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## Beijing on a collision course as it stirs up the South China Sea

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China continues to extend its borders in the South China Sea – a global trade and maritime hub – in a way that no power has done before elsewhere.

China's recent acknowledgement that it is establishing its first overseas military base in the Indian Ocean rim nation of Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa, represents a transformative moment in its quest for supremacy at sea. The country's growing interest in the Indian Ocean – the bridge between Asia and Europe – draws strength from its more assertive push for dominance in the adjacent South China Sea.

Indeed, Beijing appears to be using the South China Sea as a testing ground for changing the Asian geopolitical map. To advance its geostrategic interests, China is assertively using geoeconomic tools, such as the Maritime Silk Road and the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

The Maritime Silk Road – designed to link China's eastern coast with the Indian Ocean region and the Middle East – presents itself as a benign-sounding new banner for the country's "string of pearls" strategy.

Meanwhile, without incurring any international costs, China continues to extend its borders in the South China Sea – a global trade and maritime hub – in a way that no power has done before elsewhere. Its modus operandi involves creating artificial islands and claiming sovereignty over them and their surrounding waters. In just a little over two years, it has built seven islands in its attempt to annex a strategically crucial corridor through which half of the world's annual merchant fleet passes.

Let us be clear: the South China Sea is critical to the contest for influence in the Indian Ocean and the larger Indo-Pacific region. China's consolidation of power in the sea is encouraging it to play an important role in the Indian Ocean, where it is seeking to chip away at India's natural geographic advantage.

The speed and scale of China's creation of islands and military infrastructure have astounded the world. According to a Pentagon report in August, China in 20 months reclaimed 17 times more land than all the other claimant states combined over the past 40 years. Yet its expansions have met little international response other than rhetoric.

The US has focused its concern mainly on safeguarding freedom of navigation through the South China Sea, not on ratcheting up pressure on China to stop it from altering the status quo in its favour. In fact, the US – as elsewhere in Asia, including the Himalayas and the East China Sea – has refused to take sides in the territorial disputes between China and its neighbours in the South China Sea.

No less significant is the fact that Barack Obama's administration has hesitated to provide strategic heft to its much-publicised "pivot" to Asia. Even the modest measure announced in 2011 to permanently rotate up to 2,500 US Marines through Darwin, Australia, is yet to be fully implemented. Indeed, to Washington's discomfiture, a Chinese company with links to the

People's Liberation Army – Landbridge Group – recently acquired the right to operate Darwin port under a 99-year lease.

Asean countries' reluctance to take a unified stance to stop Beijing – their largest trade partner – from doing what it pleases has also aided Beijing's strategy.

Emboldened by international inaction and a series of crises that have helped divert global attention, Beijing has been feverishly turning low-tide elevations into small islands by dredging seabed material and then dumping it using pipelines and barges. In the process, it has been creating new “facts on the ground” for enforcing an air defence identification zone without having to declare one.

Against this background, the South China Sea has emerged as the symbolic centre of the international maritime challenges of the 21st century. The region is important even for distant countries, because what happens there will impinge on Asian power equilibrium and international maritime security.

Developments in the South China Sea – the world's newest maritime hot spot – carry the potential of upending even the current liberal world order by permitting brute power to trump rules.

If Asean states and other powers in Asia do not evolve a common strategy to deal with the South China Sea dispute within an Asian framework, the issue will be left to China and the US to address through a great-power modus vivendi sidelining the interests of the smaller disputants. The common strategy must give meaning to the recent appeal of Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe, the Indian and Japanese prime ministers to all countries to “avoid unilateral actions,” given the “critical importance of the sea lanes in the South China Sea”.

The sea's centrality to the wider geopolitics, balance of power, and maritime order should induce like-minded states to work closely together to positively shape developments, including by ensuring that continued unilateralism is not cost-free. Only sustained pressure from neighbours can persuade Beijing that its future lies in cooperation and not confrontation.

Failure to exert such pressure could create a systemic risk to Asian stability