

South China Sea: From Turbidity, to Semblance of Tranquility

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The unfolding events in the South China Sea (SCS) in the last one decade plus has been tumultuous to say the least. The year Code of Conduct (CoC) ¹was signed in Cambodia (2002) can be taken as the bench mark year when the members of the ASEAN and China agreed on prescribed methods for preventing escalation of conflict over territory and resources. It is clear that the CoC has not made much difference to the ambitious plans of China which wanted the peaceful periphery to continue on its military modernization and consolidation of economic gains solely on its terms. The developments since then in the SCS included as one of the core interests of China in particular have been spectacular with long term implications for regional and global security dynamics.

The USA did redefine its priorities in the Pacific by its slew to Indo-Pacific and has plans to reposition some 60 per cent of its maritime military assets in the Pacific as highlighted by the US Navy Secretary in front of a senate committee last year². The intention was to reposition its maritime forces complete with the attendant support structure by utilizing the bases of its traditional allies in the Pacific. It was an obvious move to enhance the sphere of its influence and contain the expansionist designs of China which was cementing its claims in SCS with reclamation of rocks and reefs with in the contested nine dash line. Logistic and support Facilities were created by China at break neck speed in many of the reclaimed islands for supporting air and surface operations from the new Islands which in turn extended the range of operations. In comparison, the action of the littorals who were weary of Chinese overtures and aggressive behavior in the area was disjointed without a unified voice. The investments from China provided the

requisite economic leverages to ensure that there was no collective voice or a unified action from the affected nations. The ASEAN managed to stop itself every time from even making a strong statement about the aggressive designs of China which by expanding its territorial claims had the potential to destabilize the region militarily.

The run up to the verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) witnessed plenty of theatrics in the region. US Naval forces commenced joint patrols with Philippines in the South China Sea close to the disputed rocks and reefs. PLA Navy carried out its own military manoeuvres close to the date of the verdict to send a strong message to observers. USA in many forums insisted on the Freedom of Navigation(FON) and right to overflight as enshrined in the United Nations Conventions on the Laws of the Sea, 1982 (UNCLOS). India lent its voice to this proclamation but was unwilling to join the US in the joint patrols in the SCS³. However, at no stage was there any evidence that either the USA or China would go beyond saber-rattling as it was not in the interest of both the countries to go to war. This hesitation on part of the USA suited China very well which went on relentlessly with consolidation of its ground position within the nine-dash line.

As for as the PCA verdict,⁴ there were no doubts whatsoever as to how China would receive the verdict that was expected to be awarded in favour of the Philippines, which was the only nation that had mustered enough courage to internationalise the issue much to the chagrin of the Chinese leadership. Finally, when it was awarded on 12 July 2016, the response of the Chinese was on expected lines and the award was rejected outright. There were no clarion calls particularly by the ASEAN nations for China to honour the verdict. China went to the extent of accusing the judges of having been bought by nations with vested interests (read the USA and the Philippines). Irrespective of the verdict, that there would be no changes in the SCS in terms of possession of real estate by China was proved beyond doubt.

Even while the discussions were taking place in Hague in the palace of peace where the PCA is located, there were tectonic shifts and changes in the way the new President of Philippines Rodrigo Duterte looked at the verdict. He made a lot of noise and made his intentions known to move away from USA and get closer to China for reasons best known

to him. While it is obvious that there would have been parleys in the secret corridors between China and Philippines at different levels, it is not yet in the public domain. It was becoming increasingly clear that he would change tack and wean away from the American influence. Chinese obviously were very pleased with this development which has embarrassed the US Leadership and the military. China and Philippines are now actively engaged in prescribing a Code of Conduct as brought out during discussions in September this year at Laos⁵. Much to the consternation of the USA, the leaning of Duterte towards China and the new-found bonhomie with the Chinese leadership will to large extent alter the geo political, economic and strategic land scape of the region. The writing on the wall was clear during the recent four day visit of President Duterte to China in October 2016⁶, where the split with USA was formally announced with a simultaneous announcement about the new-found relations with China and even Russia. It seems as if there is new alignments of great significance in the making in the South China Sea. Malaysia now seems to be falling in line with Philippines in aligning with China on the issue of the new normal in SCS. The Premier of Malaysia Najib Razak after the recent visit to China⁷ has signed many military deals and seems to be aligning with China thus changing the political and military equations in the Pacific.

With an impending election for a new President in USA, the orchestration of responses for the changed stance of the Philippines will have to wait while the concerned officials would be working on the kind of advice that can be given to the new President. The USA will also have to look at alternatives for relocation/basing of the maritime might in the Pacific by engaging with other traditional allies including Japan, Australia, New Zealand and even some of the ASEAN countries. This would be the only way in which the maritime military presence can be ensured.

While the US Navy is planning a redeployment of its maritime assets by using basing facilities in the region, China is adding to its maritime power potential by embarking on the carrier programme. It is too well aware that it cannot have a blue-water navy without significant numbers of aircraft carriers. The logical step for PLA Navy after inducting the *Liaoning* (the lone carrier at this moment) and carrying out trials is to build bigger, better and more capable carriers with credible embarked air power. According to

Jane's, the third carrier is being fitted with catapults.⁸ It will be only a matter of time before nuclear propulsion is adopted as the build standard for the new breed of carriers.

