

## RISING INSTABILITY QUOTIENT IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC: HOW SHOULD INDIA RESPOND?

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### ABSTRACT

The contemporary geopolitical environment in the Western Pacific is becoming increasingly unstable on account of intractable territorial disputes and overlapping maritime zone claims in the East and South China Seas. The tenuous Taiwan Strait dynamics further elevate the regional instability quotient. The resultant maritime security situation threatens the freedom of the seas for safe and unhindered navigation and overflight and will severely impact the sea-borne trade lifelines of the world. The revisionist outlook of China and its 'grey zone' approach to enforce its untenable maritime rights and interests lies at the root of almost all disputes. The global stakeholders must, therefore, collaboratively engage the challenger in dialogue, discussions and dissuasive efforts, with a view to seek conformance with the existing rules-based order. They must, however, concurrently develop capacities and capabilities for credible deterrence should these gambits not yield the desired outcomes. India, with an expansive vision of mutual and holistic advancement for security and growth across regions — as is amply evident from the evolution of its maritime policy of SAGAR into MAHASAGAR — must actively collaborate with the global stakeholders in maintaining the freedom and openness of the seas in the Western Pacific too.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, China, East China Sea, India, Indo-Pacific, MAHASAGAR, Philippines, PLA Navy, Rules-based Order, SAGAR, South China Sea, Senkakus, Taiwan Strait, UNCLOS

The vast Indo-Pacific region, extending from the west coast of the United States to the east coast of Africa, and forming about two-thirds of the earth's surface, is beset with a variety of geopolitical contestations, simmering tensions, underlying fault lines and consequent potential for conflict and instability. This predominantly maritime space encompasses the Pacific Ocean (probably better thought-of as the eastern segment of the Indo-Pacific) and the Indian Ocean (probably better termed the western segment of the Indo-Pacific). It is generally observed that the security challenges that threaten the freedom, openness and stability in the Indo-Pacific region mainly arise from the whole of the western Pacific littoral—ranging

from Russia's east coast to the Korean Peninsula, incorporating all the Japanese islands and covering the entire East- and South China Seas. The contentious territorial sovereignty disputes and overlapping maritime claims between various State actors — including Russia, Japan, China, North Korea, South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam — lie at the root of the tenuous regional situation.

This paper provides an overview of the prevailing contemporary geopolitical environment in the Western Pacific Ocean littoral, with a specific focus on the fragile maritime security situation arising out of the proactive actions taken by various State parties involved to enforce their rigid stances and safeguard their perceived 'maritime rights and interests'. Primary among this is the situation in the East China Sea (ECS), where the seemingly irreconcilable differences over territorial sovereignty and maritime rights between Japan and China have been turning the area into a 'hotbed' of military posturing, which has been analysed. Secondly, the existent volatile situation in and around the Taiwan Strait, where the acts of Chinese military coercion are casting an ominous shadow of confrontation, has been examined. Thirdly, the games of brinkmanship being played out in the South China Sea (SCS), where aggressive moves by China to unilaterally create 'a new normal' by continuous use of 'grey zone' tactics may cause serious escalation, have been briefly investigated. Finally, the lessons that India must draw from the prevalent situation in the Indo-Pacific and the options that New Delhi can exercise to further India's national interests are also explored.

## **EAST CHINA SEA (ECS) – A 'HOTBED' OF MILITARY POSTURING**

China and Japan have largely maintained an antagonistic relationship for quite a long time, having fought many wars, particularly over the last two centuries. Japan also invaded China on multiple occasions and captured many islands, including Taiwan, during this period. These Japanese campaigns inflicted large-scale misery and suffering on the Chinese populace, with women in particular subjected to physical abuse and dishonour. These horrific incidents still remain deeply lodged in the psyche of the Chinese people and occasionally resurface in the form of violent emotional outbursts. The Japanese campaign in the Second World War concluded ignominiously with Tokyo's unconditional surrender following the two nuclear explosions that resulted in death and destruction on a scale unimaginable

