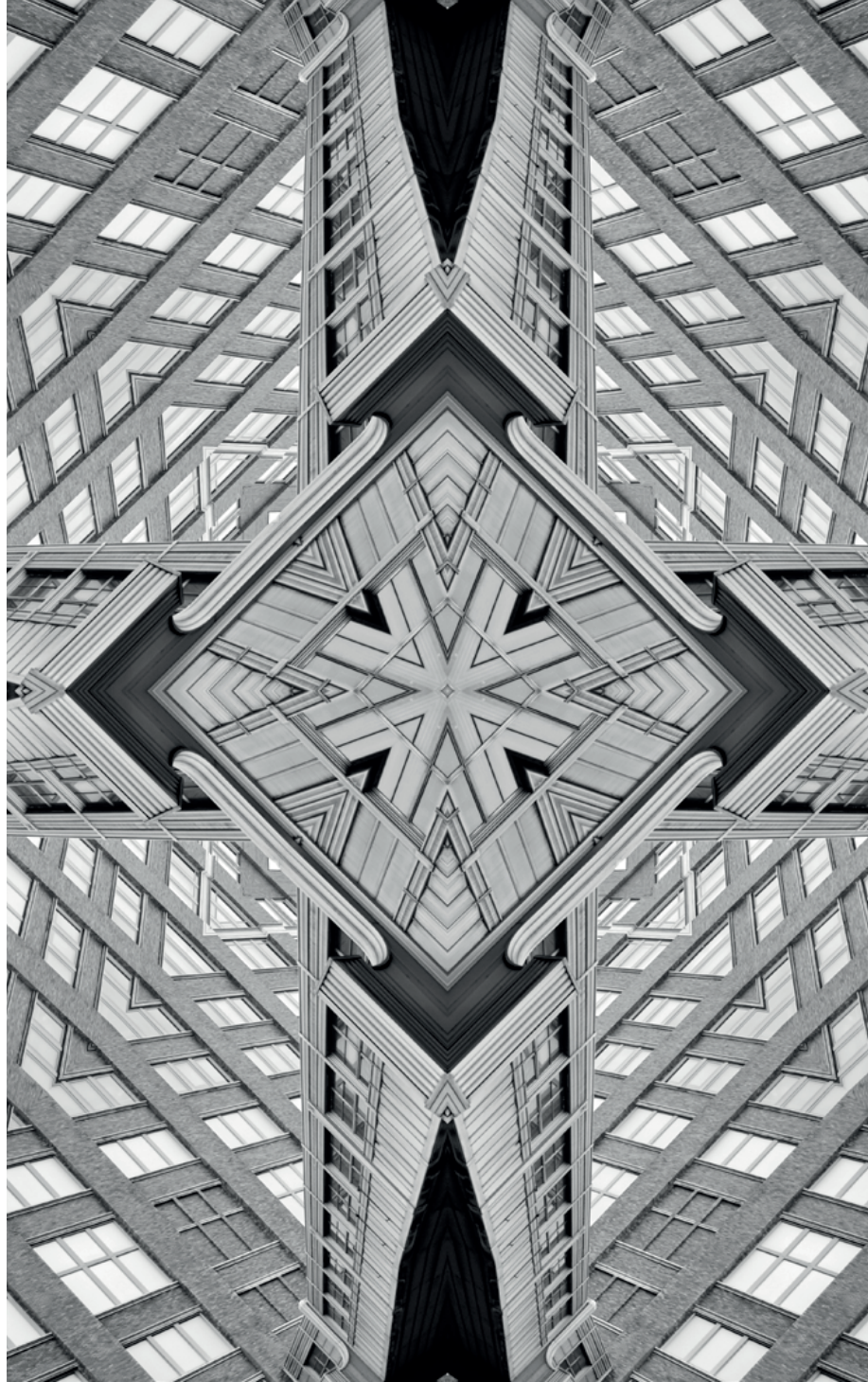


Issue

Brief

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India Calibrates its South China Sea Approach

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Abstract

India has historically taken a neutral position in the disputes along the South China Sea involving China and countries of Southeast Asia, even as the tensions have threatened the security in the region. In more recent times, however, there has been a noticeable change in India's stance. This brief ponders this shift: the rationale behind India's responses vis-à-vis the disputes, and their implications on the country's 'Act East' and Indo-Pacific policies.

