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South China Sea: India's Maritime Gateway to the Pacific

Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy

Abstract: This article looks at India's interests and strategy in the South China Sea (SCS). First, it highlights India's maritime interests and discusses the relevance of the SCS to these interests. It then examines some key ingredients of India's evolving policy initiatives in the region. The article argues that with a considerable expansion of India's engagement with the South China Sea littoral states, India appears to be genuinely emerging as an indispensable element in the strategic discourse of this region. India could be a valuable security partner for several nations in the Asia Pacific region, provided it sustains a high economic growth rate and nurtures the framework of partnership that it has enunciated in the region.

Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) disputes are regarded as one of the most difficult regional conflicts in the Asia Pacific, in an 'arena of escalating contention'.¹ Indeed, some scholars suggest that for the next 20 years the South China Sea conflict will probably remain the 'worst case' threat to peace and security in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region.² Territorial sovereignty, contentions over energy, the significance of the geographic location, the threat to maritime security and overlapping maritime claims are all sources of the SCS disputes.³ Being one of the most important seas of the world geopolitically, economically and strategically,⁴ the SCS attracts considerable attention in contemporary thinking in international relations and strategic studies. Moreover, it continues to be seen as a potential source of tension, and is becoming increasingly turbulent. Security in the SCS is a concern both for the regional countries like China, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia, and for extra-regional countries including India, due to their strategic and economic interest in the region. Any conflict in the SCS will pose a threat to regional and international security.

While India is pursuing a robust maritime diplomacy, its expanding involvement in the SCS is becoming a crucial factor in India's external relations. In addition, India is attracting increasing attention among the SCS littoral states through its regular engagement and partnership, and is creating strategic opportunities for these states. India has become more active in expressing its interest in the freedom of navigation in the SCS and the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes between Beijing and its maritime neighbours.

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India's maritime interests

The peninsular character of India, with its extensive and open coastline and a littoral that is extremely fertile and rich in resources, makes India dependent on the Indian Ocean. The significant dependence of India's trade on maritime traffic gives the sea a substantial influence on its destiny.⁵ Certainly, the Indian Ocean represents a significant commercial artery as well as a global security arena. Delhi also recognises the strategic importance of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean for the defence of the Indian peninsula. Several of India's island territories are barely 90 miles from the Straits of Malacca.⁶

Indeed, India's prosperity is dependent exclusively on sea trade. The land routes out of the Indian sub-continent are few, and provide little facility of commerce, making the Indian Ocean vital to India. India's lifelines are concentrated in that area, and its future is dependent on the freedom of that vast water surface. Hence, a secure and safe Indian Ocean, along with the vast Indian shoreline, is an insurance of India's industrial development, commercial growth and stable political structure.⁷

India's dependence on the security of the Indian Ocean, combined with its need to monitor and, if necessary, to check the naval activity of other powers, means that the country is compelled to reach deep across the ocean, far beyond its own littoral, for more expansive maritime domain awareness. India's increasing reliance on imported oil and natural gas to fuel its economic growth has led the government to view the Indian Ocean as a maritime territory for the Indian navy to dominate and police.⁸

India's interests in the South China Sea

Stretching from Singapore and the Strait of Malacca in the south-west to the Strait of Taiwan in the north-east, the South China Sea is one of the most important trade routes in the world.⁹ It is bounded by the coast of Asia from Ca Mau, the southern tip of Vietnam, to Taiwan Strait, the south-west coast of Taiwan and the west coast of the Philippines to Balabac Island, the north coast of Sabah and the coast of Brunei and Sarawak, the northern façade of Indonesia's Kepulauan Natuna and the north coast of peninsular Malaysia. The total area of the SCS is approximately 804,000 square nautical miles.¹⁰ The sea is rich in resources and holds significant economic, strategic and political importance.

According to maritime history professor Geoffrey Till, there are four key and interdependent attributes of sea power:¹¹ the sea as a medium for trade and as a resource, in terms of what lies within its waters; the sea as a medium for informational and cultural exchange as well as a medium for dominion. The SCS possesses all these attributes.

The SCS is a region of tremendous importance to the peace, stability and prosperity of the Asia Pacific region. There are overlapping claims of territorial sovereignty among various countries (see [Figure 1](#)).¹² More importantly, the region's abundant natural resources and strategic location makes it essential to the agenda of several countries, including India.