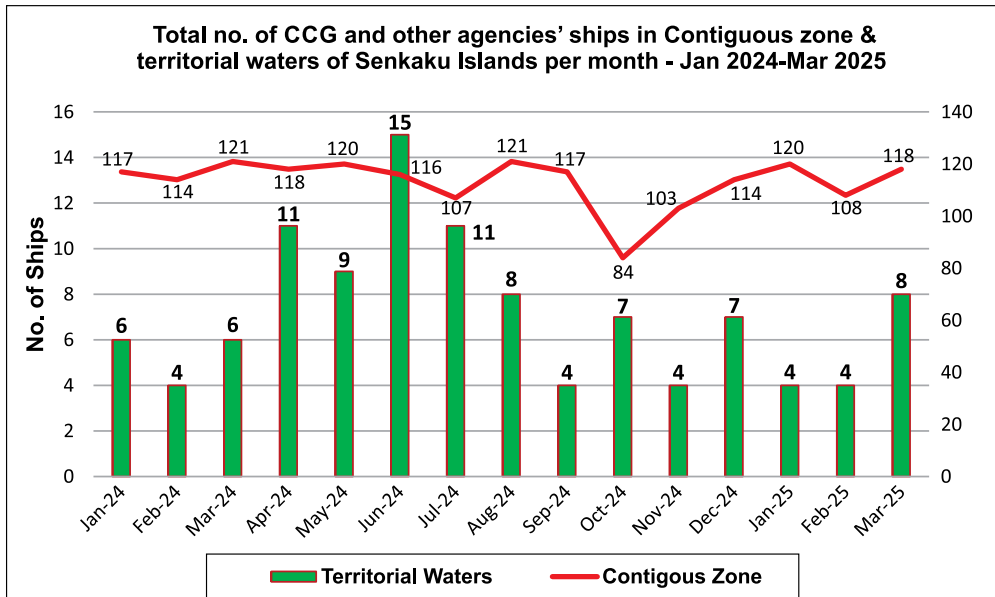
hitherto. In the period since, the Chinese communist Party leaders have sought to stoke the nationalistic sentiments of the Chinese population against the past Japanese excesses under a broad-brush rhetoric of never forgetting the “*century of humiliation*”.

In the contemporary context, the territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands — referred to as the Diaoyu Islands by China— and the competing claims over their surrounding maritime zones constitute a matter of great discord between the two countries. The situation around these islands, which continue to remain under the administrative control of Japan, were largely peaceful, except for unauthorised/illegal fishing by Chinese boats in the islands’ vicinity, and their occasional displays of aggressive behaviour and intent. The dispute regained international prominence after the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) detained a Chinese fishing vessel along with its crew on 07 September 2010, following a deliberate collision with two JCG ships in quick succession.<sup>1</sup>

Following that incident, and particularly after September 2012, when Japan nationalised three islets comprising the Senkakus — the *Uotsuri*, *Kitakojima* and *Minamikojima* —the ships of Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and other maritime administration began to be deployed on a regular basis in support of the Chinese claims. The maritime security scenario around these islands has steadily become more tense, with numerous CCG ships being continuously deployed throughout the year. These ships operate in the Japanese contiguous zone in large numbers almost on a daily basis, often crossing over into the islands’ territorial sea. Figure 1 below illustrates the monthly total CCG and other agency vessels operating in the contiguous zone of the islands and those crossing over into the Japanese territorial sea for the year 2024 and extending to 31 March 2025. This graph has been extracted from the original data published by the JCG from January 2008.

In addition, Chinese military aircraft and aerial drones, such as the BXK-005, WZ-7 and TB-001, regularly operate in the maritime areas surrounding the Senkaku Islands and fly close to the Japanese islands while crossing various international straits. Japan *per force*, has had to launch its JASDF aircraft to monitor, shadow or intercept the Chinese aircraft on almost every occasion. The fact that JASDF had to launch 722, 575, and 479 aircraft in 2021, 2022 and 2023, respectively, to challenge the Chinese aggressiveness in the skies, clearly indicates the large scale of the ongoing ‘war of nerves’.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1. Chinese Coast Guard and other ships around the Senkaku Islands



Source: Graph collated by the Author. Data derived from data published by the Japan Coast Guard since January 2008.<sup>3</sup>

Another issue between the countries relates to the dispute over resource exploitation of the *Chunxiao* gas fields in the East China Sea, which has arisen mainly due to the difference in interpretation of the extent of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982 (UNCLOS-1982). China asserts that the oilfields lie within its EEZ while Japan contends that they lie in an area where the maritime boundary remains unsettled and quotes the principle of median line adopted by UNCLOS-1982. While an uneasy truce prevails based on a mutual development agreement in June 2008, the unilateral exploitation of these fields by China on the one hand, and its wilful obstruction of any Japanese efforts to develop these resources, has generated active discord.

