



# Naval Power Dynamics in the Western Pacific Ocean: Impact on the Maritime Situation in East and South China Seas

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*The Western Pacific Region is currently faced with a number of territorial sovereignty disputes and contestations over claimed associated maritime zones. The locus of such disputes lies mainly around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in East China Sea; and the Paracel and Spratly chain of islands in the South China Sea. All the disputants are notably engaged in modernising their defense forces, with particular emphasis on naval modernisation. While the pace and quantum of such navy-building is dependent on the individual countries' comprehensive national power (CNP), China and Japan are the leading protagonists. When viewed in the context of long-standing and intractable maritime disputes, the increasing naval capabilities of regional countries adds to the level of their confrontationalist postures. This may at times, lead to undesirable outcomes by way of sheer miscalculation. In such an environment, The US decision to 'pivot' to this region brings in huge foreign policy challenges, which it must overcome in order to ensure lasting peace and stability therein.*

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## **Introduction**

The current geo-economic situation in the western Pacific Ocean is relatively more stable than in the Indian Ocean. The regional economy, which was always in a much better shape, is on the upswing again after the effects of the global economic downturn are slowly but steadily dissipating. The various mechanisms for regional and sub-regional economic and security cooperation like the ASEAN, ASEAN plus three, ARF and East Asia Summit (EAS) are making good progress.

However, there still exist several underlying issues of insecurity and instability in that region. The conflicting claims over territorial and maritime rights and interests, particularly in the East and the South China Seas remain serious and complex issues, with no scope for immediate resolution. The fragility of the North and South Korean relations has been more than evident in recent times.<sup>1</sup> The Six-Party Talks on the Korean nuclear issue have waxed and waned, with the February 2013 North Korean nuclear test being indicative of the failure of this mechanism to cap off that country's nuclear programme. The Taiwan issue remains unresolved despite the improving cross-strait relationship.

Against such a background, recent hardening of positions by countries involved in both, South China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island disputes are causing the regional dynamics to become progressively more complex. The USA, maintaining a sizeable maritime force in the region, has not helped matters by announcing its "pivot to the Asia-Pacific"<sup>2</sup> – though later moderated to "rebalance" – and calling for multilateral approach to the resolution of South China Sea disputes.

In this tenuous conundrum, this paper compares the current capabilities of the East Asian Navies – the Chinese, Japanese, North Korean, South Korean and Taiwanese – followed by that for the key South-East Asian navies. It lays emphasis on major developments and modernization efforts towards capacity accretion therein and draws appropriate inferences. The contentious maritime issues, between these East Asian countries on one hand and between China and the South-East Asian countries in the South China Sea on the other, have been identified. Finally, the manner in which their increasing maritime capabilities may be brought to bear vis-à-vis these issues and the net effect on the maritime security in the region have been investigated.

## Comparison of the East Asian Navies

A broad comparison of naval hardware of these countries elicits the fact that the PLA Navy is a relatively more superior force “steel for steel”, followed by Japan and South Korea. Japan’s Navy boasts of 48 “major surface combatants”. These include “helicopter destroyers” or light aircraft carriers, guided-missile destroyers equipped with the ‘state-of-the-art’ Aegis combat system, a combination of radars and fire-control systems similar to frontline US Navy warships; and an assortment of lesser destroyers, frigates and corvettes. A squadron of 16 diesel-electric submarines augments the surface fleet. Juxtaposing this against the PLA Navy’s 73 major surface combatants, 84 missile-firing patrol craft and 63 submarines, and the situation viewed in simple terms appears pretty much loaded against Japan.<sup>3</sup>

The North Korean Navy, despite impressive numbers largely consists of vintage patrol boats, fast attack crafts and small tonnage submarines,<sup>4</sup> all suitable for coastal operations. Its inventory clearly indicates a single-minded focus on its immediate adversary and close neighbour, South Korea. The Taiwanese Navy has modest surface Navy and virtually ineffective submarine force. It is thus a foregone conclusion that Taiwan’s maritime capabilities are woefully inadequate for any conflict with China in a cross-strait crisis. Even though South Korea has a fairly modern and decent sized Navy, there are lesser issues of serious discord with all other countries in the region barring North Korea. Hence it has no reason to expand capacities to unreasonable limits.

