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The South China sea region has emerged as one of the areas of intense global focus with claims and counter claims of contending countries flooding the region in an atmosphere of mistrust and animosity. The debate and actions by maritime para military forces, fishing fleets, agencies behaving like maritime militia have underscored the shrill cry for establishing/ reasserting sovereignty over disparate islands and “rocks” raising it to a crescendo. The entire atmosphere in the area seems laden with a growing disenchantment with the efficacy of the multilateral forums like ASEAN due to the growing divisions evidenced by the recent failure to issue a joint communiqué at the Phnom Penh meeting recently. [1] Depending on the perception and loyalties of the viewer, but a majority of the contending littorals would like to place the blame of the imbroglio at the Chinese doorstep – much to the chagrin of the latter.



The reasons for this accusation are varied but even to an outsider, it is obvious that Chinese foreign policy with respect to the South China and East China seas seems to have undergone a paradigm shift during the last few years. This has raised the debate that this might be a precursor to the forthcoming change in central leadership within the CPC (Communist Party of China). A change that may well have initiated an intense jostle for power in the background against the projected façade of a seamless transition of power at all levels. Consequently, jostling (especially at lower levels) is bound to find outlet in jingoistic expressions of sovereign rights in sensitive areas such as the South/ East China seas- in a natural effort to deviate attention for the internal churning process currently in progress.

This perceptible shift in international posturing probably received its impetus from China's rapidly growing military capabilities and an increasing sense of having “arrived” at the international geo strategic scenario. The successful staging of the Beijing Olympics only reinforced this thought process along with the fact that the world financial crisis that effectively humbled the Western economic giants, left the Chinese economy relatively unscathed. Coupled to this is the secure feeling that the PLA (especially the PLA(N)) has emerged as one of the faster modernizing forces in the world.

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This discernible modification in Chinese foreign policy imperatives involves overcoming of the phase of “biding time” to a stance that has been termed as increasingly aggressive – especially on issues related to their sovereignty claims in the region. Seemingly, the age old Chinese dictum of hiding one’s capabilities and strategically biding time for an opportune moment, which found a revival in Deng’s “24 Character strategy” on foreign and security policy, has been superseded even though it was at one time supported by Mr. Hu Jintao- the current Supremo.

(continuing)

Read full text of this paper [here](#) .

[1] For the first time in ASEAN history - the ten member regional grouping failed to issue a joint communiqué at the end of the meeting of Foreign Ministers at Pnom Penh in July 2012. There were difference on the South China Sea issue. Talks floundered after China insisted the forum was not the appropriate place to discuss the issue and Cambodia (the Chair) resisted any steps that would embarrass Beijing.