Over the last decade-plus, overtly aggressive activities by the Chinese PLA — mainly the PLA Navy (PLAN) and the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) — in the vicinity of the Japanese main and outlying islands in both, the Sea of Japan and the western Pacific Ocean, have seen a substantial rise, in consonance with the accelerated modernisation of China’s defence forces during this period. These actions have largely manifested themselves in the conduct of a series of military activities in

the waters surrounding Japan, including the two-way transit of Chinese warships and overflight of PLAAF aircraft through various straits separating the Japanese islands. Among such passages are the Soya, Tsugaru, Osumi and Miyako straits. Notably, Chinese aircraft carrier groups and the associated PLAAF and PLAN aircraft often pass through the Miyako Strait, either while proceeding for exercises in the Pacific Ocean or changing base ports between North-, East- and South Sea Fleet locations. Chinese submarines have also been detected operating in the surrounding Japanese waters — including in the contiguous zone of the Senkakus — with one serious incident involving the submerged passage of a nuclear submarine through the Japanese territorial sea.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese and the Russian navies, too, also been conducting bilateral exercises for the last five years, with ever-increasing frequency and scale, at various locations around Japan, and this further complicates the defence matrix for Japan, both in scope and geographic extent.

However, the intent of such activities, carried out by the PLA in peacetime, and shielded by stipulations of UNCLOS-1982 governing “*the right of transit passage through straits used for international navigation*” as a legal fig leaf, is quite obvious to Japan and the rest of the world. It is also quite apparent from an analysis of the data presented in the “*Defense of Japan 2024 (Digest)*” that the current military might of China far outweighs that of Japan in quantitative terms, and this critical disparity has widened considerably over the past decade. Just two comparative data-points should suffice to highlight this growing chasm. The first relates to the total tonnage of Chinese warships, which has registered an increase of 63 per cent, while that of Japan has increased by just 14.8 per cent. The second, and even more striking, development is in terms of aircraft numbers in the respective Air Forces—against an increase of 610 aircraft in the PLAAF, there has actually been a decrease of 50 in the JASDF.<sup>5</sup>

It is, therefore, entirely logical to conclude that the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF) will find it progressively more difficult to challenge the PLA’s aggressive activities in the maritime areas surrounding Japan. However, should the inordinately aggressive Chinese postures cross critical national security red-lines unacceptable to Japan, either inadvertently or by design, and given the fact that Japanese naval and aerial hardware is, in some cases at least, qualitatively superior, as also the fact that Tokyo enjoys a firm military security guarantee from Washington DC as its closest ally, the probability of a bloody Japan-China military confrontation occurring in future, cannot be ruled out.

