Paracel & Spratly Islands-Conflict resolution Impeded by China:

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(Dr Subhash Kapila was invited to participate in an International Workshop at Danang VIETNAM from June 19-22 2014 on South China Sea issues. The theme selected by him for his Presentation is as reflected in the Title and the contents of his Presentation are reproduced below)

By Dr Subhash Kapila

Introductory Observations

The South China Sea emergence as a major explosive flashpoint in the Asia Pacific in the second decade of the 21st Century owes its origin to China’s two major acts of aggression against Vietnam in the last quarter of the 20th Century, namely the capture of the Paracel Islands in 1974 and the Spratly Islands partially in 1988.

China’s assertion of sovereignty over the captured Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea was justified on historical claims dubiously going back to antiquity.

China intriguingly has not offered to date any tenable explanations as to why China when it annexed Tibet which is also termed as China’s ‘Core Interest’ in 1950, it waited for twenty five years to annex the Paracel Islands and another fourteen years additional to annex the Spratly Islands by force in 1988, and labelling the South China Sea as its “Core Interest” after sixty years.
Obviously, the South China Sea as a ‘Core Interest’ of China is a recent construct to synchronise with China’s galloping strategic ambitions to emerge as the predominant power in the Western Pacific. The annexations of the Paracel Islands followed by the Spratly Islands were the stepping stones paving the way towards this ultimate end-game.

China has defied all attempts at conflict resolution on the specious grounds that no conflict exists in the South China Sea and that the maritime expanse enclosed by its Nine Das Line are sovereign Chinese territory and waters. Notably, China till date has not provided precise co-ordinates of its Nine Dash Line; ambiguity is the hallmark of China in all territorial disputes.

Conflict-resolution and risk-reduction processes at the regional and international levels pertaining to South China Sea conflict-escalation need to face the daunting strategic reality that China would never ever be part of any resolution of the South China Sea disputes. China is not the solution but the most significant problem because China’s strategic calculus has determined that control of the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands are military imperatives for effective maritime domination of the South China Sea.

China’s provocative acts of aggression and brinkmanship both around the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands continue unabated to date as evidenced by China’s oil rig provocations in Vietnam’s EEZ in May 2014. Such acts are not limited only to Vietnam but also extend to the Philippines.

Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands conflicts consequently stand embedded in regional and international consciousness as prime examples of China’s propensity to resort to use of military force to press Chinese territorial claims based on antiquated historical records.

China has further added to the explosiveness of the South China Sea conflicts by its declaration of the Nine Dash Claim Line which in effect amounts to China laying sovereignty claims over virtually the entire South China Sea strategic maritime expanse and the various land forms of islands, reefs and shoals that dot this Sea.

Consequently, China today is not only in conflict with Vietnam over its South China Sea claims to the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands but also with the Philippines with which it recently has had armed confrontations, besides the other ASEAN countries which have littorals on the South China Sea and on whose maritime sovereignty domains China’s Nine Dash Line threateningly impinges.

China’s domineering pattern of coercion and brinkmanship in the South China Sea has spawned two significant strategic developments in the Asia Pacific.

China has by its demonstrated conflictual record on the Paracels and the Spratlys and its notable enlargement of the territorial conflicts in the South China Sea has generated “Strategic Distrust” of China in its neighbours. China’s intentions are suspect and the pattern of its demonstrated aggressive moves in the South China Sea enhances the spectre of a looming China Threat in the region. The China Threat
perception because of these developments is now palpably perceived in the Asia Pacific.

The second notable strategic development is that with China’s intentions becoming suspect in the Asia Pacific, what one is witnessing today and which has a bearing on the security and stability of the South China Sea is the emergence of an ‘Arms Race’ in the region particularly of the regional navies.

The South China Sea in 2014 appears to have emerged as a zone of heightened military tensions and increased risk of conflicts between China and major disputants like Vietnam and the Philippines, and if to this is added the East China Sea military stand-off between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands, the total picture of the Western Pacific in terms of risks of conflict becomes worrisome.

Risk potential of the South China Sea is greatly enhanced when the international dimension is added of the United States security stakes in the South China Sea as the predominant power in the Asia Pacific. Bypassing the competing territorial and jurisdictional claims of China and the ASEAN original claimants, is the United States long upheld the principle of ‘Freedom of the High Seas’ and the freedom of navigation through ‘Global Commons’ as recently termed. The United States rightly therefore has military contingency plans in place for dealing with any potential South China Sea armed conflicts.