The SCS is an integrated ecosystem. It is one of the richest seas in the world in terms of marine flora and fauna: coral reefs, mangroves, sea-grass beds, fish and plants.¹³ The sea accounts for approximately 10 per cent of the annual global fisheries

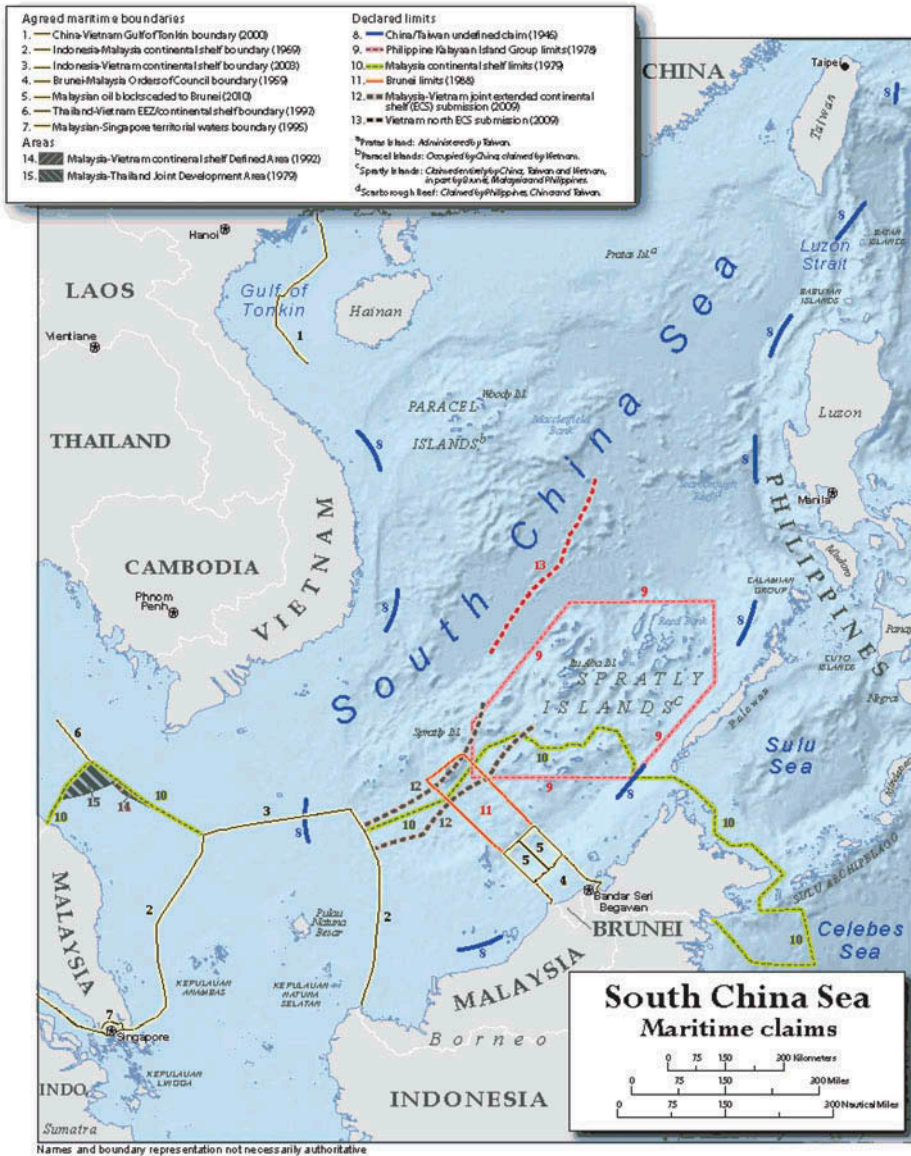


Figure 1. The SCS maritime claims.

Source: http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/South_China_Sea/images/maritime_claims_map.png

catch, making it extremely important for the fishing industries of nearby countries.¹⁴ The coastal population depend on fishing for their livelihood and the protein they get from fish and other seafood. In fact, the SCS is blessed with prodigious amounts of demersal (bottom-dwelling) and pelagic (surface-dwelling) species. The great variety and plentiful supply of tuna and shrimp have special significance for the littoral states. These two species have spawned entire industries, setting themselves apart from the other living resources harvested from the oceans. Furthermore, value-added

production (canning; filleting; fresh, frozen and chilled processing) is easily done with tuna and shrimp, creating global markets. This has translated into valuable foreign exchange earnings and job opportunities for countries in the region.¹⁵ However, China has been imposing fishing rules to operate in the disputed waters, resulting in serious maritime security concerns and objections from other claimant states. Recently, China announced new fishing rules with effect from January 1, 2014, raising questions about its efforts to exercise jurisdiction over all fishing activities in the disputed waters.¹⁶

The region as a whole is also rich in both oil and natural gas, which has led to speculation that the disputed territories could hold potentially significant energy resources. According to US Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates, the SCS contains 11 billion barrels (bbl) of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas in proved and probable reserves. The EIA faces difficulty in making accurate estimates of oil and natural gas in the area due to territorial disputes and lack of exploration, meaning that reserve estimates in the area vary greatly. According to the Chinese Ministry of Land and Resources, the SCS oil reserves are estimated to be around 23 to 30 billion tonnes and 16 trillion cubic metres of natural gas. There may also be additional hydrocarbon reserves in other under-explored areas.¹⁷