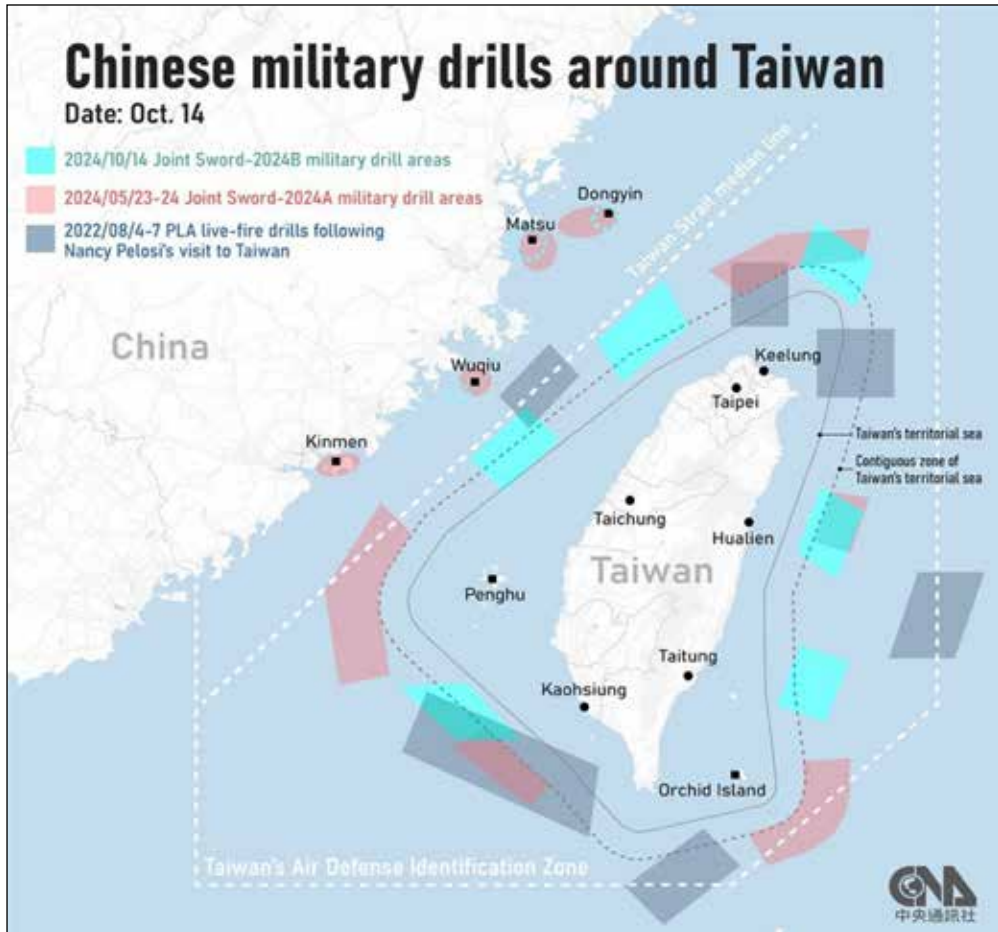
## TAIWAN STRAIT SITUATION – PRECARIOUSLY POISED

The security situation across the Taiwan Strait has remained extremely precariously poised since the visit of Ms Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, in August 2022. While across-Strait tensions have always been simmering with sporadic incidents ever since the 1990s, bringing it to a slow boil, the Nancy Pelosi incident provided China with just the right excuse to ratchet-up its proactive stance vis-à-vis Taiwan. The PLA Navy now openly engages in increased deployment and manoeuvres in the Taiwan Strait, as well as off the eastern coast of Taiwan. PLAAF aircraft and drones now fly across the median line on an almost-daily basis and intrude into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) at will.

China released a White Paper on Taiwan in August 2022, entitled “*The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era.*” As implied by the title itself, a ‘historically transformed’ and ‘rejuvenated China of the new era’ considers the current time-period as “*a new starting point for reunification*”, and that “*We [China] will always be ready to respond with the use of force or other necessary means to interference by external forces...*”<sup>6</sup> The release of this boldly stated White Paper —coinciding with the visit of Nancy Pelosi — has since been followed through with appropriate military-posturing and heightened patrolling by maritime law enforcement agencies, duly backed by a multi-pronged media, legal and psychological onslaught.<sup>7</sup> This proactive trend assumed particularly alarming portents during the ten-month period in 2024 — between the January elections in Taiwan, running through the Presidential inauguration in May and culminating with President Lai Ching-Te's first address on 10 October 2024 to mark Taiwan's 113th National Day.

The occasion-specific PLA deployments and exercises during this period were quite unambiguous about the firmness of the Chinese intent. Within just three days of Taiwan's new President assuming office on 20 May 2024, the Chinese PLA conducted a well-publicised Exercise ‘JOINT SWORD-2024-A’ at an unprecedented scale, encircling Taiwan. The 24-hour-long multi-domain exercise involved the PLAN ships and submarines, PLAAF aircraft, PLA Army's amphibious troops, PLA Rocket Force units, and CCG ships, for the first time. The exercise was spread over many areas all around Taiwan, and also brought the outlying islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, and Dongyin under its ambit.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 2. Areas of Exercise JOINT SWORD 2024 – Comparison between A and B Series



The blatant demonstration of intimidation was repeated just four days after the Taiwanese President's first National Day speech, as exercise JOINT SWORD 2024-B was conducted on 14 October 2024, at locations even closer to Taiwan, and with even greater intensity and a larger force, including the participation of the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier group. Beijing, of course, left nothing to the imagination, with the aim of the exercise JOINT SWORD 24-B being stated as:

*"... testing the joint operations capabilities of the Eastern Theatre command units in conducting sea- and air-based combat-readiness patrol, laying blockade against key Taiwanese ports, carrying out assault on maritime and ground targets, as also seize joint superiority in the combat-zone".<sup>9</sup>*