This brings China into direct conflict with the United States should China opt for pressing the applicability of its national maritime laws to the South China Sea maritime expanse and the United States intendant on challenging and breaching them.

In terms of a reality-check it can be asserted that China’s visible obduracy in resisting any conflict resolution processes arises strongly from the Paracel and Spratly Islands having acquired over-riding significance in China’s strategic calculus of acquisition of complete ‘sea denial’ and ‘sea control’ over the entire South China Sea maritime expanse for both defensive and offensive strategies.

China can therefore be expectedly and resolutely oppose any conflict resolution processes which dilute its military hold over the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands and its maritime dominance of the South China Sea.

Even if China is drawn under some contemporary pressures and submits to multilateral conflict resolution processes, strong chances exist that China would do so for form’s sake and international acceptability, but would resort to long drawn out delaying tactics to wear down discussions while it continues unremittingly to enhance its strategic and military hold over the South China Sea.

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**The Strategic Significance of South China Sea, Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands in China’s Grand Strategy in the Asia Pacific**

China’s unfolding Grand Strategy in the Asia Pacific needs to be understood to understand China’s conflict escalation in South China Sea.
waters. It revolves around three strategic aims (1) Emerge as the paramount power in the Asia Pacific with domination of the Western Pacific as a first step. (2) Emerge as the strategic co-equal of the United States, and (3) Prompting exit of US Forward Military Presence from the Pacific.

China’s mastery of the South China Sea along with the East China Sea thus emerges as a pressing Chinese strategic imperative to achieve the above strategic end-aims.

The South China Sea maritime expanse links the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean and traversing through the South China Sea are vital sea-lanes which have crucial significance not only in economic terms but also in military terms in the context of global and Asian power-rivalry. The United States, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines have the greatest stakes in South China Sea followed by India, Australia and Russia too.

But the primary rivalry and conflictual tussles over the South China Sea will be confined to China and Vietnam as the original but displaced owner of the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands.

China’s ability to convert the South China Sea to what can best be termed as a “China Inland Sea” to achieve its Grand Strategy objectives offers logical explanations to China’s unremitting continuation of conflict escalation and brinkmanship in the South China Sea region in recent times along with administrative integration of the Paracel and the Spratly Islands with mainland China.

The Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands group more specifically, are geostrategically located and so aligned in the South China Sea that developing military infrastructure on these islands, miniscule though, but which with their expansive maritime spread coupled with China developing military infrastructure on them enables China to establish naval dominance over the entire South China Sea.

Relative strategic significance of the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands in China’s strategic calculus also needs to be pointed out as this has a direct bearing on China’s amenability, though highly unlikely, to any future conflict-resolution processes.

The Paracel Islands now in full military control of China since 1974 after China militarily evicted Vietnam from there lie in the North-west segment of the South China Sea. They lie in close proximity of China’s major naval base on Hainan Island where the Chinese Sanya Naval Base hosts Chinese nuclear attack submarines.

China has developed extensive military infrastructure in the Paracel Islands to serve two Chinese strategic purposes. Paracel Islands in the hands of China’s adversaries would facilitate its use as forward naval base to contain China’s Hainan Island strategic naval base as also for close-in operations against the Chinese coastline.

Paracel Islands under Chinese military occupation enables China to extend its naval punch that much more into the Pacific. It also enables
China to have dominance over the South China Sea sea-lanes which tend to hug the Western Pacific littoral to avoid the scattered Spratly Islands.

In relation to Vietnam, China’s hold on Paracel Islands with its airstrip and naval base affords China to militarily turn Vietnam’s military flanks in any future Sino-Vietnamese armed conflict.

Spratly Islands on the other hand though relatively more distant from the Chinese coast, have a strategic significance for China in that their commanding location in the South China Sea offers China military leverages for sea control of the South China Sea maritime expanse as also dominance of the heavy volume sea traffic that traverse this Sea.

Additionally, military control of Spratly Islands confers significant military advantages on China both for defensive and offensive strategies in terms of its fast evolving blue waters naval capabilities and force projection.

South China Sea under strategic and military mastery of China enables China to strangle the jugular vein of United States military allies in the Western Pacific and impacting United States forward military presence in the Western Pacific.

