

Geopolitics of The South China Sea Region: Prospectus for Sustainable Management of Resources

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Abstract

The South China Sea - a "1.4 million square mile body of water, covers roughly a third of the planet's shipping and harbours trillions of dollars in undersea deposits of oil and natural gas. With so much up for grabs, the...Asian nations that crowd the Sea's coastline view these waters and its prizes as a source of pride and survival". Predictably, the Sea has been described as "the most troubled waters in the world today." Intra-regional competition for maritime resource zones characterizes the South China Sea; subsumed within this is the scramble for sea-space and contested boundaries. Because these concerns are so enmeshed the conflict potential of the region is very high.

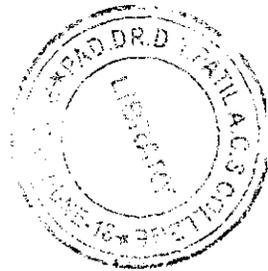
However, since this confrontationist stance has so far not yielded positive results for the countries involved, the realization that possibilities for development are better exploited jointly is slowly dawning upon them. Though consensus on peaceful co-existence is a long way off, the present trend is clearly indicative of a deeper involvement by the South China Sea countries in the geopolitics of the area. Thus, whereas earlier this richly endowed Sea was the root cause of instability in the region, now attempts are being made to see it as a common ground for cooperation. In other words, there is an understanding in the region not to let the natural resources found in these waters overpower the dispute resolution mechanism (as it happened in the 1980s) but to make them the focus of harmonious, profitable sharing.

With this geopolitical reality (of there being many conflicts in this region) and the geopolitical dream (of joint development of the South China Sea), this study makes an attempt to discover the latent "Asian potential" - the ability of the countries of the region to internalize conflicts by managing them) on their own and creating mechanisms which prevent any more such conflicts in the future, thus paving way for sustainable management of the South China Sea resources.

Introduction

The centrality of ocean space in the welfare, development and security of nations cannot be negated. Land's capacity to accommodate more people and generate resources to nurture them having been

exhausted, increasing attention is being paid to the seas and oceans of the world. This 'attention', given the selfish and competitive nature of man, takes on ugly overtones with conflicts arising due to overlapping claims to sea space and resources.



Given the growing importance of ocean space to the world community, the elaborate cast of organizations involved, and the potential for conflict: and given the responsibility that the community of nations implicitly assumes in declaring a sizeable fraction of the planet as a common heritage of mankind, a single major question arises: "what steps are necessary for the rational management of ocean space to maximize the effective use of the limited resources, to distribute benefits equitably and rationally, and to consider the longer term dilemmas as well as short-term needs?"¹

The realization that competing and conflicting interests do not benefit any country in the long run has now dawned, causing the countries to focus attention on conflict resolution wherein benefits for all are sought to be maximized, resource use attempted to be optimized and cooperative interactions on a long-term basis organized

Economic issues, political imperatives, security stances, and the resource utilization, sovereignty issues and military concerns which attach to them respectively, highlight the utility of the seas and the oceans. These concerns, along with, of course, a host of other causative factors, add a geopolitical, and hence strategic, dimension to the question of utilization and sharing of the oceans. Thus, *geopolitics of the oceans occupies a central place in the international relations and foreign policy of all states, particularly the littoral or coastal states.*

Objective

The centrality of ocean space in the welfare, development and security of nations cannot be negated. This Paper attempts to study the above reality in the South China

Sea region. The countries of this region are "sea-oriented" - offshore resources and sea-borne trade supports their economies. Thus, geographical setting and its impact on national growth and development is a key variable determining the geopolitical outlook of the countries of the region.

Methodology

The Paper is based on an extensive literature survey. Some of the write-ups seem to present biased analyses probably because their authors belong to the countries that are affected by the geopolitics of the region. However, a conscious effort has been made to analyze these with a scholarly detachment and to give an overview of the regional scenario.

Area of Study

South China Sea

Being the core of 'geopolitics and geostrategy' in the West Pacific, the South China Sea mirrors major issues in the regional political and strategic balance. Factors of limited space dotted by numerous islands and crossed by several straits along with the presence of invaluable resources have made this sea more contested than most other seas.

