

SOUTH CHINA SEA MONITOR



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The Year in Review: 2015

January: US-India Joint Strategic Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region

On the occasion of India's 66th Republic Day, President Barack Obama visited the country as the chief guest and the two heads-of-state signed the "US-India Joint Strategic Vision for Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region". The move acknowledged the shared drive between the U.S and India regarding the importance of freedom of navigation, connectivity and security. It also indicated the concern regarding an increasingly aggressive China shared by both India and the US. Obama's visit in turn drew a sharp reaction from Beijing where the growing Indo-U.S friendship is being watched carefully.

February: Artificial Islands in the South China Sea

China's expansion into the South China Sea took the forefront in maritime issues as satellite images of artificial island being constructed by Beijing were released. The images offered the first visual substantiation of the extent of progress made by Beijing in this regard. One such land formation at Hughes Reef lying 660 miles from the Chinese coast, covering 75,000 square yards and equipped with a helipad was photographed. Other similar constructions were also believed to be underway at Johnson South Reef, Gavens Reef and Fiery Cross Reef. China's actions signified its efforts towards consolidation of its claims over the disputed nine-dash line and aggravated an already tense situation.

March: Joint Patrols in the South China Sea

ASEAN nations were urged to take the lead in checking unilateral actions by China by Vice Admiral Robert Thomas of the U.S. Navy Seventh Fleet. He also proposed organizing and conducting joint patrols

by all the relevant countries made and assured the countries in the region that the 7th Fleet of the U.S Navy was ready to support such initiatives. The Vice Admiral made his observations at the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition, Malaysia, in March. The proposal was welcomed by countries like the Philippines while it drew flak from Beijing. Nevertheless, the possibility of such a joint patrol taking place in the near future appears unlikely given the complex relationship shared by the ASEAN nations and China.

April: China Maritime Tensions dominates ASEAN Summit

Maritime tensions dominated the discussions at the 26th Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit held on 26-27 April in Kuala Lumpur. The mounting tensions have been further aggravated by China's expansionist actions including the construction of artificial islands. The Chairman's statement at the Summit noted the ASEAN nations shared concerns over Beijing's land reclamation and the threat posed to peace and stability in the region. In this regard the development of a regional conflict-resolution mechanism and the implementation of the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) is imperative to address the situation.

May: Washington takes a tough stand on the SCS dispute

The United States flew a surveillance aircraft near the Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly islands in the South China Sea drawing immediate and sharp criticism from China, although the U.S. Navy P8 plane did not breach Chinese airspace. Beijing's response was

responded to immediately by the U.S which emphasized that the U.S will operate its aircrafts in accordance with international laws which applies equally to all countries in the world. Beijing's actions once again stood contrary to its words of assurance that it will not obstruct freedom of navigation as well as flight over the South China Sea.

June: China places oil rig back in Vietnam's EEZ

For the second time in two consecutive years, China moved its state owned oil rig HD-981 close to the Vietnamese coast. China had moved its oil rig once before in 2014 which was followed by strong protests from Vietnam. The oil rig moved within 120 nautical miles from Vietnam's coast which located it inside the country's Exclusive Economic Zone and was slated to be there from June till August for gas exploration. The oil rig was also accompanied by warships, planes and fighter jets which reportedly attached Vietnamese fishing boats on their way.

July: Joint Patrols in the SCS

The presence of US Commander of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Scott Swift, aboard a P-8A Poseidon aircraft during a surveillance mission over the South China Sea (SCS) sparked debates on Joint air patrols over the disputed waters. While the move was aimed at strengthening the view over American commitment to ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight over the SCS, it carried weight for the discussions underway between some ASEAN nations. ASEAN countries have deliberated conducting joint air and sea patrols in the SCS in an effort to mitigate accidents and unilateral actions. While there has been no effective progress on the idea, the model carries great potential for stabilising the region, especially if implemented through ASEAN.

August: Washington's maritime strategy for Asia-Pacific

The US Department of Defense released the "Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy" outlining Washington's concerns, challenges and strategy for the region. The strategy carries forward the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific and identifies key areas of engagement to stabilise and strengthen its presence. Strengthening its own maritime capabilities and those of its allies and partners in the region is a strategy that

directly concerns the maritime tensions unfolding in the region. The document also compliments India's Act East Policy underlining the need to help New Delhi become a net security provider in the "Indian Ocean and beyond".

