Introductory Observations

The geostrategic significance of South East Asia needs no introduction. This region was the cynosure of strategic attention during the heyday of the Colonial Era. The Second World War highlighted it further when Japan swept through the region to the very gates of India.

During the Cold War when Communist China sponsored a number of Communist insurgencies in South East Asia a Russia-China sponsored to begin with challenged the United States in Vietnam with the aim of preventing it from gaining a foothold on Mainland Asia in addition to South Korea.

During the Post-Cold era the United States as the reigning unipolar power was strategically distracted in the Balkans in the 1990s and in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s.

The better part of these two decades were exploited by China to muscle into South East Asia by crafty use of soft power and a subtle velvet glove policy where South East Asia countries were given the impression that in the strategic vacuum caused by United States temporary inattention to South East Asia, strategic prudence would demand that South East Asia countries accommodate China’s strategic sensitivities in their respective strategic calculi.
Strategically buoyant by its considerable military expansion in qualitative terms of firepower and reach and with no strategic countermoves by the USA in the last decade, China was emboldened to flex its military muscles in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

China’s military brinkmanship had multiple strategic aims directed both at the United States and its South East Asian neighbours which stand amplified in my earlier papers of the recent past.

Freed from its Afghanistan and Iraq strategic distractions, the United States belatedly recognised the above strategic reality. The first riposte from the United States emerged in the form of President Obama’s doctrine of a United States strategic pivot and rebalancing of US Forces in the Asia Pacific.

South East Asia forms the strategic under-belly of a militarily rising China and when China is jostling with the United States strategically to be counted as a strategic equal, the United States would necessarily be focussed on reconfiguring strategic equations in South East Asia.

The ‘Great Game’ is therefore now in full strategic swing in South East Asia which could have considerable strategic impact not only in Asia Pacific but globally too.

In this vein, one would like to examine a number of related issues as under:

- South East Asia Emerges as the Chequer Board between United States and China
- South East Asia Countries: The Noticeable Strategic swing in Policy Formulations Towards China & The United States
- United States Strategic Formulations in South East Asia; The Main Contours
- China’s Strategic Options: Confrontation or ‘Reverse Congagement’

**South East Asia Emerges as the Chequer Board between United States and China**

The United States strategic pivot to Asia Pacific has to be viewed in two contexts, namely East Asia and South East Asia. In East Asia, the United States is strategically well balanced and strong with a strong security structure based on the twin pillars of Japan and South Korea, and both hosting sizeable forward presence of US Military Forces.

Contrastingly, South East Asia witnesses no forward presence of US Military Forces to secure its national security interests in the region. The United States however has strong military relationships with Singapore and Thailand.
China has a head-start of two decades strategically in terms of strategically positioning itself advantageously in South East Asia due to United States default.

The United States has commenced to rectify its strategic imbalance in South East Asia and that is where ‘The Great Game’ in South East Asia would be in full strategic swing.

**South East Asia Countries: The Noticeable Swing in Policy Formulations towards China & The United States**

South East Asia countries which till recently were in strategic awe of China for reasons given in the introductory observations do not appear to be any longer so. A noticeable swing in policy formulations is discernible in the region.

China has always figured in the threat perceptions of most of the South East Asian countries, even amongst those which did not have geographical land contiguity. This threat perception on the last three years or so stood enhanced with China’s military adventurism in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

Reassured by the United States shift of strategic gaze and focus towards South East Asia has resulted in most South East Asian countries moving away from their erstwhile ‘China-Hedging’ strategies.

What is visible today is a discernible shift towards the United States in most countries of the region from Myanmar to the Philippines.

**United States Strategic Formulations in South East Asia: The Major Contours**

The point that needs to be emphasised is that the United States strategic pivot to Asia Pacific cannot be a balanced one without a total re-configuration of US policy towards South East Asia.

China’s strategic focus in South East Asia in the last two decades was a mix of strengthening its strategic footholds in Myanmar and Cambodia and by attempts to integrate its South East Asia periphery economically with China. The overall aim was though predominantly strategic.

Myanmar was of greater significance as it opened land-access routes to the Indian Ocean, energy security - both direct and indirect and presumably naval footholds on the Bay of Bengal down to the Thai littoral on the West.
Recent US strategic and political moves in South East Asia bear witness to the emerging US strategic formulations in South East Asia which essentially narrow down to the following main contours:

- Wean away Myanmar strategically away from the Chinese embrace and in course of time to script its eventual emergence as a staunch strategic partner of the United States
- Reinforce and enhance its existing alliance relationship with Thailand.
- Add greater strategic value to its strong military links with Singapore
- Indonesia to be reclaimed as a strong strategic partner of the United States
- Vietnam to emerge as a solid fulcrum of US security architecture in South East Asia by virtue of its geostrategic location, regional power potential, its enhanced military threat perceptions emanating from China which would require strong countervailing power.
  Reopening access to US Navy to Cam Ran naval base facilities is already in the works.
- Philippines to be once again reclaimed as a staunch US ally status and renewed access to Philippines naval and air bases.

High voltage political visits to countries in the region by the US President and others point to the emerging US strategic policy in South East Asia. President Obama’s visits this month to Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia are noteworthy.

**China’s Strategic Options: Confrontation or ‘Reverse Congagement’**

Confrontation with the United States is not a viable strategic option for China in view of the emerging strategic profile of the Asia Pacific where the United States in the process of strengthening its existing security architecture is focussed on winning over new strategic partners in the region.

Much to China’s strategic dismay it has not been able to add to its strategic nexuses with North Korea and Pakistan. On the contrary, China is very likely to lose countries like Myanmar in which it had strategically and financially invested heavily. China can only fight rear-guard actions in Myanmar to keep it in its fold. But that itself then has the potential to generate conflict in which China would be inviting the United States ranged against it.

China’s alternative to confrontation with the United States is to inflict on the United States a ‘Reverse Congagement Strategy’ with Chinese characteristics.
This essentially would involve a mixture of superficial engagement politically with the United States accompanied for global consumption and in tandem following military brinkmanship policies against South East Asian countries switching from their erstwhile ‘sitting on the fence’ formulations.

The danger of the above is that military brinkmanship has only a fine line which separates it from military hostilities due to misreading of the intentions.

**Concluding Observations**

South East Asia emerging as strategic chequerboard for a next ‘Great Game’ had an air of inevitability about it. It had to come where a military rising China intent on revision of the existing strategic status quo in the Asia Pacific would run into stiff opposition from the entrenched power, namely the United States.

South East Asia is the soft strategic underbelly of a militaristic China and strategic logic would dictate that the United States should exploit it. This time unlike the past, the United States can be expected to use the full complement and range of its ‘Smart Strategies’

The ‘Great Game’ is now in full strategic swing in South East Asia.

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