

The South China Sea: can the G20 play a part in conflict resolution?

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International Media Centre – G20 Hangzhou Summit. As economic development continues to be key to China's core aims, and a means by which to continue building bridges with its regional and global partners, the G20 summit remains key to the country's interactions with the world. With this in mind, the opportunity to host the summit in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has [been eagerly pursued](#) by its government, and became an occasion at which to present to the world a China that has the capability to host such a prominent event. In hosting for the first time, the Chinese leadership was keen to show the [country at its best](#), emphasising economy and green finance, and steadfastly ignoring and quietening any political issues less favourable to the Chinese regime. In downplaying political disputes however, China has risked bringing these issues to the fore, as

neighbours [anxiously look to resolve](#) tensions surrounding territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This has not only threatened to disrupt China's attempts at the perfect summit, but also resulted in continued feelings of anxiety surrounding China's rise. With tensions high before, during and after the summit, the relative lack of silence on the issue only serves as a reminder that China is still critically viewed globally through its territorial disputes, more than through the positive impact it can have upon the world.

[Territorial disputes](#) have been present in the Southeast Asian region for centuries, and have held a central role in creating tension and strained relations between neighbours, which range from Japan, and India, to even North Korea. The [South China Sea](#), which is almost wholly claimed by the PRC, however, is possibly most

contested, due to the number of claimants involved, and the rising escalation of tensions in the area in recent years. It is generally accepted that China has become increasingly assertive over territorial matters since 2012, which has led to a series of clashes in the South China Sea (and also, with Japan, over the Senkaku-Diaoyu islets). Although this has been seen by some as a natural accompaniment to China's 'rise' in the global order, [others view](#) this 'assertion' as a direct challenge by China for regional dominance, cementing a lack of trust in a region which is only now beginning to move on from the trauma and upheaval of the last century.

That this assertion is often seen as a possible challenge for dominance remains one of the region's greatest challenges. Although diplomatic crises are frequently linked to lingering WW2 sentiments and trauma, the resurgence of territorial disputes is still a huge factor in the creation of misunderstandings between states. Sino-Japanese relations (see Hugo Dobson's article on increased rivalry between Japan and China), have continued to stall in recent years, as [nationalism rises](#)

in both countries. Similarly, US-Sino relations are constantly under strain, in spite of progress in other areas; this could not have been more evident than in days preceding the summit, where both Obama and Abe warned the PRC to show '[restraint](#)' in its handling of the South China Sea issue, only to be rebuffed and issued with thinly veiled threats in response.

[US involvement](#) in the South China Sea highlights well how central this issue has become to international discourse. The call [for 'restraint'](#) not only risks further damaging of relations with China, but also reveals yet again how important Southeast Asia has become to US foreign policy. As the US continues its pivot-to-Asia, therefore, it is not an exaggeration to state that much of the region feels threatened through China's claim to the near entirety of the South China Sea, and that this continues to hinder meaningful diplomatic progress. China's continued call for bilateral talks with its neighbours have not always been productive, although its leadership's regular calls for peaceful negotiation and [continued co-operation](#) offer hope [for future progress](#).

The South China Sea reaching peak attention in time for the G20 summit is a matter that China has attempted to handle with care. That the G20 is a process designed primarily to focus on the global economy has been China's [most important fall-back](#). Previous summits have usually played out with minimal focus on political issues, and is one key reason for the G20's popularity, especially with economically developing countries such as China. Its role as an environment within which countries can focus on [economic expansion](#), with little focus on issues such as human rights, and territory, have created a forum that generally looks beyond political disputes. Yet, in recent years, there has been increased interest in moving beyond purely economic issues. This is most commonly seen through the emergence of green finance, as climate change is increasingly seen as a subject that affects not only the economy, but the entire future trajectory of the world. However, other matters such as territory are increasingly brought into the G20 frame; many leaders see that the G20, as the largest gathering of dominant world economies, should also be a zone

through which to [address wider issues](#). Recent summits have therefore called on participating nations to increase dialogue and improve relations on all issues, explaining partly the increased confidence of nations in calling on China to address the South China Sea dispute openly at the summit.