However, it is to be borne in mind that while more carriers would join the PLA Navy, it will be years before the Chinese Navy masters the art of integration and operation of the Carrier Battle Group (CBG). Militarily, it would take decades to challenge the maritime military might of US Navy in the Pacific Ocean. The US Navy is battle hardened with deployments in different oceans and enjoys technical and tactical edge in deployment of its assets. The developments in the SCS have affected different actors differently as highlighted below: -

- The fall out of the slew of the US forces to the Indo-Pacific has the potential of keeping China under check in the SCS. There is a temporary setback due to the changed stance of Philippines which will require USA to rework on its priorities, policies and partners for implementing its Indo-Pacific policy.
- There is no indication that China will slow down its long-term ambitions to claim extensive sea areas by massive dredging of even corals in the area impacting the marine environment in a big way. To say the least, it is an environmental catastrophe with immeasurable damage.
- China has kept observers guessing on whether it would declare an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in an identified area in the SCS. This is well in the realm of possibility with the new developments in the region though there are substantial arguments against the ADIZ declaration.
- With the radical changed behavior of Philippines which is now looking at China as an investor and a long-term ally, both China and the Philippines have buried the hatchet and created opportunities for mending fences. This change will impact the USA's long term plans, and a clearer idea of what responses would be shaped by the new President would be known after the swearing-in in November 2016.

- Russia has joined the fray as a new player by undertaking joint patrols with China. This will continue to be a very interesting development of great significance to the regional and global dynamics.
- On its part, India has played its role by making the right noises about obligations and responsibilities of nations to comply with the concepts postulated by the UNCLOS. There has been no specific reference or call by India for China to honour the verdict. Such an action is not even warranted as there are no gains in it. It also reinforces the view that India values its strategic autonomy and is unwilling to compromise on this stance though it is engaging with the USA at many levels to promote the strategic partnership.
- India has also enhanced the scope of its engagement with Vietnam by also extending a credit line of 500 million USD for military purchases. The continued engagement with Vietnam both for energy security and military cooperation augurs well for both the nations and would serve the long term strategic interests.
- India is also likely to supply a couple of corvettes to the Philippines⁹. However, with the increasing influence of China, it would be correct to assume that China would actively engage with Philippines for supplying military hardware on soft loans with the obvious result of India being pushed back in terms of its military sales.

In conclusion, with the developments as above, the turbulent turbid waters of SCS have become calm again on the surface but the strong undercurrents of rivalry for geo-strategic supremacy run deep and strong. It is also clear that the equations in the SCS are working in favour of China both due to the aggressive designs and work on the ground aided by inaction of other littorals in the region who have allowed the cartographic aggression of China to go unchallenged. The major factor that has brought about key changes is the changed stance of the new President in Philippines who has pulled out all stops to align his policies with the Chinese leadership.

What is abundantly clear is that while there is a temporary setback to the grandiose plans of the USA in terms of its maritime slant which requires recalibration. From the point of view of an emerging China, it will find it increasingly difficult to break out of the self-imposed shackles within the nine-dash line. On one hand, the artificial islands provide China the option to expand its sphere of operation and control. On the other, it will have to increasingly engage in defending what it has acquired by illegal means resulting in greater focus in defending its assets in the first and second defence lines. Indirectly, this will come in the way of China's Indian Ocean ambitions and will slow down its long-term plan notwithstanding Djibouti naval base where infrastructure construction has started according to China Daily¹⁰, the Gwadar port linked through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiatives.

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Notes and References

¹The Code of Conduct was deliberated for many years and finally took shape in 2002 with not much change in the way China behaved with its neighbours. The contours of Code of conduct have been explained in Kyoto review on line <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-15/managing-security-in-the-south-china-sea-from-doc-to-coc/> Accessed on 24th October 2016/

²<http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/us-navy-secretary-we-will-have-over-300-ships-by-2020/> in a report by Dipomat on 12th March 2015 reporting on the appearance of the Navy Secretary in front of the Senate committee as accessed in Diplomat on 25th October 2016.

³<http://www.voanews.com/a/india-rejects-joint-naval-patrols-with-us-in-south-china-sea/3231567.html>

India's stand as for as the joint patrol in SCS has been categoric as brought out in the VoA report of 11th March 2016. Accessed on 25th October 2016.

⁴<https://pca-cpa.org/en/news/pca-press-release-the-south-china-sea-arbitration-the-republic-of-the-philippines-v-the-peoples-republic-of-china/> available on the home page of PCA accessed on 30th October 2016. The link also contains the full award and the press release on 12th July 2016

⁵<http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/09/07/1621480/philippines-china-push-framework-code-conduct-south-china-sea> accessed on 30th October 2016 from PhilstarGlobal online edition.

⁶<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/philippines-duterte-china-announces-split-161020131226993.html> As reported in Al Jazeera in the online publication dated 21st October 2016. Accessed on 26th October 2016

⁷<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/02/china-and-malaysia-agree-on-military-cooperation-in-the-south-china-sea> as reported in the Guardian on the recent visit of the Prime Minister of Malaysia on 02 November 2016. Accessed on 03 November 2016.

⁸<http://www.janes.com/article/62780/china-s-third-aircraft-carrier-likely-to-be-fitted-with-catapults> report from Janes on the Chinese carrier programme accessed on 27th October 2016

⁹<http://www.manilalivewire.com/2016/04/the-reasons-why-philippines-decided-to-buy-the-karmota-class-frigate-of-india/> as brought out in Manila Live wire on 03 April 2016. Accessed on 30th October 2016

¹⁰http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-02/25/content_23646131.htm
As reported in China Daily in February 2016 and accessed on 25th October 2016.