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## 12<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL



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# RUMPUS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

We are not in Sun Tzu times neither are strategies so opaque nor are Xi's people willing to tolerate an autocratic ruler indefinitely. Yet China would do well to heed Sun Tzu's sage words of avoiding a reckless path to an unintended war.

## The Battle For The Paracel Islands

In January 1974, during America's war in Vietnam, an obscure naval battle was fought in the South China Sea involving an intense clash between the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and South Vietnamese navies near the disputed Paracel Islands. A short but intense battle left China in control of seemingly unremarkable spits of land and surrounding waters. The incident merited little global attention, especially when compared with past titanic struggles at sea, such as those of the two world wars. Unsurprisingly, the battle remains an obscure, if not forgotten, episode. However, in naval history, it defined China's early steps to arrogate the South China Sea. It is, therefore, important that we examine this naval battle keeping in perspective the backdrop of the larger war being waged on the Indo-China Peninsula and the US geo-political moves to open-up the People's Republic of China (PRC).

In response to the stunning victory by North Vietnamese communist forces in June 1954,

bringing to an end nearly a century of French colonial rule in Indo-China, America feared the strategic collapse of western influence against the surge of communism in South East Asia. It contrived a foreign policy that came to be known as the "Domino Theory". Subsequent events, however, suggest that the concept was ill-advised and today stands discredited; the view was that the fall of Indo-China to communism would lead rapidly to the collapse of other nations in Southeast Asia (including Laos, Cambodia and Thailand) and elsewhere (Japan, Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand and even India). US President Eisenhower, in 1954 declared, "The possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world."

American answer was the Saigon Military Mission, a covert operation to conduct psychological

warfare and paramilitary activities in Vietnam to prop up the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in South Vietnam. It marks the beginning of the American War in Vietnam. The Geneva Accords of 1954 effectively divided Vietnam in two at the 17th parallel. By 1967, a wily programme for the 'pacification and development of Vietnam' was initiated that was primarily a US military coercive effort to compel security and stability of South Vietnam's rural population. The US troops were surged to approximately 485,000. The casualties bore grim testimony to the utter failure of the scheme; by 1968, over 20,000 US troops had been killed.

It wasn't till 27 January 1973 that President Nixon signed the Paris Peace Accords, ending 'direct' US involvement in the Vietnam War. It may be recalled that Nixon opened the doors to

**Beijing** had decided to **solve the Paracel Islands** territorial dispute **by force** if the opportunity presented itself

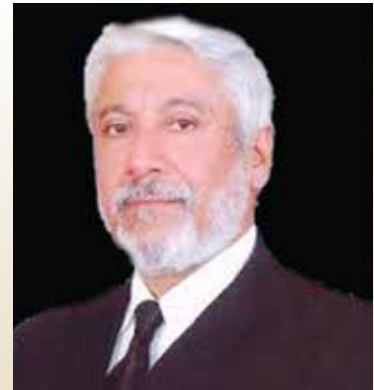


China in February 1972, during which he met Chairman Mao and signed the Shanghai Communiqué with Premier Zhou Enlai. The communiqué set the stage for improved Sino-US relations, both economic and political. Normalization of relations and the accession of China into the global marketplace was the end purpose. Clearly, there was no intention to initiate any action that might jeopardise Nixon’s grand scheme.

Harking back to the Battle for the Paracel Islands. The archipelago lies in the South China Sea approximately equidistant from the coastlines of the PRC and Vietnam. With no indigenous population, ownership has been in dispute since the early 20th century. Between 1932 and 1956, the Islands exchanged hands contentiously between the French, Japanese, Republic of China (Taiwan) and South Vietnam. By 1956, France and Japan abdicated their claims which left China and South Vietnam with small garrisons on Yongxing

and Shanu Islands. The Paracel Islands are located 300 km south of Hainan Island, and 370 km east of Da Nang. The archipelago is composed of coral islands, reefs, and banks divided into two island groups. To the northeast is the Amphitrite Group, in which Woody Island is the largest feature. To the southwest is the Crescent Group, consisting of Pattle, Money and Robert Islands on the western side and Drummond Duncan and Palm Islands on the eastern side. About 80 km of water separate the Amphitrite and Crescent Groups (see Chart 1)

On 16 January 1974, two Chinese Kronshtadt-class submarine chasers and two minesweepers along with a force of maritime militia were ordered to protect fisherman operating off the Paracel Islands. It was also a part of a force build-up in the eastern part of the archipelago. Beijing had decided to solve the Paracel Islands territorial dispute by force if the opportunity presented itself. Saigon, in the meantime,