## Major Developments in East Asian Navies

The Chinese Naval modernization programme is possibly driven by three primary objectives, namely the conflict potential within the Taiwan Strait; increased threat posed by the significant US naval presence in the Pacific Ocean; and the desirability to develop a “blue water” fleet to secure its sea lines of communication (SLOCs), passing though the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.<sup>5</sup> This modernization can be holistically viewed in terms of naval hardware accretion, additional infrastructure to support the growing force size and a matching manpower profile. The major elements of naval modernization involve the Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles (ASBMs), Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles (ASCMs), submarines, destroyers, frigates, patrol craft, amphibious ships and above all, the aircraft carrier.

The pace of Chinese naval modernization can be gauged from the fact that the percentage of modern units in the Chinese submarine force increased from less than 10% in 2004 to about 50% in 2011 and that of surface combatants increased from the same quantum in 2004 to more than 30% in 2011.<sup>6</sup> The most recent addition to their inventory is the “Liaoning” aircraft carrier, which was commissioned on 25 September 2012, after a 10-year refurbishment. Even though it is presently without its fixed wing aircraft complement, the take-off/landing trials of J-15 carrier-borne aircraft on the carrier have been successfully accomplished in November 2012. Equipping the carrier with its permanent air wing may take some time, The Chinese have now openly declared that its Navy is in the process of making preparations for forming its first carrier task force.<sup>7</sup> As part of this effort, it commissioned the first of its type 52 C advanced Air Defence Destroyers in February 2013.<sup>8</sup> The “Anti access and Area Denial” (A2AD) concept, based mainly around the DF 21D “carrier killer” ballistic missiles is being dubbed a “game changer” for the region.<sup>9</sup>

The Japanese Navy, on the other hand is taking major steps to modernize its Navy in accordance with the objectives established in its “National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPS)” of December 2010.<sup>10</sup> The NDPS lays emphasis on security of sea and airspace around Japan, response to attack on offshore islands and ballistic missile attacks. The modernization timeline of up to 2015–17 includes construction of two larger helicopter carrying destroyers, the second displacing about 18,000 tonnes and the third being F-35-capable platform in the range of about 3,0000 tonnes. All Six Aegis Class destroyers are to be upgraded to SM-3 Block IA and Full Engagement capability BMD Systems. The submarine strength will go up from 16 to 22, with the latest batch of *Soryu* class being equipped with air independent propulsion (AIP). The naval combat aviation assets would go up to 150 aircraft and helicopters.<sup>11</sup> However, the backing of US forces in support of Japan under treaty obligations – which assures Japan of US assistance when threatened with outside aggression – is the greatest factor in favour of Japan.

South Korea also banks on favourable military alliance with the USA and is modernizing its Navy at a moderate pace. The South Korean Navy created its strategic mobile fleet in 2010 in an effort to develop its blue-water capabilities beyond coastal defence against North Korea. The fleet mainly comprises three Aegis-equipped *Sejong* class destroyers (KDX III), 4500-ton KDX-II destroyers, 1800-ton attack submarines, P3-C maritime patrol aircraft and others. The third phase of the ongoing KSS-III indigenous submarine building programme is expected to deliver a total of

nine 3000-ton submarines, with the lead ship expected to be completed by 2017. But its focus primarily remains on North Korea.

The North Korea Navy remains pretty static in its modernization effort, but looks to leverage its nuclear program and land-based short-range delivery systems to balance the superior South Korean naval strength. Just as Japan and South Korea bank on positive US military support to bolster their existing military strength, the North Koreans rely on the tacit if not direct backing of China.