The South China Sea is a part of the China Sea that has been described in the World Book Encyclopedia thus:

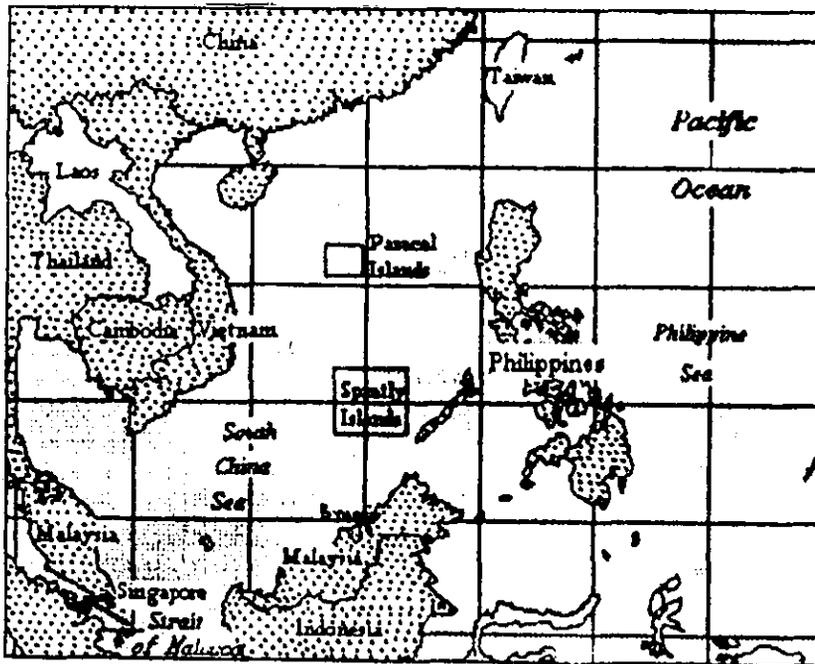
China Sea is the name of the two seas of the Pacific Ocean along the east coast of Asia. Both seas were the scenes of important naval battles during World War II. The East China Sea (area 482,300 sq.miles or 1,249,200 sq.km)

extends north from Taiwan to Japan mid Korea, the South China Sea (area 1,300,000 sq.miles or 3,370,000 sq.km) is connected to the East China Sea by the Formosa Strait. The South China Sea includes the Gulf of Tonkin and the Gulf of Thailand on the West and Manila Bay on the East.²

The South China Sea - the largest sea on the face of the earth - is an extension of the Western Pacific Ocean. In physical terms though China is not exactly in the littoral of the South China Sea, strategic interests dictate its inclusion in any study of this Sea. In this Paper, the South China Sea region includes China along with Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Singapore³. Thus, all the countries in the South China Sea region are

a part of South East Asia, China being the only East Asian country represented here.

The definition of the South China Sea as a semi-enclosed sea merits greater discussion. Since it is more vital to the global economy now, than ever before *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (henceforth, *UNCLOS*), Article 122, describes South China Sea as a semi-enclosed sea -- the northern and southern extremities of this sea being connected to another sea or ocean (the Pacific and Indian Oceans) by narrow outlets (Malacca and Sunda Straits and the Straits between Taiwan, the People's Republic of China and Philippines). Moreover, it is surrounded by many states, each of them claiming their territorial waters/sea and EEZs. In fact, *if the geopolitical characteristics and configuration of the South China Sea are considered, it can best be de-*



South China Sea Region

scribed as a 'geopolitical lake' with territory and land on 90% of its circumference and narrow choke points as its entrances and exits. It is this semi-enclosed nature of the South China Sea which, as has been highlighted in this Paper, complicates the sovereignty issue (i.e. overlapping of territorial claims).

