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World's New Battleground

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the current geo-political scenario which is creating a storm in the South China Sea. It explicitly discusses China's foreign policy with respect to the South China Sea. The region has received global attention because of the fact that more than US \$ 3 trillion in trade passes through it. China adamantly desires complete control of the region. The sea route is akin to China's lifeline because 80% of its energy imports are routed through the region.

It emphasises historical claims to the region. However, as a matter of fact, they date back to 1947 only. The government of Chiang Kai-shek drew the "eleven-dash line" on Chinese maps depicting the South China Sea. In 1953, the People's Republic of China modified Chiang's conception into a "nine-dash line" by erasing two dashes in the Gulf of Tonkin. China's claims are in contravention of international law, which does not recognise claims based on historical rights.

It uses a strategy that it deems a cabbage strategy to capture islands present in the region. It surrounds the islands with as many ships as possible to cordon off access to it. Moreover, satellite images show Chinese ships pumping sand and rocks to construct artificial islands. It is converting underwater reefs into military bases by making artificial islands.

Such activities have led to a tussle in the area between major superpowers like USA and China. An all-out war between these nuclear heavyweights seems improbable at this moment. However, any flare-up in the region can escalate the conflict. Regional countries have a crucial role to play in such skirmishes. They tend to make their maritime claims vague, thereby maximising their maritime territory, which makes an amicable resolution of the dispute extremely strenuous.

Keywords: USA, China, South China Sea.

I. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is all over the news. It lies among China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines and Taiwan. It is a connection between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Why is there so much emphasis on this part of the world? The South China Sea has huge amounts of oil and gas resources. It has 12% of global fish catch and more than 50% of the world's shipping vessels. The sea acts as a maritime lane for 1/3 of the world's shipping vessels.

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As a result, it is one of the most important sea trade routes. More than US \$ 3 trillion in trade passes through it. China is adamant about dominating the region. It claims the whole of the South China Sea as its own. Because of such high stakes involved, the region has received global attention. Major powers, particularly the USA, severely criticise China's activities in the South China Sea. Areas such as Paracel Islands, Scarborough Shoal and Spratly Islands are contested by regional countries in the Sea. But why does China consider this sea as its lifeline? One reason is that 80% of its energy imports are routed via this sea. If it does not have control over the sea, then it will be crippled for energy resources.

Moreover, it is an established fact that China is a manufacturing hub for major companies. Big companies ranging from Starbucks to Apple have their supply chains in the country. This makes a large chunk of the global economy dependent on China. It has a trade surplus with most of the countries to which it trades. Hence, it can be inferred that it maintains a favourable balance of trade equation with most countries. Due to the low labor cost of the country, corporates find it beneficial to set up their plants. China provides a feasible mode of transportation via the South China sea. Transportation of goods by land is too time-consuming. Transportation by air requires a lot of expenditure on the part of companies. Due to such factors, companies are able to manufacture at less cost and ensure booming profits. Ships carry goods from Chinese ports and pass through Malacca Straits to reach the rest of Asia and Europe. Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia are surrounding the Malacca Strait. In contemporary geo-political climate, it can be observed that USA is having influence over these countries. China has fears regarding this issue. From a strategic perspective, it needs to control the activities of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. In a potential escalation of conflicts USA might persuade these countries to place naval warships in Malacca Strait and block China's access. In such a dynamic scenario China would be pushed to the ropes. It cannot use any other sea route. Other sea routes are not viable for prosperous trade. Using other routes would take considerable time and overall trade would suffer. This would impact China's economy severely. It might go into a regressive state. If it goes into a war with USA during that time, it would not be able to support its military expenditure without economic prosperity. This would be a major roadblock for China in a potential war. From a long-term perspective, the economy would be ruined. Countries like Philippines also share a bitter relationship with China. If the Filipinos decide to side with USA, it can play a crucial role in geo-politics. In a potential war, it can cause major problems for China given its strategic geographical location. Due to its close proximity to Chinese maritime boundaries, it can inflict serious damages. To counter these situations, China tries to have

control over whole of South China Sea. Through such control it can keep a check on the activities of other states and ensure its interests are not threatened.

