

# *The Transformation of China's Way of Safeguarding Its Rights in the South China Sea in Recent Years and Analysis of Its Causes*

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**Abstract:** In November 2012, the 18th CPC National Congress officially made a major strategic deployment for building a maritime power. The message from the party's top leadership clearly tells us that China's marine strategy has undergone major changes. The change of marine strategy further affects the change of rights protection methods. Since 2012, China's South China Sea strategy has undergone qualitative changes, and the way of safeguarding rights in the South China Sea has gradually changed from passive response to initiative. This paper aims to analyze the transformation of China's way of safeguarding rights in the South China Sea since the 18th National Congress, and try to reveal the reasons behind this transformation.

## 1. Introduction

Strategy determines the path and way. To explore the transformation of rights protection in the South China Sea, we should first start from the root of the transformation of China's South China Sea strategy. Deng Xiaoping put forward the policy of “sovereignty belongs to me, shelving disputes and joint development” to solve the South China Sea issue in 1984. This is China's South China Sea Strategy after the reform and opening up, reflecting China's willingness to peacefully resolve disputes in the South China Sea with neighboring countries. However, the development of the facts is not as desired by China's original strategy. With the emergence of huge economic interests in the South China Sea, most of the disputed countries verbally admit that “shelving disputes and joint development” and omit “sovereignty belongs to me”. In the actual implementation process, the occupation of the disputed islands and the exploitation of resources by the relevant disputed countries have never stopped and intensified. Finally, this policy has turned into “shelving disputes and respective development”, completely putting China aside, resulting in an extremely passive situation in safeguarding rights in the South China Sea.

The seriousness of reality reminds us that if China does not adjust its strategy in the South China Sea, it will not be able to resolve disputes and safeguard its rights and interests. What is more dangerous is that China will be completely excluded from the South China Sea. At that time, it will be too late for China to repent! In November 2012, the report of the first meeting of the 18th Congress of the CPC Central Committee pointed out that it is necessary to improve the capacity of marine resources development, develop marine economy, protect marine ecological environment,

resolutely safeguard national marine rights and interests and build a marine power[1]. In July 2013, when Xi Jinping presided over the eighth collective learning of the Central Political Bureau, he stressed that building a maritime power is an important part of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics. We should further concern about the oceans, recognize the oceans and oceans, and promote the continuous development of China's marine construction. This is a strong message from the high level of the Communist Party of China that we should pay attention to the ocean and build a maritime power. The establishment of the strategy of “maritime power” determines that China is bound to have significant changes in the way of safeguarding the rights and interests of the South China Sea. The practice of safeguarding rights in recent years has indeed confirmed this point, that is, from “keeping low profile” to “active action”.

## **2. Transformation of Rights Protection Methods in the South China Sea**

First, administrative control has been strengthened. Sansha city was established in June 2012, covering Xisha, Zhongsha and Nansha. After its establishment, Sansha city can give full play to the role of local governments in safeguarding maritime rights in the South China Sea, help to strengthen the administrative management of the three islands and their sea areas, provide strong evidence to prove that the islands and reefs in the South China Sea belong to China's inherent territory, and cooperate with the state in negotiation and political negotiations with Vietnam and other countries through diplomacy. In the second half of 2012, the central government began to strengthen the strategic deployment of marine rights protection, and the office of the central leading group for marine rights and interests was established[2]. Subsequently, the Chinese government began to integrate relevant institutions dealing with marine affairs. Facing the increasingly complex reality of the South China Sea issue, the original pattern of “Five Dragons governing the sea” does not have the ability to independently and effectively deal with large-scale emergencies at sea, and the voice of establishing a “coast guard” with Chinese characteristics is becoming stronger and stronger.

Second, it has accelerated the exploration and development of resources in the disputed areas of the South China Sea. In the face of the continuous oil and gas development in the South China Sea by small neighboring countries, regardless of China's reality, China urgently needs to change the situation of the continuous loss of oil and gas resources in China. In recent years, China has increased its efforts to develop oil and gas resources in the South China Sea. In 2012, China's self-developed “offshore oil 981” was officially drilled in the South China Sea, which is the first time that PetroChina has independently conducted deep-water oil and gas exploration. In August 2014, “offshore oil 981” was tested in Lingshui 17-2-1 well in the deep-water area in the north of the South China Sea to obtain high-yield oil and gas flow, marking a substantive step in the deep-water strategy of China's offshore oil industry.

Third, strengthen the military presence along the southeast coast. Military strength is a strong backing for safeguarding national maritime rights and interests. According to the comparison of military strength, China is fully capable of resolving disputes in the South China Sea by force. There are more and more signs that the South China Sea has gradually become the focus of China's military strategy under the current situation of relative calm in the Taiwan Strait. This is mainly reflected in three aspects. First, the degree of modernization of weapons and equipment has been continuously improved and military strength has been continuously enhanced. In 2012, China's first aircraft carrier “Liaoning” was officially put into service, which made a qualitative leap in the strength of the Navy[3]. In recent years, a large number of ships and special forces suitable for offshore patrol and anti sneak attack operations have been in service, and small tonnage light ships have become the protagonists of daily patrol. The navy has also modernized a number of old warships. Judging from the current military strength, China's military strength has formed an

overwhelming advantage over other “claim countries” in the South China Sea. Second, a new type of nuclear submarine base has been built. In August 2014, the three naval fleets conducted exercises in the South China Sea on an unprecedented scale. It should be pointed out that China's rights protection in the South China Sea is more backed by military forces and uses non military means to solve emergencies in the South China Sea. This feature is reflected in the confrontation between China and the Philippines Huangyan Island in 2012 and the Xisha group of “offshore oil 981” between China and Vietnam in 2014. With the improvement of military strength, China will be more flexible in safeguarding its rights in the South China Sea.