The territorial and maritime disputes along the South China Sea (SCS) remain unresolved and continue to impede the path to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region. Beginning in the 1970s, these conflicts have involved China and countries of Southeast Asia, primarily Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Brunei, and the Philippines: these countries claim that China has been encroaching on their sovereign territories and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) with its aggressive land reclamation and island-building activities. China, too, has been conducting military surveillance in these areas, and building communications and logistics infrastructure in the form of port facilities, military installations, and airstrips.¹ China maintains that these territories are an integral part of its “core interests”, taking an uncompromising stance on the question of sovereignty and its determination to protect the domain militarily.²

Extra-regional countries like India and the United States also have stakes in securing the SCS—an endowed ecosystem that is home to rich biodiversity and varied resources, including an estimated 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil in proved and probable reserves, most of which lie along the margins of the South China Sea rather than under disputed islets and reefs; much more are potentially undiscovered.³ India, while not a South China Sea littoral state, is invested in the maintenance of the rules-based order and freedom of navigation in these sea lanes of communication (SLOCs). Recent statements from the Ministry of External Affairs illustrate that India intends to move away from its historical “balanced” approach towards China and the SCS disputes, and play a more proactive role, guided by its Act East policy, in particular, as well as its overall Indo-Pacific vision.

Indeed, India has economic, diplomatic and strategic interests in the vital waters of the SCS. Yet, for long, New Delhi adopted a neutral stance in the SCS disputes, refraining from even making official statements that could provoke China’s ire. What India has done is to encourage the competing nations to establish a code of conduct that would ensure “freedom of navigation” and “access to resources”.⁴ As ORF analyst, Abhijit Singh, sees it: “A tendency to view the region through a prism of geopolitics and ‘balance of power’ makes Indian decision makers wary of taking a stand on China’s aggressive posturing. Yet the costs of saying and doing nothing are rising for India as China’s firming grip over disputed territories in the South China Sea portends greater power projection in the Eastern Indian Ocean.”⁵

While India intends to maintain its neutrality when it comes to the issue of sovereignty in these disputes, New Delhi has become more vocal in the recent months, primarily after the June 2020 Galwan Valley clash between Indian and Chinese troops.^a At the 15th East Asia Summit in November 2020, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar stated: “Chinese actions and incidents in the South China Sea had eroded trust in the ongoing negotiations on the proposed code of conduct in the region.”⁶ The negotiations, he added, should not be “prejudicial to legitimate interests of third parties and should be fully consistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).”⁷

This brief examines the apparent shift in India’s position on the SCS disputes. It outlines the determinants of such a shift; highlights India’s maritime engagements and activities in the region; and analyses the implications of India’s stance on its relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The brief explores the impacts of India’s SCS approach on the country’s overall Indo-Pacific vision.

“Extra-regional countries like India and the US have stakes in securing the South China Sea—an endowed ecosystem that is home to some 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil.”

a On 15 June 2020, Chinese and Indian troops faced-off along the Galwan River Valley. The clash, exact circumstances of which remain unclear, led to the deaths of 15 Indian and 5 Chinese soldiers. They were the first casualties in either side along the Sino-Indian border since 1975.

India's Stakes in the South China Sea

India uses the SCS waterways—the second-most used in the world—for trade worth nearly US\$200 billion every year. Nearly 55 percent of India's trade with the Indo-Pacific region pass through these waters.⁸ Overall, one-third of the world's shipping pass through these SLOCs, carrying over US\$3 trillion worth of trade each year, including most of the world's requirement for vital commodities like energy and raw materials. India itself signed an agreement with Vietnam in October 2011 to expand and promote oil exploration in the South China Sea. While China has always objected to India's oil exploration activities in the Vietnamese waters in the SCS, India reaffirmed its intent to pursue such activities.⁹ In July 2019 China deployed as many as 35 ships to the area to escort Haiyang Dizhi 8, a ship operated by the China Geological Survey. A Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said at that time that China was conducting “provocative activities” near several oil blocks, including where India's ONGC was involved in oil and gas production.¹⁰

For India, its economic vitality rests on assured supply of energy and safe and secure trading routes in the region, including the Straits of Malacca. It has high stakes in keeping the sea lanes open in the SCS—the junction between the Indian and Pacific Oceans—and many other countries do as well. As David Scott, Lecturer in international relations at Brunel University, points out, “The South China Sea is becoming a factor in India's own strategic calculations and strategic debates, and India is becoming a factor in the strategic calculations of South China Sea states.”¹¹ India engages with the region through regular naval deployments, visits and exercises in these waters, through established and growing strategic-military partnerships with the littoral states, involvement in oil exploitation in these waters, and diplomatic discussions.¹²