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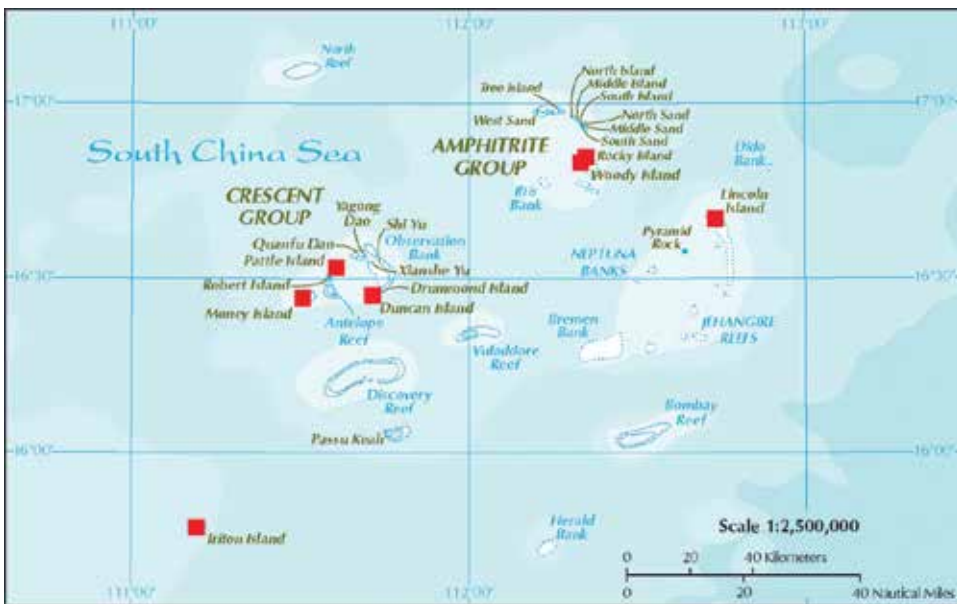


Chart 1 PARACEL ARCHIPELAGO (source 'https://www.navytimes.com/news/yournavy/2019/03/14/')

dispatched a Frigate with South Vietnamese Army officers and an American observer to the Paracels on a surveillance mission to investigate reported Chinese activities in the area (the role of the American officer on the frigate was never clear). They discovered two Chinese “armoured fishing trawlers” off Drummond Island in support of a detachment of

troops who had occupied the island. Chinese soldiers were also observed on nearby Duncan Island, with a landing ship and two additional Kronstadt class submarine chasers in the vicinity. This was reported to Saigon who despatched two more frigates and one corvette to confront the Chinese ships in the area and evict their troops on the islands. By 18 January, the Vietnamese force concentrated off the Islands. In the meantime, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) had also landed two battalions of marines supported by a large number of irregular militias.

The combined Vietnamese force of three frigates and one corvette vastly outgunned (5 inch and 3 inch guns) the PLAN force of two minesweepers, two Kronshtadt class submarine chasers (Soviet origin, main armament 85 mm and 37 mm guns) and the landing ship. In the run up to the battle, South Vietnamese troops attempting to establish a bridgehead on Duncan Island were beaten back by Chinese marines and irregulars.

On the morning of 19 January, the Battle was joined when a gun duel broke out between the two forces. The lighter and faster Chinese flotilla manoeuvred close in to the South Vietnamese force; their agility permitted them to close the larger South Vietnamese warships to within their gun range. The Vietnamese could not bring their heavier guns to bear. All the while the Chinese maritime militia on board their armed and armoured trawlers were deployed close-in to ensure a very confused picture. Tactically, once range was closed to half-mile, the Chinese vessels' rapid-firing light weapons and speed gave them a decisive advantage. The PLAN had within

40 minutes bested the South Vietnamese fleet. By late evening 20 January, the entire Paracel Archipelago was under Chinese control.

**China's Grand Strategy Unfolds**

China employed a mix of conventional and irregular forces to meet its operational objectives. Such hybrid methods foreshadowed the kinds of combined maritime warfare China would consistently employ in its grand strategy to annex the South China Sea. Indeed, operations in 1974 in the Paracels represent an archetype that could be employed again in the future. The battle was the first step in China's effort to control and usurp the South China Sea as its territorial sea.

Using similar tactics, in 1988, China seized six reefs and atolls of the Spratly Islands after another

skirmish with the Vietnamese at Johnson South Reef. In late 1994, they built structures on Philippines-claimed Mischief Reef, leaving a weak Manila no choice but to accept the fait accompli. In 2012, China compelled the Philippines to yield control of Scarborough Shoal after a standoff at sea over fishing rights in the area. Beginning in late 2013, China embarked on a massive land reclamation project in the Spratlys, building up artificial islands that added up to thousands of acres of land. Some of the man-made islands feature military-grade runways, deep-draft piers and facilities to accommodate warships.