The South China Sea has often been described as the "most troubled waters in the world today"⁵. The reasons to support this statement rest on a number of considerations, one of them being the disputes among the littoral states for controlling the islands, sea lanes of communication (henceforth, SLOCs), hydrocarbon exploitation etc. in this area. "Major sea lanes of communication are of major economic and security importance to all nations conducting trade in Asia across the major straits and the South China Sea. Natural resources, specially hydrocarbons, offshore minerals and fisheries are becoming increasingly important to the regional states"⁶.

Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas (in his speech while inaugurating the First South China Sea Workshop held in Bali, 1990), pointed out that:

The strategic importance of the South China Sea is, of course, beyond question. As a semi-enclosed sea linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans and located between continental Asia and insular South East Asia encompasses important sea lanes of communication, and indeed, the Straits of Malacca and Singa-pore at its southern entrance rank among the busiest straits in the world...(Therefore) one can hardly avoid the first impression that the

South China Sea, after Cambodia, may well become the next, acute source of conflict in the region⁷.

The geopolitics of the region thus involves this sea as the single most important principle determining inter-state relations. Its significance as an arena for political and military interaction emanates from the contest over sea space for the economic and strategic benefits its ownership would confer.

Geopolitics of the South China Sea: Political, Economic and Military Dimensions

Geopolitics is multi-dimensional-it is a complex maze of political, economic and military issues. These political, economic and military issues are intertwined in a cause-effect relationship wherein each overlaps with the other, and in many instances, is subsumed within it as well. This becomes evident when we consider that political issues have their roots in (besides other things) economic considerations, and these two together fuel military concerns. Similarly, economic issues are complicated due to sovereignty issues which make use/sharing of resources a complicated political tangle and this, in turn, adds a security angle to the entire gamut of issues. Thus, intrinsic to the geopolitical question we have many, but three main concerns and these have a lot of overlap among them.

These political, economic and security imperatives operating in the South China Sea impart to it an unique geopolitical significance which tends to justify the sobriquets 'Asia's next flashpoint', 'another hotspot of the world', 'Asia's ammunition house'...and so on which it has earned. For the sake of this study, however, it becomes

imperative to highlight, as best as possible, the intricacies of the three dimensional geopolitical problem, i.e. to take up the political, economic and military issues of geopolitics in all their ramifications.

1. Main Political Issues in the South China Sea

The South China Sea is significant politically by virtue of the fact that the countries around it are on the economic upswing and are spreading their zones of influence -- trying to extend their jurisdiction over the South China Sea. The claims to the ownership of the nearly 200 islands, islets and rocks in this sea result in an *overlap of territorial claims of the countries around it.*

The several islands in the *South China Sea* are divided by the Chinese government into four groups for administrative purposes. The Nansha/Spratly Islands (115 degrees east, 10 degrees north) -Taiping is the largest; the Xisha/Paracel Islands (112 degrees East, 16 degrees north): the Zhongsha Islands (115 degrees East, between 15 and 16 degrees north); and, the Dongsha Islands (117 degrees East, 21 degrees north).

The Spratly Islands are claimed by China, Vietnam, Philippines and Taiwan, but occupied by Vietnam, Philippines and Taiwan; there are three claimants to the Paracel Islands-China, Taiwan and Vietnam; the Pratas Islands are claimed by only China, but are occupied by Taiwan: Macclesfield is claimed by China and Taiwan. It has been remarked that (in this region) "over territorial issues feelings run high and senses low)....."⁸

The islands are rich in oil and minerals. Experts have estimated that the South China Sea could become

another Persian Gulf with 35 billion tonnes of oil and gas deposits. China has already awarded an oil exploration contract to an American company called Crestone, though this particular island is within the territorial waters of Vietnam. As a matter of fact, most of the islands, including the Spratlys, are closer to Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia rather than to China. If these claims of China are accepted, the Chinese territorial jurisdiction will increase by 2.5 million sq km; consequently, its maritime jurisdiction will increase from the present 370 sq.km making it a crucially important power .⁹

The South China Sea islands are claimed because they are blessed with critical resources and strategic position: a country's claim over them concretizes its claim over the EEZ. "It is in the interest of nations to give themselves the most generous sea boundaries. The larger the area claimed, the greater the EEZ. The greater the EEZ, the greater the possibility of gaining wealth from the sea and the sea bed."¹⁰ In other words, these islands, rocks, reefs, sand bays, etc. are important geopolitically because ownership claims to them are used to bolster claims to the surrounding seas and its resources. The following extract illustrates the criticality of islands in case of the demarcation of the EEZ:

