

## **Legal frameworks will enhance peace: DPM Teo**

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Recent tensions around the South China Sea have shown the need for countries to engage in dialogue and address disputes within international legal frameworks, said Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean yesterday.

In this regard, a code of conduct being worked on between Asean member states and China for greater cooperation will further enhance peace and stability in the region, he said.

This is an extension of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties signed in 2002, in which the signatories resolved to use peaceful means in addressing disputes.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which defines the rights and responsibilities of countries in their use of the world's oceans, is also 'especially relevant' in addressing maritime disputes, the minister said.

Mr Teo, who is also the Minister for Defence, was addressing these issues at the 11th Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers held at Sentosa.

The seven-day meeting, which began yesterday, is organised by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at the Nanyang Technological University. It has attracted more than 50 military officers from 24 countries, such as the United States, Thailand, India and Papua New Guinea.

Commenting on the challenges ahead, Mr Teo said: 'In some areas, there will be sharp and important differences that may escalate to the point of conflict.'

But where there is common ground, the aim is to move from conflict to cooperation in securing these shared interests, he added.

The South China Sea is an area 'where the potential for conflict is high', with China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines having laid claim to all or parts of its island groups or waters. The 3 million sq km area is not only a rich fishing ground, but is also believed to have large oil and natural gas reserves.

The minister added that regional cooperation and disaster relief operations, such as for Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the Sichuan earthquake in China last year, showed how shared interests have benefited the region.

But Mr Joshua Ho, senior research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, noted that while countries have cooperated on non-state centric issues, progress in resolving maritime disputes is harder to achieve.