Most notably, the SCS occupies a significant geostrategic position in terms of international shipping. The majority of shipments of energy and raw materials pass through it. India and many other countries have an interest in protecting the sea lanes that run through the area, as they consider open and stable maritime commons essential to international trade and prosperity. The SCS is an important junction for navigation between the Pacific and Indian Oceans and an important maritime gateway.¹⁸ Selig S. Harrison writes:

The sensitivity of the South China Sea as a strategic waterway is apparent from its location. To the southwest, it connects with the Indian Ocean through Malacca Strait, and to the northeast, it commands access to the East China Sea. The sea lane running between the Paracels and Spratlys is used by oil tankers moving from the Persian Gulf to Japan as well as by warships en route the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.¹⁹

It is understandable that India has a vital interest in the SCS. More specifically, statements made by Indian leaders and government officials underscore India's imperative of 'access' and 'stability' in the SCS. India's immense interest and its approach towards the SCS have been clearly articulated on several platforms by Indian policy makers. Addressing the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), India's then minister of state for defence, Jitendra Singh, said:

The safety and security of the sea lanes of communication is of paramount importance . . . there is need to reaffirm the importance of unimpeded right of passage and other maritime rights in accordance with the accepted principles of international law . . . maintenance of peace and security in the region is of vital interest and sovereignty issues must be resolved peacefully by all countries concerned, in accordance with international law. We oppose the use or the threat of use of force. We hope that all parties to disputes in the South China Sea region will abide by the 2002 Declaration on Conduct in the South China Sea and work together to ensure peaceful resolution of disputes, in accordance with international law, including the UNCLOS. We urge all parties concerned to take forward these discussions towards adoption of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea on the basis of consensus.²⁰

More recently, the Indian prime minister at the time, Manmohan Singh, enunciated India's approach towards the South China Sea during his speech at the 8th East Asia Summit in Brunei Darussalam on October 10, 2013:

A stable maritime environment is essential to realise 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.²¹

These official statements, quoted above, reiterate India's emphasis on 'peaceful settlement of dispute' in order to achieve 'collective regional aspirations'. Furthermore, these assertions also reflect the Indian leaders' thinking behind India's increasing involvement in the SCS. Delhi has expressed its determination to work for cooperative and rule-based security architecture in the region for maintaining peace and stability. Notably, speaking at the Central Party School in Beijing on October 24, 2013, Dr. Singh said, 'It will be in our mutual interest to work for *a cooperative, inclusive and rule-based security architecture* that enhances our collective security and regional and global stability'.²²

In his book *Samudra Manthan*, C. Raja Mohan highlighted five key reasons for India's renewed interests in the SCS.²³ First, with India's increasing trade with East Asia, India has begun to recognise the importance of its sea lines of communication beyond its geographical proximity, including the Western Pacific region. Second, India wants to be less dependent on major powers for its maritime needs in the Western Pacific region. Third, India is apprehensive of Chinese 'new assertiveness'²⁴ that Beijing could convert the SCS into a 'Chinese lake' by the forceful affirmation of its territorial claims. Fourth, for domain awareness in all areas of maritime interests, India desires to maintain a presence to track potential developments that could affect its national interest. And fifth, the Indian navy underlines the importance of a forward maritime presence and naval partnership critical to deter potential adversaries.

India's maritime strategic interests in the region are well established, including the fact that almost 55 per cent of India's trade with the Asia Pacific region passes through the South China Sea. India's then foreign secretary Ranjan Mathai in a speech at the National Defence College said, 'The entire Indian Ocean region stretching from the East African coast to the South China Sea remains crucial to our foreign trade, energy and national security interests'. He added:

The Asia Pacific region is witnessing evolution of a regional, economic and security architecture. We are participating in the process of East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ADMM Plus and other forums. An open, balanced and inclusive regional architecture is in the long-term interest of the region as a whole. Our strategic partnerships with Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK) and other Asia Pacific countries also serve our long-term economic, developmental and security interests.²⁵

With this renewed interest in the SCS, some main features of India's approach can be enumerated.

- First, freedom of navigation: India has a strong interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. India clearly underlines ‘unimpeded right of passage’. It is essential for peace and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region.
- Second, peaceful resolution of disputes: India favours peaceful resolution of disputes, and opposes the use or the threat of use of force to resolve competing claims. India emphasises that maintaining peace and stability in the region is indispensable.
- Finally, respect of international laws: India insists on peaceful resolution of disputes, in accordance with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The SCS dispute has lasted for decades, but developments in the last few years have increased apprehensions, jeopardising peace and stability in the region. In 2009, several major developments stirred up controversy in the SCS, including the national legislation by the Philippines on the baseline bill, and the submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) by some claimant states.²⁶ The spat between China and the US on the so-called ‘core interest’ statement by China, and the following counter-statement on ‘national interest’ by the US secretary of state Hillary Clinton, escalated the situation further.²⁷ All of a sudden, the SCS disputes have once again become a flashpoint in this region, drawing attention and raising concerns in the international community, including India. Two incidents in particular in the troubled waters—one on July 22, 2011, when India’s warship *INS Airavat* was cautioned by China when it was about 45 nautical miles off the Vietnam coast after paying a friendship visit, and the second in September 2011, when oil exploration in Vietnam’s territorial waters by India’s public sector company, Oil and Natural Gas Commission Videsh (OVL), was taken objection to by China²⁸—provide impetus for Delhi’s desire to deepen its engagement with the SCS littoral states.

