Article – II

Formation of Quad, FONOPS and China’s Expansionist Ambitions.

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Abstract

Chinese expansionism has posed a serious threat to the free maritime region in the South China sea and has also challenged the interests of other regional countries. In such a situation, America, through several policies like FONOP, has tried to challenge the dominance of Beijing in the region. The firmness to adhere to the diplomatic policy of expansionism by China and the rejection of such claims by the US has resulted in a critical situation in the South China sea. Although FONOP is getting successful in sending clear messages about the US and its allies’ rejection of Chinese expansionism, it is not capable enough to neutralise Beijing’s intentions. Hence, FONOP had led to a deadlock between both sides in the region and narrowed the scope of success for expansionist propaganda, leaving few alternatives for a ceasefire in the region of the South China sea.

Keywords: Chinese expansionism, South China Sea, FONOP, Deadlock, Alternatives.

Introduction

Since the beginning of civilization, the human race has been involved in one or the other form of trade. In the contemporary world, trade occupies a significant position in the formation of foreign policy. As the significance of trade increases, the demand for safe and secure maritime passage increases. Therefore, it becomes obvious for states to acquire influence over such maritime routes. On the other hand, several ideologically motivated agendas such as the Chinese policy of Expansionism possess a direct threat to such maritime routes as well as hamper the interest of other countries in the region of the South China sea. Adding to it, China exploits the South China sea in order to acquire huge amounts of marine food to address its large consumption. Hence, it becomes utmost necessary to safeguard the interest of such nations and preserve marine biology from such exploitative and expansionist ideology. As it is practically impossible for such regional countries to secure their ambitions from the expansionist policies of Beijing, the intervention of the United States, to safeguard the interests of its allies, becomes inevitable. However, it is still insufficient to deal with China, especially in the South China sea. Adding to it, several dominant Asian countries such as Japan and India have joined hands with the Western Powers in order to deal with the increasing dominance of China in Asian subcontinent. Further, the recent activation and conversion of the QUAD group into a military alliance have fueled the tension in the region. Therefore, in this paper, we will dwell into the threats possessed by the Chinese expansionist agenda and counter measures by various countries and alliances such as

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QUAD. In this paper, we will also talk about the American policy of FONOP and how it contributed to counter Chinese expansionism.

To dwell deep into the naval and political situation developing in the region of the South China sea, Indian Ocean and the Asian subcontinent, it is important to understand the motive behind such a position from Beijing. Hence, we will understand how the expansionist policy of Beijing works and its strategic perspective. Further, we will see the importance of counter-expansionist policies by various countries such as America, by understanding the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) operations of the former in the region. Moving on, the paper dwells on the challenges faced by FONOP as well as the significance it possesses in countering Chinese expansionism and the potential of QUAD in providing a shield to such expansionist philosophies.

**Chinese Policy of Expansionism: A strategic perspective**

China, since the rule of the Qin dynasty, has perpetuated the phenomena of expansionism and to date, the modern-day People’s Republic of China, governed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has stuck to the notion of expansionism. China backs its policy of expansionism by playing the victim card and claiming the territories by stating them to be long-lost Chinese territory lost to British, Dutch, or Russian colonies over time. Yet, the motive behind expansionism has varied from time to time. In the medieval era, it was a battle for existence. In the time of war against Japan, it was for the upholding of Sino culture. And in the recent era, the race for centrality in international politics, regional dominance, and greed for dominance over mineral-enriched regions have acted as the motive for China to ascertain its age-old policy of expansionism.