China has laid claim to all the waters of the South China Sea based on a demarcation they call the 'Nine-Dash' line. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague ruled that the origin



Chart 2. The Nine Dash Line



*Chinese carrier Liaoning with accompanying fleet conducting drills in the South China Sea.*

of the entitlement is bereft of legitimacy and could not be used by Beijing to make historic claims to the South China Sea. The line, first inscribed on a Chinese map in 1947, has “no legal basis” for maritime claims, deemed the Court.

In brazen dismissal of the Tribunal’s ruling, China persists in its sweeping claims of sovereignty over the sea, its resources and de-facto control over the trade plying across it amounting to US \$5.3 trillion annually.

The satellite imagery has shown China’s efforts to militarize the Woody Island while constructing artificial islands and setting up military bases, rejecting competing claims of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Most of the world along with claimant countries demand the rights assured under the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

In sum, China’s strategy for managing its claims in the South China Sea has emphasized delaying settlement of disputes. And in time with swelling military capability, occupation of contested features, building artificial Islands and locating military bases for control of the waters within the nine-dash line. In the face of these aggressive moves, the other claimant states are left in awe as they are handed down a grim reality.

### **To Untangle Beijing’s Behaviour**

China’s century of Humiliation (1839-1949) coincided with the start of the First Opium War and ceding of Hong Kong to Britain. The conflict provided other colonial powers, a blueprint for usurping territories from the crumbling Qing dynasty. So, northern China was seized by the Czar, Formosa was taken by Japan; while Germany, France and

Austria carved out coveted real estate through ‘loaded treaties’.

The period remains etched in Chinese institutional memory of a rapacious international system over which it had little influence. It has today shaped China’s geopolitical thrust for controlling status in the very same system. More importantly, it provides a rallying point internally and a persistent reminder to its people of why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Indeed, Premier Xi Jinping’s declaration of 2017 that “...the world is not peaceful” is turning out to be an “engineered” self-fulfilling prophecy. When put on a strategic template the delaying actions to resolve simmering discords effected only to exasperate, Janus faced policies that serve to deceive and subvert alliances, coercive manoeuvres, lease-for-debt economic deals and flouting of





Women from the Muslim Uyghur minority hold placards and flags of East Turkestan as they demonstrate near the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, 08 March 2021.

international norms bear a bizarre semblance to the words of Sun Tzu: ‘The master conqueror frustrated his enemy’s plans and broke up his alliances. He created cleavages... He gathered information, sowed dissension and nurtured subversion. The enemy was isolated, divided and demoralized; his will to resist broken.’ (Griffith, p 39).

### Challenge Of China

Of all the uncertainties, it is China, a stated revisionist autocratic power that will impact regional stability; particularly so, in the maritime domain. The planner must in the circumstance examine in some detail the challenge of China. Of significance is the shift in global balance to the Indo-Pacific intricately linked to the stunning growth of China as a contender for regional dominance. Its ascendancy is backed by military forces that are developed to the point where they expect to challenge any adversary that may attempt to deny its interests.

China’s latest Defence White Paper of July 2019 describes “Taiwan, Tibet, and Turkistan as separatists that threaten national

unity. While drumming the theme of “people’s security”, it persists with its re-education camps in Xinjiang. It hammers home the brutal repression of Muslim ethnic minorities, mainly Uighurs, and their mass incarceration. The paper warns of the dangers of territorial conflicts erupting in the South China Sea and hazards of strategic competition for resources and control of the seaways.”

### Paradox Of China’s Actions: A Conclusion

The consequences of China enabling its Anti-Access and Area Denial strategy and enabling its Coast Guard Law (January 2021) are moves to establish proprietary control, sources of raw materials, domination of sea lines of communication euphemistically called the “maritime silk route” and working to realise the ‘String of Pearls’ (currently a patchy network of Chinese military and commercial facilities along its maritime silk route). These manoeuvres in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Region evoke increasing anxieties and resistance by players in the same strategic settings. Debt traps that

have been set by China to inveigle some of the hapless littorals of the Indian Ocean of their maritime facilities are symptomatic of a new form of colonial venture. The paradoxical effects of China’s actions are to undermine its own strategic standing, hasten counter-balancing alignments such as the QUAD and urge a global logic of cooperative politics over imperial strategies.

Through all this, China remains quite oblivious to the legality of their discordant Air Defence Identification Zone, the 9-Dash line delineating their claim over most of the South China Sea, China’s Coast Guard Laws, contravention of the UNCLOS and breaching international law by constructing and militarising artificial islands. China appears to be challenging not just today’s economic orthodoxy, but the world’s political and security framework as well.

We are not in Sun Tzu times neither are strategies so opaque nor are Xi’s people willing to tolerate an autocratic ruler indefinitely. Yet China would do well to heed Sun Tzu’s sage words of avoiding a reckless path to an unintended war. **DSA**