

India, China, and the South China Sea: Presence, Implications, and Possibilities

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Abstract

The Chinese presence in the South China Sea has been a long-standing issue involving many countries, particularly India. China spreading its print to Southeast Asian countries, particularly Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Brunei, Philippines, and is now reaching out to the Solomon Islands in the Pacific. China has also conducted military surveillance in these areas, as well as erected communications and logistics structures like ports, military stations, and airfields. These developments are a matter of concern for countries even outside the SCS littoral.

India's trading interests with Japan, South Korea, Southeast Asian countries, and across the Pacific account for over 55 percent of its trade passing via SCS. China's expanding militarization, therefore, poses a substantial threat of interruption to India, particularly when relations deteriorate. In the light of these factors, this paper attempts to evaluate: a) what does Chinese presence in the South China Sea mean? b) what are the implications for India? c) How has India responded to these implicit challenges, and (d) What are the options for India to protect its national interests and trade in this scenario? Considering that geopolitical challenges need revamping of policy frameworks and institutionalized response, this paper will attempt to outline policy options for India, relying upon primary and secondary sources for its analysis.

Keywords: China, South China Sea, UNCLOS, Maritime, Littoral, Geo-politics, Foreign Policy, Military

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Introduction

The South China Sea's location is quite strategic and significant for all the players in the region, especially after the rise of the concept of Indo-Pacific. South China Sea (SCS) has huge oil and natural gas reserves. Hydrocarbon is also one of the energy resources found in the SCS near Borneo, Malay Peninsula, and Palawan. Most importantly, the world's most significant shipping lanes to the Pacific and the Indian Ocean pass through this region specifically the Strait of Malacca.

The disputes in the South China sea have been a cause of concern for many neighbouring countries. The growing Chinese presence and the response from other countries, therefore, have become crucial in the present scenario, to determine what the future course of the South China sea will look like. While conflicts have already existed in the South China sea for decades, it was in 2013 when the Philippines filed a formal complaint to deal with the dispute. India, even though do not own any piece of land in the South China Sea, has always been vocal about the peaceful resolution of disputes and is even in favour of declaring the South China Sea as a global common keeping in mind its rising significance. Since India hasn't remained unaffected by the rising claims of China in the SCS, this article seeks to analyse the impact on India due to these conflicts and the growing Chinese presence in the region. It will also critically analyse the consequences and responses of India.

China's presence in the South China Sea

China's expansive and sweeping authoritarian claims all over the South China Sea have always been the main cause of trouble in the region. Started in 2009 when contemporary Chinese official Dai Bingguo referred South China sea as one of the core interests of China - a term which was earlier used for Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. China's ambitious nine-dash line which constitutes almost all the SCS truly showed what China meant by its core interest (Mastro, 2021). China is utilizing and is trying to exercise its 2nd Century BCE sovereignty claims by increasing its military claims in the region. China has also been conducting seismic surveys in the SCS on the territories claimed by Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia meanwhile also sending threat signals to the countries involved in their own research. China has also been involved in threatening the fisherman and installing military equipment in the region - including airstrips, naval berths,

hangars, ammunition bunkers, missile silos, and radar sites - administrative buildings hospitals, and even sports multiplexes on the reclaimed islands. (BBC, 2020)

Beijing views SCS as a determining factor for its maritime strategy- specifically the Maritime Silk Road- a crucial part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Maritime Silk Road (MSR) solves China's energy issue by outsourcing and importing energy resources from foreign countries. Also, Malacca Dilemma, which has worried China for a long time due to its high dependency on it for energy security, will also be resolved by MSR. MSR is also a potential route for China to widen the scope for multidimensional cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. China has been successful in securing ties with most of the ASEAN members despite the territorial disputes due to the lucrative developmental deals in both the trade and security sectors. (Gordon et al., 2020) Other components of BRI- for example, Digital BRI have given China a scope for expanding the presence of its tech companies involved in telecommunication infrastructure and network. These companies are providing the most advanced telecom services to their consumers i.e., 5G technology. However, cyber security risks including scrutiny and surveillance, have been neglected by the consumer countries which can threaten the security of billions of people in the blink of an eye.

Implications for India, and its Response to Implicit Challenges

The Indian Navy made its existence in the SCS in 2021 when a group of four warships sailed under a task force on a two-month disposition consisting maritime exercises with some of the ASEAN members and for the Malabar exercises with Quad members (Pant, 2021). Approximately 55 percent of India's trade with the happens through South China Sea. India has its eye on the region – to watch out for any conflict that might affect India's economic interests. New Delhi's primary worry is the protection and safety of the region's SLOCs, which indirectly also assures regional stability and freedom of navigation. (Pant, 2021). The economic prosperity of India and the regional stability is dependent as on steady maritime directive with uncluttered and free sea routes.

