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THE SPRATLY DISPUTE:
A CHALLENGE TO PEACE IN THE
SOUTH CHINA SEA

RADZIAH ABDUL RAHIM

UNIT KOLEKSI KHAS

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ABSTRACT

The post-Cold War has unleashed a series of skirmishes between states that had been suppressed by the superpowers rivalry. In the South China Sea, the territorial contest for the Spratly Islands between six littoral states - the People's Republic of China (China), the Republic of China (Taiwan), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei - has flared up and increased tensions among the protagonists. The development in the area is also being observed with apprehension by neighbouring countries and others like Japan and the United States which have interests in the area. An armed confrontation in the Spratly area would disrupt the sea lanes of communication which is vital to the economy of these countries. Informal workshops have been hosted by Indonesia to facilitate the process of problem-solving among the protagonists. Proposals have also been made by scholars to encourage cooperation and joint development in the area. In addition, ASEAN is seeking ways to address the threat to regional stability through its ASEAN Regional Forum.

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INTRODUCTION.

Michael Cox couldn't have been more right when he said that the "withering away (however slowly) [of the Cold War] could release previously contained forces and generate fresh contradictions".¹ The end of the Cold War has witnessed the emergence of many new problems in the international system which pose great challenges to relation between states.

The on-going conflict in ex-Yugoslavia between the Serbs, Croats and Bosnians is proof of this. Likewise, the vacuum left by the United States and the former Soviet Union when they vacated Subic Bay in the Philippines and Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam respectively has brought the territorial dispute in the South China Sea into sharp focus.

Long known to mariners as the 'Dangerous Ground' because of their numerous shoals, the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea has become a boiling pot of Asia. The area is being contested by six littoral states - the People's Republic of China (China), the Republic of China (Taiwan), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei (See Figure 1).

Indonesia, which has been a bystander to the disputes between its neighbours and has initiated workshops to resolve the issue, is also affected by the scramble when

¹Michael Cox, "From Truman Doctrine to the Second Superpower Detente: The Rise and Fall of the Cold War", Journal of Peace Research, vol. 27 no. 1, 1990, p. 36.

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