As the Indian Navy also operates in the Western Pacific, secure access through the waters of the South China Sea becomes important.¹³ The SCS has the potential to enhance regional growth and further India's engagement with Southeast Asia.¹⁴ India's interest in the Indo-Pacific is known, and India views the region as “an integrated and organic maritime space with the ASEAN at its centre.”¹⁵ ASEAN and the far-eastern Pacific are the focus areas of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Act East policy, and the Southeast Asian commons are a “vital facilitator of India's future development.”¹⁶

As ASEAN countries' relations with China come under more strain, India is eager to play the role of a responsible regional stakeholder that can help find a balance amidst the disputes.

India's Historical Approach to SCS Disputes

Diplomatic tact

New Delhi has tried to balance the many competing interests in the South China Sea and not offend Beijing. India's concern is that if it wades too deeply in SCS affairs, China might heighten its own naval operations in the Indian Ocean.¹⁷

India's stance in the South China Sea disputes was indicated in the joint ASEAN-India Vision Statement of December 2012. It stressed "India's role in ensuring regional peace and stability, and for that we agree to promote maritime cooperation to address common challenges on maritime issues."¹⁸ The same statement said, "We are committed to strengthening cooperation to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation, and safety of sea lanes of communication for unfettered movement of trade in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS."

A year later, at the 8th East Asia Summit (EAS) in Brunei Darussalam in October 2013, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared, "A stable maritime environment is essential to realize our collective regional aspirations. We should reaffirm the principles of maritime security, including the right of passage and unimpeded commerce, in accordance with international law, and peaceful settlement of maritime disputes. We welcome the collective commitment by the concerned countries to abide by and implement the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and to work towards the adoption of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea on the basis of consensus. We also welcome the establishment of the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum for developing maritime norms that would reinforce existing international law relating to maritime security."¹⁹

“India’s concern is that if it wades too deeply in SCS affairs, China might heighten its own naval operations in the Indian Ocean.”

Such statements have been carefully worded to reflect New Delhi's stand that while the issue of freedom of navigation and the establishment of a mutually agreed Code of Conduct (COC) had been raised, it will not impinge upon China's sentiments.

India's Historical Approach to SCS Disputes

Naval posturings

India's naval presence in the South China Sea has been bigger than what its diplomatic statements might hint on. The Indian Navy has been engaging in deployments in the disputed waters since 1995. These deployments include unilateral appearances by the Indian Navy, bilateral exercises, friendly port calls, and transit through these waters. Some naval deployments are part of the series of Singapore-India Bilateral Maritime Exercises (SIMBEX). Friendly port calls to littoral countries such as Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam also bring the Indian Navy into these disputed waters.

In July 2012, India established deep-water maritime facilities in Campbell Bay (INS Baaz), the most southerly point of the Andaman Islands, potentially enabling Indian surveillance operations in the South China Sea.²⁰ The Indian Navy also held exercises in the Andamans and has deployed MiG-29K fighters in the islands.²¹ In May 2019, the Indian Navy conducted joint sailing in the SCS with the navies of the United States, the Philippines, and Japan, as a demonstration of their presence amidst suggestions by the Philippines Defence Minister, Delfin Lorenzana that “India has expressed its intent to carry out navigation activities in the South China Sea.”²²

The Indian Navy has a multi-mission presence in the western Pacific. Table 1 lists some of India's naval operations and deployments in the Eastern Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific—they reflect India's aim to enhance overall maritime security in the region and promote a rules-based international order.

Table 1
India's Naval Exercises and Deployments in the Indo-Pacific

Year	Operations and overseas deployments in the Eastern Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific
2004	Deployments of a five-ship flotilla (two Kashin class destroyers, INS Ranjit and Ranvijay; the frigate Godavari; the missile corvette Kirch; the offshore patrol vessel Sukanya; and the fleet tanker Jyoti) to the South China Sea.
2015	INS Kamorta was deployed to participate in the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition (LIMA-15) scheduled from 17 - 21 Mar 2015.
2015	INS Kamorta, Satpura took part in SIMBEX-15 in May 2015.
2015	INS Saryu, participated in a week-long ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Disaster Relief Exercise (DiREx) ^b 2015 conducted in Penang, Northern Malaysia from 24 to 28 May 2015.
2016	INS Airavat participated in the ADMM Plus (ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus) Exercise on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism (Ex MS & CT) ^c from 01 to 09 May 2016, which commenced at Brunei and culminated at Singapore, with various drills and exercises in the South China Sea.
2016	The Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet sailed out on 18 May 2016 on a two-and-a-half-month-long operational deployment to the South China Sea and North West Pacific. During this overseas deployment, the ships of Eastern Fleet made port calls at Cam Rahn Bay (Vietnam), Subic Bay (Philippines), Sasebo (Japan), Busan (South Korea), Vladivostok (Russia), and Port Klang (Malaysia). ^d
2016	INS Sumedha arrived in Padang, Indonesia on 10 Apr 2016 to participate in the International Fleet Review and the second edition of the Multilateral Naval Exercise KOMODO (MNEK). ^e