India’s South China Sea strategy

Recognising the strategic significance of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean for the defence of the Indian peninsula, India is attempting to strengthen its ties with ASEAN countries. As noted earlier, several of India’s island territories are in geographical proximity to the Strait of Malacca. According to K. M. Panikkar:

The Gulf of Malacca is like the mouth of a crocodile, the Peninsula of Malaya being the upper and the jutting end of Sumatra being the lower jaw. The entry to the Gulf can be controlled by the Nicobars and the narrow end is dominated by the island of Singapore.²⁹

ASEAN countries are indispensable partners for India, indeed.

While the principal and ostensible motivation for bringing India and ASEAN together has been economic, their mutual security concerns are cementing the ties further. India believes that its strategic interests demand a close partnership with ASEAN, both in facing its external threats and in meeting its aspirations to be a global power.³⁰ As part of India’s ‘Look East Policy’ (LEP),³¹ the engagement with Southeast Asian states has been intensified. The Asia Pacific region is witnessing the evolution of its regional, economic and security architecture.

The LEP is also an important tool in India's foreign policy discourse to address challenges from the rise of China. Kanwal Sibal, former foreign secretary of India, writes:

India's Look East Policy, as it developed, had a *strategic Chinese dimension to it. India has been mindful of the China factor in wanting to expand its footprint in this part of Asia*, the ASEAN countries too have wanted to bring India into the region more effectively to create a better balance with China's presence there.³²

There is a congruence of strategic and economic interests between India and the ASEAN countries.

India's Ministry of External Affairs annual report notes:

India's relations with the countries in South East Asia and Pacific regions have witnessed a significant transformation in recent years. The expansion and deepening of our Look East Policy, the steady trend of economic growth and stability in the region and the continuing geopolitical shift towards Asia have imparted new momentum to our engagement with individual countries, bilaterally as well as regionally.

It adds, 'India's relations with the countries are multifaceted and forward-looking; and they have acquired a strategic dimension with five of the countries (Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam) and with ASEAN'.³³

India has had active maritime links with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. The LEP was a move to revitalise a hoary link after a hiatus of a millennium. India revived a dormant and somewhat apathetic relationship, through the LEP, reinventing a historic reality for the new millennium.³⁴ Raja Mohan aptly remarks:

Amid the new strategic uncertainties, there is growing interest in the region in a larger Indian contribution to peace and stability in Southeast Asia. Perceptions of India's rise and its expanding military capabilities have raised hopes within the region for a stronger Indian security profile in Southeast Asia.³⁵

Indeed, since the explicit articulation of the strategic dimension of the LEP in 2003 by External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, India has firmed up its 'strategic partnership' with a number of countries in the Asia Pacific region. In his speech at Harvard University, Mr. Sinha said:

The first phase of India's Look East Policy was ASEAN-centred and focused primarily on trade and investment linkages. The new phase of this policy is characterised by an expanded definition of 'east', extending from Australia to East Asia, with ASEAN at its core. The new phase also marks a *shift from trade to wider economic and security issues including joint efforts to protect sea lanes and coordinated counter-terrorism activities*.³⁶

To 'protect sea lanes' has emerged as a fundamental feature of India's Look East Policy. Mr. Panikkar writes, 'A navy is not meant for the defence of the coast. The coast has to be defended from the land. The object of a navy is to secure control of an area of the sea, thus preventing enemy ships from approaching the coast or interfering with trade and commerce'.³⁷ He adds further that the Indian navy's core responsibility is to protect the seas, which are vital to India's defence.³⁸

The nature of India's partnership in the east varies in content from country to country. An important feature of this partnership is a regular high-level political visit

between India and the East Asian countries to discuss broader issues of regional and global security, and to firm up critical bilateral cooperation in the areas of defence, security and economic engagements. India has not only institutionalised regular consultations on foreign and defence affairs at ministerial and senior official levels, but it has also established strategic partnerships of varying depths and intensities with a number of countries in the region. Most recently, India has 'set up an ASEAN–India Centre in New Delhi' to improve its efforts towards cooperation with ASEAN countries.³⁹ To take this relationship to the next level, India has announced the setting up of a new mission for ASEAN and the posting of a separate ambassador for the region.⁴⁰

