

The Changing Contours of Underwater Maritime Warfare in the South China Sea

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The recent developments in the South China Sea (SCS) have unnerved the neighbours that surround it, and stake holders around the world are concerned about the happenings. Whether it was the half-hearted effort to get a code of conduct in place some fifteen years ago; or the sustained efforts by China through cartographic aggression to claim all the areas within the so called nine dash line; or the subsequent militarization of the artificial Islands created by dredging the corals with utter disregard to environmental damage; or the helplessness of the ASEAN to even rebuke China due to the strong economic dependence on China for their own growth; and the inability of the USA under President Obama to stem the tide—all these hardly deterred China from pursuing its objective of total maritime dominance in the South China Sea. Notwithstanding the US Policy of *slew to the Pacific* which appears to be faltering under the Trump Administration, China today has consolidated its position in the maritime domain. While observers are sceptic, after a recently concluded ASEAN meeting, the members are optimistic that the frame work for an effective [Code of Conduct \(CoC\)](#) would be adopted by August this year.

Even the most important verdict of the decade by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) [that indicted China](#) on and supported the case of Philippines was rejected even before it was awarded. The maritime military capability and capacity of the PLA-Navy was not built overnight. This has been a carefully crafted strategy by China which worked assiduously to consolidate its position as a major challenger to the USA which was floundering in its policies in the western Pacific. Except for harping on the Freedom of Navigation and overflight, and sending some of its combatants close to the islands in the SCS, the USA was in no mood to precipitate its actions. The recent statements by the US Defence Secretary, James Mattis, stressing that, “We oppose countries militarising artificial islands and enforcing excessive maritime claims

unsupported by international law. We cannot and will not accept unilateral, coercive changes to the status quo," has not been received well by China which slammed him for the comments made at the [Shangri-La dialogue](#).

China's multifaceted strategy is transforming the regional balance totally in its favour. First and foremost, it is bringing the smaller economies in the region under its economic clout by their dependence on heavy Foreign Direct Investments and soft loans for various projects—which, in any case, have also helped the Chinese economy to grow. The second and most important dimension of this strategy was to consolidate its military gains in the region by shoring up its response mechanisms. The artificial Islands in the SCS have extended the range of operations as they have built of runways on unsinkable carriers.

ASEAN members having disputes with China over territorial claims, are also adding to their own [submarine and ASW capability](#). The presence of both surface and sub surface units of the USA, Japan and Australia also operate in the areas of interest. There are official reports that China is contemplating revisions of its Maritime Traffic Safety Laws [MTSL 1984](#), which will make it difficult for certain foreign vessels and submersibles to enter its claimed (disputed) territory. This is being given final legal shape, and is expected to be in place by 2020. Once that law is in place, China will have the wherewithal to enforce the MTSL 2020. A credible Command, Control Communications, Computer Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) structure to detect, deter, and defend its core interests in the South China Sea is a must if the PLA-Navy has to counter underwater surveillance/offensive missions by submarines/UUVs of adversaries in its claimed territory.

The recent announcement about creating a scientific underwater monitoring facility is to be analysed in the above context. The entire process of building a credible structure in the South and East China Sea is well planned. On completion, this will ensure that China achieves maritime supremacy in all the four dimensions (including cyber), and will aid its efforts to take a lead in the informatized warfare. According to the stated purpose, the underwater scientific station will enable a better understanding of the oceanic environment and its wealth. However, it is clear that the facility will be equipped to monitor the movements of both surface and subsurface vessels. This new facility, along with inputs from other sensors and platforms, will provide the PLA-Navy

with a real-time capability to monitor all activity around its newly created assets in the SCS.

There is nothing new as far as such underwater monitoring facilities are concerned. During the Cold War, the USA and the erstwhile USSR depended on the [SOSUS](#) to keep track of SSBNs and other submarines which were proceeding to and from the patrol areas around the world. So, China is investing in a similar system, albeit after some five decades of a similar exercise by the super powers. However, the current level of technology, micro miniaturization and digitization offers more credible and cost-effective options for keeping the areas under continuous surveillance. It is important to note that there are reports about a similar Indian initiative in the Bay of Bengal along with Japan to detect the movement of PLA-N submarines by having a great underwater sonic from [Sumatra to Indira Point](#).

It is clear from all the developments in the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal that both China and India are gearing up to revamp their underwater detection, tracking, and prosecuting abilities by investing in updated current SOSUS technology in their respective areas of interest. This is a watershed moment in the history of both the Asian powers, and portends an impending Cold War in the Indo-Pacific region.

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