b The aim of ARF DiREx-15 is to exercise information sharing and networking among national agencies of this region towards providing Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) during natural calamities like Earthquakes, Tsunami, etc as well as Search and Rescue (SAR). See <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-saryu-participates-disaster-relief-exercise-direx-15-arf-0>.

c The Indian Navy has been a regular participant in maritime exercises conducted by the ADMM countries. ADMM Plus Ex MS & CT is a multinational exercise under the aegis of ADMM Plus consortium. (See, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/admm-plus-exercise-maritime-security-and-counter-terrorism-brunei-and-singapore-0>)

d The naval force consisted of the 6,200-tonne Shivalik-class guided-missile stealth frigates Satpura and Sahyadr armed with supersonic anti-ship and land-attack cruise missiles; the 27,550-tonne Deepak-class fleet tanker Shakti, one of the largest surface warships in the Indian Navy; and the 1,350-tonne Kora-class guided missile corvette Kirch, armed with sub- and super-sonic anti-air and anti-ship missiles. See: Nandini Jawli (2016), "South China Sea and India's Geopolitical Interests", Indian Journal of Asian Affairs, Volume 29 Number 1/2, p. 90.

e The Indian Navy had also participated in the inaugural edition of MNEK in 2014. See: <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/exercise-komodo-16-and-international-fleet-review-padang-indonesia>.

India's Historical Approach to SCS Disputes

2019	INS Kamorta exercised with the Indonesian Warship KRI Usman Harun in the Bay of Bengal as part of the Indian Navy – Indonesian Navy Bilateral Exercise 'Samudra Shakti' from 6 to 7 November 2019.
2020	The 30th edition of the India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (Indo-Thai CORPAT) ^f between the Indian Navy and the Royal Thai Navy was conducted from 18 – 20 November 2020.
2020	The 35 th edition of the India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT) ^g between the Indian Navy and the Indonesian Navy was conducted from 17 to 18 December 2020.
2020	The Indian Navy (IN) undertook a Passage Exercise (PASSEX) ^h with Russian Federation Navy (RuFN) in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region (IOR) from 4 to 5 December 2020.
2020	The 2020 edition of SIMBEX ⁱ in the Andaman Sea
2020	2nd edition of India, Singapore and Thailand Trilateral Maritime Exercise SITMEX ^j -20, from 21 to 22 November in the Andaman Sea.
2020	The Indian Navy carried out a military exercise with a US Navy carrier strike group led by the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier <i>USS Nimitz</i> off the coast of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. ²³
2020	The IN undertook PASSEX with the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in the East Indian Ocean Region from 23 to 24 September 2020.
2021	India and the US on March 28 kicked off a two-day naval exercise in the eastern Indian Ocean region. ²⁴

Source: Compiled by the author from the Indian Navy website, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/operations/10/page/1/0>

There has been a distinct naval dimension in India's Act East policy. According to academic and foreign-policy analyst Raja Mohan, "The traditional clear distinctions, then, between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific are beginning to blur. India is now looking beyond the Strait of Malacca to include the South China Sea in its national security calculus."²⁵

f To reinforce maritime links, the two navies have been carrying out CORPAT along their International Maritime Boundary Line twice a year since 2005, with the aim of keeping this vital part of the Indian Ocean safe and secure for commercial shipping and international trade. See: <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/node/27149>.

g To reinforce maritime links, the two navies have been carrying out CORPAT along their International Maritime Boundary Line since 2002, with the aim of ensuring safety and security of shipping and international trade in the region. CORPATs build up understanding and interoperability between navies and facilitate institution of measures to prevent and suppress Illegal Unreported Unregulated (IUU) fishing, drug trafficking, maritime terrorism, armed robbery and piracy. See: <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/35th-edition-india-indonesia-coordinated-patrol-0>.