September: AUSINDEX

India and Australia for the first time held their bilateral maritime exercise off the eastern coast of India. Conducted under the ambit of the India-Australia Framework for Security Cooperation, growing maritime ties between the two nations come at a point of an unstable security environment in the Indo-Pacific. Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean over the year continued to grow steadily affecting India's maritime security environment. As the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific continue to evolve and take shape, India and Australia are emerging as key actors in taking a lead and stabilising the region. The bilateral exercise is a positive step toward a relationship which has great potential for maritime collaborations given the intersection in strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific.

October: US Freedom of Navigation Operations

Continuing with the trend of the year to challenge Chinese unilateral actions in the South China Sea, the US Navy reportedly carried out a Freedom of Navigation operation within the 12 nautical miles off Subi Reef- one of the artificial islands that Beijing is constructing. The operation was significant in establishing that artificial islands do not enjoy a territorial sea of 12 nautical miles in accordance with the UNCLOS. The exercise was Washington's way of sending a message that it will not recognize illegal establishments in international sea. However the nature of the exercise remain unclear as reports latter suggested that the US Navy carried out an "innocent passage" exercise rather than a military ship transiting through 12 nautical miles- essential to send across a strong message to China. Nevertheless, the incident attracted a strong response from the Chinese and Washington did make a point even though not at the magnitude the region would have liked it to.

November: India's new maritime security strategy

India, keeping up with the momentum of change in the maritime domain, released the "Ensuring Secure

Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy”- an update on the previous strategy- “Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy”. The strategy was released keeping in mind the changing geopolitical environment and its strategic implications on India’s maritime goals. The document provides a glimpse into the areas of interest and challenges for the Indian Navy and is a good guideline to analyse the India’s changing maritime strategy. The document for the first time defines what it means to be a net security provider and also recognizes the strategic shift to the Indo-Pacific. Although it lacks technical details on how the navy wants to achieve its goals, it is positive step toward suggesting the framework of India’s maritime strategic thought in the Indo-Pacific.

December: China continues to defy UN Permanent Court of Arbitration

China continues to participate in the legal proceedings at the UN Arbitration court over the South China Sea disputes with the Philippines. Beijing in 2014 released a position paper challenging the jurisdiction of the court over settling such a dispute. However, the tribunal in October 2015 refuted China’s jurisdiction and admissibility objections noting UNCLOS in settling maritime disputes through an arbitration court. While this was a positive and significant victory for the Philippines, Beijing has stood its ground refusing to acknowledge the primacy of the court in making judgments. China will mostly ignore all the judgments on the Philippines submission which are not legally binding- but risks losing moral ground and increase in international and political pressure to resolve the increasingly tensed maritime conflict.

MEDIA WATCH

Philippines Makes Last-Minute Decision to Join China-Led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

After months of holding out, the Philippines on Wednesday said it would join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank before a year-end deadline for founding members. The Southeast Asian nation will sign the AIIB’s articles of agreement before December 31, the government said in a statement. ([Bloomberg](#))

Vietnam Reveals New Drone for Patrolling the South China Sea

Vietnam revealed its largest indigenous high-altitude long endurance unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) this December. According to local media reports, the prototype was completed at the beginning of November and will commence test flights over the South China Sea in the summer of 2016. The prototype is a joint project of Vietnam’s Academy of Science and Industry and the Ministry of Public Security. The new UAV, designated HS-6L, will perform both civilian and military tasks, judging from the aircraft’s design features. ([The Diplomat](#))

China opposes Filipinos landing on S. China Sea island

China voiced strong dissatisfaction at the arrival of Filipino demonstrators on China's Zhongye Dao Island in the South China Sea on December 28. "China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands, including the Zhongye Dao Island," said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang in response to a question on the Filipino demonstrators, who landed on the island over the weekend. ([Xinhua](#))

Japan says armed Chinese coastguard ship seen near disputed islands

A Chinese coastguard ship equipped with what appeared to be four gun turrets was sighted near disputed islands in the East China Sea, Japan's coastguard said on December 23. Chinese coastguard vessels sail regularly near the islets, but a Japanese coastguard spokeswoman told Reuters it was the first time an armed Chinese coastguard ship had been

spotted in the area. For its part, China said the vessels were carrying standard equipment and doing nothing wrong in Chinese waters. ([Reuters](#))

China rejects U.N. arbitration on disputed South China Sea

China on December 21 rejected a UN tribunal's arbitration on the disputed South China Sea saying it had no jurisdiction over the case even as Beijing asserted it would not accept any third-party settlement of territorial disputes. "China's territorial sovereignty should be decided by all the Chinese people, and no other people or organisation has the right to handle it," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei told media here. ([The Hindu](#))

