

ASEAN nations fail to reach a consensus on South China Sea despite rounds of talks

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The dispute over the South China Sea doesn't seem to be nearing a settlement as the main grouping of Southeast Asia apparently has no consensus among themselves on how to deal with China's territorial expansion in the disputed territories.

ASEAN Regional Forum meeting

This is despite three rounds of formal and informal talks today between the ministers of the 10 countries that make up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as they remained deadlocked because Cambodia didn't want China criticized, diplomats said.

"It's really a loyalist of the big country C," a diplomat who attended closed-door meetings told The Associated Press, referring to China.

The stalemate puts pressure on ASEAN's cherished unity and also gives an upper hand to China, which has used every diplomatic means at its disposal to stave off wider international criticism over moves it's made in the South China Sea that have impacted four Southeast Asian countries.

"Certainly, Cambodia's paralysis of ASEAN ... hurts ASEAN's unity, cohesion, relevance and reputation," said Malcolm Cook, an analyst at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, a Singapore think-tank. "It makes ASEAN peripheral, not central, on this issue."

A bland press statement issued at the end of the first round of talks Sunday said only that the ministers had a "candid and constructive exchange of views on regional and international issues ... as well as developments in the Middle East, Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea."

After that, the foreign ministers broke for lunch before going into a so-called "retreat," where they were by themselves and in less formal surroundings. It was not clear whether they made any progress because many of the ministers came out and said nothing to waiting reporters. No statement was issued.

Like all other ASEAN meetings, the foreign ministers' conclave also traditionally issues a joint communique. But the sticking point is whether to include in it a reference to the South China Sea.

ASEAN's cardinal principle is decisions by consensus, which means any country can veto a proposal. This time, it is Cambodia, China's close ally, invoking its veto. In 2012, Cambodia also blocked a reference to the dispute, which ended with the ministers failing to issue a statement for the first time in the bloc's history.

Sunday's talks were expected to deal with terrorism, the economy, climate change, security, the impact of Brexit and other issues. But all this has been overshadowed by the July 12 decision by a Hague-based tribunal in a dispute between China and the Philippines.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration found that China had no basis for its expansive claims to territorial waters around

the Philippines.

China has similar claims that clash with Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei, and the ruling should have emboldened ASEAN to challenge Beijing more forcibly.

Diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter with the media, said the draft communique to be issued by the ministers left blank spaces under the heading "South China Sea" until a consensus can be reached.

Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman Sek Wannamethee Sek said the "joint communique is still being drafted."

Laos, which also is a China ally, has been careful not to take sides because of its position as the host. But it supports Cambodia's veto.

"For Laos and Cambodia, they clearly see relations with China as more important than their membership in ASEAN and are willing to damage ASEAN to aid their relations with China," said Cook, the analyst.

The South China Sea is dotted with reefs and rocky outcroppings that several governments claim, including China and the Philippines.

The arbitration panel didn't take a position on who owns the disputed territories. It did conclude that many of them are legally rocks, even if they've been built into islands, and therefore do not include the international rights to develop the surrounding waters. That and other findings invalidated much of what China's called its historic claims to the resource-rich sea.

In order to ease tensions, China, the Philippines and possibly other claimants must define what the ruling means for fishing, offshore oil and gas exploration, and military and other activities in the vast body of water that lies between the southern Chinese coast and the Philippine archipelago.

China has rejected the ruling as bogus, and called for bilateral negotiations with the Philippines. In recent days, its military has staged live-firing exercises in the area and said it would begin regular aerial patrols over the sea. It also has asserted that it will not be deterred from continuing construction of its man-made islands.

In a commentary Sunday, China's official Xinhua News Agency urged East Asian nations to be vigilant against U.S. "interference" in the region and to foster closer ties with China, "a market no country can afford to lose."

- (With AP inputs)