h PASSEXs are conducted regularly by IN with units of friendly foreign navies, whilst visiting each other's ports or during rendezvous at sea. See: <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/passage-exercise-passex-between-russian-federation-navy-and-indian-navy-eastern-indian-oce-2>.

i The SIMBEX series of exercises between IN and Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN), being conducted annually since 1994, are aimed at enhancing mutual interoperability and imbibing best practices from each other. The scope and complexity of these exercises has increased steadily over the past two decades to include advanced naval drills covering a wide spectrum of maritime operations. See: <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/node/27158>.

j The first edition of SITMEX, hosted by Indian Navy, was conducted off Port Blair in September 2019. See: <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/node/27160>.

Why the Shift in India's Approach?

The momentum of India's 'Act East' policy

Even with India pulling out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the country's existing engagement with ASEAN is back in focus. A 2019 industry study suggests that India's bilateral trade with the ASEAN economies would double by 2025 to US\$ 300 billion from the 2018 level of US\$ 142 billion.²⁶

Table 2
India-ASEAN Trade (2013-2020)

India's trade with ASEAN	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Exports (US\$ billions)	33.13	31.81	25.13	30.96	34.20	37.47	31.55
% Growth	0.38	-3.99	-21.00	23.19	10.47	9.56	-15.82
Imports (US\$ billions)	41.28	44.71	39.91	40.62	47.13	59.32	55.37
% Growth	-3.71	8.33	-10.75	1.77	16.04	25.86	-6.66
Total (US\$ billions)	74.41	76.53	65.04	71.58	81.34	96.80	86.92
Trade Balance (US\$ billions)	-8.14	-12.90	-14.78	-9.66	-12.93	-21.85	-23.82

Source: <https://commerce.gov.in/about-us/divisions/foreign-trade-territorial-division/foreign-trade-asean/>

The ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA) of 2009 has boosted bilateral trade. India's merchandise exports to ASEAN increased from US\$23 billion in 2010 to US\$36 billion in 2018 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of five percent, while its merchandise imports from the bloc increased from US\$30 billion in 2010 to US\$57 billion in 2018, at a CAGR of eight percent. India's exports to ASEAN in 2019-20 were worth US\$31.49 billion, while its imports from the bloc reached US\$55.37 billion.²⁷ In comparison, China became Southeast Asia's largest trade partner in the January-June 2020 as the trade war

Why the Shift in India's Approach?

with the US has forced Beijing to recalibrate its global supply chains. China's total imports and exports with the ASEAN increased by 2 percent on the year to \$297.8 billion. The bloc accounted for 14.7 percent of China's overall trade for the period, up from 14 percent in 2019.²⁸

India's defence links with ASEAN have increased over time, in particular in the naval domain (see Table 1). With countries like Vietnam, India has been deepening its defence cooperation since the 1990s. In December 2020, during the virtual meeting between Prime Minister Modi and his Vietnamese counterpart, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, seven agreements were inked. These included one on implementing arrangements on defence industry cooperation, and another on nuclear cooperation between India's Atomic Energy Regulatory Board and Vietnam's Agency for Radiation and Nuclear Safety.

The summit also provided an opportunity to hand over one high-speed guard boat to Vietnam, launch of two other vessels manufactured in India, and keel-laying of seven vessels being manufactured in Vietnam under the US\$100-million defence Line of Credit being extended by India. The two sides also agreed to explore new and practical collaborations to build capacities in the areas of blue economy, maritime security and safety, marine environment and sustainable use of maritime resources, and maritime connectivity.²⁹

Meanwhile, the mainstay of India-Philippines defence relations is underlined by capacity-building and training, exchange visits of delegations, and naval and coast guard ship visits. National Defense Secretary Lorenzana visited India with a five-member delegation from 8-11 March 2018; it was the first ever bilateral defence minister-level visit to India from the Philippines. Apart from bilateral interactions with his counterpart, he also visited defence establishments and defence equipment production centres in India. Indian Navy and coast guard ships regularly visit the Philippines and hold consultations with their counterparts. In February 2019, ICGS Shaunak visited Manila on the occasion of Indian Coast Guard Day; earlier, Indian Navy Vessel, INS Rana visited Manila from 23-26 October 2018.³⁰

“India's trade with ASEAN countries will double by 2025 to US\$ 300 billion, from the 2018 level of US\$ 142 billion.”

Why the Shift in India's Approach?