**South China Sea: The Strategic Significance versus the Economic Significance Debate**

South China Sea debates in intellectual discussions and academic debates tend to accord an overly disproportionate emphasis on the economic significance of the South China Sea in terms of hydrocarbon deposits, sea-bed minerals deposits and extensive fishing grounds.

The point that needs to be advanced is, that be as it may, such debates tend to suggest wrong and misleading deductions that by stressing the economic significance of the South China Sea avenues and solutions could possibly emerge leading to collaborative and joint management and control of such resources and paving to some sort of conflict resolution.

Such advocacies are dangerous as they smack of appeasement and tend to concede that China can continue to merrily hold on to their fruits of aggression while ASEAN and major powers like the United States could settle for joint management or joint control in pursuit of risk reduction in the South China Sea region. Such advocacies would not ensure return of the Parcels and Spratlys to Vietnamese sovereignty.

A simple question that needs to be answered is whether if the South China Sea was not rich in natural resources, China would have accorded similar obsessive significance to control the Paracels, Spratlys and the South China Sea? The answer is negative because China’s underlying imperatives to control the South China Sea are overwhelmingly strategic and connected to China’s Grand Strategy to emerge as the predominant power in the Asia Pacific and China’s Blue Water Navy strategic breakout into the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Complete mastery of the South China Sea by China is therefore a pressing imperative.
Economic significance of the South China Sea is of secondary importance in the Chinese strategic calculus. Persistent stress on economic significance of South China Sea in strategic debates affords China a smoke-screen to mask its real strategic aims of full-spectrum domination of the South China Sea.

**China’s Strategic Blueprint to Gain Complete Mastery over the South China Sea**

China’s blueprint to gain complete mastery over the South China Sea has been a graduated one and seemed to have incorporated two different stages which were both determined by China’s own military power capabilities and the prevailing global and regional security environment in terms of a power vacuum existing at the given moment, which China could exploit.

The two-stage capture of the Paracel Islands followed by a gap of over a decade to capture the Spratly Islands can be analysed as necessitated by the time required to build Chinese naval capabilities to sustain control over the distant Spratlys.

Capture of the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands were swiftly followed by strongly fortifying them as garrisons and creation of naval and air force infrastructure from where Chinese dominance of the South China Sea could be exercised.

Once this was achieved China’s next step was to add legitimacy of Chinese control over these Islands and South China Sea waters was to consolidate legislative control through the medium of various laws like the 1992 “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Territorial Waters and Contiguous Areas” and in November 2007 by establishing of Sansha Islands District.

In South China Sea, China had embarked on a similar strategy against the Philippines commencing with military occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995 and conflicts with the Philippines today in the South China Sea over other islands/reefs are acute today.

Having militarily and administratively incorporated the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands and thereby presenting a ‘fait accompli’ to the region and the world, China now seems intent on expanding its maritime control over the entire South China Sea expanse through combat-ready Chinese naval patrols, Chinese Navy exercises including a recent one including China’s first Aircraft Carrier. China’s central message being to demonstrate to the world that the South China Sea maritime expanse are sovereign Chinese waters and that China has the military might to ensure control and also legislate laws to legally regulate all activities in the South China Sea.

Recent reports suggest that China has enlarged this strategy to include the Southern segment of the South China Sea touching to Indonesia’s Natuna Islands. Indonesia was prompted to point out that China’s Nine Dash Line was impinging on Indonesia’s maritime sovereignty. This was unusual as Indonesia had been restrained and muted in its responses to China’s claims. Indonesia too now has belatedly embarked on a naval build-up.
China’s strategic blueprint can best be illustrated by what one strategist has aptly described as the “Salami Slice Strategy” and this is what he has to say:

“But what about an adversary that uses ‘salami slicing’

------ the slow accumulation of small actions, none of

which is a ‘casus belli’, but which add over time to a

strategic change?

The goal of Beijing’s ‘salami-slicing’ would be to gradually
accumulate through small but persistent attacks, evidence
of China’s enduring presence in the claimed territory,
with the intention of having that claim smudge out the

economic rights of ships and aircraft to transit what are

now considered to be global commons. With ‘new facts

on the ground’ slowly but cumulatively established,

China would hope to establish de-facto and de-jure

settlement of its claims” Robert Haddick, Foreign

Policy Journal, August 02 2012

**China’s Fortification of Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands**

In pursuance of China’s strategic objectives in the South China Sea considerable fortifications and military infrastructure has been developed by China. A passing reference is therefore necessary to highlight China’s intentions and its stubbornness in resisting any mediatory or
conflict resolution processes.