A diagram depicting the general locations of PLA's exercise JOINT SWORD 2024-B, along with its comparisons with the earlier exercise JOINT SWORD 2024-A of May 2024, as published by Taiwan's media, is reproduced in Figure 2.<sup>10</sup>

This escalatory trend in the PLA's overtly aggressive manoeuvres vis-à-vis Taiwan was amply evident from China's Exercise STRAIT THUNDER 2025-A, conducted on 01 and 02 April 2025, wherein 38 PLA Navy ships, 12 government vessels and 135 PLAAF aircraft participated, with the objective of seizing control of key areas and controlling chokepoints.<sup>11</sup> It may just be that the top Chinese Communist Party leadership still harbours some doubts about the PLA's capability to pull it off with successful results.

However, this supposed reticence on the part of Beijing does not alter one bit the long-held Chinese conviction of 'reunifying'. The progressive increase in the tempo of Chinese military exercises around Taiwan, when read in combination with the firmness of intent and appropriateness of timing articulated in the Taiwan White Paper of August 2022, should leave one in no doubt about the possibility of this horrific event occurring, sooner rather than later. The global media speculation, duly fuelled by occasional statements from senior US military officials, has already posted a possible timeline of 2027 for this eventuality.<sup>12</sup>

## SOUTH CHINA SEA (SCS) – A PLAYGROUND OF BRINKMANSHIP

China staked its maritime claim to nearly 90 per cent of the South China Sea (SCS) by publicly asserting, in a note to the United Nation's Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UN CLCS) in May of 2009, that it "... *enjoyed sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, as well as seabed and sub-soil thereof*". It sought legitimacy for this expansive and legally untenable claim by attaching the "nine-dash line" map to the aforementioned note.<sup>13</sup> China had earlier forcibly captured Johnson South Reef from Vietnam in 1988 and occupied the Mischief Reef of the Philippines in 1995. China continues to hold them to date and has subsequently built artificial islands on them and five other features in addition — some of which are barely visible specks during low tide — by large-scale reclamation, in absolute contravention of

the customary law of the sea. The humongous scale of reclamation can be gauged from the fact that China has built airfields of 3,000 meters in length on three of them — the Mischief, Subi, and Fiery Cross reefs.

The proactive Chinese activities in support of their so-called ‘maritime rights and interests’ in the SCS have seen the adoption of a particularly aggressive stance against the Philippines. The Chinese fishing fleet, maritime militia vessels, and CCG ships, using various combinations of ‘grey zone tactics’, have been consistently blocking the access of the Philippines’ naval ships and government vessels, including those of its coast guard, to various islands and features within the EEZ of the Philippines. They have also been systematically harassing the Filipino fishermen and disrupting their fishing activities in and around these features. The prime areas of repeated China-Philippines stand-offs in the SCS — all within the EEZ of the Philippines, particularly since the heightening of bilateral tensions in 2012, are Scarborough Shoal, the Second Thomas Shoal, and the Sabina Shoal.

Although the International Court of Arbitration at the Hague, issued a ruling in favour of the Philippines in 2016, rendering all the maritime areas in the SCS “... encompassed by the ‘nine-dash line’ as contrary to the Convention [UNCLOS] and without lawful effect” and that “China has violated the sovereign rights of the Philippines over various features within that country’s EEZ”,<sup>14</sup> Beijing simply refused to recognise the award on certain specious technical grounds. In fact, ASEAN countries, having sensed the unilaterally revisionist tendencies of China soon after its use of force against Vietnam and the Philippines in the 1980s and 1990s, managed to collectively negotiate a “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” (DOC) with China in November 2002. However, the non-binding nature of the DOC turned out to be its greatest drawback, as China continued to override its provisions to suit its interests while maintaining a façade of collaborative pretence.