These are just some of the most important examples of how India has deepened bilateral and multilateral engagements with the Southeast Asian countries. Mutually supporting each other in the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal, has allowed the ASEAN nations and India to sustain their relations. It is only a matter of time before India's naval capabilities, maritime infrastructure, closer naval partnerships and capacity-building programmes progress into stronger cooperative partnerships in the region. The collaborative interests between the ASEAN countries and India are further evident in the prioritisation of freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea – some of the key aspects discussed at the ASEAN-India Summit of November 2019.³¹

China's belligerence

China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea is a cause of concern for India. The 'Incremental Encroachment Strategy' that China is exhibiting in the South China Sea, East China Sea (ECS) and Ladakh is a serious concern not only for the countries directly affected by overlapping EEZs or unsettled borders, but also for the rest of the world.³² There is rising incidence of Chinese intelligence ship sightings in the IOR. Chinese Dongdiao class intelligence-gathering ships – known earlier to stalk US, Australian and Japanese warships in the Western Pacific – are now operating in the waters of the Eastern Indian Ocean, keeping an eye on India's naval movements.³³ In response, the Indian Navy intends to maintain a presence in the South China Sea.³⁴

Vietnam and other ASEAN nations have requested India's assistance in stabilising naval cooperation and balancing China's assertiveness in the region. Laura Q. Del Rosario, the Philippines' former deputy minister for international economic relations, had once stated: "India should go East, and not just Look East."³⁵

Stronger positions from other extra-regional players

India is looking to work more closely with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific, and is entering into issue-based minilateral partnerships like Japan-Australia-India, India-Australia-France, and the Quad. The Quad, since its revival in 2017, has reiterated its aim of working towards a free and open Indo-Pacific. Of the four partner countries, only India has not directly spoken about the South China Sea disputes. However, following the Galwan Valley clash of June 2020, a change in India's attitude towards China started becoming more noticeable, even in relation to the SCS disputes.

Why the Shift in India's Approach?

On 13 July 2020, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo released a statement that reflected the hardening of US policy in a “vital, contentious part of the Indo-Pacific region which is the South China Sea.”³⁶ The statement said, “Beijing’s claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them.”³⁷ This follows the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague in favour of the Philippines, which declared that China’s historical claims to the maritime resources were “unlawful” and beyond the purview of the UNCLOS.

Although the US has in the past issued statements in support of the tribunal’s ruling, it made its position more clear when it spelled out that “PRC has no lawful territorial or maritime claim to Mischief Reef or Second Thomas Shoal (off the Philippines), Vanguard Bank (off Vietnam), Luconia Shoals (off Malaysia), waters in Brunei’s EEZ, and Natuna Besar (off Indonesia).”³⁸ In April 2020 the US Navy deployed a three-ship TF led by the Amphibious Assault ship USS America and was joined later by a Royal Australian Navy frigate.³⁹ Moreover, the US is set to establish a US\$ 2.2-billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative aimed at enhancing its deterrence and defence posture; increasing readiness and capability in the Indo-Pacific region; and deepening cooperation with allies and partners including India, Australia and Japan.⁴⁰ France in February 2021 sent an amphibious assault ship, the Tonnere, and the frigate Surcouf to the Pacific on a three-month mission.⁴¹ In the same month, two US carrier groups conducted joint exercises in the South China Sea near the China-controlled islands.⁴²

In November 2020, Japan and Australia agreed on a breakthrough defence pact allowing reciprocal visits for training and operations, and voiced concern over the disputed SCS. The pact allows Japanese and Australian troops to visit each other’s countries and conduct training and joint operations and was agreed in principle by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and his Australian counterpart, Scott Morrison, who was visiting Tokyo at the time.⁴³

The Joe Biden administration, during the fifth anniversary of the Arbitral Tribunal Ruling on the SCS on 16 July, issued a statement: “Nowhere is the rules-based maritime order under greater threat than in the South China Sea. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) continues to coerce and intimidate Southeast Asian coastal states, threatening freedom of navigation in this critical global throughway.”⁴⁴ It said an armed attack on Philippines forces or vessels in the South China Sea would push the US to act according to its Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines.^{k,45}

k Article 4 of the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty states- Each Party recognises that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on either of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes. See, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp#:~:text=ARTICLE%20IV,accordance%20with%20its%20constitutional%20processes.

