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Tribunal jolt to China a shot in arm for weak

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📷 Protesters display placards hours before the Hague-based UN international arbitration tribunal announced its ruling on South China Sea. (Photo: AP)

The landmark verdict by an international tribunal against China in a maritime dispute is a vindication of the truth. By upholding Philippines' plea and shaming the giant, the tribunal reminded us that principles ought to govern world politics.

Intimidation of the meek by the mighty are assumed to be routine in global affairs. The advancement of international law, specially as an emancipatory tool giving succour to marginalised underdogs, is a counter to this long-held



Darwinian belief that the world is a terribly unequal arena. The UN tribunal's award in the South China Sea case is a template for negotiating the profoundly egalitarian aspects of international law. Neutral judges from France, Poland, Holland and Germany decided China's maximal claim of "historic rights" to resources in 90 per cent of the South China Sea was illegal.



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By declaring China's expansionist "nine-dash line" or "cow's tongue" demarcation zone of maritime territory untenable under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the tribunal dealt an embarrassing blow to Beijing's narrative that it's law-abiding nation.

Rejecting China's attempts to monopolise the South China Sea and exclude neighbouring states from accessing it, the tribunal challenged the realpolitik logic that legitimises the quest for dominance by militarily superior countries. With a rusty navy the Philippines had already been shooed away from Scarborough Shoal, Mischief Reef, Fiery Cross Reef and other rocky features in the SCS by China.

China nonchalantly dredged artificial islands, militarised them and used these as beachheads to illegally extend its exclusive economic zone in a brazen territorial grab. China has been aggressively establishing one fait accompli after another in the SCS in recent years and forcing nations like the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Taiwan to eat humble pie.

Though these nations seek military assistance with the United States, Japan, India, Australia, and are also trying to forge a unified front against Chinese strong-arming through regional bodies like Asean, Beijing has repeatedly come up trumps by dividing them and using a combination of military, economic and diplomatic tactics.

China's insistence that the Philippines and others engage in asymmetric one-on-one negotiations, and its arrogant behaviour that demands obeisance to its ever-enlarging sphere of influence in Asia, fly in the face of its self-proclaimed "peaceful rise". For almost all its neighbours, China's rise, as shown in its SCS encroachment policies, is a threat.

It's amid this air of hopelessness and helplessness that The Hague tribunal stepped in with its accurate findings. By backing those unfortunates who have been thrown to the wolves, this impartial body has won the admiration of global public opinion.

China is technically obligated to abide by the tribunal's order as it is a UNCLOS signatory. But China being China, it boycotted tribunal proceedings and denounced it as a "farce" that was allegedly a conspiracy by Japan and the West.

The Chinese government's retort after the much-awaited tribunal award that it is "null and void and has no binding force" just shows how much this superpower has brashly transcended international law.

China's response is based on an authoritarian mindset that is contemptuous of international institutions, and hell-bent on rewriting the world order to suit Chinese designs. The way it reacted peevishly towards Norway in 2010 after jailed Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo got the Nobel Peace Prize also demonstrated its mentality.



China's angry and defiant rejoinders to The Hague tribunal reconfirm it is no angel vis-a-vis the US, that is infamous for mocking the International Court of Justice when it deemed its 1986 invasion of Nicaragua propaganda that it's a "different kind of great power" in contrast to the US just won't wash.

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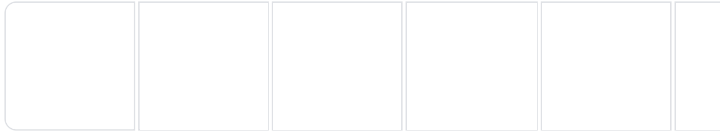
If superpowers are devoid of responsibility to the common good, what kind of new world order awaits weak nations?

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English philosopher Thomas Hobbes' horrifying vision of a world where there is "fear and danger of violent death" and the prospect of "nasty, brutish and short" lives appears headed for an extended tenure in the 21st century if China and the US keep bossing over the planet.

Still, thank heavens that there is international law to at least symbolically expose and intangibly defeat these goons. Pushback against the arbitrary and unfair exercise of power can only materialise through moral leadership from the portals of justice.

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