



## **"Chinese Behaviour and Actions in the South China Sea: Implications for India, Australia and the Region"**

**Speaker:** Dr. Christopher Roberts

**Chair:** Ambassador Ashok Kantha

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**Conference Room, ICWA (Sapru House)**

Ambassador Ashok Kantha introduced Dr. Christopher Roberts and laid out the background of how Chinese are handling the issue of South China Sea, their behavior in context to territorial claims in Paracel and Spartlays illustrating a larger story of emergence of a more assertive China which is willing to deploy its very considerable economic, political, military and diplomatic clout accumulated over last three decades to pursue its interest. He further added, during the period beginning from December 2013 until late 2015, China managed to bring about the unprecedented reclamation of territory around seven features it claims in Spartlays, totally involving 3000 acres as compared to 50 acres claimed by other parties. China has also constructed both civilian and military facilities on these augmented land features including a 3000 meters long military air field in Spartlays in addition to the one it already had in Paracel, plus a whole lot of other facilities have been created. Ambassador emphasized the fact that others are in a way accommodating and adjusting to the changes that have been brought about by China in the South China Sea. There seems to be the assessment on the Chinese side that, though it might be paying some cost in terms of diplomatic damage, what it is achieving is a good trade off. Lastly, he mentioned that what is going on in Dokhlam lately is part of a larger pattern of what Chinese behavior exhibits in the South China Sea.

The seminar further continued with the presentation of Dr. Christopher Roberts. The speaker laid out the presentation in two parts. The first half was related to a brief overview synopsis of developments in the South China Sea including arbitral ruling and the dynamics in the South China Sea between the claimants and linkages with ASEAN and other major powers. The second half included various implications.

The speaker pointed out Australia-India dynamics in terms of the key historical junctures in regard to the South China Sea. He mentioned about Kuomintang; response to airplane surveillance photographs by the Philippines which proved that China was building an installation, 1999 Manila Statement and also Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) that had significant detailed references to the continental shelf and exclusive economic zones. This was the pro-activeness in ASEAN that Beijing at that time was concerned about. But nonetheless in the wake of ASEAN solidarity countries faced a situation where China thought a kind of charm offensive diplomacy and changed the tact engaged in extensive diplomacy within ASEAN.

Further progressing to 2000s, the speaker elaborated about the declaration of conduct to the parties involved in the South China Sea which was a compromise arrangement. It was a binding code of conduct to which ultimately the ASEAN states could not agree. Given these developments and perceived inability of China to leverage through ASEAN at the bilateral level, from 2007, a more coercive approach including the sinking of the Vietnamese vessels, coercive measures towards the abandonment of the trilateral consortium on oil extraction and embolden China in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis where Chinese scholars increasingly told about harmonious east civilization which has linkages to the middle kingdom based on a kind of asymmetrical dependence, was adopted by China. There was a sense of reciprocity that was conditional upon other countries and tributary states interests not conflicting with the core national interests of China. As progress takes place with continued negotiations on the idea of the code of conduct, there has been a continuous pattern of stolen tactics, the times not right, and the blaming positions of smaller countries in ASEAN. Also, the speaker briefly commented on the arbitral ruling of the South China case.

In the opinion of the speaker, the binding code of conduct will be unlikely regardless of what China has said. If the code of conduct comes into existence with any dispute settlement mechanism under the global system, even then China would only agree to it because of the new status quo which by that time would be in its favor. Further, the speaker concentrated on the China's premises and failed action of the United States to deter the Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Dr. Roberts highlighted the yin and yang strategy of China that included Dual Signaling, Dual Purpose and Dual Action that China undertook while devising its strategy.

Concentrating on the implications of the South China Sea on countries like India and Australia, the speaker presented certain implications, which were as follows:

- Beijing is undermining the rules-based order. We see non-compliance with legal foundations (global implications from this precedent)
- Undermining stability: e.g. 'Global Times' comment on Kashmir: Such statements have the potential to incite violence

- Increased security dilemma for small, medium and major powers; second order effect: diversion of government expenditure away from schooling, health, poverty alleviation and toward military modernisation.
- Dramatic return to anarchical environment (i.e. the Thucydides world)
- Weakened economic growth

Dr. Roberts also focused on the challenges that India, Australia, and other stabilizer countries might face in terms of being more active in the South China Sea case. The speaker argued that neither India nor Australia or any country can on its own unilaterally deter China to continue down its path where it is going without the support of the other stabilizer countries. Further, the speaker suggested that there is a need for a structured dialogue between the stabilizer countries for which the potential starting point could be Track 1.5 dialogues between the countries.

Finally, the speaker highlighted that the multilateral cooperation has the potential to affect Beijing's calculus. The failure of adequate deterrence has significantly increased the costs of reconsidering the rule-based global order. While decisive actions can be delayed, decisive action will eventually have to be taken.

*Report prepared by Avadhi Patni, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

### **About the Speaker:**

Christopher Roberts is currently in New Delhi as a Leader's Fellow at the Australia-India Institute and he is also an Associate Professor at the University of New South Wales within the Australian Defence Force Academy campus. He specialises in the politics and security of the Indo-Pacific including great and middle power dynamics, the South China Sea, ASEAN, the drivers and constraints to international collaboration and competition, and the pre-conditions to peace and post-conflict resolution. Christopher lived in Japan and Singapore for five years and has nearly two decades of field experience throughout Asia including all the ASEAN nations plus Japan, South Korea, and China. Christopher has completed over fifty publications including books (2 sole authored and 2 edited), journal articles, chapters, conference papers, commentaries, and reports. These works have also addressed the politics, security, and foreign policy approaches of Myanmar, Brunei, Laos, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Australia.

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