

Pacifying the Sea

Key steps made toward peacefully settling the South China Sea disputes By Yu Lintao

With the joint effort of China and member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), foreign ministers of the 11 countries endorsed the framework of the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea at their meeting in Manila, the Philippines, on August 5, announcing that they would initiate substantive consultations on the text of the COC at a proper time within the year.

The latest progress marks an important step toward peaceful settlement of the maritime disputes concerning the South China Sea, which will also lay a good foundation for China-ASEAN pragmatic cooperation.

Common will

Actually, the consensus on the COC framework was first reached at the 14th China-ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting on the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea, which was held in Guiyang, capital of southwest China's Guizhou Province, in May. This time, the consensus was reconfirmed by the foreign ministers' meeting.

In a joint communiqué released on August 5 after the 50th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Manila, participants showed they warmly welcome the improving cooperation between ASEAN and China and stated that they are encouraged by the conclusion and adoption of the COC framework, which they believe will facilitate the work for the conclusion of an effective COC on a mutually-agreed timeline.

Peace and stability in the South China Sea is the common will of the whole region. The calming down of the maritime disputes in the second half of 2016 happened through the joint efforts of China and ASEAN countries. And, more and more ASEAN countries are inclined to the view that peace in the South China Sea should be safeguarded jointly by regional countries, said Lou Chunhao, a researcher on maritime issues with the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR).

"We welcome the adoption of the COC

framework, because it will meet the aspirations of people from ASEAN countries and China," said Nguyen Thien Chi, a scholar from Ho Chi Minh City-based Viet Nam-China Friendship Association, in an interview with China's Xinhua News Agency.

Wilfrido Villacorta, former Philippine ambassador and permanent representative to ASEAN, told Xinhua that the framework, when translated into an actual COC, would definitely be a monumental joint contribution by ASEAN and China to peace and stability in the region.

The framework, which will shape consultations for the COC, envisions the COC to be a rules-based framework containing a set of norms to guide parties in the South China Sea and promote their maritime cooperation, Villacorta added.

Following the approval of the COC framework, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters that the latest achievements on

Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano stresses the importance of peace and stability in the South China Sea at a news conference after the conclusion of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and Related Meetings in Manila on August 8



the South China Sea issue testify to the fact that China and ASEAN have the wisdom and capability to properly manage the disputes, formulate a set of regional rules that recognized by all, and preserve peace and stability in the South China Sea.

"We also hope that the two wheels of the COC consultations and maritime practical cooperation can run in parallel and reinforce each other," Wang added.

Worries and hope

Despite regional countries having decided to settle the South China Sea issue themselves and the situation now developing on a positive track, some countries outside the region, namely the United States, Japan and Australia, are seemingly not quite happy about the positive move toward the peaceful settlement of the South China Sea maritime disputes. Shortly after the COC framework was endorsed, the three countries called on China and the Philippines in their joint statement to abide by the award of an arbitral tribunal in July 2016 in the arbitration case between the Philippines and China over the South China Sea.

The arbitration was unilaterally initiated by the Philippines' Aquino III administration in 2013 but was boycotted by China, as the Chinese

Government made a declaration in 2006, pursuant to Article 298 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, excluding disputes regarding matters such as those related to maritime delimitation and historic titles from compulsory dispute settlement procedures including arbitration. Current Philippine President, Rodrigo Duterte, decided to put aside the arbitration award and turned to talks with China for the settlement of bilateral maritime disputes.

In response to the call of the three countries, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano said at a press conference in Manila on August 8, "We are a sovereign nation. We will decide what is good for us and what strategy is good for us... We respect their views, but the problem of a territorial dispute between China and the Philippines is between China and the Philippines."

On August 10, U.S. Navy destroyer *USS John S. McCain* conducted a so-called "freedom of navigation operation" in the South China Sea, coming within 12 nautical miles of China's Meiji Reef in a provocative fashion.

Lou of the CICIR pointed out that countries including the United States and Japan still dream to use the South China Sea issue as a means to contain China. "It cannot be ruled out that they

will continue to play a damaging and negative role over the issue," he said.

Nevertheless, the good thing is that most countries of the region have acknowledged that the situation in the South China Sea is improving and are willing to further preserve the positive momentum. All parties involved in the COC framework believe that while peace is mandatory for development, sincere cooperation can boost shared economic growth.

In the joint communiqué after the 50th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the ministers highlighted that China's economic growth will continue to benefit the region and stressed the need for more economic integration between ASEAN and China and the need to have more high-level dialogues and exchanges.

According to the joint communiqué, the ministers looked forward to the designation of 2018 as the ASEAN-China Year of Innovation Cooperation and agreed that both sides would issue the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision Statement at the 21st ASEAN-China Summit next year.

In the past 50 years since the establishment of ASEAN, plentiful substantial cooperation achievements have been made between China and ASEAN in bilateral trade and investment. Up to the year 2016, China had been the largest trading partner of ASEAN for eight years in a row, while ASEAN had been China's third largest trading partner for six years consecutively. Last year, two-way trade between China and ASEAN reached \$452.2 billion. At the same time, high-level exchanges between the two sides have also grown quickly. At present, the two sides have established more than 10 ministerial-level dialogue mechanisms and more than 20 senior official-level cooperation mechanisms.

China's fast growth benefits ASEAN, while ASEAN's development also promotes China's growth, said Xu Liping, a senior researcher on Southeast Asian studies with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in a group interview with reporters. Following the positive step forward over the South China Sea issue, mutual trust between the two sides will be further enhanced. Against this backdrop, a China-ASEAN community of common destiny characterized by common development and common prosperity will become more visible, Xu added. ■



Cambodian dancers perform at the China-ASEAN Expo in Nanning, south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, on September 11, 2016

Copyedited by Chris Surtees
Comments to yulintao@bjreview.com