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Submarine Collision Highlights Turbulent South China Sea

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Navigating through or under the water can be very trying at times when the area that one is transiting or operating is not well surveyed and charted. A vast area in the Spratly and Paracel island chain in the South China Sea is covered with corals and seamounts which could grow or pop up after a seismic disturbance. It is not surprising that occasionally merchant vessels or military ships ventured off course and were reported to have grounded or collided with underwater objects like what occurred to the USS Connecticut on 2nd October 2021.

Research institutions and the mass media put forward speculations and various theories as to how a sophisticated nuclear submarine could collide or hit an unidentified submerged object whilst operating in that area, and that an array of sonars and other navigating systems have failed to detect and provide the early warning required to steer the submarine away from such danger is not acceptable for an operational submarine.

Due to the sea's riches here, this region has become an area of contention by six littoral states and entities. It is believed that there are vast areas of oil and gas deposits as well as precious metal in

its depth, and it is also a rich fishing ground for these states bordering the South China Sea. It is the main sea route for a vessel sailing from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, where over 80% of the world maritime trade passes through.

Water Space Management

Looking at the number of countries within the South China Sea region that have submarines in their inventories, the likely areas to operate are very limited taking into account the inherent obstructions. Thus, water space management can be a problem when not all the countries subscribe to reporting to the same submarine operating authority. The likelihood of collision and other accidents could occur when the watchkeepers are complacent or letting their guards down.

The Turbulent Sea

For the past two decades or so six littoral parties, (China, The Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and Taiwan) have staked claims over this body of waters. Skirmishes have occurred between China and Vietnam, and between China and The Philippines, while harsh diplomatic exchanges have taken place between China and Malaysia, and between Malaysia and The Philippines to reiterate their stake in the claim. All the six claimants besides Brunei have built man-made islands on the atolls and shallow waters and equipped them with all sorts of military gadgets, some with a runway to further enhance their defence on their claimed areas. All these activities have attracted attention around the world and China has been seen as an aggressor since its built-up is much more than the rest of the claimants and is believed to have in place sophisticated weapons and equipment.

In the recent few years, the United States has been challenging China's legitimacy to the claim by conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) through China's claimed areas. The US has also encouraged the Quadrilateral (QUAD) group of the US, Japan, India and Australia partners to carry out such activities to test or probably to create an unwarranted response and anxiety.

The question is, is there a need for such FONOPs? Has China or any of the claimant states denied or impeded any type of vessels from transiting through these disputed areas? To this date, none

has been reported. The increase of naval activities will create unsettled anxiety, thus rendering the status quo situation to become a turbulent one.

Why the US employed a submarine like USS Connecticut to the South China Sea and for what purpose is anyone's guess. Submarine is a versatile force and could perform multiple roles. In October 2021, there was an incident involving the US submarine, the USS Connecticut. The exact location where the submarine collided with the submerged object was not made known in the report and would probably never be divulged. The likelihood of snooping operations to gather intelligence on the movement of Chinese military vessels is high if the incident occurred near the Paracel Islands or off Hainan.

Tapping submarine cables and planting listening devices and other intelligent gadgets could be one of the multiple tasks that could be performed by a submarine to update the complete intelligence picture. Another possibility could be the submarine was providing escort to the United Kingdom Carrier Strike Group led by HMS Queen Elizabeth, which had just passed through that area between August to October 2021. Whatever task that had been undertaken by the submarine, if it had operated within the confines of the gazetted sea lanes, it would not have run into this incident. The most likely situation was it operated "outside the normal" operational area when the incident occurred.

Looking at the damage as reported in the USNI news, the front portion, bow section was removed which indicated it might be transiting between 10-15 knots when the incident occurred. The impact rendered the vessel unsafe to transit underwater as it was probably experiencing some crack or leak in the ballast system. Luckily there was no damage to its nuclear reactor when the accident occurred. If that happened, it would have been a SCS "Chernobyl" moment which would be irreversible in terms of the damage to the maritime environment in the SCS.

The depth at which the accident occurred was not made known as well. Lots of possibilities were put forward over the last few weeks in the mass media and generated much discussion by researchers stating their arguments and views on the incident.

Coincidentally at about this time, when the submarine was detected within the vicinity off the Chinese waters, the Chinese PLA Air Force was observed to be operating a variety of aircrafts including maritime patrol and electronic-warfare aircrafts, insinuating that the submarine was jammed and its electronics were rendered inoperable thus resulting in the collision. This might not happen unless the submarine was operating in periscope depth where its antennas were all raised and these were jammed which could have created some effect on its electronics, but some form of counter measure could have been performed to render the jamming ineffective. This ambiguity needs some scrutiny before conclusion could be made and this may not be achieved as the required information was not readily available.

It is believed that China's underwater technology has improved over the last decades. Unmanned underwater vessels, underwater listening devices, sonar buoys, sonic devices and other intelligent gadgets could have been developed and deployed to protect and provide early warning in its waters, signalling caution to those would-be snoopers that there will be a response when detected.

This incident in a way has hyped up military activities in the South China Sea. The turbulence will not subside but will result in further escalation of tension which all the countries in this region would not want it to happen.

To manage and mitigate tension, confidence building and dialogues among all parties concerned are necessary in order to set aside differences, to have mutual respect, and to achieve the common goal of enhancing safe navigation and protect the environment, instead of creating doubts and suspicions.