Enough imagery of Chinese fortifications and creation of military infrastructure are available on the Internet for all to see.

Surely, China has not constructed airstrips for use by combat aircraft, jetties for naval ships and other military installations on the Paracels and Spratlys for use jointly with others in the event of some sort of demilitarisation or joint management of the South China Sea.

These are only the precursors of an intensified militarisation by Chia of the South China Sea as it vigorously pursues its strategic end-game in the South China Sea.

**Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands: Perspectives Mid-2014**

Conflict resolution of the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands disputes in mid-2014 does not appear as a distinct possibility. On the contrary the perspectives that hover over the horizon on South China Sea conflicts are of a China intent on continuing with its ‘Salami Slicing Strategy’ in terms of the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands groups and so also its enlargement of maritime control over the South China Sea.

China continues to rigidly insist that the South China Sea conflicts neither are nor a dispute between China and ASEAN and thereby implicitly ruling out any ASEAN dialogues on resolving the conflicts. China in sticking rigidly to its traditional “bilateral dialogue format” is reinforcing the impression that no space exists for any multilateral conflict resolution of the South China Sea as insisted by the South East Asian disputants.

Disturbingly, China in the associated East China Sea dispute with US ally Japan proceeded to escalate the conflict by declaring an ADIZ over what are evidently international waters. China appeared to be testing United States responses to its provocative brinkmanship in the Western Pacific waters.

The above development needs to be viewed in terms of perspectives as a prelude to declaring a similar ADIZ over the South China Sea.

In response to such Chinese provocations, the United States President during his recent tour of the Asia Pacific allies of the United States declared in no uncertain terms that the US security commitments to Japan and the Philippines were “absolute” and included the Senkaku Islands and the Spratly Islands. The United States further signed an Enhanced Defense Agreement with the Philippines.

China undeterred in wake of these US declarations proceeded this month with the establishment of the oil-rig in waters of Vietnam’s Exclusive Economic Zone and provocative incidents against the Philippines.
In mid-2014, therefore, the more salient perspectives that emerge in light of the above can be summed-up as follows:

- South China Sea Conflict Escalation More Likely than Conflict De-Escalation.
- China’s New Strategic Focus on Complete Maritime Control of South China Sea.
- China Not Inclined to Submit to any Mediation or Arbitration by International Tribunals/Organisations.
- ASEAN’S Deafening Silence on South China Sea Conflicts Likely to Persist.
- United States and Russia : Time to be Strategically Honest on South China Sea Conflict Escalation
- Prospects of Asian Coalitions Emerging in Response to United States and Russian Diffidence in South China Sea Conflicts.

**South China Sea Conflict Escalation More Likely Than Conflict De-Escalation**

China’s strategic calculus dictates imperatives of complete maritime control over the South China Sea, both for its defensive and offensive strategies.

Complete control over the South China Sea would necessarily involve not only further fortifying the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands but further acquisition of Vietnamese-held and Philippines-held Islands.

Parallel strategy would also include establishment of a Chinese ADIZ over the South China Sea and other maritime restrictive regulations to be enforced by the growing strength of the Chinese PLA Navy.

Conflict Escalation in the South China Sea by China therefore is a more likely scenario than Conflict-De-Escalation or Risk Reduction in the foreseeable future.

In the intensified brinkmanship being adopted by China in the South China Sea conflicts even a slight miscalculation by China leading to armed conflict with the Philippines or Vietnam may lead to United States military intervention furthering Conflict Escalation.

Notably, the primary conflict in the South China Sea will remain confined between China and Vietnam. ‘Vietnam is the only bulwark against China in the South China Sea’ and China is likely to focus all its military strength to tame Vietnam if it wishes for complete maritime dominance of South China Sea.
China’s New Strategic Focus on Complete Maritime Control of South China Sea

China’s island-grabbing by force of the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands from Vietnam were the initial steps in China’s end-aim of acquisition of complete control over the South China Sea.