Taiwan has taken a number of steps to plug the gaps in its military capabilities, like expanding defence industrial base, transitioning to an all-volunteer force<sup>12</sup> and strengthening its non-commissioned officer corps. However, the Taiwanese naval modernization plan is stagnating on account of the US not being able to fulfil its arms supply commitment to that country in the face of serious objection and vehement opposition from China. Major naval equipment pending supply includes the submarines, destroyers and the maritime reconnaissance aircraft. Even if these equipment eventually get integrated into the Taiwanese Navy, the balance of maritime forces would still continue to tilt heavily in favour of China.<sup>13</sup> The only positive aspect in favour of Taiwan is again the assurance of American military support, should China attempt unification by force.

## Developments in the South-East Asian Navies

The geographical location of Southeast Asian countries places them at key positions for vital maritime traffic connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. These links are virtually the economic lifelines of many countries of the Indo-Pacific, including Japan, South Korea, China and India. In the current decade, many Southeast Asian countries have expanded their defence spending against a backdrop of economic development and other factors. They have consequently been modernizing their military forces, particularly their Navy and Air Force, not only for traditional national defence but also to address new security issues such as anti-terrorism and piracy.

Singapore, which identifies diplomacy and deterrence as the twin pillars of national defence, is leading the military modernization effort with its defence spending accounting for about one-quarter of the national budget.<sup>14</sup> It is followed by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, with Philippines bringing up the rear. The comparative defence expenditures of selected South-East Asian nations from 1990 to 2010 is shown at [Figure 1](#).

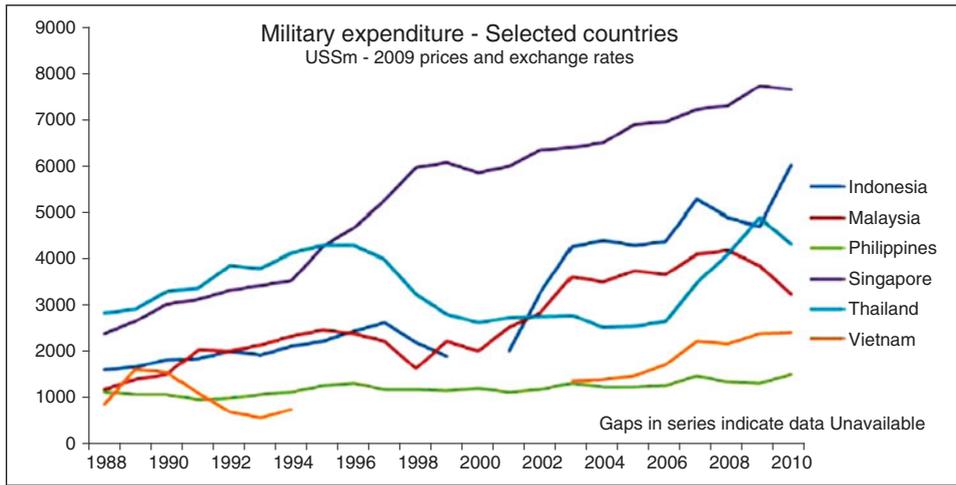


Fig. 1. Comparative Defence Expenditures – Selected South-East Asian Countries. Source: UK House of Commons Library, Research Paper 11/79.

Some of the major acquisitions either effected or being planned by the regional navies are enumerated below:<sup>15</sup>