Challenges and Options for India

India has always emphasised the need to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. Today it is taking a more vocal stand, declaring the South China Sea as a global commons⁴⁶ wherein all disputes should be settled in accordance with international law and without prejudicing the legitimate interest of any third party who has a stake in the disputed waters. The Indian Navy has deployed one of its frontline warships in the South China Sea after the Galwan incident.⁴⁷

Though there are speculations if this was just a part of the routine naval deployments, which the Navy has been carrying out in the region, the message is unmistakable. Additionally, the Indian Navy also deployed its frontline vessels along the Malacca Straits near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the route from where the Chinese Navy enters the Indian Ocean Region to keep a check on any Chinese naval activity.⁴⁸

There are certain challenges that India will have to face while sustaining its stance on the SCS disputes. The principal impediment is likely to come from the ASEAN itself. India has observed how Singapore, Vietnam and Myanmar appear to be more invested in India's role as a security provider in comparison to Malaysia or Indonesia – due to the sensitivity attached to security in the Malacca Strait. At the same time, Laos and Cambodia enjoy closer relations with China, whereas the Philippines, Thailand and Brunei remain undecided on India's role as a security provider in the region.

China is a power that will continue to be an important partner for the ASEAN and, for that matter, many others in the Indo-Pacific, especially in a post-COVID world where countries will struggle to revive their economies. ASEAN overtook the European Union to become China's largest trading partner in the first quarter of 2020, and China is the third-largest investor (\$150 billion) in ASEAN.⁴⁹

To be sure, there is no unity with ASEAN regarding the competing claims with China.⁵⁰ For instance, the Philippines President, Rodrigo Duterte's remarks in April 2021 have sent out a mixed signal with regard to his country's approach to the SCS dispute. While the Philippines will not withdraw the navy and coast guard boats patrolling the disputed South China Sea, Duterte said he wants "to maintain friendly ties with China, citing Manila's 'debt of gratitude' for Beijing's help with the coronavirus vaccine."⁵¹

There is no doubt that there has been a palpable shift in India's approach to the disputes along the South China Sea. This tilt may not be a significant one, and it remains to be seen whether it is merely symbolic or more substantial. However, a certain momentum is visible in India's stance, and such a shift, albeit

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slight, can be a facilitator for new policy initiatives and actions on the part of India in the SCS and the broader Indo-Pacific.

In the short term, it will not be feasible for India to have a military role and it has also wisely chosen to stay clear of any involvement in a possible confrontationist scenario. It has conveyed its unwillingness to participate in joint patrols or FONOPS with the US Navy in the South China Sea. Since this is a regional issue and given the prevalent opinion that ‘ASEAN centrality and unity’ is waning, the Southeast Asian countries will want to handle the disputes at the ASEAN platform. However, there remain ways where India can show its Southeast Asian neighbours that even while it is aware that it has a limited role in the military domain, given their sensitivity to the idea of foreign military operating in their sovereign waters, India can still engage in a substantial course of action to help the ASEAN littorals. This will show India’s regard for Southeast Asia as the fulcrum connecting the Indian the Pacific Oceans, thereby enlivening the principles underlined in its Indo-Pacific policy.

- India is fully committed to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and to ensuring a rules-based international order. To that extent, it is fully supportive of initiatives in this regard in the entire region. It participates in numerous bilateral and multilateral naval exercises in the region; it is usually the first responder in any Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operation; and it is an active participant in various regional security forums. India can, in the various bilateral, CORPAT exercises it undertakes with the Southeast Asian navies, introduce the aspect of information sharing and networking among national agencies of this region towards providing HADR as well as Search and Rescue operations during natural calamities. This has been done in the past under the aegis of the ASEAN Regional Forum, and can be re-started, or else introduced in the Samudra Shakti¹ and SIMBEX exercises.
- Effective maritime enforcement capacity begins with strong maritime domain awareness (MDA), defined as the ability to gather, process, analyse, and share real-time information about what is occurring at sea. This capacity is vital for promoting marine safety, responding to vessels in distress, stopping illegal activity, tracking at-sea transshipments, and protecting waters from illegal incursions by foreign vessels. Most countries must rely on multilateral information-sharing. India’s Indian Ocean Region Information Fusion Centre (IOR-IFC) can work with the IFC in Singapore, Indonesian Maritime Information Centre, and Malaysia’s International

¹ India-Indonesia bilateral joint maritime exercise

Challenges and Options for India

Maritime Bureau to exchange and share information on illegal incursion and movement of Chinese fishing and naval vessels in the disputed waters of the SCS.