China, having a huge economy as well as a military power, uses a salami-slice strategy to establish geopolitical influence and to expand its territory as well as a maritime influence across a vivid range of arenas (Kandhari 2020). The term ‘salami-slice tactics’ was coined by a famous Stalinist Communist Matyas Rakosi, meaning a divide and conquer policy with the help of huge military (by threats) and economic power (debt traps). Adding to it, the active foreign policy and mega-projects like BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) have fuelled the Chinese ambition of dominance and expansionism. With such economic powers, China tends to provide huge loans to developing or under-developed nations and in return acquires certain areas of the nation depending on China’s interest in the region. One such example is of the country of Sri Lanka, located in the Indian Ocean. Due to the Chinese debt trap, the country was forced to hand over its port of Colombo to Chinese authority and only Chinese visas are valid on the port, abandoning Sri Lankans from their land and subsequently making it a Chinese colony in the Indian ocean (ANI 2021). Such acts are an abuse of maritime safety and security and it also compromises free navigation.

Not only through monetary powers, but China also uses its military powers to threaten several countries sharing maritime boundaries with China in the South China Sea. Although the Chinese agenda of abusing the sovereignty of neighbouring states via military intervention is not something new. After acquiring Tibet in 1949, China had its border extended to the Himalayas and shares a long border with India. India, the Asian
giant and direct competitor for the Chinese in the region has constantly been the victim of such military harassment from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), also known as the Chinese Army. Since the Sino-Indian war in 1962, India has shared a border dispute with China on various stands. Even several Indian states, such as the state of Arunachal Pradesh have been claimed by the Chinese Communist Party. In recent attempts, China tried to conquer Indian territory, resulting in various stand-offs in Doklam, Ladakh, and Arunachal Pradesh. Not only with India, but China also shares its land border disputes with Bhutan, Nepal, and Russia, making it clear strategic greed for unreasonable expansionism (Kandhari 2020).

China’s ambition and seriousness for the expansion are perhaps most evident in the South China Sea. With several interests in the region such as the importance of fishing, the significance of trade routes in the region, and the availability of oil in the regional ocean, China has its claim over the region. It has resulted in naval as well as diplomatic confrontation with countries like Taiwan (Republic of China), Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, and Australia. Since 2013, the Chinese PLA has restored island-building in the Spratly and Paracel Islands region to extend its maritime reach to an unreasonable limit. Such an act hampers the interests of the countries mentioned above. It also challenges American dominance and significance and therefore the American response, as well as interference in the political scenario of the South China Sea, becomes inevitable (Herscovitch 2017). Therefore, to defend the American interests as well as to safeguard the interests of allies of America, there was an urgent need for a diplomatic policy that can effectively counter Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea. Such an urge triggered the need for the formation of a foreign policy to counter such expansionism and to ensure free and safe navigation, resulting in FONOP (Freedom of Navigation Operations).

**What is FONOP?**

The United States of America, since the outset of the 20th century, has been an advocate for free maritime passage. Yet, with the world getting divided into developed and developing nations, the former demands better access to the maritime sail and to explore the sea, whereas the latter seeks to protect their offshore resources. Such greed for dominance in the water might result in chaos. Hence to form a better consensus between the nations and to create a safe passage, the United Nations (UN) drafted the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). UNCLOS culminated in 1982, intending to open the high sea for all and reserve certain areas (200 nautical miles) under Exclusive Economic Zones. Hence, with the ordinance of UNCLOS, the United States feared violation of its interests and abuse of the rights of minor nations by certain powers, resulting in the formation of FONOP (Freund 2017).

FONOP stands for Freedom of Navigation Operation, a political and naval mission with an intention to disregard any claims on the maritime territory, extending to Exclusive Economic Zone (hereinafter referred to as EEZs) of various nations, by the United States of America. As defined by the US department of defence, FONOPS is a challenge to all exclusive maritime claims, to ensure freedom of navigation and enforcement of all international laws concerning oceans and seas. The drifting of UNCLOS, as mentioned
above, triggered concern of excessive and unreasonable maritime claims by countries with strong national maritime interests. Therefore, FONOP was founded based on sovereign and equal laws with the motive of international cooperation and interdependence,