More importantly, the role of defence forces, particularly the Indian navy, is increasingly becoming central to India's overall strategy. The Indian navy and other defence forces hold regular training, exercises and visits with almost all the countries of the East Asian region, including China. In some of these countries, India has set up defence academies to impart training on a permanent basis. India has also started supplying defence equipment and defence technologies to the countries of the region.⁴¹

India's booming trade with Southeast Asian countries has given the Indian navy more reasons to develop an expeditionary outlook. The new outward orientation of the Indian navy steadily gathered momentum in the 1990s with wide-ranging bilateral and multilateral contacts. As noted earlier, India began to expand its joint naval exercises with all the nations of Southeast Asia, stepped up its port calls in the region and received ships from the region at its own ports. The Indian navy has been involved in several high-profile maritime operations in the region, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, joint naval exercises, port calls and transit. In particular, the Indian navy's prominent roles in relief operations following the Asian tsunami of 2004 and the cyclone that struck Myanmar in 2008 were remarkable.

To reinforce its ties in the maritime domain in a more meaningful way, India has consistently engaged in joint naval exercises of various magnitudes. Joint naval exercises have become a catalyst for maritime confidence building, and include multilateral operations such as the biennial *Milan* (which includes Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore) since 1995, search and rescue operations (SAREX) (with Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia) since 1997 and bilateral exercises such as the Singapore–India Maritime Bilateral Exercises (SIMBEX) since 1993.⁴²

Furthermore, despite the absence of forward bases, the Indian navy has been able to make port calls in Singapore, Vietnam and other countries. This has been complemented by the expansion of the Andaman and Nicobar command with the establishment of the 'Naval Air Station' in Campbell Bay (INS Baaz) on July 31, 2012, which is perceived as India's 'window into East and Southeast Asia'. Admiral Nirmal Verma, then chief of the naval staff, after commissioning INS Baaz, said that 'the archipelago, separated as it is by more than 650 nm from our mainland, offers a vital geo-strategic advantage to India. Not only do they provide the Nation with a commanding presence in the Bay of Bengal, the Islands also serve as our window into East and South East Asia'.⁴³ He added, 'They also sit astride some of the busiest shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean, most carrying strategic cargo for East Asian economies'. INS Baaz is currently equipped to operate light to heavy aircraft capable of short field operations from the runway of about 3,500 feet. The runway will be progressively lengthened to enable unrestricted operation of all categories of aircraft

including heavy aircraft. The base will also be bolstered with modern airfield instruments and navigation aids. The stepped up military presence in the archipelago will provide a strong security cover to India's 600,000 sq km of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) spread out in this region, which is around 30 per cent of the country's total EEZ of 2.01 million sq km.⁴⁴

Delivering the Y. B. Chavan Memorial Lecture at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), former Indian chief of naval staff, Admiral (Retd.) Arun Prakash, remarked:

The navy's foreign cooperation initiatives have ensured creation of a favourable maritime environment in the region. Apart from activities such as exercises, joint-patrolling, port calls and flag-showing deployments, the navy's outreach also includes provision of maritime security on request by neighbours. Agreements exist with almost all IOR countries that permit IN ships, submarines and aircraft to avail refuelling and turn-around facilities at very short notice.⁴⁵

The Indian navy is gradually enhancing its capability. While aircraft-carrier *INS Vikramaditya* is the latest and much-awaited addition to the Indian navy, there are several other noteworthy developments. The nuclear reactor of India's first ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) went critical⁴⁶ on August 9, 2013 in Visakhapatnam, followed, three days later, by the launch of the indigenous aircraft-carrier in Kochi. India's navy inducted a Russian nuclear-powered attack submarine on a 10-year lease in 2012. To amplify its nautical capacity and reach, the Indian navy expects delivery of seven stealth frigates, six diesel submarines and 30 other warships, as well as over 150 fighters, maritime patrol aircraft and helicopters over the next decade.⁴⁷ India still has to travel a long distance to become a credible and responsible maritime power in the emerging Asia Pacific security architecture. S. D. Muni aptly remarks that 'India is still new in the field of maritime and military diplomacy . . . India's naval reach and capability to share a greater security burden with the East Asian neighbours would get a boost when its proposed "amphibious warfare base" is fully established in Andaman and Nicobar Islands by 2020'.⁴⁸

India's maritime strategy, titled 'Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy', clearly articulates the Indian navy's role in achieving its foreign policy objectives. It asserts that the major task of the Indian navy during the 21st century will be to use warships to support national foreign policy. During the long years of peace, the Indian navy needs to project power and show presence, catalyse partnerships through its maritime capability, build trust and create interoperability through joint/combined operations and international maritime assistance. The strategy also highlights the Indian navy's role in helping to maintain peace and tranquillity in the Indian Ocean region and in meeting the expectations of India's friends when needed.⁴⁹ The Indian chief of naval staff asserts in his foreword, 'Our [Indian Navy's] primary maritime military interest is *to ensure national security, provide insulation from external interference*, so that the vital tasks of fostering economic growth and undertaking developmental activities, can take place in a secure environment'.⁵⁰

