

Newspaper	THE STAR
Date	28 APRIL 2017

# South China Sea remains a concern

The Star - 28/4/2017

**MERGAWATI  
ZULFAKAR**  
in Manila



merga@thestar.com.my

THE framework of the code of conduct (CoC) in South China Sea being finalised by Asean and China may be adopted next month when senior officials meet. But concerns remain on “developments” still taking place in the hotly contested maritime area.

Asean and Chinese officials have met twice this year – in Bali and Siem Reap in February and March – to work on the draft. But some officials fear the CoC, when it is finally adopted, will be less “valuable” as China which is also claiming the area, continues with its development plans.

The South China Sea issue continues to be a hotly debated issue at Asean meetings as four of its members – Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam – are claimant countries. Taiwan is another claimant country.

“Since an announcement was made to complete the framework by the middle of this year, China has continued its work in the claimed area while officials are having talks on the framework.

“Construction is still ongoing as well as deployment of assets. Some of us are sceptical of the CoC, but it is still important to have it to ensure all claimant countries behave,” said an Asean official.

The issue will be one of the points expected to be raised at the 30th Asean Summit tomorrow, to be hosted by Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte.

In the draft of the chairman’s statement for the summit, Asean



**Safe arrival:** Najib inspecting an honour guard on his arrival at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Manila. — Bernama

leaders continued to share serious concerns over recent developments and escalation of activities in the area, which may further raise tensions and erode trust and confidence in the region.

The leaders are also expected to touch on the progress to complete the framework of the CoC.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in March the first draft of the framework has been completed and both China and Asean countries were satisfied with the progress, adding that tensions in the maritime area had distinctly dropped.

The framework seeks to advance a 2002 Declaration of Conduct (DoC) of Parties in the South China Sea,

which commits to following the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos), ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight, and refraining from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited island, reefs, shoals, cays and other features.

An Asean official said the draft framework may be adopted in May by senior officials who will then submit it to the foreign ministers during their annual meeting in Manila in August.

“That is when we enter a new phase of actual work towards CoC, which means more time is needed.

“What we can hope for while all this is taking place, China and other parties will restrain themselves

from any other activities.”

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who arrived for the summit yesterday, said in his official blog that Asean – which is celebrating its 50th anniversary – had grown by leaps and bounds to become one of the most successful groupings in the world.

Najib, who is accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, said the GDP of Asean countries in 2016 was US\$2.5 trillion (RM10.75 trillion) placing the region as the world’s seventh largest economy.

“Based on projection, the world’s economic experts are confident that Asean would be able to leap high as the fourth-largest economy by 2050.”