### **3. Cause Analysis**

There is a causal relationship between the occurrence and development of anything. The transformation of the Chinese government's way of safeguarding rights in the South China Sea is also the result of the comprehensive action of many factors. The transformation of China's way of safeguarding rights in the South China Sea is first caused by the change of objective environment. The crazy competition of relevant claimant countries, the tendency of increasing internationalization and the increasing importance of the South China Sea to China's Security jointly promote the transformation of China's way of safeguarding rights in the South China Sea.

#### **3.1 The Competition between Relevant Claimant Countries is Becoming Increasingly Fierce**

The South China Sea issue did not exist before the 1960s, but in the late 1960s, the United Nations Economic Commission for the Far East survey found that the South China Sea Islands and nearby waters may be one of the most abundant oil and gas reserves in the world. Under the temptation and stimulation of huge practical interests, after entering the 1970s, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and other countries, regardless of historical facts, scrambled to seize some islands and reefs in the South China Sea by military means or other forms of sovereignty declaration, carried out large-scale resource development activities, and then openly put forward their respective sovereignty requirements. The South China Sea issue has emerged and become increasingly prominent. Since the 21st century, neighboring countries have been more unscrupulous in plundering the South China Sea. In the political aspect, through legislation, immigration and other means to compete for disputed islands and sea areas; In terms of economy, we will continue to strengthen the development of oil and gas resources, fishery resources and tourism resources on the occupied islands; At the military level, constantly update weapons and equipment and strengthen military presence in disputed waters; At the international level, backed by foreign powers, they deliberately provoke disputes in the South China Sea, and even frantically compete for rights and interests in the South China Sea regardless of the agreement reached with China.

#### **3.2 The Intervention of Foreign Powers Has Led to the Increasing Internationalization of the Situation**

Under the circumstances that the relevant countries in Southeast Asia intend to promote and the intervention of extraterritorial powers, the South China Sea dispute has been gradually internationalized. The extraterritorial powers involved in the South China Sea issue include the United States, India and Russia, mainly the United States. The main reason for the United States to intervene in the South China Sea issue is to implement its “Asia Pacific rebalancing” strategy, curb China's development and maintain the dominant position of the United States in East Asia. Its main ways to intervene in the South China Sea issue are as follows: first, diplomatic means. The United States has improved its relations with Vietnam and strengthened its alliance with the Philippines. In

2009, at the ASEAN Regional Forum, the United States announced “returning to the Asia Pacific”[4]. Second, economic means. The United States actively participates in the exploration and development of oil and gas resources in the South China Sea. Exxon, Mobil and other major oil companies have investment projects in the South China Sea. Under the harsh environment in which major powers covet the South China Sea, the original rights protection policies and methods can no longer safeguard China's legitimate rights and interests in the South China Sea.

### 3.3 The Rights and Interests in the South China Sea Are Becoming More and More Important to China's Security

The rising importance of the South China Sea to China is also an important reason for China to change its way of safeguarding rights. China's self-produced oil and gas resources can not meet its own needs, and most of them need to be imported, which increases China's economic dependence on foreign countries. The South China Sea is rich in oil and gas resources. According to the exploration results, it can be used by China for 80 years, which is very important for the rapid development of China's economy. In addition, the South China Sea is also an important maritime trade channel for China, most of which are exported through the South China Sea. The importance of the South China Sea to China is not only reflected in economic interests, but also in national security. The South China Sea is one of the 16 major maritime transportation routes in the world. It has very important strategic value and is an important export for China to highlight the encirclement and go to the sea[5]. If it is not effectively controlled, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will be impossible. In particular, in recent years, China has faced an increasingly complex surrounding environment, and the “Asia Pacific rebalancing” strategy of the United States against China has put China under unprecedented pressure. In this case, if China does not adjust the way of safeguarding rights in the South China Sea, it may lose the South China Sea, and the consequences are unimaginable.

## 4. Conclusion

From “keeping a low profile” to “active action”, in general, it is to change the situation of independent and passive response in diplomacy, emphasize the cooperation with other rights protection means, and actively safeguard the rights and interests of the South China Sea. The previous rights protection in the South China Sea mainly focused on diplomatic means, such as unilateral statements, protests, oaths, negotiations, etc. facts have proved that China's diplomacy on the South China Sea issue is very passive without the cooperation of economic, military and other means. In recent years, diplomacy in the South China Sea has become more proactive. From the time point of view, since 2012, China's maritime rights protection has turned to a positive period. Generally speaking, it is to gradually obtain the control of relevant disputed islands and water areas by taking various non military means such as administration, diplomacy and economy with the support of continuously improving military strength.

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