

## **India's Interests in South China Sea: Implications for Regional and Global Security and Stability**

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*There are some very interesting developments in the maritime domain both in the Indian Ocean and also in the South China Sea (SCS). While China does have legitimate interest in the Indian Ocean, there are similar Indian interests in the SCS though India is not a party to the disputes in the SCS. China seems to carve out an ambitious plan in the Indian Ocean using some innovative instruments such as the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) to further its global reach and influence. To any observer it is clear that India has as much right in engaging the neighbours of China for commercial and strategic reasons. By all yardsticks India's interests in the SCS and its engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other East Asian powers are consistent with its Act East policy to further its own economic and strategic worth. New Delhi's increasing engagement with the United States which has even gone to the extent of accepting India as a major Non-NATO ally in principle and has introduced a bill which is expected*

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*to become a law after the due process in USA [NATO being the North Atlantic Treaty Organization] has ruffled the feathers of China which sees the actions of the US in the SCS as unwanted intrusion. It even accuses the US of propping up the claimants in South China Sea by quoting various provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and undertaking military manoeuvres in the area for protecting the concept of Freedom of Navigation. The developments in the South China Sea in the coming years will have an immediate impact on the region and also spin-off effects in the Indian Ocean where China seeks to establish its influence.*

The political temperatures in SCS are set to soar not just due to the disputes about the territories but also due to the recalibration of the US policy which will bring more maritime forces to this theatre. With the pivot to the Indo-Pacific, there is an expression of intent to bring additional sea- as well as land- and air-elements with better capability to the theatre<sup>2</sup>. China looks at the US presence as destabilizing and even provocative particularly from the time the US naval ships started the freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) close to the disputed Islets and other Islands. These disputed Islands have been transformed into semi-military forward posts with the positioning of radars, communication facilities and even missiles. India is an extra-regional player (ERP) in the SCS with legitimate interests just as China is in the Indian Ocean with similar economic and strategic interests.

## **ASEAN, China and the South China Sea**

As regards the response of the ASEAN Regional Forum which has almost all the claimants as its members, it has not been able to influence the ASEAN as an entity (Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) to have a single voice in protest against the aggressive behaviour of China. The Code of Contact<sup>3</sup> drawn up in 2002 has not achieved much on the ground with the dividend of peace going only to China which has changed the geography in the SCS by

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<sup>2</sup> Asia Pacific Maritime Security Strategy vide page 20 [http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/NDAA%20A-P\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Strategy-08142015-1300-FINALFORMAT.PDF](http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/NDAA%20A-P_Maritime_Security_Strategy-08142015-1300-FINALFORMAT.PDF) accessed on 15 May 2016

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.asean.org/?static\\_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2](http://www.asean.org/?static_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2) as accessed on 10 May 2016 from the official ASEAN website

construction of artificial Islands and reinforced its claims. It has been suggested that China would like to buy peace and time by massive investments in the countries with which it has disputes. This strategy will not necessarily work as the smaller neighbours are angry with the ground changes seen as efforts to consolidate the claims of China. The smaller nations which have disputes with China are not in a position to challenge its might militarily or otherwise and hence are constrained in their ability to thwart Chinese advances. Indonesia has benefited in the past with massive investments and continues to receive Foreign Direct Investment from China. However it is disillusioned with China and is on record to say that the MSR will do a lot of harm to its economy. There is angst amongst other claimants in the SCS about the way China has buttressed its claims by building and reinforcing the Islands carved out of rocks.

Another claimant, Vietnam fought valiantly against China in 1979. Vietnam is looking to India to shore up its military capability. The recent visit of US President Barack Obama to Hanoi has on one hand added to the confidence of the smaller nations but also left China fretting and fuming over these developments in the SCS.

India on its part has been engaged in promoting Vietnam's economy and defence capability. It has offered to maintain their Kilo-class submarines, train their pilots, assist the Vietnam Air force in maintenance<sup>4</sup>, set up satellite-monitoring systems and help in other areas of mutual interest. These developments have upset China, which will be compelled to earmark forces for contingencies in the South China Sea particularly in the disputed areas.

The case of the Philippines is an interesting one as it seeks to internationalise the issue of territorial claims in the SCS. The Filipino action of challenging China through the Tribunal at the permanent court of arbitration at The Hague<sup>5</sup> is supported by the US. Expressing solidarity with the Philippines, it has also started patrolling in the South China Sea along with the Philippines. It is known that the verdict is likely to be in favour of the Philippines which will further isolate China when it chooses to ignore the verdict by harping on some unsubstantiated historical claims. China has a great advantage in its backyard in the SCS when it comes to the assets in the nine-dash line

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<sup>4</sup> Saw Swee-Hock, Sheng Lijun, Chin Kin Wah, ASEAN-China Relations: Realities and Prospects, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore pp. 140-141

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.maritime-executive.com/article/philippines-presents-maritime-claims-at-the-hague> as brought out in the Maritime Executive. Accessed on 18 May 2016

and will retain them irrespective of the decision at The Hague and also the so-called FONOPS by the US Navy.

There are also many ASEAN-based institutions such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), in addition to the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) which are available for enabling discussions amongst the participants<sup>6</sup>.

There are suggestions from some quarters that China should be engaged in some talk by India and the US and that the nation with the ‘middle kingdom syndrome’ will heed counsel on issues related to its claims in the South China Sea. However when one examines the utterances of the Chinese leaders and their strong statements about the SCS, it is clear that this proposal is not even good on paper.