- Singapore is actively striving to modernize its forces by introducing early-warning aircraft, air tankers and submarine rescue ships, making it the first country in Southeast Asia to do so. Singapore introduced early-warning aircraft E-2C in 1987, air tanker KC-135R in 1997 and a submarine rescue mother ship in 2008. Six French-made *Formidable*-class frigates with stealth capability were commissioned in 2009. Singapore also purchased two second-hand Swedish-made submarines in 2005.
- In 2009, Indonesia completed the commissioning of four Dutch-made *Sigma*-class corvettes. In December 2011, it concluded a contract to purchase three 209-class submarines from the South Korea.
- Malaysia’s first Scorpene class submarine jointly developed by France and Spain was commissioned in January 2009, followed by the second one in November 2009. The six German-made *Kedah*-class corvettes ordered in 2000 were all commissioned in 2010.
- Even though Thailand does not own any submarines at present, it is reported to be considering the introduction of a submarine in its Navy. On the other

hand, it is the only South-East Asian country in possession of an aircraft carrier, the *Chakri Naruebet*, which has a very limited operational role.

- Vietnam concluded a contract to purchase six *Kilo*-class submarines from Russia in December 2009 and is negotiating with Holland on a contract to build four *Sigma*-class corvettes. In addition, Vietnam purchased two Russian-made *Gepard*-class frigates in 2006, which were both delivered in 2011.
- The Philippines acquired one *Hamilton*-class frigate retired from the US Coast Guard in 2011 and the second in May 2012. It has ordered three new *Augusta*–Westland AW 109 helicopters fitted with submarine-hunting devices such as sonar and magnetic anomaly detection (MAD), and search and rescue equipment. They will operate from the Hamilton frigates with the expected delivery in 2014.

## Maritime Issues in East Asia

Despite the above East Asian countries (barring North Korea), being deeply engaged in comprehensive economic, social, people-to-people relationship with each other, most have serious and long-outstanding maritime differences. Major maritime issues between the main protagonists are enumerated below.

### Issues involving Japan, South Korea and Russia

Japan has sovereignty disputes over outlying islands with Russia, South Korea and China. Though all the 56 Kurile Islands are under the Russian jurisdiction, Japan claims the two southernmost large islands (Iturup and Kunashir), as well as two islets, which has led to the ongoing Kurile Islands dispute. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's first ever visit in November 2010 brought the dispute again into limelight. In February 2011, Medvedev also called for substantial reinforcements of the Kurile Islands' defences following the Japanese stance. Russia reportedly conducted a naval exercise in the vicinity of the disputed Kurile Islands, wherein Russian military aircraft also participated along with the naval ships.<sup>16</sup> One Japanese media report also suggested that two Russian fighter aircraft breached the Japanese air-space near its Hokkaido Island while carrying out these exercises, forcing Japan to scramble its own intercept aircraft in response, apparently the first such move in last 5 years.<sup>17</sup>

South Korea and Japan both claim ownership of the Dokdo/Takeshima islands, based in large part on differing interpretations of historical documents. The dispute has regularly caused diplomatic frictions between them. On 10 August 2012,

President of South Korea, Lee Myung-Bak, visited the islands, which made Japan temporarily withdraw its ambassador to South Korea.<sup>18</sup> Japan has made four proposals for referring the issue to International Court of Justice (ICJ) for arbitration, the last being in 2012, but South Korea has thus far declined to take the issue to the ICJ.

### **Senkaku/Diaoyu Island Dispute between Japan, China and Taiwan**

Japanese sovereignty claim over these islands is based on the premise that it integrated the islands into Okinawa Prefecture in 1895 after conducting surveys to ascertain that the islands were uninhabited and there was no sign of these being under control of any state. The Chinese on the other hand, contend that their sovereignty over Diaoyu Islands historically dates back to Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), and that the Japanese pushed the weak Qing rulers to sign the treaty of Shimonoseki post-Sino-Japan war in 1894–1895, ceding these islands to Japan. Taiwan's claim arises from the fact that when Japan relinquished the control over "Formosa" and its administered islands post-Second World War, the Diaoyu islands belonging to this administrative unit also became part of Taiwan. Taiwan though has not been vehemently pressing its claim and is letting China do the needful for the time being. In the current context, Tokyo's nationalization move of the Senkaku Islands has been seen as grave provocation by China and Taiwan. Amidst rhetoric, bluster and brinkmanship, the situation over the last year has progressively been deteriorating to a degree wherein it threatens to derail their bilateral relations and create serious instability in the region.