As the United States of America is not signatory to the UNCLOS and does not believe in the existence of EEZs, it tends to violate it by sailing through the areas permitted to the nations nearest by UNCLOS, and particularly the areas that the concerned states have closed for free navigation. The primary motive behind the formation of FONOP was to counter the increasing dominance of China and its muscle power flex in the South China Sea, although the policy is now being implemented around the globe (Freund 2017). America has repeatedly violated the EEZs of NATO members as well as its allies across the sphere. Also in recent events, America's naval fleet has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) in Indian EEZ, violating the latter rights assigned under UNCLOS. Such steps, taken against America’s most important strategically ally in the region, i.e. India, prove that irrespective of geopolitical circumstances, America will adhere to its policies regarding the FONOP and security concerned with maritime perspective. Although, as mentioned above, the primary aim of the policy was to counter expansionism and Chinese dominance in the South-China Sea, let us dwell deep into the effectiveness of the policy and the aftermaths of such ideological as well as a socio-political clash in the South-China Sea.

**Significance of FONOP in countering Chinese expansionism in South China sea**

China, being the largest trading nation and largely dependent on the trade routes of the South China sea, possesses a keen interest in securing trade routes and intends to avoid any clash with regional powers, which might result in a power imbalance in the region. On the contrary, Beijing has several interests in the region as mentioned earlier. Hence, the Chinese ‘Military Militia’ has acted as an unattributed source of intimidation for all the vessels, whether commercial or military, operating in close proximity to China’s claimed territory (Burges 2020). The formation of a nine-dash line by Beijing, encompassing numerous atolls and islands, with vast tracts of the sea which has already been avowed by other states results in serious consequences in terms of political upliftment. It further results in widespread and often violent public sentiments, backing certain ideologies, depending on the nation’s interests. In such a situation, the interference of the United States with its military powers, such as FONOP, are welcomed by multiple nations and largely opposed by Beijing (Krejsa 2015). It results in intense situations which might work as a catalyst in turning the South China sea into a political battlefield between Beijing and Washington DC.

In such a situation, Freedom of Navigation Operation works as a checkpoint for the Chinese PLA’s muscle power flex in the region. The direct aim of FONOP is to maintain free maritime space for all in the South China Sea, it is in the interest of US foreign policy as well as the regional nations to adhere to the policy and monitor the regional situation closely. By executing various naval exercises at different locations and times regularly under FONOP, it is a direct and efficient way to convey Washington’s rejection of Beijing’s excessive maritime claim and to uphold its commitment to uphold the rules-
based order in the region. Other commitments by the US to its allies such as the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defence Treaty, adds to the importance of FONOP in fulfilling such ambitions (Krejsa 2015). With the ties between south Asian countries and China strained due to the Nine-Dash line and another Chinese expansionist phenomenon, the Americans had keen diplomatic interests to safeguard its allies' interests in the region. One of the primary significances or the achievements of the FONOP is that it has effectively backed the claims of the regional nations and has acted as a spine for resistance to Beijing’s dominance in the region ("U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress" 2021). Also, several naval interventions in the Chinese claimed regions have kept the latter's desires in check. Therefore, it can be said that it is of utmost necessity to counter the dominance to create a safe and secure maritime region for all. Hence, the need for FONOP is justified, yet it is a matter of fact to understand whether it has completely neutralized the Chinese dominance or is successful to some extent only.

**FONOP: Necessary but not sufficient**

In order to keep pace with current geopolitical development in the region, it is highly detrimental for Washington to conduct only FONOP to deter Beijing from pursuing its ambitious claims. FONOP is no doubt a necessary and costly asset of the US in keeping Chinese expansionism in check, but it also possesses a risk of conflict with Chinese fleets (Herscovitch 2017). Therefore, to persuade the Chinese Communist party to reconsider its unilateral expansionist propaganda, regional countries should come together and show constant resistance to such unilateral power. Also, FONOP in itself is insufficient and incapable to counter Chinese dominance single-handedly because the motive behind FONOP is not actually to challenge the territorial status quo in the region. Hence, FONOP cannot stop China single-handedly from repeating its activities such as the one at Spratly Island and another standoff as witnessed at the Scarborough Shoal incident. Therefore, to counter Beijing’s expansionism, the United States has to indulge in various kinds of diplomatic tactics and even have to use naval power if necessary. Diplomatic acts such as imposing bans or sanctions on Chinese companies and officials involved in acts violating the free maritime space for all, or even need to strengthen regional powers by financial aiding. Such acts might be costlier and might require a significant change in U.S policy towards the South China Sea disputes. Until this happens, FONOPs are necessary to let Beijing understand that Washington is firmly determined to resist its expansionist approach in the region.

