



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

The China-US Escalating Tension in the South China Sea

Dr Ahmad Rashid Malik, Senior Research Fellow, ISSI

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Introduction

China-US rivalry has been escalating in the South China Sea with each passing day. On 19 December 2016, China seized a US drone submarine, an unmanned undersea vehicle (UUV), in the South China Sea, triggering a controversy between the two powerful nations. The UUV has the capability to carry weapons and sensors.¹ The submarine could advance US underwater activities against China.

The question precisely arises as to what was the mission of the submarine while the purpose was not to resort to escalation? Was the submarine on a intelligence-gathering mission about Chinese military assets in the South China Sea? Or, was it a mere collision at the high seas or a deliberate attempt to provoke China?

Responses

The United States did not show an extremely powerful reaction, but the Pentagon asked for the return of the submarine. The United States claimed that the submarine was sailing in the international waters and not in the Chinese waters. Previously, the United States faced such violations launched by Iran and Syria. The submarine issue is the new one, but a "muted" response by Washington was mainly because the submarine was unmanned. Had there been a captain or sailors on the submarine, the response could have been different. Similarly, Chinese response was also not hawkish. Some believe that the seized submarine was set for spying on reef construction near the Nansha Islands,² but Chinese Foreign Ministry refuted all such claims and tried to calm down the situation.³

The "muted" reaction could be taken as a policy gesture of the new incoming administration in Washington under President-elect Donald Trump, which might be interested in de-escalating military tension with China and managing the level of mistrust and enmity between the two nations. China also did not want to inherit the submarine drone legacy with the new US administration in order to build a better relationship damaged during the Obama administration in the past eight years.

Historical Disputes

In spite of the UN Convention On the Law Of Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982, there are large number of islands, islets, atolls, and reefs claimed and counter-claimed by other nations. The UNCLOS has not solved the issue but provided a framework for disputes resolution. At least eight countries namely; China, Japan,

Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei contest for territories. Recently, China and the Philippines triggered a major breakthrough by resolving the dispute of Scarborough Shoal (Huangyan Island in China), amicably and setting aside the ruling of the Hague's verdict in favour of the Philippines passed on July 12, 2016.

There is a legacy of the Cold War too. The role of outside powers is another source of tension. Militarisation by many countries also fueled tensions in the region. Being an important passage of international maritime transportation, many analysts believe that the South China Sea would be a future zone of conflicts among big powers.

The right to free navigation and in China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) by the US navy creates uneasy situation in the South China Sea. China claimed that the United States needed to get the approval from Beijing before going into operation in Chinese EEZ.⁴

Other Factors

The submarine issue cannot be looked in isolation from similar navel cooperation going on between the United States, India, and Japan to counter the growing Chinese influence in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The recent Malabar exercise targeted China.⁵ China has established the Gwadar port to divert a part of its oil imports from the Persian Gulf via the Straits of Malacca in the Pacific. An Indian nuclear submarine violated Pakistani waters on the eve of the opening of the Gwadar Port on 13 November 2016. The Malabar naval exercises between the United States, India, and Japan held since 1992 and Japans' joining in 2007, were an important strategic posture to jointly respond to China's emerging role in the Indian Ocean and its growing strategic partnership with Pakistan.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the coming US administration in Washington would lower down the hype of tension created in the past decade or so in Asia-Pacific and in the South China Sea. The dismantling of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a good starting point to end the free trade controversy in Asia-Pacific, creating more room for the Sino-American trade cooperation. The "muted" response" on the US side and "not-so-hawkish" response by the China side on the submarine issue is yet another good indication for building a peaceful relations across Asia-Pacific.

References

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 - ² Ibid & Ryan Pickrel, "China Tells Trump It Didn't 'Steal' US Underwater Drone", *The Daily Caller* (Washington). December 19, 2016.
 - ³ Katie Hunt & Steven Jiang, "China: Seized underwater drone 'tip of iceberg' when it comes to US surveillance", <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/18/politics/china-us-underwater-vehicle-south-china-sea/>
 - ⁴ Minghao, op.cit.
 - ⁵ Li Chen, "Malabar exercise more bluster than real deterrence in East China Sea", *Global Times* (Beijing), December, 26, 2012.