The extent to which nations feel compelled to safeguard their EEZ is witnessed by an Associated Press photograph that appeared in Nov. 1987. It showed a Japanese maritime safety agency surveyor and his

*assistant perched on a small rock in the middle of the sea. The caption read "... surveyors battle against the tide to measure Okinotorishima Island, Japan's southern most reef, 1700 km. south of Tokyo. The surveyors were measuring distances on the reef prior to the government spending American \$200 million to build steel wave absorbing blocks to prevent the island from disappearing as a result of wave erosion. If the rock had disappeared, Japan could have lost 400,000 sq.km. of its EEZ. A similar example is the Malaysian Government's decision to station soldiers on Turumbu Layang-Layang (Swallow Reel) in the South China Sea, which involved building 'special accommodation units' to allow them to survive at high tide.*¹¹

Moreover, control over the narrow waterways-the straits-also becomes an important angle in the sovereignty tangle. These (straits) are of economic and security importance to all the nations in the South China Sea littoral and beyond it because they serve as trade routes. "Sea trade routes are often referred to as sea lanes of communication or SLOCs. Regional sea trade is vulnerable to disruption due to the convergence of the SLOCs into choke points at the Malacca Straits to the west, the Bashi channel in the northeast, and at various straits through the Indonesian Archipelago. All of these key entry and exit points could be denied to shipping by military force".¹² Bulk of imports, especially critical imports like energy resources, of China, Japan, Philippines and many other states of the region, course through the South China Sea. According to

an estimate, more than half of the super-tanker traffic of the world passes through the region's waters - snaking the South China Sea the second busiest international sea lane in the world.¹³ This makes control over this sea and its SLOCs decisive to the balance of power particularly in the region around it. In fact, the South China Sea islands' geopolitical significance is heightened by their indisputable geostrategic importance - they astride one of the most important SLOCs in the world. Any control over these islands means effective surveillance of these straits.

Thus, all these issues of islands, EEZs, resources (which can be had both from - the islands and the EEZs) and the SLOCs - are inextricably linked. The *semi-enclosedness of the South China Sea complicates all these sovereignty claims and counterclaims further*. This nature of the sea (along with the presence of innumerable islands and islets) means that there is no place more than 370 km (200 nautical miles) from land. Much of the sea waters have been divided into "national parcels"¹⁴ but still, many of the boundaries are contested and herein lies the political significance of this sea.

2. Economic Dimension of the South China Sea Geopolitics

In the South China Sea setting of contested islands and constricted sea space, a lot is at stake. Putting it in power different way, because a lot is at stake, this sea space and the islands therein are contested. The crux of the statement, whichever way it is phrased, is that in the present times regional concerns, particularly in the South China Sea region, have come to rest upon economics. Economic considerations, earlier just one of the dimensions of geopolitics, now dominate in

a large measure, the entire gamut of geopolitical imperatives.

Potential oil rich seabed has been an important cause for the build up of tensions in the South China Sea over the past 20 years or so. "There may be many causes for the build up of tension in the South China Sea over the past two decades, but the potential oil-rich seabed obviously is one of the most important considerations sparking the territorial claims.....The South China Sea today is one of the most productive offshore areas in the world. Since 1950, 29 oilfields and 4 gas fields have been developed in the South China Sea."¹⁵ Oil and gas resources in the South China Sea region are strategically located close to large energy consuming countries. In fact, in the recent past, the economic growth rates of these countries have been among the highest in the world and this has been accompanied by further increase in their demands for energy.

The strategic and economic importance of the oil resources of this region increased since the repercussions of over-dependence on the Middle East oil felt in 1974 adversely affected the economic stability of the countries everywhere. "The drastic raising of oil prices since 1974 has made littoral states increasingly positive, if not bellicose, in staking out seabed zones for oil exploration and exploitation."¹⁶ Realization dawned upon the states that over-reliance on an external supply of a strategic resource like oil is a potent weapon which can be used to throw them out of gear and bring their economy to a standstill.

