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## South China Sea: United States Must Pre-Empt Gathering Storm

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By Dr Subhash Kapila

South China Sea is witnessing a gathering strategic storm unleashed by China's brazen brinkmanship to gain full-spectrum dominance over this maritime expanse with a new strategy of creating man-made 'Artificial Islands' besides its illegal military occupation of Paracel and Spratly Islands groups.

The South China Sea is literally being transformed into a combustible global flashpoint and China's ceaseless brinkmanship and maritime aggression both in terms of military occupation of Paracels and Spratlys and constructing "Artificial Islands" in disputed waters, places the South China Sea dispute on a short fuse. China needs to be restrained internationally and more specifically by the United States. United States must take the lead and India with its vital strategic partnerships with Vietnam, Japan and an evolving one with the Philippines should not appear as a strategic laggard. India has already asserted to uphold the freedom of navigation through international waters without restraints being imposed by a littoral country.

China for over decades has followed a well calibrated strategy of 'salami slicing' to extend its sway over the South China Sea. The creation of artificial man-made islands to dot the South China Sea aims to seal its sovereignty, at the expense of Vietnam and the Philippines, over what China has declared to be a "Core National Interest" and China's assertion that it is willing to defend its core interest by force if challenged.

China's determination to change the 'status quo' in the South China Sea maritime expanse is patently clear now with China oblivious to the strategic reality that its conflict escalation in the South China Sea has resulted in an Asian polarisation against China. Its new strategy of reinforcing its sway over the South China Sea has now raised the hackles of the United States too and the region expectantly waiting to see

United States to call China's bluff.

China has gone to the extent of warning the United States not to send its warships to manoeuvre in the South China Sea or its military aircraft to overfly the areas of its new artificial islands on surveillance missions. Such Chinese temerity is surely provocative and conflict escalating when kept in mind that the South China Sea is an international maritime expanse not subject to China's sovereignty.

China is indulging in a dangerous and brazen aggressive brinkmanship in the South China Sea enthused so far by lack of firm responses by the United States as the only global power capable of check-mating China's aggressive moves in the Western Pacific. China's aggressive moves are not directly aimed at the main disputant nations of Vietnam and the Philippines but aimed more critically at challenging the United States overwhelming military superiority in the Western Pacific.

China can be expected to provoke its envelope of conflict escalation by increasing the numbers of artificial islands to be constructed in the South China Sea, secure in the belief that the United States besides its compulsive China-hedging strategy would soon be engulfed by the run-up to US presidential elections domestic politics further limiting US strong responses against China. United States strategic gaze once again is being distracted by the Middle East security instability and this may yet be another factor encouraging China in its military adventurism currently. China has historically timed its military adventurism when major powers are distracted elsewhere.

That the situation in the South China Sea is conflictually escalating is evident from the strong statements emanating from top US Navy Commanders in the Pacific on Chinese current strategic moves of China and also statements emanating from Washington. But the United States needs to seriously ask itself as to when was China ever deterred by strong statements of the United States. Evidently, China was never so deterred. The United States must urgently take a call on the burgeoning "China Threat" in the Indo Pacific seriously.

US Secretary of State Kerry's recent visit to Beijing in this connection and in his meeting with the Chinese President appealed that China should not escalate the situation in the South China Sea and disturb the status quo. He was met by a bizarre response from the Chinese President that the Pacific Ocean is big enough for both the United States and China to co-exist. Should not the United States recognise the implicit message in Chinese President's statement that China intends to pursue its reinforcing control over the South China Sea as its Core National Interest? Should this message not be read in conjunction with China's warnings to the United States not to send its naval ships and military aircraft into waters and airspace of the disputed South China Sea expanse?

These signs are ominous of the gathering storm in the process of engulfing the South China Sea with China intent on establishing full sovereignty over the South China Sea and the United States being pushed into a strategic corner in which America may have no options left but to re-establish its strategic dominance over the Western Pacific rather than retreat in the face of China's imprudent intransigence.

China only understands the language of force and a display of the will to use force as was exhibited by the United States in the Clinton years

when the United States sent two of its Aircraft Carrier Groups into the Taiwan Straits when China had indulged in similar conflict escalation. China was deterred from its strategic waywardness then.