**FONOP deadlock in the South China Sea: Narrowing the scope of expansionism**

Since 2017, it has been a pattern for the U.S to send its naval fleet in disputed South China sea territory once in two months, which is being countered by diplomatic warnings from Beijing. Although such acts have been now the ‘new normal in the region, FONOP has indeed been efficient in limiting Chinese expansionism and narrowing down the scope to a relatively smaller extent. With no scope of Washington ending its operations under FONOP, it left Beijing with a deadlock in the South China Sea. It further limits the availability of options for Beijing to escape the deadlock. Therefore,
let us have an overview of the realistic options available to China to approach the underlying situation in the region.

Firstly, the U.S FONOPs frequently occurring at times and locations unilaterally decided, it gives an upper hand of dominance to Washington, undermining the authority of Beijing on its ‘claimed’ maritime rights in the region. Such an act is responded to by Chinese authorities by sending its Air Force to counter American presence and in some instances by firing warning shots, showing Chinese agitation due to the latter’s presence (Xiaobo 2019). Therefore, the first option is to maintain the status quo in the region, with neither Beijing nor Washington winning the battle.

Secondly, FONOP has been successful in tackling Chinese ambitions constantly. Such an act can frustrate the stakeholder of expansionism. Adding to it is the American policy of un-forgiveness to maritime harassment, especially when it comes to FONOP which is backed by its military strength (Xiaobo 2019). Global and long-standing practice of FONOP by the US navy, showcasing it to be the flag-bearer for free and safe oceans, further narrows the scope of FONOP being deterred from operating in the South China sea. Hence, in such circumstances there arises a possibility of Beijing responding harshly with collisions or minor conflicts being possible outcomes.

Thirdly, United States’ FONOP in the South China sea has aimed to target China’s unreasonable and excessive maritime claims which include excessive straight baselines such as the ‘nine-dash line, encompassing claimed territories of other nations, attempt to establish a monopoly in the region by making it necessary to require the prior consent of Beijing to send naval warships in the region, artificial island makings, absolute jurisprudence over EEZs and many more. FONOP has had success in keeping such Chinese ambitions in check and therefore has resulted in a deadlock in the region (Xiaobo 2019). Therefore, it leaves Beijing with an option to negotiate and seek cooperation in the region. Although considering the Chinese seriousness towards Expansionism, the practicality of such an option is the bare minimum.

After understanding the role of the United States of America and its policy of FONOP, it is vital to understand the response and foreign policy of several other Asian giants and the formation of QUAD. Therefore, to grasp the bridge between the policy alignment of various Asian nations, let us first understand the importance of Japan and the concerns it possesses in the region due to Chinese expansionism.

**Japanese interests in the South China Sea and attempts to safeguard its interests**

Japan’s security strategy since the start of the cold war between the USSR (currently Russia) and USA was solely focused on defence of Japan in a very narrow sense. Japanese security groups were not concerned with any activities in the region and were forced simply on the inland security and prevention of intrusion in the Japanese territory. Yet, the increasing monopoly of China in the region and the breakdown of the USSR forced the nation to break its silence. Gradually, Japan developed its military and navy, making it one of the most advanced naval forces in the region after China. Being the closest ally
of the United States, Japan was provided an umbrella protection by the latter. Such a situation came along with the territorial disputes with the Chinese claims (Koda, 2016). Thus, for Japan, the South China sea does not merely go for the natural interests but is also supposed to deal with territorial disputes and several other grand issues which might result in escalations or even a direct military collision which may undermine regional stability and possess the potential to drag the region to unpredictable and chaotic situations.