As noted earlier, India's strategic interests in the SCS also emanate from the importance of the sea as a vital transit route, given the Indian navy's growing presence in the Western Pacific, as evidenced by its joint naval exercises with Japan and South Korea and the import of oil and gas from Sakhalin in the Russian Far East. During the last few years, India has signed security cooperation agreements with several

countries in the region, including Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines, which have amplified new vistas of cooperation. India has been a source of military training for the ASEAN states. All the ASEAN countries are partners under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, which also offers a defence training programme. India's military assistance to some ASEAN states involves defence supplies and maintenance support. Proposals for joint defence production with Singapore and Indonesia are being actively pursued by India.⁵¹ Thus, India is augmenting its capability and reach to defend its larger national interest.

More importantly, India's growing military ties with this region have been matched by the provision of a supportive location, for example by Singapore, for Indian forces passing through from the Indian Ocean into the SCS. India and Singapore have robust defence cooperation. Their commitment to maintain freedom of navigation through the regional sea lanes has given a further fillip to defence cooperation. It augurs well not only for fruitful interaction between the two countries but also for a more stable and peaceful region.

Similarly, Vietnam is of great strategic importance because its position enables it to control 'the South China Sea—a true Mediterranean of the Pacific'.⁵² India's relations with Vietnam, part of which are based on a set of historical commonalities, predate any conflict between India and China as well as between China and Vietnam. The strategic dimensions of Indo-Vietnamese relations, initiated during the 1980s, started unfolding in the form of structured and institutional arrangements during the 1990s.⁵³ Bilateral ties between India and Vietnam have strengthened in recent years with a focus on strategic cooperation and trade. Ever since the formal declaration of a strategic partnership in 2007, India has steadily expanded defence cooperation with Vietnam and signed a \$100 million line of credit agreement with Vietnam to facilitate defence procurement and to sell strategic weapons.⁵⁴

Furthermore, India has agreed to expand military training and assist the Vietnam navy's strike capabilities. India is already providing 'comprehensive underwater combat operation' training to Vietnamese sailors at *INS Satavahana* in Visakhapatnam. It could also help 'train Vietnamese pilots to operate Su-30MK2 fighter jets'. Vietnam is also 'exploring the possibility of acquiring Indian-manufactured surveillance equipment such as unmanned aerial vehicles'.⁵⁵ India can be of considerable help in modernising the Vietnamese navy. More importantly, 'Vietnam highly values India's capability'.⁵⁶ Hanoi has welcomed India's naval forays into the South China Sea since 2000 and offered regular access to its port facilities.⁵⁷ Privileged access to Vietnamese port facilities could boost the Indian navy's strategic access in the SCS. In fact, India's intensive naval engagement with Vietnam could be very helpful in advancing India's interest in the region.

Speaking on the eve of Navy Day in 2012, the then Indian naval Chief Admiral D. K. Joshi remarked:

Not that we expect to be in South China Sea waters very frequently, but when the requirement is there, for example in situations where our country's interests are involved, for example ONGC Videsh etc, we will be required to go there and we are prepared for that. Are we preparing for it? Are we holding exercises of that nature? The short answer is yes.⁵⁸

Admiral Joshi's statement underlines New Delhi's approach towards China's rising assertiveness in the SCS and demonstrates a more robust Indian maritime diplomacy.

After decades of low-profile diplomacy in the Pacific, an increasingly confident India is gradually stepping up its engagement with the wider region and flexing its naval muscle in the process.

It is important to note that three high-level visits took place within three months (August–October 2014).⁵⁹ These visits resulted in the inking of several agreements and stepped up cooperation. During these meetings, ‘India reaffirmed that it regards Vietnam as an important pillar in its Look East Policy’.⁶⁰ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi remarked in a press statement during Vietnamese Prime Minister Dung’s visit to India in October 2014:

Our defence cooperation with Vietnam is among our most important ones. India remains committed to the modernisation of Vietnam’s defence and security forces. This will include expansion of our training programme, which is already very substantial, joint exercises and cooperation in defence equipment. We will quickly operationalise the 100 million dollars Line of Credit that will enable Vietnam to acquire new naval vessels from India. We have also agreed to enhance our security cooperation, including counter-terrorism.⁶¹

Similarly, Vietnam also reiterated support for India’s regional and global engagements. The prime ministers of India and Vietnam agreed that ‘a strong India–Vietnam partnership would lead to peace, prosperity and stability for people of both countries and in the wider region’.⁶² Some new elements in the expanding defence cooperation between Delhi and Hanoi are: cooperation in the UN peacekeeping mission; cooperation in shipbuilding; weapons system modernisation; and research and application of hi-tech defence systems. However, agreements between these two countries related to energy have caused some controversy in the light of China’s territorial claims in the SCS and Vietnam’s position on this matter.

