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South China Sea Arbitration: Evolving geopolitical battle lines between China and the US

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Well over three years since the Philippines initiated arbitration proceedings as regards its maritime jurisdiction in the South China Sea (SCS), The Hague based Permanent Court of Arbitration announced the award of the arbitration on 12 July 2016.

As expected the Tribunal rejected China's claims as regards its historic rights in the SCS, the status of features in the SCS and the entitlements to maritime areas, and the lawfulness of the Chinese activities in the SCS. In essence it upheld Philippines sovereign rights with respect to sea areas in its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf. The Tribunal also considered that recent large scale land reclamation and construction of artificial islands by China at seven features in the Spratly Islands since the commencement of the arbitration had aggravated the dispute between the parties.

China has denounced the award as a farce and a trash of paper. The commentators in China agree that the verdict is a huge problem for China, for it is the manifestation of an evolving geopolitical scenario. They see it as a contradiction and conflict between an emerging and an established power. The question they are asking themselves is whether China is prepared to such battle lines

or not. Zheng Yongnian, a security analyst believes that the Award could be considered as a watershed in the global geopolitical transition. Rather than viewing this a conflict between the Philippines and China, they have increasingly regarded it as a contest between China and the US which China has accused of deploying 250,000 troops, 5 aircraft carriers, 250 naval vessels and more than 1,500 military aircrafts in the Asia-Pacific with an aim to contain China.

China's knows irrespective of this massive force, the US is not entitled to implement the verdict of the arbitration; therefore, the best possible way for China is to accommodate Philippine fishermen in the vicinity of Huangyang Island. Secondly, China may initiate negotiations with ASEAN countries on fishery industry in the SCS etc. measures which will cool down the conflict to certain extent. If the countries like Philippines and Vietnam do not agree for bilateral negotiations and consultations, China must slap punitive economic sanctions on such countries as the US did to Cuba for over half a century. Secondly, China can turn SCS as a piece of burden on the SCS chessboard which is beneficial for China competition with the US, assert the analysts.

China believes that SCS crisis is not as serious as the deployment of THAAD in the Korean peninsula. The trial is similar to Russia deploying missiles in Cuba in 1962. Other crisis such as Chinese and Japanese fighter jets flying dangerously close over Senkaku/Diaoyu Island, Taiwan firing a missile towards China, and now they contemplating making Itu Aba Island/ Taipingdao accessible to the US army are all the crisis of US making to divert China's attention away from the THAAD.

How China should be responding to the deployment of THAAD, the Chinese analysts feel that China must slap hard hitting economic sanctions on South Korea, at least with those provinces in South Korea where missiles would be deployed. Meanwhile, China must stop Taiwan from inviting the US military ships visiting Itu Aba. China must respond to such crises simultaneously, for if China doesn't respond to THAAD deployment appropriately, South Korea will think that China has no problem with it, it is in this context that China must slap fatal economic sanctions on South Korea in shortest possible time. As regards the Itu Aba, China must draw a red line as soon as possible. If this line is crossed, there should be no hesitation in taking over the island by force. China must have a plan and the plan must be made public so that people know about China's bottom line.

Therefore, the verdict of the arbitration does not mean that it is all over now, contrarily it is the beginning of the contest between major powers. China has a habit of acting slow feels the experts. For example, imagine the outcome, had China acted in the SCS five-six years back. Therefore, China lacks predictive policy research. It is the time that China made its forays into to similar research conducted by the US.

It appears that China is prepared to a protracted contest with the US on a whole range of issues. However, it believes that its rise will not necessarily be a bloody one as there are instances when the transition has been peaceful. Secondly, China is aware of asymmetries in its power projection vis-à-vis the US, therefore, rules out a major conflict with the US. At the same time, it will not be shy of using force if it has got to defend the one China policy; as regards SCS it appears that

China is willing to negotiate the common exploration and development of the SCS minus sovereignty.