India has always been dedicated towards establishing a rules-based order in the region, especially by being an avid follower and promoter of the UNCLOS. After the Galwan episode, the Indian Navy shipped one of its combat ready vessels to the South China Sea. Though it is unclear whether this was part of the Navy's usual naval deployments in the region, the message is clear. In addition, the Indian Navy placed its ground zero vessels near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as well as

at the location from where China's Navy come in the Indian Ocean Region, to stay alert and keep a watch on their actions (Pant, 2021). During 15th EAS, India's EAM S. Jaishankar said that China's activities in the SCS has eroded the trust and negotiation procedure in the region. (Saha, 2021). This proves that India is ready to take a strong stance to ensure Chinese activities in the South China sea are curtailed. It is very clear that India's position has shifted from being a diplomatic presence to taking active measures to protect its interests along with proving itself a helpful regional player.

Southeast Asia has become a centre of India's foreign policy in recent years specifically after the introduction of Act East Policy. Act East Policy did not only make ASEAN but also the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean the major determinant of India's foreign policy. It turned the previously passive approach of India into an active one comprising major cooperation initiatives that are mutually beneficial. The region is important to India not just geopolitically, but also in terms of trade and import/export. Around the majority of India's oil imports and 40% of the total trade happen through the Strait of Malacca. (Mohan & Jintao, 2022)

Safety and smooth functioning of the routes ensuring smooth energy supply, particularly through sea lanes are of paramount importance to India. Both Strait of Malacca and SCS play an important role in ensuring India's energy supplies and other trades.

Furthermore, India has been actively involved in vocal support for the peaceful and diplomatic resolution of disputes in the region. India has not only vividly supported UNCLOS and rules-based maritime order but also endorsed a free and open Indo-Pacific with freedom of navigation. India's association with QUAD and promotion of its principles is a clear testimony that India is trying to improve and strengthen its relations with its maritime neighbours by marking its presence and commendable contribution to almost every regional and multilateral organization.

Be it energy, trade, climate change, defence, logistics, or maritime exercises, India's presence post-2010 has increased significantly. India has not only participated but also taken initiatives in starting new forums and regional organizations that aim to contribute to strengthening relations. Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiatives, Naval Symposiums, Infrastructural Projects, Maritime Exercises, Training exercises, drills, and economic cooperation through free trade agreements are some of the examples of India's engagement with the ASEAN. These

engagements not only ensure India- ASEAN strong relations but are an attempt to counter the presence of China in the region.

China has a far more strong and more aggressive foothold in the South China sea region in terms of economic investments and other developmental projects. However, in recent years, India has also initiated multiple infrastructural projects to ensure connectivity and better cooperation with the South East Asian partners like BBIN Initiative, BIMSTEC to promote cooperation in the multiple fields including tourism, connectivity related projects, counter-piracy operations, energy related cooperation and other areas that could reduce or replace the demand for China's economic aid/ investments and increase Indian influence over countries in the region. (Sahu, 2019)

Soft power including civilizational ties also plays a major role in improving relations when it comes to Southeast Asian nations. India, in the last two decades, has tried to open and explore new avenues to enhance its cooperation and presence near the South China Sea. China's increasing multidimensional presence has forced India's hands to increase its presence in the SCS. The Strait of Malacca plays an important role in India's strategic initiatives. Notably, the Strait of Malacca is of paramount importance to China keeping in the mind its high dependence on hydrocarbons which comes from the sellers in the Middle East and Africa. Almost 70% of the PRC's energy-related trade is shipped through the Strait of Malacca which makes it a geopolitically strategic chokepoint not only for China's energy security but also from India's point of view. (Paszak, 2021)

And keeping in mind China's growing economy with post-pandemic boosted demands, China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca is going to remain in place for some time. (Berkeley Political Review, 2019) In addition, India's base in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has assured continuous presence and eyes on the activities of the South China Sea with quick access to the region. Since China has notably increased its presence in the Indian Ocean by strengthening its relations with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh- India's presence and continued interest in the South China Sea is in response to that.