### **Issues between China and Taiwan**

In addition to Chinese disputes with Taiwan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the Spratly group in the South China Sea, the most critical issue that remains outstanding is that of unification. China has never renounced the "use of force" option to compel Taiwan to unite. The only factor that is preventing this from happening is the American stance in support of Taiwan, should China resort to force in this endeavour.

### **Issues between Two Koreas and Japan**

The two Koreas are technically still at war. North Korea has been continually involved in military skirmishes with South Korea across the northern limiting line (NLL),

which it does not recognize as a boundary. The underlying tensions tend to flare up occasionally. Since 2009, there have been many incidents of live fire situations. There was a bitter standoff at sea in November 2009, wherein the naval ships of both countries fired at each other across the NLL, resulting in much damage and fatalities. The most horrific incident happened in March 2010 when a South Korean naval patrol vessel “Cheonan” was apparently torpedoed and sunk by a North Korean submarine off the Korean coast, killing all 46 naval personnel on board. Responsibility could not be pinned conclusively on North Korea, resulting in South Korea not being able to respond appropriately.

Japan, like South Korea, is also wary of the North Korean nuclear and missile development program. North Korea has serious differences with the US. In fact, North Korean vice Foreign Minister rhetorically warned during his address at the UN General Assembly on 01 October 2012 that “due to the hostile American policies towards DPRK, the Korean Peninsula had become the World’s most dangerous hotspot and was [but] one spark away from nuclear war”.<sup>19</sup> North Korea subsequently went on to launch a rocket using ballistic missile technology in December 2012, ostensibly to place a satellite into space. This was followed with its third nuclear explosion test on 12 February 2013 despite the UN Security Council having unanimously adopted resolution 2087 in January 2013, expressing its “... determination to take ‘significant action’ in the event of a further DPRK nuclear test.”

Both, Japan and South Korea, which are in positive alliance with the USA and on whose territories the US forces are based, fear retribution from North Korea on this account. Both countries want to see the North Korean nuclear programme plugged and are involved in this effort through the presently stalled Six-Party talks. China, as the coordinator for the talks and also wielding substantial leverage over North Korea, indirectly provides more complexity to this conundrum, even though it lent its support to the UN Security Council’s Resolution 2087 and has also been critical of the latest North Korean nuclear test.

## **Maritime Issues in South-East Asia**

Territorial disputes between some South-East Asian countries and China over the Parcel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea are seen as the most volatile maritime issues in South-East Asia. Related issue of the maritime zones associated with these islands and the resource exploitation rights therein are further vitiating the

tenuous environment in the region. Although China has been insisting on bilateral negotiations on the abovementioned issues, signs of cooperative endeavours succeeding to an extent did emerge by keeping the disputes in the backburner. In November 2002, the South-East Asian nations and China jointly signed the “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC 2000)”, which aims for a peaceful resolution of the issue.

The provisions of DOC 2002 did bring a measure of stability in the region by substantially reducing the acrimony amongst the disputants until April 2009, when the deadline for submission of continental shelf claim by the countries to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) drew near. In a 07 May 2009 communication to the UN CLCS in response to the Vietnamese submission, China stated that it “...enjoyed sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, as well as the sea bed and subsoil thereof”<sup>20</sup> and appended the figure of “nine dashed lines” to the letter.

The non-binding DOC 2002 provisions of parties “refraining from such activities that would complicate or escalate the situation” could not ensure further tranquillity, as the other parties to the dispute also hardened their positions when confronted with tightened monitoring activities by China’s maritime law enforcement agencies. The tensions between China and Vietnam, and between China and Philippines in particular, have become increasingly frequent and intense. Two notable incidents that occurred since then, one each involving Vietnam and Philippines, are mentioned below:

- A month-long standoff between China and Vietnam following the cutting of exploration cables of a Vietnamese seismic survey ship *Binh Minh 02* by the Chinese maritime patrol ships in the Vietnamese EEZ in May 2011.
- An extended “war of nerves” against Philippines over Huangyan Island (Scarborough Shoal) that lasted for nearly 3 months commencing mid-April 2012.

