

Maritime Security Challenges in South China Sea

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Abstract: The South China Sea region is a part and parcel of Indo-Pacific region and it has emerged as a major maritime challenge, not only for the littorals and the contending states, but for all the users and the stakeholders as well. Most of the scholars assume the fact that the simmering disputes and resort to brinkmanship pose a serious threat to the peace and stability in this region. Moreover, the geo strategic significance of the South China Sea is very difficult to overstate and this sea functions as the threat of the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. A large part of India trade passes through this area that provides a transit between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. Moreover, the universal aim of all the maritime parties like Australia, South Korea, Japan, India and the US revolves around maintaining peace and stability while ensuring the freedom of

navigation and unhindered access to the movement of shipping trade across the region. But the China has always opposed external disturbance in this region. Reason behind it is that the China always claims that this region belongs to her territorial interests. That is why; the US arrival in this region may disturb the peace process in South Asian countries. Now it is obvious that the maritime threats and challenges affecting this region demand a closer maritime bondage and cooperation among the rivalry forces. Some of the scholars suggest that ASEAN can play a vital role to create a peace and stability in this region and China should also cooperate with the maritime powers to continue trade facility in the region. Moreover, China should respect the decision of International Court regarding the matter of Philippines in the context of South China Sea. The present research paper highlights the

maritime security challenges in South China Sea.

Keywords: South China Sea (SCS), Security Challenges, Regional Powers, Peace and Stability, Navigation, Militarization, ASEAN.

Introduction: The fact is that security challenges in South China Sea are very significant, and China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines have always compete their jurisdictional claim, particularly over the rights to exploit the region's possibly extensive reserves of natural resources such as gas and oil. Moreover, maritime countries demand for the freedom of navigation which is the most contentious security issue, especially between the China and the US. over the right of the U.S. Military vessel to operate in China's 200 miles '*Exclusive Economic Zone*' (EEZ). Actually, the U.S. efforts to intervene in this region and the China as a claimant of the South China Sea have intensified the tension areas and security concerns. Consequently, China has embarked on a substantial, modernization of its maritime paramilitary forces as well as

naval capabilities to enforce its sovereignty and jurisdiction claims by forceful means if its need an essential effort on her side. Moreover, the strategic warning signals have also highlighted the risk of conflict regarding the territorial and strategic interest of the China and the US in the region. That is why; the rising U.S. – China mistrust and intensifying bilateral strategic competition would like managing such a crisis more difficult in the region of South China Sea.

The Strategic Significance of the South China Sea: Most of the scholars and strategic analysts assume the fact that the geographical location of this region is strategically very important in Indo-Pacific relations, particularly for the maritime powers and it provides a linkage between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, it is a very crucial shipping channel about half of the world's trade and has emerged as a global flash point. Being a major maritime challenge, not only for the littorals and the contending states, it is also very difficult to overstate the geostrategic significance of the South

China Sea. Never the less we can't ignore the fact that it functions as the throat of the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, this region carries nearly \$ 1.2 trillion in US trade annually and also represents energy life line to the energy deficient states in North-East Asia and China. Moreover half of the India trade through the area passes through the region that provides a transit between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, ensuring the rapid shipment of goods and deployment of the armed forces by the rivalry powers, the US and the China, which has intensified the problem of geo-strategic security concerns in the region.

Furthermore, this region is rich in natural resources and holds a very significant amount of the energy resources. Now it is estimated that South China Sea has the oil reserves of 7.7 billion barrels with a approximate total of 24 billion barrels reserves of natural resources. Its natural gas reserves of 7,500 km (266 trillion cubic feet) make it virtual fountainhead of hydrocarbon energy. That is why; intending to dominate the region, the China and the U.S. have been playing a

vital role to stabilize and encourage the process of peace and stability in this region. Now it is very obvious that the geo-strategic importance of the region have also stated many maritime threats and security challenges in Indo-Pacific relations. Some of the scholars also assume that India has emerged as an important facet of the US pivot or rebuilding strategy in Asia. The China's attitude towards India have always been very suspicious and biased, particularly rather than other regional maritime powers. Here it is also noteworthy that in the South China Sea, large scale land reclamation and militarization activities have been taking place, which in turn may have raise many tensions and security concerns in the coming years. Moreover, the South China Sea contains Japan's and Australia's vital and energy resources depend. Therefore, these maritime powers also have a legitimate claim to express their serious security concern in the region.

Security Challenges in the South China Sea: Some of the foreign policy and strategic annalistic scientist have asserted the fact that tension and

security concerns in the South China Sea have intensified the problem of peace and stability in the region and it also has been an attractive point of many research scholar. Beijing and Washington are at odds over China's apparent claims to sovereignty over the surroundings water of reclaimed land features and the US freedom of navigation passages through this route of maritime powers. There are also growing disagreements over fishery issues and deep water drilling, making it imperative that the maritime powers are fully responsible to create security concerns in the region. Therefore, to tackle the security issues in the South China Sea has attracted the attention of all maritime powers. However, disputes in this region are not confined to competing claims for sovereignty, but also revolve around some others critical issues of access to control over maritime resources and freedom of navigation in this region. Underlying these disputes and security concerns is the geostrategic transformation and realignment occurring in the broader part of Indo-Pacific region. Likewise, depleting fishing grounds in many countries have also led the fishermen of

maritime powers to venture into the South China Sea. It has also lead to conflict and tensions in this region.