Japan's primary concern is the increasing militarisation of various islands of the region by China as an eventual grip/strategic control over the region. Secondly, the potential escalation of tensions between China and the United States, Japan's key ally, poses a threat to regional stability. Therefore, in order to deal with such a situation, Japan has started to establish deeper ties with Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam. Also, with its evolving naval capabilities, Tokyo is bound to perform various naval exercises in the region with its friendly states. Further, the country plays a vital role in the QUAD group which now focuses on regional stability and counter the Chinese expansionist propagandas. We will dwell deep into the QUAD and its significance at a later part in the paper but let us now have a look at the stance of Australia and how it aims to counter China and safeguards its interests.

**Australian interest in the South China Sea, threat from Chinese expansionism and the response from Canberra.**

Australia, being one of a developed member state with keen interest in the region of South China Sea, has been passive to the developments in the region since the 1980s with a neutral stance since the beginning of a political outcry between Washington and Beijing. Since 2007, the stance was even more concrete as China has surpassed other nations to become the largest trading partner of Australia (Medcalf, 2018). But after witnessing the Chinese unwillingness to accept a rule-based order and maintain an equilibrium with the five Southeast Asian littoral states in the South China Sea and Beijing’s unfair intention to run the region univocally has forced a shift in the age-old stance of Canberra. Over the past decade, China has more aggressively pushed its unlawful 'nine-dash line' maritime claim, violating the maritime and sovereign rights of nearly half a dozen states in the region. This poses a direct challenge to Australia’s adherence to maintenance of rule-based order and its deep stakes in the security of the South China sea.

Further, the most advanced catastrophe in the relation between Canberra and Beijing came after the former’s position on the UNCLOS ruling over the issue between Philippines and Beijing and overwhelming support from Australia for a probe of COVID-19 pandemic outrage. Both the recent developments have played a significant role in deteriorating relations between both the nations. Therefore, in such a situation, Australian think tanks took a foresight of the threats and hence abandoned neutrality in their stance in the South China Sea (Medcalf, 2018). In the recent series of happenings, Australia has become one of the most trustworthy partners of the United States of America in the region. With this, it has been pretty active in its diplomatic stance and verbal criticism of Chinese expansionism (Wesley, 2014). But the same has not been sufficient and therefore Australia needs to take several essential steps to strengthen its voice in the region. It can be done by various strategies
such as by increasing coordination with Southeast Asian littoral states on Chinese activities inconsistent with the UNCLOS rulings. Secondly, the country should look for more bilateral and minilateral naval exercises with friendly nations or with nations with common intentions in order to register their presence in the region. Third and one of the most important aspects on which Australia needs to work is to increase its military and naval power as it is the weakest bone of the nation. Although recently, several steps have been taken, such as the AUKUS deal with the United Kingdom and United States of America for nuclear submarines and other high-tech machinery. It even requires further coordination with the United States in exercises such as FONOP. Fourthly, it is the need of the hour for the Australian government to promote militarisation of the QUAD group and to support regular Quad leader’s summits with the South China Sea disputes and Chinese expansionist propagandas on the agenda. Such a step will surely boost the importance of the nation in the region as well as strengthen its anti-expansionist steps. Yet another country which is arguably one of the largest competitors of China in the region has faced the same challenge for decades, especially in the recent era. Talking about India and its interests in the Indian ocean and recent standoffs on the land border, it is of the utmost importance to understand the Indian stance towards China.