Minerals like manganese, molybdenum, cobalt, nickel, etc. are also found in the depths of the seas around the *South China Sea* islands. With further technological ad-

vance, harnessing these minerals would also become profitable.

Quite contrary to hydrocarbons that attract an immediate global attention, fish and other living resources have more of a localized or regional importance. "Fisheries are of substantial economic importance in South East Asian countries as measured by their contribution to indicators of economic 'size' such as the GNP or GDP, by employment, by export earnings and by import substitution."¹⁷ Less land area coupled with high population pressure leaves little space for cultivating agricultural crops and for livestock raising. Besides, in this warm and humid region these activities, particularly livestock raising, are not viable. So a lack of vegetable and animal protein in the diet is compensated by fish. "Increasingly, national governments of coastal states have begun to look towards the sea as an important source of food. Indonesia is dependent on fish for about half its population's requirements of animal protein, while Malaysia relies on fish for about 65 percent of its requirements."¹⁸

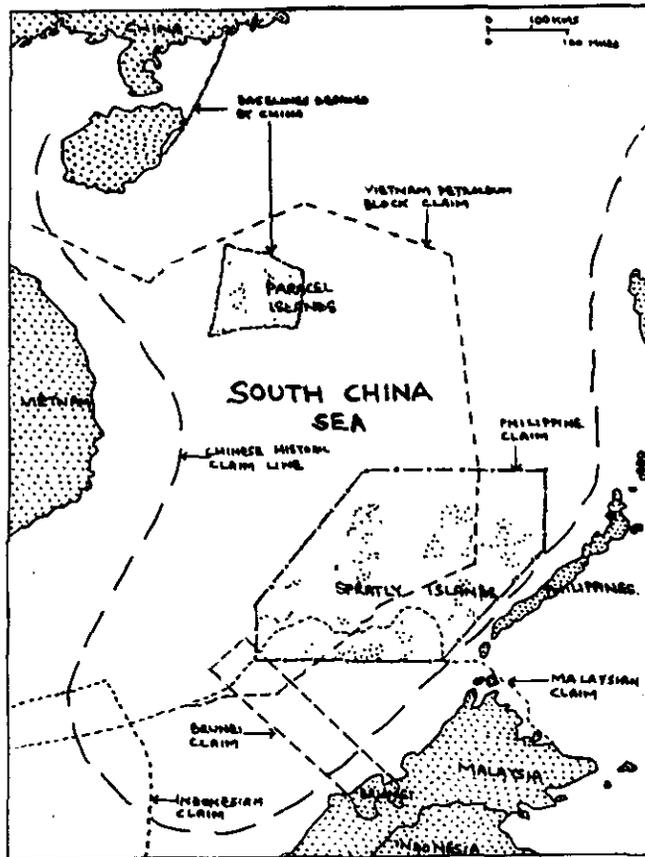
Besides food, fisheries are an important source of livelihood. A seaward orientation, coupled with a high pressure on land, is reason enough for the people to turn to the sea for their living. In fact, even those who are engaged in agriculture or other seasonal economic activities take to fishing during the lean period.

The UNCLOS III Agreements also established the right to exploit or conserve the living marine resources within the EEZ of each country. The problem in this respect is that fish shoal and spawning movements are not confined to boundaries-either those marking national sovereignty or unilaterally

declared lines marking 'fishing zones'. This leads to many complications. For instance, the migrating Club Mackerel of the Gulf of Thailand, an important catch for Thailand, appears to spawn in Vietnamese and Cambodian waters. Thus, whereas Vietnam gets only small and immature fish, Thailand seems to get mature fish - but limited in numbers as much of the immature fish has already been caught by Vietnam. This is a 'problem' for both the countries and since it is rooted in the natural migratory behaviour of fish, there appears to be no direct solution.

