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[Home](#) > South China Sea: The Wages of United States Strategic Complacency

South China Sea: The Wages of United States Strategic Complacency

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The United States in end 2017 is faced with a grave legacy challenge of the South China Sea maritime expanse under illegal military occupation of China as a result of US strategic complacency in the past decade. This has resulted in a grave Chinese security threat to Indo Pacific security as a whole.

Chinese aggression in takeover of the South China Sea was a symptom of the larger Chinese itch to prompt an United States exit from the Western Pacific and dent American image in Asian capitals that the United States was not a credible strategic partner in countervailing a rising China.

United States policy establishment with its adherence in the past decade to 'China Hedging Strategy' and 'Risk Aversion' policy priorities stood as a passive spectator as China in a calibrated strategy embarked on annexation with superior military force of islands in the South China Sea whose sovereignty lay with Vietnam and the Philippines. These soon were fortified militarily.

China to achieve full-spectrum dominance over the South China Sea proceeded to construct a series of 'Artificial Islands' bristling with naval jetties, airstrips and sizeable electronic surveillance facilities. Combat jet fighters and air-defence infrastructure is being added as an ongoing project. International media has provided a wide photo-coverage evidence of China's illegal military activities in the South China Sea expanse.

China wilfully ignored US rhetorical protests and warnings to desist from her destabilising military activities in the South China Sea. China increased its pace of completion of mastery over the South China Sea more so after The Hague Tribunal in an international ruling decreed

that China's claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea was 'illegal'.

China's sequential time-span of a decade to effect full-spectrum dominance of the South China Sea with the United States in a policy paralysis to checkmate China throws up two major deductions:

- China with full-spectrum dominance of the South China Sea and having designated it as a 'Core Issue' implying that China is willing to go to war to sustain its illegal occupation, has signalled that China is not open to any conflict –resolution dialogues on its illegal sovereignty and now military control of the South China Sea.
- China in doing so further reinforces the growing global perception that China's propensity to use force and aggression to implement the Chinese President's 'Great China Dream' will not end. China's success in gaining mastery of South China Sea without any US checkmating could gain further momentum.

It is this backdrop of China that US President Trump's according over-riding priority to the Indo Pacific security in his National Security Strategy 2017 directive seems to be an initial step in damage control of the attempted China's strategic blueprint to dominate the Western Pacific, unravel the US security architecture in the region and attain complete mastery of the waterways of Asia Pacific and its maritime routes.

The same backdrop of China seems to have prompted US President Trump to designate China as an adversarial power in his National Security Strategy 2017.

The United States in 2018 and beyond is in a strategic bind over the South China Sea takeover by China. The United States cannot afford to let the China-imposed status quo prevail endlessly without appropriate ripostes as what is at stake is the wider issue of Indo Pacific security and stability. The United States has a vital national security determinant of not allowing China emerging as the hegemonistic power in Indo Pacific.

More specifically, the United States to sustain its predominance in the Western Pacific cannot allow China to have a free run in all the Seas of the Western Pacific, shake the stability and security of Japan and South Korea as vital Allies of the United States and not allow China to dent United States Asian image of provider of global security and stability.

Since outright use of military force to unravel China's military mastery and control over the South China Sea is not an immediate option, The United States will now be forced to resort to a combination of multiple politico-strategic and politico-military strategies to push China into a direction of accepting that freedom of navigation of international waterways cannot be restricted by China; and further, that China cannot get away with its strategic delinquencies against regional and global security without paying unaffordable costs.

China cannot be allowed to get away with its ill-gotten gains of aggression in the South China Sea. China cannot be allowed to get away with double standards of transforming militarily the international maritime routes of the South China Sea into a 'China Inland Sea' and restricting navigation in international waters and at the same time expect that China should have unrestricted use of international trade routes of the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Ocean or the Mediterranean Sea.

The United States should therefore first and foremost assert and enforce the principles of free maritime navigation and use of international maritime expanse of the South China Sea and the airspace above it. To this end international naval patrols either under the United Nations flag or by a US-led coalition of both Asian and European nations (who have an equal stake in use of South China Sea) should be used on lines of the inconsequential FONOPS of the US Navy, but more assertively.

To neutralise China's artificial islands providing military control over the South China Sea, the United States and Asian countries should provide finances and technology to Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia to construct similar islands in the South China Sea and lease them to United States to offset Chinese local military superiority in the South China Sea.

The United States should beef-up the matching countervailing coalitions that it is helping to create in terms of the US-Japan-India Trilateral and the US-Japan-Australia- India Quadrilateral. To this should be added the Vietnam-Indonesia-Singapore Trilateral and a Australia-Indonesia-Vietnam Trilateral. Such a web of strategic groupings would deter China from dividing the region as it has attempted of ASEAN.

In this direction the creation of a formalised and structured Indo Pacific Treaty Organisation, recommended in my earlier Paper deserves special mention and consideration.

The above combination of politico-strategic and politico-military measures may be adequate warning and deterrent signals to China that Asian powers and the United States as the resident external and global power mean business. While it may not prod China to unravel its military aggression in the South China Sea but it may yet bring China to realise that its military occupation of South China Sea has not met China's end-objectives in the South China Sea. Freedom of navigation through international waters would have been enforced and China deterred from its next aggressive step of declaring a China-ADIZ over the South China Sea.

Moving to the other dimension of China not being allowed to get away with its strategic delinquencies in the Indo Pacific without paying exorbitant costs for such activities of a power aspiring to be a Superpower, the United States must take the lead in creating strategic counter- pressure points against China. By 2018 a number of vulnerabilities have surfaced as far as China is concerned. If properly exploited by the United States these have the potential prod China not only in recoiling in the South China Sea but also rethink its Asian hegemony plans and its global Superpower aspirations.

China's biggest vulnerability is a slowing economy and the vital component which propelled China's exponential military rise and use of 'Hard Power' in the South China Sea military occupation. China derives its economic strengths mainly from its trade-links with the United States. The United States has a good grip on China's economic jugular vein and this must now be used to effect by the United States to prompt China into second-thoughts on South China Sea.

China's Western Frontiers in Xinjiang and Tibet are in a state of unrest and patently vulnerable. Tibet like South China Sea is a 'Core Issue' of China and so could be Xinjiang going by the brutal suppression of Uighurs there. The United States has the instruments of power to make China's Western Frontiers unstable enough to recoil from its Eastern military adventurism in the South China Sea.

United States 'ace card' against China is Taiwan both on the political sense and the military sense. The United States should vocally declare that it is dispensing with its "One China" Policy and the rest of the global community would follow suit. China cannot go to war with the United States on an America dispensing with its "One China" policy. Nothing would hurt China and its 'Core Interests'. The United States would have thus extracted a heavy price from China for its military adventurism in the South China Sea.

In conclusion, it needs to be reiterated that United States strategic complacency in being a passive spectator of China's military occupation of the strategically vital South China Sea has been the United States most Himalayan post-World War II blunder. The United States should not accept the status quo for reasons of its sustaining onslaughts on its global predominance and its credibility in Asian capitals as the enforcer of Indo Pacific security and stability. For China to recoil in its South China Sea military aggression, the United States must use its ace-card of jettisoning its "One China" policy which China cherishes beyond everything else for reasons both political and strategic.

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Tags:

[South China Sea](#) [2]

[Illegal Construction in South China Sea](#) [3]

[US Strategic interest in South China Sea](#) [4]

[Indo-Pacific Security](#) [5]

Category:

[Papers](#) [6]

Countries:

[China](#) [7]

[India](#) [8]

Topics:

Strategic Affairs & Security ^[9]

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