**Critical role of India in stability of Indo-pacific region**

India, being the second largest economy and military, is undoubtedly one of the most important countries in the Indo-Pacific region. India’s close allies with Russia since its independence had resulted in a neutralised role and also had no direct confrontation with the Chinese neighbour. Yet, the recent hostile behaviour of Beijing towards New Delhi, motivated by expansionists propagandas, have parted the interests between both the Asian giants. Adding to it, India’s friendly and all-time good relation with USA and European nations such as France has further resulted in a clear conflict of interest and ideology between the two most populated nations across the globe. India has no direct interests or concerns around the region of South China Sea, yet India is not out from the Chinese expansionist agendas as it is directly affected at the land border and in recent times the situation has been worse (Rao, 2020). Further, the footsteps of the Chinese navy in the Indian ocean, where the clear interests of India lie, has been a reason to worry for New Delhi. Under the ‘Chain of Pearls’ Beijing has attempted to surround the Indian water in such a way that a new phase of dominance in the Indian ocean has been triggered. In response, India too has several strategies such as ‘Necklace of Diamonds’ as a counter-plan for neutralising such dominance in a region where there are natural interests of India.

The above-mentioned countries, i.e. USA, Japan, Australia and India possess the potential of hampering the Chinese expansionist propaganda and have rightly formed the QUAD with the purpose to counter Beijing’s ambitions. Hence, let us have a look at the QUAD and its importance in the region of Indo-Pacific.
Quad: Of Paramount Importance to Counter Chinese Expansionism

The circumstances in the 21st century have called for a shift in the security architecture from the Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific, triggered by the rise of China and its expansionist narrative. Hence, the countries such as The United States of America, Japan and Australia, having larger interests in South China Sea and the possession of potential to counter Chinese ambitions have joined hands with the Asian giant and probably one of the largest regional competitors to the China, i.e. India, with an intention to form a group of strong military and economic markets. The group, QUAD or QSD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), is seen as a strategic grouping to counter unilateral dominance of Beijing. The core objective of the Quad is to secure a rules-based global order, freedom of navigation and a liberal trading system in the Indo-pacific region (South China Sea and Indian Ocean).

QUAD, started as a relief group between four democracies, currently works on a far broader agendas which includes security, economy and health issues as witnessed in COVID-19 pandemic (Panda, 2020). As of 2021, leaders in all four countries have become more aligned in their shared concerns about China’s increasingly assertive behaviour in the region. Recent ongoing developments in the region, frequent military and naval exercise in the conflict zone and the cooperation has been one of the strongest challenges to Beijing. It is difficult for any Southeast Asian country to engage with China’s People Liberation Army on its own. Yet, the Quad countries see an advantage in trying to contain Chinese influence militarily. The Quad leaders have also emphasized cooperation across areas of shared interest to bolster confidence in the democracies’ ability to counter China’s assertion of regional influence. As long as tensions with China remain, the Quad’s agenda is likely to expand as the democracies of the Indo-Pacific seek to balance China’s growing power.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis and evidence confirm that the Chinese Communist Party has been successful in deeply emphasising the expansionist propaganda in the region under the name of national unity.
As alarmed by such foreign policy, it was inevitable for countries such as America, Japan, Australia and India to strike back through the means of various political and military alliances to defend their own and their allies’ interests in the region.
Therefore, to send a clear message of intolerance of such draconian policies, the US formulated the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP). FONOP, to counter and forfeit Chinese claims in the region, violates the dominance of the latter by marching through the exclusively claimed territory of Beijing. Such policy has no doubt been successful in infringing a challenge to the Chinese dominance in the region. Although, such an effort is ‘too little and too late’. On the other hand, China has ‘swallowed more than what it can chew’, i.e. has no good diplomatic relations with almost all the nations sharing borders (land and sea), resulting in serious concerns and diplomatic shifts in the policy framing of countries like Japan, Australia and India. It further gave birth to QUAD, termed as Asian NATO, with a sole purpose of countering the Chinese ambitions and protecting the interests of likeminded nations. In current circumstances,
with the increasing strength of China as well as other regional powers mentioned above, it becomes difficult to foresee a victorious side in near future. Hence, the only affordable option left is to create stability in the region or the region may be pushed into some serious calamities.

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China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress.