The US role in this region has created some security concerns for China. Jing Dong Yuan remarks; ***“The US is playing a prominent role in the South China Sea dispute by refusing to recognize any unilateral actions aimed to create new realities on the ground and supporting some of the claimant states efforts to refer the dispute to international arbitration”***. However, the challenge for the U.S is to clearly separate its effort to reinforce international law, and in this instance, the UNO Convention on the Law of Sea from its foreign policy agenda of strengthening alliances, building security partnership and reinforcing its military presence, which are all part of its rebalancing to Asian Strategy in this region. This inevitably casts territorial dispute in the South China Sea under the shadow of an emerging China- US rivalry for regional privacy and hegemony in the region. Some of the security concerns and challenges in this region are as under:-

- **Freedom of Navigation:** The US claims that it conducts freedom of navigation, operational patrols to challenge excessive and therefore, illegal claims to maritime space that is allowed by international law including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. But China has not legally promulgated or declared an official or legal base line around any of its occupied features in the separately Islands, nor has China delineated a 12 nautical miles territorial area in this region. In fact, China claims an ambiguous military or security alert zone around its artificial islands. That is why, China's assertions of control over this region what is claimed over its territorial waters within its nine – dash line claim to the South China Sea. Likewise, all the maritime powers intend the free navigation facility for the trade that is why, this region has been created with many tensions by all of the maritime powers with the China.
- **Land Reclamation:** According to the US officials China's land reclamation totaled twelve square

kilometer in 2014-15. But China is dredging sand from seabed and gouging coral reefs to fill in low tide elevations by powering concrete over this mass to create artificial islands. However the term '*land reclamation*' is misleading because it implies that China is recovering soil from islands that have been eroded. But an island under international law is entitled to a twelve nautical mile sea area and a 200 nautical miles *Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)*.

- **Militarization of South China Sea:** The US began to excuse China of militarizing the South China Sea through its construction of artificial Islands that could serve as forward operating post for military aircrafts and war ships. China has always opposed the US efforts of militarization. China claims that this region comes under its territory and it has the right of self-defence. Secondly China argues that it was only doing what other claimants had done by putting military personnel on its feature to protect the infrastructure that it had built, such as docks and air strips.

Thirdly, China has charged that the US efforts to militarize the South China Sea by over flights, by military aircrafts and by conducting patrols and naval warship exercises in this region. But both the maritime powers (the US and China) have always been unsuccessful to define the term '*Militarization*'. Nevertheless, this term can be used as under

- Stationing uniformed armed military personnel in the South China Sea.
- To build bunkers and defensive gun emplacements.
- To construct dual use infrastructure such as Docks, Air Strips, Radar and Communication Facility.
- To establish signals intelligence and electronic war fair equipments.
- To deploy armed coast guard vessels, paramilitary forces, anti-aircraft missiles including surface to surface missiles, cruise missiles, sub marines, jet fighters and bombers etc.

Conclusion: To conclude the debate we can trace out that there are some recent developments in Indo-Pacific relations

with special reference to South China Sea regions that has created many security concerns and challenges in the region. There is evidence that China is expending a corps of Nuclear Sub marine based in Hainan, an island on China's southern tip, in the northern portion of the South China Sea. The US also desires its open military excess to this area. Moreover, South China Sea is very rich in energy reserves the fact is proved by many surveys. According to the study made by Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Philippines, this region of water holds 1/3 of entire world marine bio-diversity, thereby making it a very important area for the eco-system. But fishing vessels in the region are also a source of conflict and security concerns for the China and other maritime powers. Being the main sea route, more than half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage passes through these choke points and a third of all maritime traffic worldwide. Moreover, the oil transported through the Malacca Strait from the Indian Ocean and route to East Asia through the South China Sea, is triple the amount that passes through the Suez Canal and 15 times

the amount that transits the Panama Canal. In this way this region is very important for the trade. That is why; maritime powers have always been eager to make a easy accesses in this region. But China has always been against the interference of the external powers as well the regional powers in the South China Sea. China always claims that it is her territorial right to protect the region as a self-defence from the outside disturbance in this Pacific region. Recently China has also ignore the decision given in favor of Phillipine by the International Court of Justice. Therefore, there are many security concerns and challenges in this region and the UN needs to tackle the problem of security challenges in South Asian Sea. However, some of the scholars assume the fact that ASEAN can play a vital role to tackle all the maritime problems in South China Sea. It is also suggested that *Confidence Building Measures* (CBMS) should be adopted by maritime powers.

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