## **Maritime Silk Road**

Having understood the importance of the oceanic connectivity across continents, China has embarked on the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) which is a maritime component of the ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. The two-fold objective is to establish hubs in the Indian Ocean and beyond to serve both its economic and strategic interests in the coming decades.

Through OBOR China seeks to enhance connectivity both over land and through the sea routes. As in the many articles commissioned by the mouthpiece of the government, as brought out in a sample article in *Global Times* it claims that it will enable peaceful development in the Middle East.

The land segment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes through the disputed areas of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK). India has protested this move to legitimise the Pakistan occupation of the disputed area. China appears to have no second thoughts when it comes to such decisions while objecting to India’s engagement for oil/gas exploration in similar areas owned by Vietnam but disputed by China.

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<sup>6</sup> APMSS Ibid page 20

The MSR is also an instrument to woo the maritime neighbours of India with heavy investments in blue economy. In addition to expanding the market share of China in these countries, it also provides some leverage for future military use in the Indian Ocean. As of now, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh are on the radar of China. Most have agreed to come on board with a view to developing local economies. India is non-committal due to both concerns and the official stand that China has not come out with all the details of the master plan and that the OBOR appears to be a unilateral initiative without taking the future stakeholders into confidence.

## **Security Environment in South Asia, and China as a Catalyst**

There are issues of serious concern when it comes to the changing contours of security in India's neighbourhood. The complexities of India's security challenges arise from:

- (1) the issue of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme with help from China and North Korea,
- (2) China's supplies of modern weapon systems to Pakistan, and
- (3) China's wooing of India's neighbours to serve its long-term strategic interests.

The security and stability dynamics in the Indian sub-continent continues to be a factor of power play in the region among China, the US and India.

China's actions in the recent weeks demonstrate its motives in supporting Pakistan and propping up this ally against India. These latest actions are:

- (1) China's objection to India's bid to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group,
- (2) Beijing's investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which passes through the disputed area of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, despite China's incongruous objections to India's decades-old oil exploration initiatives in Vietnam's maritime economic zone,
- (3) China's objections to India's bid to join the exclusive club of Permanent Members in the United Nations Security Council,

- (4) China's recent build-up of troops along India's North East border following its reorganisation of military formations, and
- (5) China's bailing out of Jaish-e-Mohammad in a United Nations committee.

The enhanced engagement of India with the US is a factor that has put China on the defensive. The engagement with Vietnam and other countries in East Asia are needed for enhancing the footprints of India's economy and influence. To a large extent, China can blame itself for acts of commission and omission that pushed India to increased levels of strategic engagement with the US which looks at the Act East policy of India as being in convergence with its own recalibration in the Asia-Pacific policy. The US appears intent on promoting India as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean<sup>7</sup>. The latest announcement about introducing a bill for granting India a special status of a non-NATO ally<sup>8</sup> would further the strategic and military relations. India has also participated in the Malabar exercise and the latest edition in 2015<sup>9</sup> included Japan in an exercise conducted in the Bay of Bengal.

In international equations, it is noteworthy that China has very few friends<sup>10</sup>. There is an all-weather ally Pakistan and another reluctant half-ally, North Korea. Even in Africa there is strong resentment about the practices of China which has not helped the local economy as the locals hardly get a chance to be part of the projects funded by China. By all indications China nurtures ambitions to replace the US as the Number One nation in the coming decades. This will not come easily, given the changing geo strategic contours in SCS.

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<sup>7</sup> APMSS Ibid page 28

<sup>8</sup> Full details of the processes that have been set in to motion for granting India a major non NATO ally status <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/US-lawmakers-look-NATO-ally-status-for-India/articleshow/52371549.cms> accessed on 22nd May 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Details of the participating nations in Malabar 2015 and other details are contained in Stars and Stripes website vide <http://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/exercise-malabar-kicks-off-with-us-japanese-indian-navies-1.373549> accessed on 18 May 2016

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/07/08/5-reasons-china-has-no-friends/>. This article brings out why it is important for China to forge new alliances and have friends. Accessed on 10 May 2016

## India's Options in the SCS

India has enormous interest in the SCS as lot of Indian trade also moves through the SCS to and from East Asian economies. There are also long-term economic and strategic interests that need to be nurtured. India needs to follow Kautilya in these equations of the SCS and engage all the neighbours of China in a productive manner. India has some inherent strength that needs to be applied to increase the range of engagements with the littoral States in the South China Sea at one level and other Asian and South Asian neighbours at another level.

The biggest advantage it has is the one conferred by geography which not only gives it a long coastline but also the most important strategic and military outpost in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. There is a need to further strengthen the Command, Control, Communication, Computer, Intelligence, Interoperability Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4I2SR) architecture in the outposts of India which are close to the exit from the South China Sea through the Malacca Straits. There is also an urgent need to consider commissioning a nuclear submarine base in A&N<sup>11</sup> to serve the long-term interests of India in the Indian Ocean and beyond. The A&N Islands are strategically extremely important to India's maritime preparedness vis-à-vis Chinese IOR ambitions<sup>12</sup> and require all the attention from the planners in Delhi.

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<sup>11</sup> Andaman and Nicobar Islands (A&N) is the only theatre which has the Tri Services Command where all the three services operate under a unified command. The proximity to Southeast Asian countries and also the Malacca Straits makes the A&N an important strategic asset for India.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1553>. The strategic importance of the far-flung Islands which serve as India's forward maritime post are covered in the article by this author carried by SAAG. Accessed on 19 May 2016