

DIGEST

CHINA

Recent Developments in China's Policy over the South China Sea Dispute

Xiangqian Gong*

1. Introduction

Maritime delimitation and sovereign rights remain conflicts that threaten the peace and security of East Asia. Competition for natural resources in disputed areas further aggravates regional conflict. In the case of the South China Sea, many factors are still evolving. China must prudently deal with these complex and challenging ocean-related conflicts. However, it remains to be seen whether China will change its current policy direction.

2. Great Challenges for China's Policy on the South China Sea

China is the first country to discover, name, develop and exercise sovereignty and jurisdiction over the South China Sea ("SCS") Islands. However, successive Chinese governments did not attach enough importance to development of its navy. As a result of China's traditional seclusion policy and shortsightedness, China lacks the manpower to control and manage all of the islands. Even after the Communist Party came into power in 1949, China focused more on continent security than maritime rights. It adopted an inactive policy in declaring sovereignty rights in the South China Sea, except taking limited self-defense measures in certain circumstances.¹ Since Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Openness policy in the 1980s,

* Associate Professor of Beijing Institute of Technology. The author may be contacted at: g-xq@163.com

¹ In January 20, 1974, *e.g.*, Chinese military units seized islands in the Paracels illegally occupied by South