Options for India to protect its National Interests

India, from time to time, has modified its strategy, opinion, and stance for the Southeast Asian members as well as the region itself. Keeping in mind the strategic interests of India in the region,

i.e., for trade, energy supply, and balancing the presence of China, India changed its passive Look East Policy to Act East Policy - with rejuvenated efforts and more actionable initiatives for each and every aspect that is important to both India and not only ASEAN but also Japan, Australia as well as extended neighbourhood including the US. India's active and vocal participation in public diplomacy forums including the Shangri-La dialogue, ASEAN regional Forums, and many others shows India's willingness and efforts to engage with its eastern partners in every way possible. Bilateral relations need to be focused on more by searching for new avenues for cooperation. India does not enjoy an equal level of bilateral relations with each and every ASEAN member. Focusing on bilateral relations will help India in finding mutually beneficial areas of cooperation and maybe even enhance partnership in already existing fields of relations for example energy security. Firstly, India's **MAKE IN INDIA** initiative also has the scope to contribute in this domain when it comes to defence cooperation. India can increase its bilateral defence ties by offering indigenously designed, manufactured, and modified equipment. This will help in two ways- India will be able to cater to the needs of its neighbour by replacing China and its supply of defence equipment. Indigenously manufactured/modified weapons will give India chance to train the officials of the country at the receiving end about its usage and benefits. This will also enhance mutual trust and cooperation between the two nations.

Secondly, India's continued presence in the region for providing humanitarian aid and relief packages will also help in building mutual trust and friendship. India has initiated and led multiple HADR operations to support its eastern neighbours at the time of need even during pandemics.

Thirdly, Science and technology have the potential to transform the definition of bilateral relations. Sharing the technology behind a sustainable practice or a data collection methodology or even the modified version of the end product will help both parties to discover mutually beneficial products.

Fourthly, Maritime exercises - multilateral as well as bilateral have, without a doubt, always helped in bonding between the forces of two countries. Even though, currently, India is involved in multiple bilateral and multilateral exercises, and can even initiate a few more exercises regularly to boost the relations.

Fifth, Myanmar is currently under army rule and facing sanctions and backlashes from everywhere. However, being a neighbour and meanwhile witnessing increased cooperation between China and

Myanmar, India needs to rebalance its approach with Myanmar. Instead of boycotting and alienating a neighbour, India can engage in public diplomacy with Tatmadaw to understand the country's requirements and needs, can seek for solving the refugee issue by any means possible, and look out for traditional as well as non-traditional avenues for cooperation. This will not only help India in assisting an alienated friend but also avoid the chances of Myanmar falling into the hands of China or getting converted into a failed state like Sri Lanka.

Along with ASEAN, India should also look out for cooperation with Japan, the US, Australia as well as South Korea- both bilaterally and multilaterally near the South China Sea. Quad is surely a good initiative. However, public diplomacy forums working on a specific issue instead just focusing to work on one country will work more effectively. It will not only increase the presence of multiple strong actors in the region but also counter China's overarching claims. The US has also recognized India's role in the region therefore it will be easier to work together and find new areas of cooperation. Also, all these countries have been involved in some kind of disputes previously as well as currently. This will give a common cause for cooperation. (Jawali, 2016)

Small Island Nations in the Pacific can also play a crucial part in helping India. India should look out for the scope of more developmental projects and cooperation with these nations also.

Way Forward

India's interests revolve around economic and diplomatic ties in the South China Sea. Energy resources along with defence cooperation are the major aspects of interests. India has always been a responsible growing regional power - complying with all the international laws and regulations- seeking to resolve territorial disputes through peaceful negotiations and diplomatic efforts. India needs to expand its regional engagement by involving in bilateral relations with each and every actor. ASEAN will always be the key for India to secure its geopolitical interests in South East Asia. Collaborating with Small Island Nations apart from ASEAN will also prove to be helpful for India in fulfilling its ambition of countering China in the South China Sea. The US, which has accepted the significance of India as a regional power, will also prove to be useful. Bilateral engagement with the US including maritime exercises and also defence cooperation will directly or indirectly help India. Japan - India collaboration to counter China's presence can work by joining forces over developmental projects for a third party as they did for Sri Lanka. This will

present an alternative to China in front of South East Asian nations. Australia- India energy cooperation along with Australia's severed ties with China especially during the pandemic, will help India in opening up new avenues for collaboration. India needs to find avenues for both soft and hard power collaboration to overshadow the presence of China in the region.

Conclusion

To conclude, India has and will always remain a major power in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is like India's own backyard with neighbours and resources. However, slowly increasing presence of China with all of its lucrative schemes and developmental projects and now witnessing its consequences, India needs to make a subtle but dynamic strategy involving - using smart power to collaborate with the regional partners- not just to counter China but to mark its own presence through its own working style. India needs to make its presence felt in the SCS to make China realize that India is not a weak state and has the capability to retaliate through powerful collaborations and engagements. India can secure its maritime interests be it in the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea. India's engagement in the so-called "anti- China squad" is a befitting reply to it. China's continuous denial of Indo-Pacific as a concept and QUAD as a group is testimony that China is worried about these developments. India needs to work in the same way to keep China at bay.

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