With the prospects of these disputes becoming unmanageable by peaceful negotiations as time progresses, leading to increased instability in the region, the international community is concerned about the potential effect of such instability on the vital global SLOCs passing through the South China Sea. Similar apprehension is also being expressed about the “freedom of navigation” being constrained on account of suo motu restrictions likely to be imposed by some countries in their areas of maritime zones,

deriving out of their sovereignty claims. The fact that these concerns are seriously being taken note of is evident from the articulations of different extra-regional stakeholders at various forums and multilateral mechanisms like the ARF, APEC and the East Asia Summit. The most notable of these was the statement of Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State during the ARF meet in July 2010 to the effect that the US has “national interest in the freedom of navigation and open access to Asia’s maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea”.

### **Impact of Naval Strengthening in East Asia**

As far as the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute is concerned, both, China and Japan are pushed along by their domestic compulsions. The Chinese and the Japanese leadership changed hands in the end of 2012. In fact, the newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had vociferously canvassed for Japan to take a decisive stand on the Senkaku Islands issue during the election campaign. It is quite possible that his views on the Senkaku dispute were also one of the contributing factors in his Liberal Democratic Party winning the election in December 2012. Although Japan still possesses the most technologically advanced and capable navy in Asia, the implications of precariously poised territorial dispute with China go beyond politics and diplomacy.

Boundary patrols around Senkaku are led by the civilian Japanese Coast Guard. However, the Self Defence Forces have extended their surveillance posture south of Okinawa and are being trained and equipped for the defence of outlying islands. China, for its part, has also sent out its maritime surveillance ships. However, ships and submarines of the Chinese East Sea Fleet are conducting extensive exercises in the East China Sea, including live firing of missiles and other ordnance. The amphibious exercises for beach landing and seizure are also being conducted. In addition, the exercising maritime units of the North China Sea Fleet also transited through routes proximate to the islands in February, May, August and October 2013.

Although the US treaty guarantees to constrain China’s military options vis-à-vis Japan, Beijing’s moves to assert its sovereignty claims through military presence around Senkaku raises the risk of collisions or other “kinetic” events.<sup>21</sup> The scrambling of aircraft by both sides to intercept each other’s air intrusions and reported aiming of weapon radars by the PLA Navy ships on the Japanese warship – though vehemently denied by China<sup>22</sup> – has further escalated the potential for an

undesirable incident. Should this happen, there will invariably be a public outcry for an active response, which the Chinese leadership in the current period of political transition may find hard to ignore. In such a situation, the possibility of a localized China–Japan military clash breaking out in the East China Sea cannot be entirely ruled out.

The North Koreans have had an astute sense of gauging the precarious geopolitical situations for more than half a century and their propensity to indulge in pre-emptive unilateral activities to draw maximum mileage from such complexities is well known. One should not put it beyond them to leverage the emerging China–Japan crisis to engage in brinkmanship with the South Koreans. On 24 September 2012, it denounced the warning shots fired by South Korean naval ships at its fishing boats along the disputed NLL as acts of provocation. North Korea has been continuing with its own contribution towards regional instability by launching its rocket based on ballistic missile technology in December 2012, followed by the third nuclear test in February 2012, despite severe opposition. The South Korean Navy has accordingly been constrained to maintain prolonged alert level along its sea borders, in response. Thus, the possibility of a Korean flare up further raises the instability quotient of the region.