The ineffectiveness of the DOC in checking the Chinese ‘salami slicing’ tactics in the SCS led to another concerted effort by the ASEAN Bloc to negotiate a fresh “Code of Conduct” (COC) with China. However, while the COC negotiations have continued to languish for some two decades, China purposefully goes about pursuing its revisionist agenda. As a result of such wrangling, ASEAN stands fragmented into four distinctly discernible groups on the SCS issue:

- (a) Those in active dispute with China — Vietnam and the Philippines

- (b) Countries facing minor, but resolvable issues in SCS — Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia
- (c) Countries seen to be siding with China — Cambodia, Laos
- (d) Countries having no direct dispute with China and maintaining an independent stance – Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar

China, of course, stands to benefit from this divided ASEAN house, and prefers to deal bilaterally with each of these countries, with a view to arrive at a negotiated settlement on its own terms, and in favour of its own national interests, by leveraging the vast differential between their diplomatic, military, informational and economic (DIME) strengths. This Chinese strategy certainly seems to be succeeding when one views countries like Malaysia and Indonesia adopting a soft and reconciliatory approach despite China occasionally riding roughshod over their sovereignty and maritime claims in the SCS. Vietnam has similarly advocated the use of ‘bamboo diplomacy’<sup>15</sup> despite irregular Chinese activities in the Vietnamese EEZ, as also provocative acts such as the promulgation of new baselines in the Gulf of Tonkin, despite a longstanding mutually agreed delimitation of the international boundary.

It is, thus, quite possible that China, in the near future, may unilaterally take aggressive actions to change the *status-quo* in the SCS by forcefully grabbing certain disputed features through the use of its ‘grey zone’ warfare assets and tactics. The foremost country that is likely to face the brunt of China’s use of force is the Philippines, and the first domino to fall could well be the Second Thomas Shoal. Beijing is possibly playing a waiting game *vis-à-vis* the Philippine Navy’s landing ship, the *Sierra Madre*, which has remained aground, while remaining a commissioned warship and still flying the Philippines flag, for close to three decades on that shoal. Beijing appears to be waiting patiently for the highly corroded ship to sink of its own accord, before making further aggressive moves.

The second plausible target could be the Scarborough Shoal, where the Chinese maritime militia vessels, fishing fleet, and the CCG ships — often working in unison — have been systematically denying access to Filipino fishermen, government vessels, the Philippines Coast Guard (PCG), and even warships of the Philippines Navy, since 2012.<sup>16</sup> This fractious matter again came to a head when the current Marcos Jr administration assumed a harder stance *vis-à-vis* the protection of its sovereign rights within its EEZ in 2023. The Philippines further

Figure 3. Chinese baselines around Scarborough Shoal



Source: Benar News

sought to formalise its claim to this shoal — and also to other features in SCS within its jurisdiction — by including them in its two newly passed laws, namely, the “Philippine Maritime Zones Act” (PMZA) and the “Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act” (PASLA).<sup>17</sup> China, in response, promulgated new baselines around the shoal in November 2024 — as illustrated in Figure 3 — to provide legal cover to its access-control gambit, and sought to cement its claim by submitting its coordinates to the United Nations a month later.<sup>18</sup>

China raked up yet another point of dispute when one CCG ship repeatedly rammed an anchored PCG vessel (*BRP Teresa Magbanwa*) at Sabina Shoal in August of 2024, and punched a gaping hole into its hull.<sup>19</sup>

Since the Philippines and the US are treaty allies, the US Department of Defense (DOD) has been actively supporting the capacity-building and capability-enhancement efforts of the Philippines, both in terms of the transfer of platforms

and equipment, as well as training the Philippines' navy and PCG and jointly exercising with them. In addition, the US Navy has increased its proactive presence in the SCS, often deploying two aircraft carrier groups in tandem. Japan, too, has committed to supporting the Philippines through the sale of large Coast Guard vessels and by offering soft loans and grants for the building of more ships for the PCG.

The resultant situation, arising out of the confrontational big-power dynamics, irreconcilable territorial sovereignty and maritime zones' claims, and the related national sensitivities of the disputants, is certainly quite volatile. Therefore, acts of brinkmanship, whether by use of 'grey zone' tactics or by way of overt posturing implying the 'threat of use of force', certainly have the potential to escalate into an open conflict with terrible consequences for all concerned.