China’s assertive behaviour in the SCS seems to be working as a catalyst in the India–Vietnam relationship, as is clearly evident in the latest India–Vietnam Joint Statement, which has a new element stating that freedom of ‘overflight’⁶³ in the East Sea/SCS should not be impeded. Notably, China’s recent move to station one of its oil rigs in the disputed territory and the creation of an air defence identification zone fuelled insecurity and escalated political tensions in the Asia Pacific region. Nevertheless, cooperation between Delhi and Hanoi is guided by the long-term considerations of India’s economic and strategic interests, without direct implications for territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Indeed, New Delhi has been mindful of Beijing’s sensitivities.

India has also strengthened its relations with the Philippines. Friendly visits by the Indian navy, within its annual deployments into and through the SCS, have become a regular ongoing feature since 2000. Strengthened bilateral cooperation between Delhi and Manila also ‘involve[s] a certain degree of Indian naval presence in the Southeast Asian archipelagic country’.⁶⁴ During the second meeting of the Philippines–India Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation in Manila on October 21, 2013, both countries agreed to upgrade the Delhi–Manila bilateral relationship to a comprehensive partnership, and to expand defence cooperation between the two sides. Perhaps most notably, the joint statement calls the SCS the West Philippines Sea,⁶⁵ the name Manila uses to refer to the disputed waters. This broke with India’s usual policy of referring to the waters as the South China Sea to avoid upsetting Beijing. Furthermore, India’s then external affairs minister, in response to a question from reporters following a speech he gave, underlined

India's support for using UNCLOS as the basis for resolving any disputes in the SCS. In fact, he also offered support for the Philippines' decision to seek international arbitration to settle its dispute with China.⁶⁶ The endorsement of the positions taken by the Southeast Asian parties to the disputes, which Beijing strongly opposes, shows Delhi's aspiration to reinforce its cooperation with ASEAN countries.

Likewise, India–Indonesia security links and naval cooperation are growing steadily.⁶⁷ India and Indonesia are strategic partners and maritime neighbours with a common interest in the maintenance of regional peace and security. The commencement of the Defence Ministers' Dialogue and regular convening of the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC) meetings and staff talks established between the armies and the navies of the two countries have resulted in enhancement of defence cooperation. Recently, the two sides have agreed to enhance exchanges between their respective air forces, including the establishment of staff talks, to continue the sharing of information and intelligence, as well as to increase the frequency of exchanges, training and joint exercises, including special forces. India and Indonesia have also decided to explore bilateral collaboration in sale and co-production of defence equipment, in mutually agreed defence-related research activities and in training and capacity building.

India's policy initiatives and announcements denote its pursuit of a stable, rule-based Asian security architecture. India has established or co-established its own multilateral institutions in the region, including the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Scientific, Technological and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association⁶⁸ (IORA).⁶⁹ In addition to the SCS littoral states, India is strengthening cooperation with major powers to promote its national interests.

Recognising the important role that India and the United States play in promoting peace, prosperity, stability and security in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean region, leaders of both countries have underlined that India's 'Act East Policy' and the United States' rebalance to Asia provide opportunities for India, the United States and other Asia-Pacific countries to work closely to strengthen regional cooperation. The 'US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region' affirms the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea. It notes: 'We call on all parties to avoid the threat or use of force and pursue resolution of territorial and maritime disputes through all peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea'.⁷⁰

The US plans to 'invest in weapons including a new long-range stealth bomber as well as other assets to secure the Asia Pacific region. The US also will deploy advanced aircraft and ships to the region'.⁷¹ India and the US are also working in a trilateral framework with Japan to promote an open, balanced and inclusive security architecture in the region. The Indian Prime Minister and the US President underlined the importance of the cooperation between the three countries through identification of projects of common interest and their early implementation, and they decided to explore holding the dialogue among their foreign ministers.⁷² India and the US also underlined their commitment to promote regional dialogue on key political and security issues and to invest in robust trilateral cooperation with other friendly countries in the region.

The changing strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific has brought India and Japan closer together. The re-election of Shinzo Abe as Japanese Prime Minister in December 2012 has given new momentum to the relationship.⁷³ There is a significant scaling-up of defence cooperation between India and Japan.⁷⁴ Delhi and Tokyo see each other as natural partners—Japan's technological prowess and wealth complement India's size, and a New Delhi–Tokyo duet would stretch China's power across two widely separated fronts. The new security relationship between India and Japan is bringing their armed forces closer to each other. There has been a steady stream of high-level visits to and from Tokyo and Delhi in the last few years. Apart from Russia, Japan is the only country with which India holds annual summits, and since 2006 the two countries claim to be united by a 'strategic and global partnership'.⁷⁵ Japan and India have a pivotal role to play in ensuring regional power equilibrium and safeguarding vital sea lanes in the wider Indo-Pacific region—an essential hub for global trade and energy supply. The transformative India–Japan entente promises to positively shape Asia's power dynamics.⁷⁶