Philippines vows stronger military to back South China Sea claim

Philippine President Benigno Aquino vowed to leave behind a stronger and a more capable armed forces to face maritime challenges in the South China Sea when he leaves office next year. Aquino, ineligible to run for re-election under the constitution, promised to spend about 83.90 billion pesos (\$1.77 billion) in a five-year period until 2017 to strengthen the military as China asserts its claims to most of the waters. ([Reuters](#))

U.S. Bomber Flies over Waters Claimed by China

An American B-52 bomber on a routine mission over the South China Sea unintentionally flew within two nautical miles of an artificial island built by China, senior defense officials said, exacerbating a hotly divisive issue for Washington and Beijing. Beijing filed a formal diplomatic complaint with the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, which prompted the Pentagon to look into the matter. ([The Wall Street Journal](#))

Taiwan arms deal enough to give China bloody nose, but no more

A new US arms package for Taiwan will help boost the self-ruled island's ability to inflict a bloody nose on China in the attempt of an attack, enough to make Beijing think twice before any military adventure. But Taiwan, which is expected to vote in a new government next month less friendly to China, needs advanced weapons such as the latest fighter jets or

submarine-making technology if it stands a chance of holding off a concerted Chinese assault before U.S. forces come to the rescue. ([Asia Times](#))

Indonesia looks to boost defenses around Natuna Islands in South China Sea

Indonesia plans to strengthen its capability to defend its land and waters in the South China Sea, namely the Natuna Islands around which the country has declared an exclusive economic zone that overlaps with China's "nine-dash line" maritime claim, its defense minister said on December 15. ([The Japan Times](#))

South China Sea: Australia steps up air patrols in defiance of Beijing

Australia has stepped up military surveillance flights over the South China Sea in a signal to Beijing that it means to continue operating in the regional flashpoint area despite heightened tensions provoked by territorial disputes. In a move that is likely to grate with the Chinese government, an RAAF P-3 Orion aircraft carried out patrols in the air space in recent weeks, prompting a demand from Chinese naval forces in the waters below to explain itself. ([Sydney Morning Herald](#))

First time in a Joint statement: India, Japan unite on South China Sea

A year after PM Narendra Modi visited Japan and riled Beijing with his comments on "expansionist" policies of some countries, India and Japan have, for the first time, come up with an unequivocal statement on South China Sea and called on countries to "avoid unilateral actions" that could lead to tension in the region. Last year, India had signed two joint statements with Japan, but neither mentioned the South China Sea. ([The Indian Express](#))

Tensions along South China Sea hastened Su-35 deal

Su-35 planes can be deployed from China's newly developed artificial islands in the sea. Russia's decision to export is highly capable Su-35 planes is expected to bolster China's military presence in the South China Sea. It is also set to escalate military technology exchanges that would help Beijing and Moscow develop cutting edge weapons. ([The Hindu](#))

US P-8 spy plane deployed to Singapore

The United States has deployed a P-8 Poseidon spy plane to Singapore for the first time. It is the latest in a series of US military actions seen as a response to China's increasingly assertive claims over territory in the South China Sea. The US says it will also base a military reconnaissance plane at Singapore's Paya Lebar air base. US P-8s already operate from Japan and the Philippines, and surveillance flights have taken off from Malaysia. ([BBC](#))

COMMENTARIES

Is India Ready To Be a Power in the Pacific?

- **Darshana M. Baruah**

For some time now, many have argued that India should assume the role of the so-called “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean and across the Asia-Pacific. Taking on this responsibility will require it to assert its strategic goals across the region. But given the evolving security environment in this region, it is quickly becoming apparent that many countries, including the United States, want India to step up perhaps more than New Delhi itself wants to. Furthermore, it also seems that India’s understanding of the role is significantly different from those making these demands.

Despite New Delhi’s reassurances, it has yet to build a “blue water navy,” a force capable of operating in open seas and projecting power to areas of strategic interest. The Indian army continues to be the favorite child of the Indian military, with [nearly half of the defense](#) budget typically going to the ground forces. On the other hand, the navy has seen a reduction in its allocated budget from 19 percent in [2012 to 2013](#) to 16 percent in [2015 to 2016](#). As of January 2015, the Indian navy had a shortage of [1,322 officers and 11,257 sailors](#). In the past, there have been [reports](#) of acute shortages of ships and helicopters. Furthermore, a series of mishaps aboard Indian naval ships and submarines led to the [resignation](#) of former Naval Chief DK Joshi in February 2014 — the first resignation of a leader of the armed forces since Indian independence in 1947.

