

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

[Home](#) > South China Sea: China Regenerates Coercion and Brinkmanship against Vietnam

South China Sea: China Regenerates Coercion and Brinkmanship against Vietnam

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Thu, 05/08/2014 - 09:23

Paper No. 5697

Dated 8-May-2014

By Dr. Subhash Kapila

China has once again endangered security and stability in the maritime expanse of the South China Sea region by repetition of its traditional strategy of military coercion and brinkmanship against Vietnam in early May 2014.

In what looks as a calculated strategy, the renewed Chinese provocations in the South China Sea in disputed waters against Vietnam in the last three days soon after US President Obama's visit to Asia Pacific and reaffirming US security commitments to Japan and the Philippines, suggests that more provocative and brinkmanship by China in the South China Sea can be expected.

Vietnam may not be covered by any US security commitments but would the United States be able to be a passive bystander when China resorts to unprovoked coercion and brinkmanship against Vietnam in disputed waters of the South China Sea and thereby endanger regional security and stability.

With China regenerating fresh tensions in the South China Sea against Vietnam, strategic planners in Washington would be well advised to dust-off their contingency plans in the South China Sea which are also said to cover the contingency of China-Vietnam clashes in South China Sea escalating to a full-blown conflict.

China provoked the on-going conflagration by what can be termed as unilateral and incendiary provocation by despatching the Chinese drilling rig HD-981 into Vietnamese waters. In what could have been dismissed as a mere provocation, China gave it added military contours by despatching a Chinese flotilla of naval ships and other dozen ships to provide cover to the Chinese drilling rig. As on May 06 2014 the Chinese flotilla is reported to number about 53 vessels. Chinese Air Force MIG 29 fighters are also reported to have made overflights in the

area of confrontation. Vietnamese fear that China may have also positioned submarines in the area.

The general area of the present China-Vietnam confrontation is about 120 nautical miles from Vietnam's coast and as per the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesperson was "undeniably within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone and continental shelf".

Consequently, ships of Vietnam maritime police and other agencies proceeded to the area and sought to prevent the Chinese drilling oil rig to establish a fixed installation in Vietnamese waters. Short of actual firing of shots the detailed video-footage released by Vietnam in its official briefings for the international media vividly show Chinese naval vessels "intentionally" ramming Vietnamese vessels and using high-velocity water cannons causing damage and injuries to Vietnamese personnel.

The China –Vietnam confrontation has been on-going for the last three days without any Chinese restraint. Vietnam adopted diplomatic means to defuse tensions but seems to have apparently failed due to China's obduracy. Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh telephonically called China State Councillor Yang Jiechi to protest that China was generating unprovoked tensions in Vietnamese waters and that tensions be defused by China withdrawing the drilling rig and its accompanying flotilla of escort ships from Vietnamese waters.

China's retort expectedly was that the Chinese Flotilla and the drilling rig were operating in waters under Chinese sovereignty.

The United States officially reacted through statements by the State Department spokesperson who declared that **"The unilateral action appears to be part of a broader pattern of Chinese behaviour to advance its claims over disputed territory in a manner that undermines peace and stability in the region"** It was further added that the United States views these incidents as **"dangerous conduct and intimidation"** on the South China Sea. The United States also termed the introduction of the Chinese drilling oil rig in disputed waters as "provocative".

The above United States assertions have been more forthright than in the past and when linked up with President Obama's declarations in his recent visit to the region along with US Defense Secretary's statements in China last month may be signalling a revised but yet welcome US strategic formulation on the South China Sea.

The international media has widely commented upon China's regeneration of provocative brinkmanship in the disputed waters of the South China Sea in utter disregard of the prevailing tensions in the South China Sea region.

This brings one to China's intentions in regenerating coercion and brinkmanship in the South China Sea region and its timing against the backdrop of the following events/developments:

- ASEAN Summit meeting is just about a week ahead in Myanmar. Is China indulging in a repeat performance of the Cambodia episode

and does China intend to further divide ASEAN as a grouping and render it toothless on the South China Sea conflicts?

- Why is China adding fuel to the fire when it has ongoing military tensions with the Philippines on South China Sea disputes? This week Philippines have captured a Chinese fishing trawler along with 11 Chinese fishermen in its territorial waters. This could lead to added tensions.
- Is China testing United States intentions and resolve contextually to 'rebalance' its regional military posture and also to renewed US declarations that its security commitments to its Allies in the region are 'absolute'?
- Has Vietnam been picked up by China for its renewed brinkmanship on the flawed pretext that the United States with its distraction in Ukraine would not react to China's military adventurism against Vietnam beyond rhetorical support?
- Is there any linkage between China's actions in establishing a Chinese drilling rig in Vietnamese waters in response to the recent Vietnam-India agreement to expand their joint oil prospecting in Vietnamese waters?

Overall, the impelling motive determining China's unfolding strategy in the South China Sea seems to be to reinforce its military hold over the entire South China Sea as enclosed by its Nine Dash Line by incremental steps as the one underway against Vietnam.

China's next military incremental step can expectedly be the announcement of an ADIZ over the South China Sea. The United States as the predominant power with substantial stakes in the South China Sea would have to take the call.

Tags:

[President Obama's Visit to Asia Pacific](#) [1]

[Cambodia](#) [2]

[Vietnam-Philippines in South China Sea](#) [3]

Category:

[Papers](#) [4]

Countries:

[United States](#) [5]

[South Asia \(General\)](#) [6]

[SEAsia](#) [7]

[China](#) [8]

Topics:

[Strategic Affairs & Security](#) [9]

Source URL: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1513>

Links

- [1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/699>
- [2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/700>
- [3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/701>
- [4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>
- [5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/united-states>
- [6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/south-asia-general>
- [7] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/se-asia>
- [8] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/china>
- [9] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/strategic-affairs-and-security>