This willingness to engage beyond the economy is particularly important presently, as tensions surrounding the South China Sea have increased significantly in recent months as a result of a ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration on 12 July. [This ruling](#) dismissed China's historical claims to the Sea as meritless, and called on the PRC to scale back its activities in disputed areas. The Filipino [claim was taken to The Hague](#) in the understanding that bilateral talks had yielded few results, and that Chinese activity in the area violated the UNCLOS (United Nations Conventions on the Laws of the Seas) agreements in relation to 'exclusive economic zones and territorial seas'. As both parties have signed UNCLOS, the tribunal looked merely to whether or not China had moved beyond its

jurisdiction. In restricting the access of Filipino fishermen to areas around Scarborough Shoal, building small islands, and destroying natural [features of the seas](#), China was ruled to have acted illegally, and would have [to ease up on](#) aggressive tactics in the sea.

Xinhua News followed the ruling with the claim that the panel's decision was ['naturally null and void'](#), and lacking legitimacy. This can be linked largely to China's belief that the Philippines acted without Chinese consent in seeking out a third party to resolve the dispute. For China, bilateral talks are still relied upon most when it comes to international disagreements. Dismissed as an illegitimate court and outcome by China's leadership, the global community and international media have keenly followed recent developments, some of which appear to show continued island creation in opposition to the court's decision. Such a ruling is hugely detrimental to China's claims of sovereignty over those areas, and undermines [nationalistic feeling](#) that the Chinese Communist Party has diligently instilled in the Chinese public over the

years. Therefore, China's [response](#) to the ruling was, as expected, to [refuse to accept its legitimacy](#), and state that the ruling is not accepted under international law.

It is for these reasons that the G20 made such a prominent stage for discourse on the South China Sea, regardless of whether or not China intended to engage. China's traditional reliance on economic channels of dialogue have made it vulnerable to accusations that it is unable to act responsibly at a global level, and can therefore not be relied upon to discuss political issues without engaging in aggressive or deflective actions. The [G20 Leaders' Communiqué](#), released at the end of the summit, came closest to broaching the subject, and refers to how 'challenges originating from geopolitical developments', and 'conflicts also complicate the global outcome', without ever mentioning the South China Sea. [Side-line meetings](#) at the summit involved various leaders giving advice to China on how best to handle the situation, but made little headway in genuinely engaging on the topic. It can be seen as commendable, in some form, that the PRC has not allowed

a relatively small issue to cloud an otherwise progressive summit, and it must be made clear that to constantly focus on the South China Sea is to bring public attention back towards an issue that is far too complex to solve over the course of the G20 meetings. In fact, by stating in the communiqué that the G20 countries hope to move beyond disagreement, and rely instead on progress, it can be argued that China has chosen wisely to move beyond regional disputes to wider global interests.

Nevertheless, there is clearly an issue when a country relies upon deflection and threats to work through an issue with which it is [uncomfortable](#). In drawing on ‘inclusivity’ and global development as important aspects of this year’s G20, China must learn to shake off its reputation as an actor which only seeks self-promotion, for the greater cause of [global collaboration](#). China can be seen as caught in a self-created trap. In acting defensively on difficult matters such as territory, others expect China to continue promotion of its own interests ahead of collaborative efforts, and to remain fixed upon certain diplomatic styles. This makes it difficult for

others to look beyond issues such as territory, as China continues to make it such a large part of their foreign policy. Although China downplays attention paid to the South China Sea, its unwillingness to discuss territory except through physical action and thinly veiled threats, continue to serve as a source of anxiety to other countries in the vicinity. Every positive interaction with China comes back to the South China Sea, making genuine progress – diplomatic or not – very difficult to achieve.

This has resulted in a world as caught up with the South China Sea as [China](#), and it is clear that global arenas such as the G20 are aptly suited to address some of these associated problems. If the G20 is to retain its status as an effective alternative to the G7, it must learn to consistently work on improving relations between countries beyond the economic fields of discourse. For China, the summit was an opportunity to work with other nations to cast itself as a ‘responsible actor’ at the global level. By navigating the summit with minimal aggression, the PRC is showing increased signs of socialisation, although it still has

some way to go. China must now work with its fellow G20 members, and other South China Sea claimant states, to peacefully create a positive dialogue to find a [resolution to the dispute](#). China's calls on the G20 to work together towards joint progress are key in shaping the course of future geopolitics, and it must be hoped that future summits will continue to move, with care, towards more meaningful resolution of difficulties that prevent

improved relations and collaboration between all members and non-members.

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