- India has already been engaged in capacity-building initiatives with countries like Vietnam and the Philippines. India and Vietnam pursue naval cooperation which includes composite training programmes in the field of submarines, aviation, and dockyard training. In 2015, both countries' coast guards signed an MOU for establishment of collaborative relationship to combat transnational crime and for sharing best management practices and augmenting operational-level interactions.⁵² In 2016, India and Vietnam upgraded their ties to the level of a “comprehensive strategic partnership”. The two have signed an agreement to exchange white shipping^m information. India is also exploring the possibility of selling warships to the Vietnamese Coast Guard.
- In 2017, India and the Philippines signed an MOU on defense cooperation and logistics. In 2019, they signed another MOU on the sharing of white shipping information. Their coast guards regularly conduct bilateral maritime exercises. Such initiatives should be undertaken with other claimant countries like Indonesia. Moreover, Indian Coast Guard can provide trainings to the Vietnamese, Filipino and Indonesian coast guards. Coast Guard exchange programmes can be initiated and exercises can be conducted to provide training in handling cases of illegal fishing vessels, especially Chinese fishing boats entering the disputed waters. Given that the Chinese fishing vessels encroaching the disputed waters have become a regular occurrence and the coast guards are the first responders, besides naval training and exchange, coast guard training and contributing to their capacity building also need to be considered.
- India had been exploring international markets in Southeast Asia and elsewhere to sell the Brahmos missile system. Among the ASEAN countries, Vietnam was the first country that was offered these missiles. India proposed a US\$ 100-million line of credit to the Philippines for the purchase of military hardware. It has also offered the Philippines its Akash missile systems (25 kilometres, mid-range surface-to-air missile system) that can intercept and destroy hostile aerial platforms. India should now consider selling Brahmos missiles to countries like the Philippines and Indonesia.

^m White Shipping agreement is signed between the navies of countries to exchange information on the passage of commercial vessels and ships in each other's oceanic territories.

Challenges and Options for India


- Some claimant countries like Indonesia are keen on infrastructure development of the islands around the disputed waters (for example, in Natuna Sea). Indonesia is seeking to invite the US to invest in the development of Riau Islands' Natuna regency, which is a part of Indonesia's outer islands in the southern part of the contested South China Sea.⁵¹ This is where India and its other Quad partners can come in. India can push the US, Japan, Australia to invest in the infrastructure development in Southeast Asia, and by extension, in the ASEAN Masterplan on Connectivity 2025.
- Extra-regional players like India, the US, Japan, and Australia can constantly voice the need for upholding international law in the SCS on the part of China and for the faster conclusion of the COC on terms which would be acceptable to China as well as the claimant ASEAN countries. This can help create pressure on the Chinese leadership in various global platforms.
- Besides the platform of Quad, India can work with other countries in other forums. For instance, most of the naval activity in the South China Sea is dominated by the Asian and Pacific powers. The recent announcements by European navies to operate in the SCS, directly challenging China's expansive claims and supporting freedom of navigation at sea, are causing concern for Beijing. India can consider joining such activities. The US has plans to set up a 'numbered fleet'— i.e., the First Fleet which could be operating in the crossroads between the Indian and the Pacific oceans and based in Singapore. Apparently, US allies and partners such as India, Singapore and Japan may have endorsed its utility and agreed to support it.

The key is to start with such soft security issues in the immediate term and draw out proposals that will be immediately acceptable to the ASEAN member states. This will help India gain the trust of its ASEAN partners: that India truly is an advocate of ASEAN centrality and that Southeast Asia is the cog of its Indo-Pacific policy. Even the Quad members, the European countries like France, as well as the UK, can work alongside India and the other like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific on these non-conventional areas.

Conclusion

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Policy researchers in New Delhi have long advocated that given China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region, which is considered as India's primary theatre of interest, it is time for India to also increase its presence and influence in China's backyard—the Western Pacific. From speaking up on the South China Sea when its interests in oil exploration in the disputed waters in Vietnam were encroached upon, to releasing official statements that call attention to Chinese encroachments in the disputed territories—a tilt is noticeable in the Indian government's approach.

For having a stronger presence in this part of the world and gaining greater trust from its Southeast Asian neighbours, India would need to interact and engage more as part of its Act East policy along with the other Quad members that have similar influence in the region. India must harden its stance on the South China Sea conflicts, and work towards developing a composite strategy on dealing with the issues to make its presence felt in the region and, ultimately, craft a more meaningful Indo-Pacific strategy. 

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Endnotes



Ideas . Forums . Leadership . Impact

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