Nature's design further complicates the issue. Thailand's concave coastline stands to its disadvantage as it gets lesser sea space, as against Vietnam's protruding coast. Thus, overlapping of interests and claims comes up yet again. "The South China Sea, in this respect, is an 'economic pond' which all littoral states aspire to exploit. It, in fact, has some characteristics of a common fishing pond, where ominously naval forces are becoming more visible and over which national claims are more frequently made"¹⁹

Maritime Claims in the South China Sea



Source: Adelpi Paper - No.328, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London: Oxford University Press, May 1999, p. 59

Besides minerals and fish, guano, turtles and crab meat are also important products of the South China Sea islands.

Thus, economics is a powerful engine that drives geopolitics. Interest in the economic fortunes of the South China Sea is the motive force propelling all the countries, particularly those within the region, to increase their military capabilities to be able to rise to the occasion in the eventuality of an armed conflict. In other words, economic concerns fuel military stances.

Conflicts over... resources have been a central factor in the recent spurt in regional arms procurement. Investment has been particularly concentrated in military forces.... suited to protecting maritime claims..... This has meant that military spending, far from being seen as a diversion of resources from economic development, is often seen as a necessary investment in protecting vital economic interests.²⁰

Thus, it is important to focus on security and strategic considerations in order to get a complete picture of South China Sea's geopolitical reality.

3. Security and Strategic Considerations

A lack of security regime in the South China Sea region in the Post-Cold War era drove the region's states to arm themselves probably out of a perceived instability arising out of a heightened potential for armed conflict in the eventuality of the islands dispute lying unresolved. The paradox is that with the end of the Cold War, this region has witnessed unprecedented peace and quiet, and yet it has been during this period that the countries of the region have gone in for arms procurement and military modernization on a scale not witnessed before.

Though the governments contend that they have merely been 'modernizing their forces' (i.e. upgrading existing facilities), they have, it appears, developed new and more sophisticated technologies for armed conflict. "Strategic, economic and political links have remained important factors in East Asia's procurement decisions".²¹

Though the main factor causing an upswing in military acquisition is the threat perception arising out of border (i.e. sovereignty) and resource sharing (i.e. economic) disputes, it is not the sole cause responsible for this trend. The reasons behind the countries' attempt to strengthen their military forces in the region vary. Some states want to transform their navy from brown-water to blue-water. Others are trying to arm themselves to resist a possible regional threat. Perhaps a few of them are doing it just to keep up with their neighbours. For whatever reasons, if continued unchecked this regional arms buying spree may lead to military conflict in the future.²²

Of the several factors leading to increased arms procurement in the region, the following two merit closer look:

a) EEZ Surveillance and Protection

The promulgation of 200 mile EEZs under UNCLOS III (1982) has been a main factor leading to arms build-up in the South China Sea region. The drive to tap the resources from the South China Sea, as has been discussed at length earlier, has resulted in contested sea space, which in turn has generated the need for surveillance and monitoring of the zones claimed by each country. Moreover, there is a constant effort on part of the countries to demonstrate their power potential over the areas, which they claim.

For instance, Malaysia went as far as declaring the need to protect the EEZ as a 'new element' in the 1986 -1990 Five-Year Defence Plan. Further, the defence vote was increased significantly in the subsequent Plans - the principal reason cited for this was the need to upgrade the capability of the country to exercise control over and ensure safety of its EEZ.²³

b) Broadening of Regional Security Concerns: Economic and Environmental Issues

The term 'security' - besides including 'military' concerns also includes economic and environmental issues. Economic security involves surveillance of SLOCs and EEZs and protection of marine resources (this overlaps with point (a) given above). Environmental security is concerned with oil spills and other forms of marine pollution. These issues have become an increasing source of international disputation and their importance is likely to increase in the future. Environmental issues - i.e. issues of environmental degradation primarily, are important because, one - they are not confined to the national boundaries of the countries in which these environmentally harmful activities are generated; and therefore, two - the costs are borne by those who do not stand to benefit from the activity generating these adverse impacts on the environment. Since these negative repercussions lead to a decrease in returns from the sea - say, in case of the living resources (fish, etc), the conflicts (about the polluting country owning responsibility and taking steps to combat and /or minimize these negative fall-outs) are on the rise. Such economic and environmental conflicts require maritime patrol and thus, they are one of the causes

for an increase in the arms procurement in the South China Sea region.

