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## **An Invitation**

### **ENTERING UNCHARTED WATERS? ASEAN AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE**

**Friday, 18 February 2011  
Seminar Room II  
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies  
Singapore**

After the signing in November 2002 of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea among China and ASEAN member states in Phnom Penh, the sensitive issue of the South China Sea has been kept somewhat dormant for the past eight years. Absence of progress on confidence building measures among claimants in the disputed area, which covers the Spratlys, the Paracels and Scarborough Shoal, has posed one of the greatest challenges in ASEAN-China relations.

Recently, the controversial issue has resurfaced. This long-running territorial dispute has been high on the agenda of ASEAN's meetings. The conflict has become internationalised and has involved not only the claimants to the disputed areas, but also non-claimants and outside powers, including the United States. Many of the area's more than 250 islands are claimed by more than one country, among them the Spratlys, with China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines each claiming either all or parts of the archipelago, and the Paracels, claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam.

ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan once said that the South China Sea was essentially a lifeline or part of a lifeline for all regional countries. Up to 85 per cent of energy sources for East Asian countries have to pass through the South China Sea. Surin said, "So any disturbance there certainly will affect confidence in the region and will have an impact on our trade, investment and tourism."

To some political observers, this dispute is a test case for ASEAN, in forcing a more unified stance among its members, while posing a question of the effectiveness of ASEAN's mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The role of the United States in the South China Sea conflict is also crucial. Washington has perceived that the conflict has caused an impact on its own interests: the right to freely navigate the area and the need to contain the dispute and to prevent it from affecting regional security. Thus, U.S. Secretary of

State Hillary Clinton called the dispute “a leading diplomatic priority” for the United States during the ARF meeting in Vietnam last year.

The main objective of this one-day conference is to focus on how ASEAN, as an organisation, should be handling this issue, through what channels and mechanisms. It is also imperative to seek clarification of each ASEAN claimant’s position.

ISEAS cordially invites you to participate in the conference as a valued guest. This invitation is non-transferable.

Please send your response to Ms Lily Koh by 15 February 2011. For further enquiries, please contact Lily via email: [ascevents@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:ascevents@iseas.edu.sg), tel: 6870-4509 or fax: 6775-6264.

Attached are the programme and the reply form for your completion.

Rodolfo Severino  
Head, ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS

Enc:

31 January 2011