### **Impact of Naval Strengthening in South-East Asia**

With the ongoing modernization of the South-East Asian navies, their capacity for handling non-traditional challenges has definitely increased. The Indonesian, Malaysian and Singaporean naval ships have been coordinating and conducting their own anti-piracy patrols in the Malacca and Singapore straits under Operation MALSINDO from July 2004 onwards. In September 2005, “eyes in the sky” aerial patrols were started in addition.<sup>23</sup> With Thailand having joined in subsequently, these ongoing measures have resulted in the piracy in these waters being reduced to negligible levels. Some countries like Singapore and Malaysia are even sending their warships for anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden.

However, the main maritime issue in the South-East Asia revolves around the South China Sea dispute. Though the naval strength of ASEAN nations is still far below that of China, the mere fact that they are modernizing with weaponry and equipment that is far in excess of their requirement to deal with non-traditional maritime security issues raises aspirations to take on the China’s naval might, however

ambitious it may appear on the surface. Promulgation of recent maritime Laws/Regulations – “Hainan regulation for the management of public order for coastal and border defence” and “law on Vietnamese sea” both effective from 01 January 13 – further provide a legal basis for maritime law enforcement agencies to prosecute infringements in maritime areas under their respective jurisdictions. When seen in the context of the increasing capabilities of these South-East Asian navies, the provisions of such laws/regulations do raise the potential for future skirmishes.<sup>24</sup>

Under these circumstances, China being the largest maritime power in the region will face a dilemma over whether to adopt the “softer” maritime diplomacy or “harder” dominant stance. The resultant instability will definitely affect vital trade and energy flow on a global scale. Consequent restriction on “Freedom of Navigation”, may upscale the crisis from regional to global, possibly forcing the hand of the global stakeholders, sooner or later.

Besides, the distinct naval modernization of some South-East Asian countries like Singapore, which is not involved in the South China Sea issues, does raise certain questions about its rationale, particularly when it has no external threats and no issues with China. One feels constrained to ask whether this is to create a notional regional supplementary infrastructure for the American pivot to the Asia-Pacific.

## Conclusion

Japan is constrained to maintain a hard line position over Senkaku dispute vis-à-vis China as it is the only disputed territory under its effective control, as against Kuriles and Dokdo islands, which are respectively under Russian and South Korean governance. The Senkaku dispute has the potential to surpass both the Korean imbroglio and the South China Sea tussle, mainly because two major Asian powers, high on nationalistic sentiments, economic robustness and reasonably large force levels are involved. However, their geographical closeness; technological and professional edge of the Japanese Navy over PLA Navy; and deep economic interdependencies; are some key factors which will ensure that no clear winner will emerge, even if a skirmish limited in scale and scope breaks out. At the same time, the chance of a Korean crisis emerging without much notice, continues to loom large and cannot be discounted.

As the vexatious of the South China Sea disputes are also not liable to be resolved in a short timeframe, China on one hand and Philippines and Vietnam on the other

will continue to engage each other in acrimonious incidents. Over-ambitious perceptions of some South-East Asian countries about the level and scope of American support with regard to their maritime disputes with China may also result in serious miscalculation. Philippines and Vietnam may particularly be prone to this pitfall with regard to their way forward in dealing with their island disputes in the South China Sea.

The American diplomatic efforts to bring back a sense of normalcy in the western Pacific covering both, the East and the South China Seas does not seem to be succeeding as Japan, Vietnam and Philippines expect the USA to favour their positions. On the other hand, China views the American drive with a lot of skepticism, if not outright suspicion, as it perceives the declared US ‘rebalance’ towards Asia-Pacific, as targeted against China. Thus Washington faces a real dilemma with at least three countries in the area soliciting open support as alliance partners and others looking on with similar expectations, while it debates on how not to get involved directly.

In the event, notwithstanding the manner in which these issues pan out in the western Pacific Ocean, Washington has a tough task at hand. While it is imperative that its standing vis-a-vis both the allies and China be maintained; interests of other countries who are watching the developments and would surely draw their own conclusions, also has to be factored into its larger game plan in this part of the World.

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