The author of "Sea in Modern Strategy", L.W.Martin cautioned that "we almost certainly underestimate the future importance of the Sea as a source of political issues and possible conflict"²⁴ in relation to world seas in general.

With this geopolitical reality (of there being many conflicts in this region) and geopolitical dream (of overcoming these conflicts and forging new bonds of lasting leadership and peace) the latter part of this Paper tries to focus on the 'Asian potential' - the ability of the countries of the region to internalize the conflicts by managing them on their own and create mechanisms which prevent any more such conflicts in the future. This would be the first step in the direction of a more meaningful utilization of South China Sea space and resources. It has been noticed in the recent past that the stances and opinions held by the countries of this region reflect a desire to rise above their 'limited' and 'restricted' perspectives to enhance cooperation and mutual trust on the basis of widened horizons. If realized, this would facilitate the creation of "a framework of regional and international relations which disengage the Asian societies from global rivalries and makes the Asian region a force for global peace."²⁵

The Future Prospects of Geopolitics in the Region - Possibilities for Cooperation

Sea space is the dominant regulating factor in the geopolitical concerns of this region.

The geopolitical framework of the South China Sea enables us to use a consistent maritime perspective to the study of regional affairs. Also,

*in an area where sea occupies as much space as land, maritime issues have been and will continue to be, of fundamental importance in the understanding of regional affairs.*²⁶

The inter-related issues of resource utilization, sovereignty and security concerns lie at the heart of South China Sea geopolitics. To reiterate, *the desegregation of these (economic, political and military) concerns is futile as an intense cause-effect relationship exists between them. Therefore, any attempt to purge the region of its ills will have to offer holistic solutions addressing each of these concerns.* In the present times the economies in the South China Sea region are in a rapidly expanding phase. Realizing full well that it is economics, which drives politics and security, the countries are trying their best to maximize their economic potential by harnessing the resources, which the South China Sea offers. They should realize that getting tempted by transient commercial and strategic opportunities to engage in conflict would only serve to undermine the overall power potential of the region besides causing irreparable damage to the marine resources. Moreover, accomplishing short-term gains erodes any possibilities of long-term benefits.

With the confrontationist stance taken by the countries of the region so far having not yielded positive returns, the realization that possibilities for development are better explored jointly is slowly dawning upon them. Thus, a shift is now visible in the South China Sea concerns -- with more and more countries here favouring peaceful co-existence. Though consensus is a long way off, the trend is clearly indicative of a deeper involvement by the South China Sea region

countries in the geopolitics of the area. Thus, whereas earlier this richly endowed sea was the root cause of instability in the region, now attempts are being made to see it as a common ground for cooperation.

South China Sea: An Arena for Co-operation

With the passage of time it has been established that no one country has the power to control the riches of this sea single-handedly and that a short-sighted mindless scramble for the bounties of this richly endowed sea will not benefit any country. In other words, there is an understanding in the region not to let the natural resources found in these waters overpower the dispute-resolution mechanism (as it happened in the 1980s), but to make them the focus of harmonious, profitable sharing. Therefore, joint development is the most desirable way to tap these resources. Joint operations can take the form of either joint maritime surveillance or joint development of resources. Joint maritime surveillance would generate information - for the sharing of which regional arrangements should be made. This would foster regional dialogue and exchange of ideas, which in turn, would become the basic building block for regional security cooperation. "A joint maritime surveillance regime charged with responsibilities for sea safety, environmental monitoring and exchange of relevant information is commended to the governments of South East Asia for its potential to enhance security of the region in which they reside."²⁷ In fact, every country of the South China Sea region should devote part of its national surveillance efforts to the cause of regional security, thereby reducing the possibility of eruption of new crises.

Joint development of resources is also crucial to ensure peace. The contest for strategic resources is the most destabilizing factor because of the primacy of economic concerns in the present day world. However, joint development of these resources would lead to cooperation rather than hostile confrontations provided there is some tacit understanding in resource utilization by the regional countries.

