatic solutions in the South China Sea, making little progress and exposing divisions amongst its members.

The Philippines have brought the case before the Hague's International Tribunal with the support of Vietnam but other ASEAN nations are generally wary of speaking out for fear of alienating China. Lately even the Philippines' position has been losing momentum after President-elect Rodrigo Duterte, who will take office on 30 June, has expressed willingness to restart bilateral negotiations with China.

Elenoire Laudieri di Biase - *Sinologist at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, and at Melbourne University. Senior Analyst on China at NATO Defense College Foundation*