Injecting much-needed thrust to its rapidly growing strategic partnership with Japan, India has invited Japan to take part in the India–US Malabar naval exercise. Delhi has also decided to hold another joint working group meeting in March to discuss the sale of Japanese US-2i ShinMayva amphibious aircraft to the Indian navy, as well as regular joint combat exercises and military exchanges and cooperation in anti-piracy, maritime security and counter-terrorism. Leaders of both countries are satisfied that the trilateral dialogue between India, Japan and the US has been held on a regular basis. There was a successful conduct of the second bilateral exercise between the Indian navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force in December 2013 off the coast of Chennai. Furthermore, defence ministers of both countries appreciated 'on-going maritime cooperation' as exemplified by bilateral Japan–India maritime exercises and participation of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force in the India–US joint naval exercise 'Malabar 14' in July 2014, which was held off the coast of Japan. The 4th vice-minister/defence secretary-level Defence Policy Dialogue and the 3rd Two-Plus-Two Dialogue were held in Delhi in April 2015. More importantly, leaders of both countries underlined that 'in the inter-connected Indo-Pacific region, the India–Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership has a key role in maintaining peace and stability in the region'.⁷⁷ Thus, India and Japan have reaffirmed their determination to further 'strengthen and elevate' bilateral defence cooperation.

India, Japan and Vietnam are exploring a trilateral framework of cooperation. In fact, Delhi, Tokyo and Hanoi have agreed to work in a trilateral format to coordinate positions on security and economic policies.⁷⁸ One senior Vietnamese scholar confirmed that 'India, Vietnam and Japan have already signed a trilateral cooperation agreement in December 2014'.⁷⁹ This trilateral agreement is mainly focused on defence technology, cooperation and intelligence sharing. It could enhance their cooperation and information sharing on electronic intelligence, communication with and tracking of satellites, and interception and transmission of a variety of military communication. This could also be helpful in the technological modernisation of Vietnam's defence forces. India and Japan could also work together with Vietnam to strengthen the submarine operational capabilities of the Vietnamese navy.

In addition to its expanding interactions with Japan, India has begun to focus on South Korea. India and South Korea announced elevation of their bilateral

relationship to a 'strategic partnership' in January 2010. Both countries agreed to intensify bilateral defence engagement and promote greater cooperation on maritime security.⁸⁰ As strategic partners, the two countries are working together in regional and international forums to address the strategic challenges facing the region, which include maritime security, freedom of navigation, maintaining a stable balance of power and putting in place an open and inclusive regional security architecture. South Korea and India along with Japan have launched a trilateral dialogue among the think tanks of the three countries to shape common policy responses to issues of regional and global importance. At the moment, the dialogue is at Track II level but there is every possibility that it could be elevated to government level in due course.⁸¹

In seeking to promote and protect its interests in the SCS, India is pursuing dynamic maritime diplomacy. India's future in the SCS and Asia Pacific region is 'about generating strategic options that did not previously exist for the littoral states of the western Pacific'.⁸² Delhi's pragmatic approach in regard to the SCS makes it a potentially valuable security partner for several countries to its east.

Conclusion

India has a vital maritime interest in the South China Sea. The SCS represents a maritime crossroads between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and is a critical corridor for commercial and naval shipping. In pursuance of its LEP, India's engagement with the region is strengthening steadily.

Around 55 per cent of India's trade in the Asia Pacific transits through the SCS region. For India, the region serves as a strategic link between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, whose security is vital for the smooth flow of its seaborne trade. Furthermore, India's active engagement with the SCS littoral countries is to commercially participate in exploration of the vital energy resources. The SCS is a maritime gateway for India's rising profile in the region.

Access to resources such as oil, natural gas, food and minerals is now high on the agenda of global issues to be faced in the years ahead. An increasing involvement in the SCS region illustrates the relationship between India's strategy and its need for resources and for the routes and logistical systems necessary for their transportation. There are some apprehensions in Delhi about Beijing's ambitions in the SCS. Chinese assertiveness and its tendency to unilaterally seek to change the status quo have the potential to impinge upon India's commercial and strategic interests in the SCS.

As discussed earlier, the SCS could be the 'worst case' threat to peace and security in the ASEAN region. Although military conflict over freedom of navigation and access to maritime resources is neither necessary nor inevitable, it is natural for India to address the 'China threat perception' and to promote its national interest. Indeed, India has a legitimate interest in the freedom of navigation, access to maritime resources and respect for international law in the SCS.

With considerable expansion of its engagement with the SCS littoral states, India appears to be emerging, genuinely so, as an indispensable element in the strategic discourse of this region. India could be a valuable security partner for several nations in the Asia-Pacific region, provided it sustains a high economic growth rate and nurtures the framework of partnership that it has enunciated in the region. A strong economy is essential for India to enhance its maritime

capabilities, so that it can become a responsible stakeholder in peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Disclosure statement

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