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## 19<sup>TH</sup> CPC: LOOKOUT FOR CONTINUITY OR CHANGE IN CHINA'S MARITIME BEHAVIOUR

Pooja Bhatt  
*Research Associate, CAPS*

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The 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of China's National Congress will be held on October 18, 2017. Held once every five years, it is the most important political meeting in the country where the formal leadership selection process of the Communist party of China takes place. The current Chinese President and the General Secretary of the Party, President Xi Jinping is expected to continue for another five-year term. His policies in the first term stressed upon socio-political- economic development of the country and establishing better trade relations with the world. As his global economic focus in the form of Belt and Road Initiative and geopolitical sensitivities in the maritime region are taking shape, Beijing's behaviour and postures in the South of China Sea (SoCS) will be meticulously observed during the next term of the leader. He is also expected to have 'his own' new set of Politburo Standing Committee members installed (as five out of seven are retiring this year). This will ensure a better control of the Chinese leadership over

decision making and execution of the domestic and foreign policies of the PRC.

Like his predecessors, Mao Zedong (who introduced socialist political and economic foundation in China) and Deng Xiaoping (who introduced Socialism with Chinese characteristics and who brought strategic vision and a scientific outlook to China's development), President Xi has been bringing changes in the social, political and economic aspects in the country. During his first term, he stressed upon the 'Chinese Dream<sup>1</sup>' of improving people's lives as one of the foundations of CPC's goals, cracked the whip against corrupt officials, restructured the country's military, and renewed China's environmental stance (by signing the Paris Agreement) under his 'Four Pronged Strategy' for development.

China's assertive maritime claims in the South China Sea have been a bone of contention between Beijing and its maritime neighbours.

Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, and Taiwan who have contesting claims on their respective Exclusive Economic Zones that fall within the U-shaped Nine Dash Line region claimed by China in the SoCS. China's bellicose maritime activities in the SoCS such as island reclamation, installation of military infrastructure on the islands, aggressive patrolling by Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) is seen with suspicion by the neighbours and the rest of the world.

### **China's unilateral fishing moratorium in SoCS**

China has been imposing a unilateral fishing moratorium in the SoCS. From May 16 to August 1, 2017, fishing was not allowed in parts of the Sea under China's claim except by single-layer gill nets or other approved methods. These bans in the SoCS began in 1999<sup>2</sup>. They cover the South of China Sea above the 12th parallel north of the equator. Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines claim waters inside the moratorium zone and, therefore, did not abide by China's ban to pause fishing<sup>3</sup>.

The CCG has been threatening and shooting at fishermen from the neighbouring countries such as Vietnam (near Paracel islands) and the Philippines (near Spratly islands). Fishing is a major livelihood for these coastal communities and such disputes are likely to impact the peace and stability of the region.

### **China's South China Sea Fleet**

According to *China Military*, in August 2017, the People's Liberation Army's first batch of navy trained pilots successfully completed their night time operations in the SoCS waters using a new kind of fighter. This is seen as a step towards building an all-weather combat naval aviation force. Trained by the PLA South China Sea Fleet, the pilots underwent multiple night flight missions towards training that includes solo flights, multi-fighter coordination, target search and strikes over SoCS, as stated by Central China TV (CCTV)<sup>4</sup>.

Besides this, China has relied on superior technologies such as radar systems and underwater submersibles (named Jiaolong) to keep a command over the region. Jiaolong is equipped to dive to depths up to 7,000 meters for info on marine life, hydrothermal movement, and multi-metal nodule mining<sup>5</sup>. Described as a technological breakthrough for the global scientific expedition by China, the underwater drone is, however, perceived as a threat by its neighbours for its duality of operations as well as for the nature of the data collected by it under the waters.

### **Belt and Road Initiative and SCS as a part of SLOC**

Towards the end of his first term, President Xi crystallised the One Belt One Road initiative in May 2017 at Beijing. He rechristened the China-

led massive infrastructure and connectivity project known as 'One Belt One Road' to Belt and Road Initiative<sup>6</sup> to make it more palatable to countries like India who refused to be a part of it. Till now 74 countries and international organisations have signed the BRI forum, however, Beijing needs more support from the countries to make this parasol of several inter-continental trade, infrastructure and connectivity projects a success. Several countries including India are seeking clarity on this project before joining the initiative.

The Belt refers to the land infrastructure and connectivity projects starting from China to Europe and some parts of Africa, whereas the Road is attributed to the maritime projects passing through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. It stretches from the South of China Sea and connects several countries of the Indian Ocean region such as India, Sri Lanka, Africa and Malaysia. It forms the busiest SLOC with two third of world trade passing through this maritime trade route.

The trade route is too large for any country to administer. Both Indian Ocean and the South of China Sea are geo-strategically delicate regions and currently the hotbed of contestations on the basis of sovereign maritime rights. Presence of powerful naval forces of countries like China, India, Japan, UK and the US has made the region add to the complexities related to the maritime governance of these important SLOCs. Under

such conditions, Chinese attempts to involve its maritime neighbours in the project and its actions against them in the SoCS will be seen as diametrically opposite postures.

### Conclusion

Beijing, under President Xi is expending a lot of economic as well as diplomatic capital to make the BRI project a reality. There are several bilateral negotiations and exchanges that are underway at Track One and Two levels between China and other countries that form a part of larger BRI project. Nonetheless, the geopolitical susceptibilities of the SoCS emanating due to Beijing's actions are seen with caution by both immediate and far-off neighbours. The actions are scrutinized as much as the words ('international cooperation', 'win-win situation for all', 'common development', etc.) in international relations and, therefore, the world will look out for any change and continuity in China's maritime behaviour under the expected second term of President Xi Jinping.

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China (2017), "Wang Yi Delivers Report at Series Report Meetings on "Five Years of Sheer Endeavour" [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1488687.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1488687.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> Xinhuanet (2016), "Annual South China Sea fishing ban begins", published on May 16, 2016. Accessed online. URL:

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[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/16/c\\_135362708.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/16/c_135362708.htm)

<sup>3</sup> *VOA News* (June 2017), "Countries Defy China's Extra-Strict Fishing Moratorium in South China Sea", published on June 26, 2017. Accessed online. URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/countries-defy-chinas-extra-strict-fishing-moratorium-in-south-china-sea/3893413.html>

<sup>4</sup> *China Military* (Aug 2017), "First PLA navy-trained pilots complete night mission in S.China Sea", published on Aug 25, 2017. Accessed online. URL: [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-08/25/content\\_7730466.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-08/25/content_7730466.htm)

<sup>5</sup> *South China Morning Post* (July 2017), "Why Beijing is speeding up underwater drone tests in the South China Sea", published online on July 26, 2017. Accessed online. URL: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2103941/why-beijing-speeding-underwater-drone-tests-south-china>

<sup>6</sup> Xinhua News Agency (2017), "Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation", Accessed online. URL: <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/201705ydyforum/index.htm>