



China's Land Reclamation in the South China Sea: Implications for the Region

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In the midst of recent spats in the South China Sea over land reclamations, China released its Military Strategy White Paper in May 2015. While China and Vietnam have been involved in land reclamation and counter land reclamation in the Sea, the US is demanding greater freedom of navigation in the disputed sea. A Pentagon report released on May 8, 2015 has also confirmed that China has embarked on land reclamation in a big way. China's assertive posture seems to be demonstrated by reports that it has allegedly deployed mobile artillery weapons on a reclaimed island. While Vietnam's assertive response and the US public pronouncement about the disputed sea are not akin to China's interests, Beijing is moving forward on its assertive posture on the South China Sea, a development which is not in the interest of regional peace and harmony. According to the Chinese White Paper:

On the issues concerning China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some of its offshore neighbours take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands that they have illegally occupied. Some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China. It is thus a long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests.

China lays claims of sovereignty over a group of reefs, islets, atolls, sand cays, banks and islands in the South China Sea. The dispute involves the overlapping claims of territorial sovereignty and maritime rights by six governments, namely Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. China virtually claims the entire South China Sea through the nine-dashed line explanation, which was submitted to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLCS) in May 2009.

China's Artificial Islands

In the past few months, there have been reports of China being involved in land reclamation efforts and constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea. Till now, China has reclaimed at least 2,000 acres of land and has also reportedly developed infrastructure in the form of ports, fuel storage depots, air strips and radar sites. The artificial islands, it is believed, would be used as military outposts by China. The construction has been met with staunch protests from the Vietnamese and the Filipino sides, but China responded back by calling its activities falling “within the scope of China’s sovereignty” and a measure to improve navigation safety in the sea. China also portrays such activities as not directed at any country and just to safeguard its own national interests.

Nevertheless, these islands will not only help China in reinforcing its claims on the islands, but also in extending its armed forces’ area of operation. Moreover, it would provide China with a free hand to monitor and safeguard the Sea Line of Communication (SLOC). The Sea not only encompasses the main SLOC that connects Southeast Asia with Northeast Asia with almost 80 percent of China’s crude oil imports passing through it, but also covers large fishing area and is home to vast reserves of oil and natural gas.

However, these developments are resulting into mounting tensions between Vietnam and China as Vietnam has also began to reclaim land at Vietnamese-controlled Sand Cay and West London Reef in the Spratly Islands. On May 14, Vietnam, for the first time admitted that it has carried out some construction activities but termed it as “normal and lawful”. While China’s move has been seen as expansionist, Vietnam refers to it as a retaliatory measure taken in its own territory to defend the country against a possible

aggression. Interestingly, the latest Chinese land reclamation activities are done in areas near the Vietnamese bases.

US-China Row in the South China Sea

Of late, the US has become firm and open on the issue of the South China Sea. With the White House Press Secretary, Josh Earnest's press statement mentioning that the "Situation in South China Sea is critical to the national security interest of the United States", the tension between the US and China has risen. China, which has been challenging the US *Pivot to Asia* policy, opposes the US interference in the South China Sea dispute. The fresh tensions on the issue are giving the US and Vietnam opportunities to inch closer to each other. The recently concluded visit of the US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter should also be seen in that context. In order to counter China's assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region, the US seems to be helping Vietnam and other countries of the region to boost their military capabilities. In one of the recent moves, the US pledged to give US\$18 million to help Vietnam buy US' Metal Shark patrol boat. Further, US Defence Secretary, Ashton Carter, at the Shangri-la dialogue in Singapore on May 30, 2015, proposed to establish 'the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative'. The main purpose of the proposal is to contain China's maritime ambitions in the South China Sea and prepare countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines militarily, which would act as deterrence and keep the status quo intact.

Is South China Sea Dispute the Next Flashpoint?

Clearly, with a mention in the Military Strategy White Paper and latest moves in the South China Sea, China is exhibiting its assertive posture. China is already considering setting up an Air Defence Identification Zone over the Sea. With these developments, China's relations with the countries of the Southeast Asian region would be at stake.

While the US has, time and again, been issuing statements on the South China Sea issue, it has short-term impact on China's bilateral relationship with the US. However, such statements by the US have been rhetorical as nothing substantial has been done by the US to put diplomatic and military pressure on China. It still remains to be seen, first, whether the US is ready to give a new meaning to its *Pivot to Asia* by assuming greater responsibility

in the South China Sea and; secondly, what impact will the US efforts to boost the military capabilities of the regional allies will have on the resolution of the South China Sea dispute.

The impact of China's assertive postures in the South China Sea is likely to be twofold:

- This would not only further damage China's good neighbourly policy, but also fuel the apprehensions of several stakeholders in the region including Indonesia which is not a direct party in the dispute but apprehensive of China's Nine Dash Line and encroachment in Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone. Land reclamation activities are already increasing mistrust. Eventually, this would prove to be an obstacle in realising China's One Belt, One Road initiative, mainly its maritime leg, Maritime Silk Road (MSR); and
- Second, the US has already started extending military assistance to develop military capabilities of Vietnam and the Philippines, a trend that is also noticed in case of US-Japan relations. Though the US is still slow on adding a military dimension in improving relations with Vietnam, and defence cooperation is yet to achieve its full potential, militarily stronger Vietnam and the US-Vietnam bonhomie over the South China Sea dispute are certainly not in China's interest.

While no military confrontation would take place in the near future, the tension level has certainly risen. The mention of the South China Sea and the US along with the countries involved in the conflict indicates that China's approach would remain uncompromising and unaccommodating. The land reclamation activities of China and Vietnam in the South China Sea have seemingly aggravated the situation with the potential to raise alarm among the other Southeast Asian countries regarding China's increasingly assertive postures. In essence, it is imperative for the region to look for an 'out of the box' solution to the South China Sea dispute, which do not seem in offing with the declaration of the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea in its present form, lack of enough interests shown by the US and insignificant military capabilities of the Southeast Asian countries vis-à-vis China.

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