Zhiguo Gao adds a word of caution on this issue - he points out that in case of joint development in the South China Sea the tendency, by far, has been to 'beat around the bush'. He says that though this concept (joint development) has been repeatedly brought-up in the conflict resolution workshops, not much has been actually done to initiate the process. He conjectures that lack of serious political inclination towards this end accounts for laxity on part of the governments of the region. The author further says that just by putting forth the idea of joint development and talking about it in the various informal regional meetings would not go far in solving the South China Sea problems. This trend can at best serve to popularize the concept - which has already been done. The need of the hour is to translate thoughts into action. A meaningful cooperative endeavour at the regional level is the only hope for the South China Sea area.

Multilateralism as the key to solving the South China Sea imbroglio has been suggested by academics and military analysts - even the governments of the regional countries have become increasingly oriented to this approach. Considering that in some way or the other, all the South China Sea countries have a stake in it, it is but logical that to find a solution to the problem all the con-

cerned parties are invited. Thus, in this region the very nature of conflicts makes multilateralism the most obvious approach to conflict resolution. In the event of a failure to take-up this "challenge of multilateralism, the region may become the most important zone of conflict."²⁸ Mark J. Valencia is of the view that multilateralism would solve the Spratly conflict. He suggests the establishment of a multilateral Spratly Management Authority to administer the contested area. It is an innovative, but possible, way out of the chaotic mesh of claims. This idea can be extended to the entire South China Sea area.

It is understood that regional countries must intensively engage in negotiations before any line of action can be decided. "Negotiations may work well, given goodwill and mutual interest in working towards a binding conclusion."²⁹ In any negotiation transparency should be ensured. Though this will not prevent conflict, it would certainly go a long way in creating a cooperative security culture in the South China Sea - and this would lay the ground for a mutually agreeable and beneficial sharing of sea space and the resources.

Besides the above-mentioned mechanisms Willy Ostreng suggests that the problems in the *South China Sea can be solved by setting up of commissions*.³⁰ These commissions should have people with professional expertise, intellectual inclinations and broad regional outlook - as their members. The views/opinions of such commissions could serve as guidelines to the governments and authorities, which make political decisions. "This aspect is particularly significant in the South China Sea, where a basic component of the problematique is the parties

finding it difficult to sit down at the same negotiating table."³¹ Though commissions and other informal workshops of this nature are effective constraints -- they prevent the countries from taking unilateral military action, it is important to add that "fruitless talks combined with unilateral military and economic initiatives may well erode rather than build confidence"³² Thus, how a particular conflict resolution mechanism is handled is as important as what it proposes.

Conclusion

Thus, "many venues are open to disputing parties, including arbitration, adjudication and conciliation, as well as other regional or local ad hoc procedures."³³ The South China Sea can be exonerated of all its ills only if the countries of the region decide to do so. But it is important for them to realize that they have to rise above the concept of 'national versus regional welfare' and view the two as complementary, i.e. neither is it possible to have a healthy regional order if the countries of the region are not sound, nor is it possible to conceive of national well-being if the region is marred by conflicts and disputes. In fact, the good of the people in general should always be borne in mind for this is the most perfect and universal yardstick for achievement.

Each of the different lines of cooperation as mentioned above-can initiate dialogue and lead to concrete action towards sustainable and joint development of marine resources. The concerned parties should bear in mind the fact that sustainable management of South China Sea resources rests on the premise that national goals and regional aspirations cannot, and should not, be discreetly compartmentalized-there is

much complementarity between the two to permit desegregation.

Summing up, it may be added that with high resource potential, manpower pool, recent technological advancements and economic prosperity - this region holds immense promises for the future. It can develop to its fullest potential only if the countries join hands. By generating mutual amity and finalising the conflicts through diplomacy, all the countries can contribute towards a bright geopolitical future for the South China Sea. It is imperative, therefore, to reinforce regional dynamism and use it as a launching pad for intra-regional cooperation in sustainable development of the sea's resources.

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