With the Indian navy clearly facing numerous organizational challenges, why is Washington encouraging New Delhi to take on the role of the net security provider in the Indian Ocean and Asia Pacific region?

In 2009, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [argued](#) that India should be a net security provider; Leon Panetta [implied the same](#) in 2012. The most recent and significant acknowledgment of the Pentagon’s push for India’s role as a net security provider was outlined in the U.S. Department of Defense’s [recently released](#) “U.S. Asia Pacific maritime security strategy” which noted that the United States is “seeking to reinforce India’s maritime capabilities as a

net provider of security in the Indian Ocean region and beyond.”

At the crux of all this is India’s geographic location. During his September 2015 visit to India, Australian Defense Minister Kevin Andrews [said](#) that “Australia recognizes India’s critical role in supporting the security, stability, and prosperity of the Indian Ocean region and the stability of a wider, rules-based global order.” Despite the challenges the Indian navy faces, the country’s geographic location allows it to assert itself in the Indian Ocean region in a manner that exceeds its capabilities. India’s long eastern coastlines provide access and command over the Bay of Bengal, while its western coast provides access to the Arabian Sea. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located close to critical sea lines, provide comfortable access to the Malacca Straits and the southern reaches of the Indian Ocean.

Its naval limitations aside, New Delhi’s contributions in fighting maritime piracy both off the Horn of Africa and in Southeast Asia are noteworthy. The Indian navy’s performance during natural calamities and in search and rescue operations (SAR) after the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the Maldives Fresh water crisis of 2014, and [during SAR operations for MH370](#), demonstrate its strength.

But to be the net security provider for the region, this is not enough.

India must articulate a clear policy with political will to direct it. It will have to get involved in regional developments and take a lead in creating mechanisms and frameworks, such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and the Indian Ocean Dialogue, while simultaneously joining existing ones (like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the Maritime Silk Road) to expand its reach. Last July, the Philippines’ Foreign Secretary Evan Garcia [encouraged](#) India to play a greater role in the South China Sea when he remarked that India “is not an invited guest, India should be at the head table” when it comes to policing the South China Sea. Nations such as Singapore and [Vietnam](#) also share these sentiments. Furthermore, many navies — the United States, Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam, Philippines, or Singapore — stand ready to cooperate with the Indian navy. But India can only deliver the guarantees it hopes to through increased participation

at regional security forums, where it can shape the discourse and, in doing so, define the role that it is willing to play.

India’s own definitions of what being a net security provider entails and what a blue water navy looks like, also differ from that of countries involved in the region. India’s definition of power projection in its area of interests may not necessarily align with the definition outlined by other Asia-Pacific nations. India’s interests in securing the Indian Ocean are likely to substantially converge with those of Pacific powers like the United States. But in areas like the South China Sea, which form a “[secondary area](#)” of interest for the Indian navy, the overlap may be considerably less.

In October 2015, India’s Defense Minister Shri Manohar Parrikar released India’s revised maritime military strategy document for 2015 (IMSS-2015), which offers a definition from the Indian perspective of what it means to be a net security provider. The Indian Navy, for the first time, has defined the phrase “net security provider” as maintaining “the state of actual security available in an area, upon balancing prevailing threats, inherent risks and rising challenges in the maritime environment, against the ability to monitor, contain and counter all of these.” However, the definition does not include the geographical scope of the region where India would pursue the above defined role, which reflects Indian hesitation to assert beyond its immediate strategic considerations.

The pressure for India to emerge as a regional leader and as a net security provider is high, and will only increase. The support from nations in the Chinese maritime neighborhood (Vietnam, Philippines, and Singapore) is encouraging, but perhaps their expectations exceed India’s own vision.

India’s current leaders have suggested that India is willing to play the role of an active security provider. After former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh [declared](#) that India is well-positioned to be a net security provider, the Modi government has taken a firmer stand through its [engagement with its maritime neighbors, joint strategic visions, and collaborations with regional navies](#). The Asia-Pacific is ready for a new discourse on maritime security. India is a central part of the discussion on maritime cooperation and security in the Indian Ocean region, among Australia, United States, European, and Southeast Asian countries. What the region now

requires, however, is a bit of patience while India charts its own policy and adds its own substance to this narrative, before it can truly emerge as a net security provider.

Source: *Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2015

7 Events of Geopolitical Consequence to Anticipate in Asia in Early 2016

- **Ankit Panda**

2016 will kick off with a bang. Here's what you need to keep an eye on early in the New Year.

