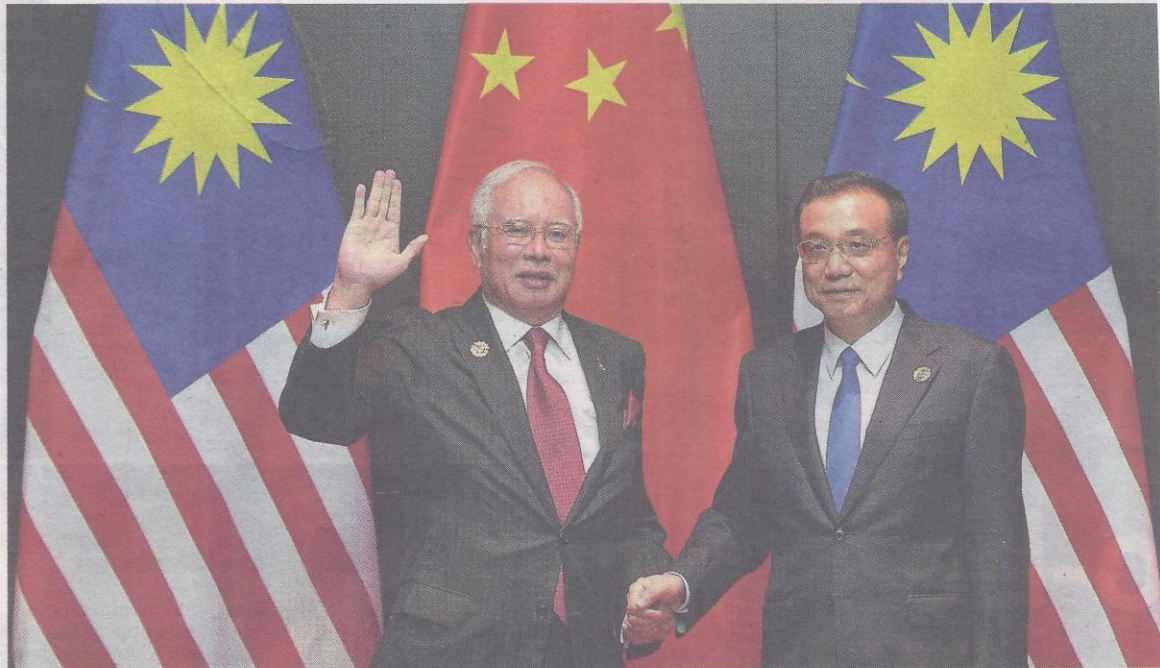


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Emergency hotline

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Asean and China adopt guidelines for maritime crisis



Mutual trust:
Najib and Li presenting a united front at the Asean-China Summit in Vientiane. — Bernama

IF unity among Asean was questioned during the handling of the South China Sea maritime territorial claims, it seemed to be intact yesterday after the region's 10 leaders met with China Prime Minister Li Keqiang.

And in another move to ease tensions in the maritime area, the Asean leaders and Li issued two separate statements which addressed the issue.

The leaders also adopted guidelines for a China and Asean hotline for use during maritime emergencies.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak admitted that managing the South China Sea dispute was "tricky and sensitive".

"We have to manage it carefully," he told Malaysian media after the Asean-China Summit here.

The summit took place several weeks after China and Asean set a deadline to finish the framework for a binding Code of Conduct (CoC) by the middle of next year to address issues faced by the claimant countries.

The breakthrough came 14 years after Asean and China signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC).

In a joint statement released after the Asean-China summit to commemorate the

MERGAWATI ZULFAKAR
in Vientiane



25th anniversary of dialogue relations, the leaders reaffirmed their respect for and commitment to the freedom of navigation in and flights over the South China Sea.

In a joint statement on the application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (Cues) in the area, the leaders reaffirmed their countries' commitment to Cues to improve operational safety of ships and aircraft and to ensure mutual trust among all parties.

"We agree to use the safety and communications procedures for the safety of all our ships and aircraft, as set out in Cues, when they encounter each other in the South China Sea.

"We affirm that this effort contributes to our commitment to maintaining regional peace and stability; maximum safety at sea; promoting good neighbourliness; and reducing risks during unplanned encounters in the air and at sea, and strengthening cooperation among navies," said the statement.

Four Asean countries – Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam – have claims in the South China Sea, apart from China and Taiwan.

China's growing presence in the maritime area has sparked protests from other claimant countries, with the Philippines filing a case with an international arbitration tribunal which ruled that China has no legal basis to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas.

When asked why there was no mention of the tribunal ruling in the joint statements, the Prime Minister said the ruling couldn't be enforced because "there is no provision to enforce unless both parties go to arbitration and they agree on the terms of arbitration".

"But this was unilateral on the part of the Philippines, so there is no mechanism for enforcement.

"The Philippines will claim this as moral basis because it reflects the kind of interpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea," Najib said.

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