China regularly says it has historical claims over the entire region. However, this proposition is fallacious. It is not centuries old as they claim it to be. They go back to 1947. The nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek drew the "eleven-dash line" on Chinese maps depicting South China Sea. The ruling Kuomintang party proclaimed that the entire area would come under China's sovereignty. Chiang was enchanted by the Nazi concept of an expanded Lebensraum (living space). He wanted to create an expanded living space for Chinese. He believed German fascism to be a model for China. In an attempt to establish such a living space, cartographers of the ruling regime drew a U-shaped line consisting of 11 dashes. This cartographic coup was adopted by People's Republic of China following the triumph of Chinese Communist Party in the civil war in 1949. It modified Chiang's conception into a "nine-dash line" by erasing two dashes in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1953. The interpretation of these lines has become very confusing for the regional players. It has become challenging to understand whether the gaps between two consecutive lines denote that Chinese would not lay claim over that area. Under Article 57 of the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a sovereign has an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) up to 200 nautical miles from its coastline. Article 57 further elaborates that the State can construct artificial islands in this perimeter. UNCLOS rejects the idea of justification of claims based on historical rights. It logically follows that China's claims are in clear contravention of the international law. This is because it claims the entire South China Sea which is well beyond 200 nautical miles. On 22 January 2013, the Republic of the Philippines instituted arbitral proceedings against the People's Republic of China under Annex VII to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. China was vehemently opposed to the proceedings. It did not participate in it. According to the files of Permanent Court of Arbitration, on 1 July 2015, the Chinese Ambassador to the Kingdom of the Netherlands sent a letter to the members of the Tribunal recalling China's "consistent policy and practice of [resolving] the disputes related to territory and maritime rights and interests with States directly concerned through negotiation and consultation" and noting China's "legitimate right" under the Convention not to "accept any imposed solution or any unilateral resorting to a third-party settlement," a right that it considered the Philippines breached by initiating the arbitration. China puts the spotlight on the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). DOC states that countries should resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes via consultations and negotiations.

Spratly Island is at the heart of the conflict. Any country that can control it can extend their EEZ to include a substantial portion of the South China Sea. China is clearly using force and intimidation to control the South China Sea. Satellite images show Chinese ships pumping sand and rocks to construct artificial islands. For example, in 2014 Fiery Cross Island was an underwater reef. But two years later it became a Chinese military base. Satellite images show air strip, missile defense system etc. By constructing these islands, it is essentially making naval bases to support ships. With enhanced support for the ships, it can control more area. In 2017, a US destroyer ship sailed just 12 miles from China's artificial island in Subi reef. China sent its own destroyer and patrol boats as a warning. It uses a strategy that it deems as cabbage strategy to take islands in the region. It surrounds the islands with as many ships as possible to cordon off access to it. For example, in May 2013, it sent fishing boats, surveillance ships and navy destroyers to Ayungin Shoal which is 105 nautical miles from Philippines. This demonstrates that Ayungin Shoal is within the EEZ of Philippines according to UNCLOS. It had 8 soldiers stationed there. Like leaves of a cabbage Chinese ships sealed the area and created a blockade for food and supplies. China also has conflicts regarding oil rigs in the contested waters. On 4 May 2014, Vietnamese and Chinese naval vessels collided in the contested waters near the Paracel Islands. Vietnamese justified their move of sending naval vessels by arguing that it wanted to stop China from constructing an oil rig. To protect its claim in South China Sea, China desires to be a blue water navy in Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. A blue water navy is essentially a naval force that can monitor the movements of naval vessels across the entire ocean. In the world there are currently just two countries with blue water navies- USA and Russia. South east Asian countries view Chinese claims as a thorn in their flesh.

The power algorithms are changing throughout the world rapidly. Last century power converged in the Atlantic Ocean. This century power is believed to be converging in Indo-Pacific region, particularly the South China Sea. Countries are nowadays changing their alliances. States are looking at the geo-political scenario with a different outlook. The foreign policy of the countries supports this claim. Some military analysts say that there will be a war in South China Sea in future. For example, Steve Bannon, White House chief strategist and one of President Trump's closest advisors, is certain that the USA will go to war in this region. However, given the nuclear capabilities of the two countries, an all-out war would be catastrophic. Hence, to abstain from this, the issue of the South China Sea remains in legal and diplomatic realms with minor clashes occasionally. This issue regarding maritime territory overlooks grave consequences to the coral reefs. The problem of competing for maritime claims cannot be solved bilaterally. It can only be solved multilaterally because many states are

claimants of the disputed islands. However, these countries tend to make their claims vague and maximize their maritime territory. No sovereign is willing to make a compromise. Since a long time, the strongest navies in the South China Sea belonged to external powers. The USA, with its naval supremacy, was never interested in resolving the issue over the disputed maritime claims. It just wanted to maintain tranquillity in the area. It was solely concerned with the open access to the sea lane. As long as the regional players were not engaged in a war in the South China Sea, USA's vested interest was not hampered. The prospects of resolving this dispute through peaceful means look dull because of the non-involvement of a superpower. Any flare-up in the region can escalate the conflict. Such a probability can lead to an arms race. States would be armed to their teeth to ensure that they have the upper hand in any future conflict.

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