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Mutually beneficial settlements

CHINA'S offer to shelve its long-standing territorial dispute over the Spratlys and opt for a more productive approach is the signal that nations surrounding the South China Sea have been waiting for in order to create a peaceful and prosperous region. China's initiative to jointly develop the Spratlys with the other claimants could not have come at a better time, especially in the face of a growing phobia in the West of the "Yellow Threat". The move, announced by Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng during his meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, must be viewed as an overture on China's part to forge closer ties with its neighbours.

China's offer, therefore, should be welcomed by every East Asian nation including members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean), especially as four of the grouping's members, namely Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei, are claimants in the territorial dispute. If the offer is to be accepted gracefully, Asean will have to carefully negotiate with some of its members, especially the Philippines and Vietnam which have also made strong claims. There are also other economic and political issues that need to be addressed. These include the role of each government, the distribution of wealth from the Spratlys to countries involved in its joint economic development, and the position of Taiwan, another claimant.

While the offer seems hard to resist, Malaysia - in the spirit of Asean - believes in first consulting its neighbours and then making decisions through a consensus, thus avoiding any possible conflict. Therefore, Malaysia will seek the opinions of its Asean counterparts during the grouping's unofficial summit scheduled for December in Kuala Lumpur. As far as Malaysia is concerned, it is important to consult the other eight Asean members, including the non-claiming countries namely Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Singapore.

The Sino-Asean relationship will be further strengthened by China's willingness to turn a potential threat into a mutually beneficial economic venture. And there is more than just Spratleys that China and Asean can look at. Once they reach an agreement on the Spratleys, China and Asean - with a combined population of close to 2 billion people - may want to discuss and address any other common issues of concern in the region.

If China and Asean succeed with the Spratleys venture, the exercise will serve as a valuable lesson for the Asean nations in trying to resolve their respective outstanding territorial disputes. There are quite a few overlapping claims within the region, apart from the Spratlys dispute. Malaysia, which shares borders with Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines, is certainly facing its fair share of territorial disputes with some of its neighbours. With Indonesia for example, the Sipadan and Ligitan territorial claims, which has surfaced since 1969, had to be referred to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) because of the deadlock in coming up with a solution to the overlapping claims. The decision to refer the dispute to the ICJ was agreed upon during an official visit to Malaysia by President Suharto early this year. During the visit, both Malaysia and Indonesia deliberated long on the issue and felt it should be solved amicably in the spirit of camaraderie. As a follow-up to the visit, Malaysia and Indonesia signed an agreement to refer the dispute to the ICJ during a function held in conjunction with the special Asean Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur on May 31. Both

countries had also expressed their hope that the ICJ will make a decision on the Sipadan and Ligitan issue before the Asean Informal Summit in December.

The Spratleys, and how China and Asean deal with the dispute and one another, will raise the question on whether or not it would be more productive for Indonesia and Malaysia to jointly develop the Sipadan and Ligitan islands and share in the subsequent profits. Similarly, other territorial disputes in the region should not be allowed to prolong as this will only create problems for future generations.

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