China having fortified its military presence on these Islands in the shape of airstrips, naval jetties, military surveillance set-ups and logistics dumps feels now emboldened to achieve complete mastery over the South China Sea.

This is being now operationalised in the form of combat-ready naval and air force patrols over the South China Sea and major military exercises including its first aircraft carrier.

China therefore has now given visible shape to its declaration that the South China Sea is its “Core Interest” and that it is ready to go to war to protect its ‘Core Interest’.

China Not Inclined to Submit to any Mediation or International Arbitration by International Tribunals/Organisations

Enough stands written on the subject by South China Sea strategic analysts and debated in international seminars on China’s defiant postures to submit itself to any such processes.

Even in cases where such International Tribunals pronounce a verdict/ruling against China on a reference by any disputant, such rulings cannot be enforced and such a course therefore emerges as an unviable option for the disputants.

ASEAN’s Deafening Silence on South China Sea Conflicts Likely to Persist

Perceptionaly, going by the insipid statements and communiques emanating from recent ASEAN Summits which betray a marked reluctance to make critical references to China’s conflict escalation in the South China Sea against its fellow ASEAN members, the perspectives are bleak that ASEAN will ever take a united and firm stand against China on the issue.

ASEAN’s deafening silence visibly affects and impedes the sensitisation of South China Sea conflict escalation in world forums as an explosive flashpoint in South East Asia which could then have paved the way for some sort of international intervention.

United States and Russia: Time to be Strategically Honest on South China Sea Conflict Escalation

South China Sea conflict escalation being an explosive flashpoint in Asia Pacific is by now a well-established fact with both regional and
international implications. China’s brinkmanship spilling into armed conflict is a hovering possibility.

Strategic realities check of South China Sea conflict escalation by China would indicate that both the United States primarily and Russia too, in that eventuality, could not afford to be passive spectators. Both the United States and Russia have declared their respective strategic pivots to Asia Pacific in quick succession. Obviously both United States and Russia perceive significant strategic stakes in the security and stability of the conflict-prone South China Sea region.

United States and Russia therefore both need to step-out from their rhetorical postures on South China Sea conflicts. United States and Russia must note that it is high time that both honestly assert forcefully the “Red Lines” that China must not cross in South China Sea conflict escalation. Further both the United States and Russia individually should lean heavily on China to submit to conflict resolution processes on the South China Sea conflicts.

**Prospects of Asian Coalitions Emerging in Response to United States and Russian Diffidence on South China Sea**

Prospects of Asian coalitions emerging in response to United States and Russian diffidence on South China Sea conflicts cannot be ruled out in terms of perspectives. Such coalitions can coalesce around major Asian powers like Japan and India.

Japan and India as major Asian powers have significant stakes in the security and stability of the South China Sea region. Both Japan and India have territorial disputes with China and in their threat perceptions, the China Threat figures significantly.

Vietnam as the pivotal state in South East Asia is robustly battling China’s conflict escalation in the South China Sea. Significantly, Vietnam has a Strategic Partnership with India and its security ties with Japan are growing.

Japan and India have a strong evolving Strategic Partnership which is irksome to China. This in terms of perspectives can be the core around which Vietnam, the Philippines, South Korea and possibly Australia could coalesce to checkmate China’s military adventurism in the South China Sea region.

**Concluding Observations**

The South China Sea today stands reformed today into an explosive gunpowder keg on a short fuse due to China’s sequential moves of annexing by force the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands from Vietnam, followed by their fortifications and now operationalising its Nine Dash Claim Line in terms of maritime dominance of virtually the entire South China Sea region by its fast expanding Navy.
China’s aggressive moves and brinkmanship in the South China Sea against Vietnam and the Philippines has unleashed intense and flared nationalism and with tempers running high this additionally adds to the explosiveness of the existing adversarial stand-offs.

China exploitation of its military asymmetries in proceeding aggressively in its territorial dispute with Vietnam, Japan and the Philippines may have left no options for these countries but to embark on what can be called as feverish arms races to build-up their combat potential against China’s looming maritime strengths as a sort of minimum deterrence.

The United States and Russia may not therefore be able to continue to hold on to their strategic and military diffidence on South China Sea conflicts for long, as China’s stubbornness in not yielding to any conflict management, conflict resolution or risk reduction initiatives may ignite the short fuse in the South China Sea.

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