

Historical and Taxonomical Claims Over South China Sea

Author: Dinesh Yadav *

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During his address at the Defense Conference in London on 14 September 2015, Vice Admiral Yuan Yubai, the Commander of the PLA Navy's North Sea Fleet, stated that "the South China Sea, as the name indicates, is a sea area that belongs to China." He further stressed that the waterway has belonged to China from the time of the Han dynasty, which had ruled from 206 BC to AD 220. The above assertions merit scrutiny to examine the veracity of the Chinese historical and taxonomical claims over the South China Sea.

The Chinese historical claim to South China Sea date back to the Han dynasty (206 BC to AD 220), a period considered as the golden age in Chinese history. These islands were referred to in some of the Chinese texts in the 4th century BC, but only implicitly, as part of the "Southern Territories" or "South Sea". The Islands were referred to as the "Three Mysterious Groups of Islands" during the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC). During the Eastern Han dynasty period (AD 23 to 220), the South China Sea was renamed "Rising Sea", so the islands were called the "Rising Sea Islands". Even if one were to concede that the Sea or the Islands were christened by the Chinese dynasties two millennia ago, would that suffice to stake a historical claim? The maximum area over which the Han dynasty exercised suzerainty is less than half of what constitutes China today. Would the historical claim over the Sea not inevitably apply *mutatis mutandis* for land boundaries, as they existed under that era? It is indeed ironical that Beijing advocates different claims over different regions, based on historical claims from different time-frames!

Even though Beijing asserts strong maritime traditions whilst furthering its maritime claims, Chinese were actually latecomers to navigation beyond coastal waters in the region. The accomplished seafarers of the region were the Malayo-Polynesian peoples who had explored the seas from Taiwan to New Zealand and even

up to Madagascar in the west. Even the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims like Faxian(AD 399-412)used Malay ships during his visits to India and Sri Lanka.

Further, Beijing's claim to the South China Sea as "historic waters" do not hold much water as the Asian empires of pre-modern era did not exercise sovereignty and were rather characterised by undefined, unprotected, and often changing frontiers. On the contrary to the rationale justifying its claims in South China Sea, Beijing, whilst dealing with its territorial disputes with neighboring India, Burma, and Vietnam, takes a position that its land boundaries were never defined, demarcated, and delimited. China, therefore, gives reverse justifications for its claims over land and sea. Whilst furthering its claims over land boundaries, Beijing argues that historically, its land boundaries were never defined and are a legacy of colonial era; and therefore, cannot be accepted. On the other hand, to expand its maritime zone, it takes a contrasting stance that China's maritime boundaries were always clearly defined.

If at all, the Chinese historical claims have any cogency, so would be the historical claims of Vietnam and the Philippines over Taiwan; Taiwan was originally settled by people of Malay-Polynesian descent. Similarly, Mongolia could claim all of Asia (parts of Genghis Khan Empire) and India could stake claims for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Malaysia (Srivijaya), Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (parts of Maurya/Chola/ Moghul/ British Indian empires)! Accordingly, the Chinese claims over the South China Sea based on historical grounds is not tenable.

China's claim to South China Sea is not actually historical, and it dates back only to 1947, when Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government propounded the so-called "eleven-dash line" on Chinese maps of the South China Sea. Following the ouster of the Nationalist Government in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party adopted this 'cartographic mis adventure after erasing two dashes in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1953.

The other justification on part of Admiral Yuan Yubai's assertion, that the South China Sea's name implied that its waters belonged to China, is wishful, to say the least. To dispel such notions, the Philippines has already re-christened the South China Sea as West Philippines Sea and Vietnam calls it East Seas. If the taxonomy could be the relevant ground for claiming a Sea, it would be interesting to know the Admiral's response on the names of Gulf of Mexico, Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea or the Indian Ocean!

Whilst the idea of national sovereignty dates back to seventeenth-century Europe (the Treaty of Westphalia), the idea of maritime sovereignty is relatively a modern construct, having gained prominence only from mid-twentieth-century onwards. As a responsible power of the 21st century, Beijing should appreciate that any attempt to redraw the land and maritime boundaries based on historical claims

would be a never ending process and would take the world back into the pre-Westphalia era.

* Commander Dinesh Yadav is a Research Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi. The views expressed are his own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the NMF, the Indian Navy or the Government of India. He can be reached at dinesh8y@yahoo.com