



## ‘DREDGERS TO THE FORE!’



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On the eve of President Trump’s 12 day visit to Asia earlier this month, China had unveiled its largest dredging vessel. The rapid reclamation of reefs and islands in the South of China Sea in the last decade by China has left most countries in the region extremely concerned about losing their sovereignty rights in the areas ‘wrongly claimed’ by China, as brought out in the deliberations by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in its verdict announced on July 12, 2016. With the introduction of this giant dredger, China’s plans in the SCS are causing greater discomfiture among the ASEAN countries – some of whom have overlapping claims to features in the contested waters with China.

Some of the benign uses of dredgers have always been their ability to make passageways in rivers, thereby providing greater facilities for boats and ships to carry out trade by using the waterways, in addition to the road/rail links. So long as the dredgers are used to expand existing reefs and islands to provide infrastructure for expansion of trade and attendant commercial gains, all is well, the damage to the marine life notwithstanding (as is always denied by China). It is only when this expansion of islands is used to create military facilities – ostensibly for ensuring safety to the large number of Chinese commercial vessels that transit through the SCS daily – and also the aggressive activities of the Chinese Maritime Militia (that uses strong arm tactics to frighten away fishermen of neighbouring countries carrying out legitimate fishing), that all does not seem to be so well.

The Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) – that consists of the largest number of vessels among any coastguard unit in the world – is frequently used to assist the CMM. The CCG is actively involved in preventing commercial exploitation of resources in the South of China Sea, even though some of the regions where such activities are being carried out fall outside their (Chinese) EEZ. Besides Spain, whose oil exploration company – Repsol – was asked by Vietnam (under pressure from China) to stop drilling in block 136-03 in July, 2017, US’ Exxon Mobil too has been hard pressed to decide on its \$10 billion Blue Whale gas project for exploration in Block 136-03 in the face of the Chinese stance in the

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region. Exxon has deferred its final investment decision to 2019. The Indians seem to be the only foreign power that has stood up to Chinese threats and its OVL – the overseas arm of ONGC – is continuing its exploration in these contested waters in the form of the Block 128 exploration after receiving the two year extension from Vietnam in Jun 2017.

The Chinese, on the other hand, have been drilling for oil in other nations' EEZs in the region, throwing caution to the winds. In May 2014, the HD 981 – a Chinese oil rig – commenced drilling for oil/gas in an area that was part of the continental shelf of Vietnam and within Vietnam's EEZ. Despite several protests by Vietnam, there was no action taken by the Chinese. Following a clash between Chinese and Vietnamese ships – which included use of high powered water cannons and ramming of each other's ships – riots broke out in Vietnam in which more than 20 ethnic Chinese were killed. The Chinese withdrew the rig from the area. In June 2015, the same oil rig was back in the area and is continuing its operations, clearly in violation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (that has also been signed by China), with Vietnam showing utter helplessness to counter these moves by China.

From the above it will be seen that at the very root of this new-found confidence for the Chinese is the efficient work carried out by the dredgers in reclaiming the islands and enabling China to create forward posts from where 'strong-arm' tactics could be enforced by a combination of the 'terrible trio' – the Chinese Coast Guard, the Chinese Maritime Militia and the PLA Navy.

President Trump, during his address at the 25th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' meeting, held in Da Nang, Vietnam on 11 Nov 2017, only articulated his vision for a "free and open Indo-Pacific region", leaving Vietnam in a dilemma as to how to deal with the growing Chinese pressure in the volatile South of China Sea region.

China justifies its development of reefs and islands in the region as being necessitated by its economic compulsions of ensuring security for its commercial vessels that account for more than 3.4 trillion USD trade that passes through the waters of the South of China Sea. In an attempt to ensure protection for its commercial vessels during their transit from Africa, or past the Suez Canal, China has operationalised its first overseas naval base at Djibouti in the Horn of Africa region. China has also been successful in arm-twisting Maldives into changing its Tourism Act about sale/lease of land to foreign entities. The Act was amended and soon thereafter FeydhooFinolhu, an uninhabited island near the country's capital city of Male, was leased to a Chinese firm for 50 years at a cost of \$4 million.

There are no marks for guessing the likely employment of the recently commissioned Chinese giant dredger.

### What should India do?

The Eastern sea-board of India boasts of the four Indian “unsinkable aircraft carriers”, viz. the airfields at Port Blair, Carnic, Campbell Bay and Shibpur – all in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The airfield at Campbell Bay dominates the busiest SLOC – the six degree channel – and is barely 170 km away from Aceh, the North Western tip of Indonesia. The Indian Navy conducts coordinated patrols (CORPAT) along with navies of other countries in the region to deter pirates from threatening the merchant vessels transiting the busy Malacca Straits. Presently, the airfields at Port Blair and Carnic have the ability to field fighter class aircraft. With the presence of the Andaman and Nicobar Command at Port Blair, India’s joint Military capability would be able to contain any offensive designs posed by an adversary in the Bay of Bengal region or from the south-eastern approaches to the Indian mainland.

The Lakshadweep islands on our Western seaboard, however, are presently nothing more than a tourist destination for the most part, although they too have a very strategic location, situated as they are astride the six degree channel and the approaches to the Arabian Sea; barely 500 km North of the FeydhooFidalhoo island leased by China from Maldives. The Lakshadweep Islands are at an average distance of 400 km from the Western coastline of India. This is a significant distance when it comes to projecting military power, defending one’s national interests, or securing the southern and south western approaches of the nation from a naval/aerial threat.

The Indian mainland has a vast network of rivers that have the potential of being converted to waterways that could be used for transportation of freight. The world over it has been recognised that transportation of goods by inland waterways would be an economical mode of transportation. Under the Pradhanmantri Jal Marg Yojna, the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) has begun the preparatory works on converting 106 rivers into National Waterways (NWs) by making them navigable. There are various dredging companies in India that have experience in carrying out dredging of ports, desilting operations in rivers, lakes, etc. Some of these are Dharti Dredging and Construction Limited, SWALF Engineering Services Pvt Ltd., Chennai, KNK Group (that was responsible for dredging of the Mundra Adani Port), etc.

While these companies may already have their hands full in meeting the demands of the IWAI, their combined capacities could be well utilised in creation of infrastructure on our western seaboard,

i.e. at some of the islands in the Lakshadweep. A few examples of islands where dredging work could be possibly undertaken – keeping the sensitivities of the Environment and Forestry Ministry in mind in not destroying the fragile marine life of the Lakshadweep Islands – are given below:

- Tinakkara island (East of Bangaram Is) where a runway of 2.5 km length can be carved out with minimal dredging to reclaim the sand bar connecting Tinnakara island to Parali Island.
- At the southern tip of Minicoy Island, the area due West of Fallessery appears to be devoid of any habitation presently, except for a few huts. This area is vast and could be developed for a runway with at least three km length and could also have adequate support facilities (that could include maintenance facilities, hangars, etc.). There would still be adequate space for basing of an Air Defence radar, SSMs, SAMs and for creation of weapon storage areas and accommodation for personnel. There would be no need for dredging of any sort on this island. However, clearance of trees would be required.

The creation of infrastructure on our Western seaboard – sitting as it is astride the busy six degree channel and the SLOCs from the Straits of Hormuz to the Malacca Straits – would show the resolve of the nation in protecting own EEZs from being set upon by prospectors digging for ‘black gold’ in the future, besides providing the first line of defence away from the Indian mainland.

The Indian dredgers can solve the dilemma for the nation if we give them a Thumbs Up ASAP.

*(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])*

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