## LESSONS TO LEARN FROM THE WESTERN PACIFIC INSTABILITY

Given the inherently unstable geopolitical environment in the Western Pacific littoral, and China being a common denominator in bringing about such a state of affairs in each of the connected subregions mentioned above — and even succeeding to variable degrees, with largely 'less-than-robust' opposition from affected stakeholders — one needs to remain cognisant of the possibility of a somewhat changed 'global order'. In such an environment, the current 'balance of power' model, wherein almost all countries in the littoral wish to benefit from comprehensive economic relations with China, while concurrently expecting national security assurance from the US, will just not be feasible. In such a situation, the affected countries would *per-force* have to make hard choices between the US and China.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, there are already debates raging the world-over with regard to the US's ability and/or willingness to provide an absolute security umbrella to its treaty allies; and equally serious questions are being raised by its 'like-minded' partners about its often-shifting intent and priorities. In this 'zero-sum' kind of game, the emergence of a 'China-centric' world order — however far-fetched it may appear at present — does fall well within the realms of a realistic imagination.<sup>21</sup>

The foremost lesson that the global policymakers must derive from the emergent situation in the Western Pacific region is that the current rules-based and time-

tested global order must be preserved at all costs, so as to prevent the possibility of an altered ‘balance of power’ in favour of states with a known revisionist agenda. However, it is more than apparent that China, with its propensity to always create a ‘new normal’ in the Western Pacific Ocean — and elsewhere as is its wont — is not quite amenable to the dialogue and discussions within the tenets of the existing global order, based on international conventions, treaties, customary laws and the rules framed by global governing institutions. Beijing is especially wary of discussions in the multilateral format, but wants to participate in as many such forums as possible so that it can shape its policy prescriptions to its inherent advantage from within.

Another option available to the global community is ‘dissuasion’ through multi-pronged opposition to revisionist mind-sets and activities, and collective efforts at disapproval, condemnation or isolation. This effort, however, requires a strong and united front to be presented by a large group of countries, which is very hard to accomplish in the contemporary global environment, with nations persisting with differing viewpoints, priorities, international relations compulsions and, above all, widely varying national interests. The resultant absence of robust, unified mechanisms to mount sufficient pressure on the challenger to conform to the provisions of the established rules-based global order may render such initiatives largely ineffective and thus causing them to fall well short of the desired outcome. Another factor that makes this effort even more daunting is that China also has its own group of ‘friends’, which it has nurtured through the various resources at its disposal. Such ‘friends’ of China often work at ‘cross-purposes’ and end up further diluting the intended power of ‘dissuasion’.

That leaves only one option, that of ‘deterrence’, which is well-nigh impossible to exercise for any one country on its own, however powerful, capable and resource-rich it may be. This again calls for a substantial degree of collaborative effort, sincerity of purpose, and the commitment of a large quantity of financial, technological, and human resources, all on a long-term basis. In order for this option to succeed, the countries that actually stand to be most adversely affected must make a concerted decision to develop punitive capabilities to retaliate in the all-encompassing realm of multi-domain warfare. This, however, appears to be an even taller order than the concept of collaborative ‘dissuasion’, but if the world truly understands the perils of living in a China-centric global order, there is no option but to give it an honest trial.

## RESPONSE OPTIONS FOR INDIA

The dynamically fluid geopolitical environment in the Western Pacific and the surcharged atmosphere on account of the intractable stances and non-negotiable positions adopted by certain countries therein leave very little manoeuvring room for external players, including India, many of whose maritime interests lie in that region.<sup>22</sup> This makes it imperative for the country to carefully weigh its options and response plans with a view to safeguarding its national interests to the best possible extent. The Western Pacific region also qualifies as a major area of interest on yet another parameter, that is, one “*based on considerations of Indian diaspora, overseas investments and political relations.*”<sup>23</sup>

Since these factors form an intrinsic part of India’s national interest in the Western Pacific, New Delhi must respond to the current developments in the region with measured adroitness. However, it would be quite unrealistic for India to intervene militarily at such extended distances. Therefore, other levers of the DIME construct — the diplomatic, informational, military and economic — must be suitably exercised, either in standalone mode or in various combinations, for ensuring the best possible outcomes. Some such measures are mentioned below:<sup>24</sup>

- (a) Ensure that Taiwan continues to exist as an independent State, free from overt threats of reunification, so that it continues to occupy the ‘front-side focus’ of China. To that end, India could look at a more nuanced ‘One China Policy’.
- (b) Build additional capabilities to mount punitive countermeasures in the Indian Ocean while steadfastly refusing to let China change the *status-quo* on the land border. In fact, a heightened level of the Indian naval posturing in the Indian Ocean may be demonstrated, to coincide with specific developments when excessive Chinese brinkmanship in the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea is observed. This will convey a strategic message of nuanced Indian concerns *vis-à-vis* its interest in the Western Pacific, with the additional benefit of keeping Beijing busy in deciphering the actual Indian intent.
- (c) India may either increase the frequency of its annual naval overseas deployments in the Western Pacific or extend their duration, and must also provide greater publicity of these events in the international media.