This 2016 is just around the corner and there's a lot to keep an eye on in Asia in the first month of the year. In January 2016, we'll see elections in Taiwan, the formal operational launch of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the possible resumption of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the first steps toward renewed comprehensive talks between India and China, and the possible disintegration of a recently concluded controversial deal between the Japanese and South Korean governments on comfort women. Here's your guide to starting off the new year with an eye to some early developments of geopolitical significance in the Asia-Pacific:

Elections in Taiwan: Taiwanese citizens will head to the polls on January 16 to vote in their latest general elections. Preliminary opinion polling suggests that a victory for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), led by its presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen, is likely. The ruling Kuomintang party may find its rule at an end in Taiwan. Should Tsai prevail in the elections, Taiwan will see its first female president and possibly some changes to its foreign policy and positioning vis-a-vis the mainland. The Kuomintang government's most recent term has seen a controversial period of rapprochement with the mainland. Though the DPP and Tsai have said that they will largely avoid rocking the boat with China if they win, Beijing remains wary. In any case, the outcome of Taiwan's election next month will be worth watching early in 2016.

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank goes live: As [I recently discussed in greater detail](#), the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

(AIIB) took a major step toward becoming operational last week, when 17 of its founding members ratified the bank's Articles of Agreement. In January, the inaugural meeting of the bank's Board of Governors will take place, which will also signal the commencement of the bank's operations. The AIIB is significant as an example of China's growing ambitions as a multilateral leader, offering an alternative vision of global governance and development than those of Western-backed institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In 2016, we'll see this new institution take off.

A major party congress in Vietnam: In early January, the Vietnamese Communist Party will convene to select a new generation of leadership for the country and the party. Vietnam will elect a new general secretary for the party, a new Politburo, and a new central commission. ([See here](#) for background on the domestic dynamics involved.) Vietnam is an increasingly important actor in Southeast Asia and is a claimant in the South China Sea where tensions with China remain high. Hanoi is additionally being courted by the United States and Japan to balance against Beijing's growing assertiveness in the region. The outcome of the party congress [may not necessarily mean major changes to the country's foreign policy](#) or direction, but this will be an event to watch early in 2016.

An uncomfortable deal between Japan and South Korea: One of the unexpected bits of good news late in 2015 was [the announcement of a historic deal between Japan and South Korea](#) on the "comfort women" issue on December 28. The issue has long divided Seoul and Tokyo, two important U.S. allies in Northeast Asia. However, even though the two countries' foreign ministers declared the issue "resolved finally and irreversibly," a number of complications have already come up that suggest implementation of this agreement will not be easy. First, the South Korean survivors of sexual slavery at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Army—the "comfort women" themselves—have [rejected the deal](#). Secondly, [Tokyo is reportedly linking the disbursement](#) of funds under the agreement to the dismantling of a statue depicting the plight of former "comfort women" near the Japanese embassy in South Korea. This issue appears far from resolved. Expect

the first month of 2016 to be heavily dominated by continuing turbulence over the landmark agreement.

Comprehensive peace talks between India and Pakistan: [Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise Christmas stopover in Lahore, Pakistan](#), where he embraced and promenaded with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif, sent an unmistakable message that the prospect of comprehensive peace talks between India and Pakistan in 2016 is real and carries momentum. Most of 2015 saw the two nuclear-armed rivals call off planned diplomatic talks, but the final weeks of the year have seen a convergence. Following the display of camaraderie between the two prime ministers, New Delhi and Islamabad [are planning foreign secretary-level talks in mid-January](#) to get the ball rolling toward a serious resumption of comprehensive peace talks. The outcome of those talks could set the tone for engagement between the two South Asian giants in 2016.

Peace talks with the Taliban: [Afghanistan and Pakistan have seen a cautious rapprochement in the final weeks of 2015 as well](#). With Islamabad's imprimatur, peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban could be back on early in 2016. The success or failure of those talks will be indicative of just what to expect in Afghanistan's ongoing struggle against the militants, who have seized more territory than at any time since the U.S. invasion back in 2001.

Birth of the ASEAN Community. This one's really an honorable mention of sorts, since there isn't quite an "event" to anticipate, but ASEAN will [usher the new year in by formally launching the ASEAN Community](#), which comprises the ASEAN Economic Community, the ASEAN Political-Security Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. In sum, these initiatives strive to bring more interconnectivity, prosperity, trade, and stability to the ten member states of ASEAN and their 600 million residents. If the ASEAN Community experiment sees early successes, 2016 may be the year we see the emergence of a unified southeast Asian economic bloc—a development that should surely transform how observers think about the economic landscape of the Asia-Pacific.

Source: *The Diplomat*, December 31, 2015

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