The South China Sea in the context of worsening security environment in the region brought about by China's unrestrained military escalation of the last year or so needs to act swiftly and decisively. Not only should United States despatch at least three Aircraft Carrier Groups into the South China Sea but also carry-out sailings and overflights in and around and over these 'Artificial Islands' to checkmate China's dubious strategic moves in this globally critical South China Sea.

Asian capitals would welcome United States such substantial check-mating steps in the South China Sea aimed to dampen Chinese military adventurism and establishing Chinese hegemony over the South China Sea region. It would also put a brake on China's strategic over-riding aim of pushing out the United States out of the Western Pacific. ASEAN countries especially should welcome restraining China by the United States and not let China divide ASEAN to dilute strong positions on South China Sea being adopted.

The Western Pacific includes the East China Sea where China disputes Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands: it also includes the South China Sea where China by use of military force has captured the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands. Here China is in military confrontation with both Vietnam and the Philippines.

The United States in the new US-Japan Defense Guidelines unveiled this year now stands committed to assist Japan in any aggression against the Senkaku Islands. Under the mutual defense treaty with the Philippines, the United States is obliged to protect the Philippines against any aggression.

Vietnam though not tied in direct security treaty relationship with the United States, falls under the category of United States global commitment to the 'defense of the global commons' and upholding the principle of 'freedom of navigation through international waters'. These principles are also subscribed to by all Indo Pacific Asia countries with the exception of China.

China's strategic aims in creating 'Artificial Islands' in the South China Sea are two-fold in terms of such manmade islands becoming platforms for location of military facilities enhancing its full-spectrum dominance capabilities of the South China Sea. The second reason is to get past UNCLOS stipulations that maritime territorial limits apply only from landforms and not submersible reefs and coral outcrops. China is in the mistaken belief that these newly created artificial islands by China would be counted as land forms.

Taking the second strategic Chinese objective first, experts on the issue and analysts have come to the conclusion that China's artificial islands now created to buttress its claims to the entire South China Sea expanse are not legally tenable. In a piece in The Diplomat dated May 04 2015 Prasanth Parmeswaran when writing on this issue, the author makes two important points. The first that Low Level tide elevations are not capable of generating claims by themselves 'per se' with the idea being that they are distinct from islands because they

are inundated at High Tide. Nor do “artificial islands”. Secondly, he states that “According to Article 60 (8) of UNCLOS ‘Artificial islands, installations, and structures do not possess the status of islands. They have no territorial seas of their own, and their presence does not affect the delimitation of the territorial sea, the Exclusive Economic Zone, or the continental shelf”

China habitually has always disrespected international conventions and agreements when its strategic interests are contradicted. China can be expected to do so in this case too. Unless, the United States steps-in to restrain China from its strategic waywardness generated by its self-perceived obsession of being a superpower, the South China Sea may draw-in the United States willy-nilly into a Limited War conflict with China arising from Chinese military over-reach provoking Vietnam or the Philippines.

Reflected in my earlier SAAG Papers on the subject was the fact that China’s unremitting brinkmanship in the South China Sea was to exploit United States reluctance to stand up to China when challenged and in this nibbling process dent US image and credibility in Asian capitals as a nett provider of security in the Indo Pacific.

The present challenge thrown by China at the United States in terms of creating ‘Artificial Islands’ by large scale sand fillings of reefs etc. is the most potent one as it is intended to be a triple challenge. First, by creation new ‘Artificial Islands’ China intends to create new landforms hoping that it could enlarge and multiply its maritime expanse holdings by posing legal ‘fait accomplis’ to bypass UNCLOS rulings. Second, such islands would act as Chinese “Force Multipliers” when they are converted into military airstrips, naval facilities and surface-to-air missiles stations, enabling China’s full-spectrum dominance of the South China Sea. Third, and most importantly, China having gone through the first two steps outlined above, without any checkmating by the United States has succeeded without any costs to dent United States image in Asian capitals and create the damaging perception that the United States is incapable of restraining China from converting South China Sea into an explosive flashpoint.

Concluding, the present juncture is a ‘Wake-up Call’ for the United States if it wishes to stay strategically embedded in the Western Pacific specifically and Indo Pacific at large and take up China’s strategic gauntlet thrown at the United States. United States must walk the talk and ‘Standing Tall’ in living-up to its role as a nett-provider of security in East Asia to begin with.

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