ASEAN member-states should also be requested to highlight the activities of Indian naval ships, with their own narratives of greater cooperation and like-mindedness.

(d) India must oppose any attempts by China to unilaterally change the *status quo* in the East China Sea and the SCS, with regard to Beijing's expansive claims over various features and excessive maritime claims, in as many forums as possible. In this context, India's nuanced change of tack with respect to the arbitral award of July 2016 favouring the plea of Philippines, where it emphasised on "...*the need for peaceful settlement of disputes and for 'adherence' to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea ...*" is, indeed, quite noteworthy.<sup>25</sup>

(e) Since India does not identify with the so-called 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' due to the serious sovereignty- and territorial integrity concerns — and has therefore remained out of the Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), too — this project should be referred to in India and by Indian interlocutors including our diplomats in Indian missions abroad, as the "*China Pakistan-occupied Kashmir Economic Corridor*" (CPOKEC) to convey India's symbolic opposition. This could somewhat even out the renaming gambit that China has been engaged in at many locations, including some in the Indian territory of Arunachal Pradesh.

(f) Finally, India must advocate the necessity of keeping the PLA busy on multiple fronts from different directions, and the members of the QUAD grouping can play a very active part in this effort. Japan could deploy more of its JMSDF, JCG and JASDF assets off the Senkaku Islands and also to actively shadow the PLA warships and aircraft crossing various straits under its jurisdiction. Japan's proactive engagement with the Philippines by way of financial, material and diplomatic support in response to the Chinese 'grey zone' posturing in the South China Sea is a welcome development. Continual freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) through the Taiwan Strait by the US Navy ships, as also by warships of a few other like-minded stakeholders, in addition to the US Navy's FONOP sailings around the Chinese claimed features in the Paracel and Spratly islands, will also ensure the engagement of sizeable PLA forces in the area.

## CONCLUSION

The inherently unstable maritime security environment in the Indo-Pacific, driven by complicated geopolitical dynamics between the regional littoral States, presents a huge area of concern for the largely interconnected world. The majority of global commodity- and energy trade, moving along the international shipping lanes (ISLs), forms the economic lifeline of almost all countries. Therefore, it is in the utmost interest of all stakeholders to ensure that the seaborne connectivity through the Pacific Ocean is not interrupted on account of the serious instability that is taking root in the Western Pacific.

The US has been the acknowledged stabilising factor in the region and has been providing alliance-based security cover to many countries for more than half a century, with its forward military presence also ensuring reasonably 'free, open and secure' commercial activities through the seas. India, as a maritime power of some consequence and having a substantial stake in the free flow of its trade through that region, must also take suitable measures to keep the ISLs open and, in times of tension or conflict, to keep its SLOCs protected. In fact, the inherent instability in the western Pacific must be viewed as an opportunity for India to lend more intensity and heft to its 'Act East' Policy by proactively leveraging its good relations with countries like the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, and Russia. As a logical extension of this endeavour, serious thought must be given to progressively extending the growing economic and people-to-people relations with Taiwan into the diplomatic realm too.

India has recently (in March of 2024) expanded the scope and extent of its 2014 maritime policy, earlier encapsulated in the acronym "SAGAR" (Security and Growth for All in the Region), thereby generating a new acronym "MAHASAGAR" (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) that encapsulates its current maritime policy.<sup>26</sup> Just one letter "S" that has been added to the word 'Region' of the previous articulation of a decade hence, denotes the aspirational spread of India's maritime outreach to the entire Indo-Pacific, and even beyond. The Indian Navy, as the most easily projectable force — and mandated with the discharge of multifarious missions that fall within its combat, diplomatic, constabulary, and benign roles — is undoubtedly the most appropriate instrument to undertake the several tasks that are and will be associated with this maritime policy of 'MAHASAGAR'. In fulfilment of this endeavour, the Indian

Navy will automatically be the prime actor to initiate the implementation of the recommended response options for India within the Indo-Pacific.

## ENDNOTES

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