



India in the South China Sea: Role and Implications

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Abstract

The South China Sea, which is regarded as the most complicated water in the Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century draws the attention of the world. With six countries fighting for jurisdictions, problems in the South China Sea aggravated and many external powers focus on international maritime laws in general and reconsider maritime security vis-a-vis the South China Sea in particular. India is of no exception. In support of ensuring maritime security, India has increasingly broadened its reach and influence in the maritime realm. The strategic perspectives and response of India in the disputed South China Sea naturally have strategic consequences. Quite notably, India's maritime policies and strategies in the South China Sea unsurprisingly aroused mixed reactions from amongst the claimants of the South China Sea.

Keywords: *China, Southeast Asia, Freedom of Navigation, Energy Security, ASEAN.*

Introduction

In point of fact, the most complicated political map of Asia in the present context shall be a feature of an archipelago at the center of Southeast Asia known as the South China Sea. The South China Sea emerges as the abode of contention among the littoral countries such as China, Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan. What makes this region a spotlight to the international community is the clashing jurisdictional claims which insinuate the breeding ground of inter-state political conflict among the Southeast Asian countries along with China. This situation catches global attention in the wink of an eye paying regard to security enigma in a complicated and increasingly economically globalized world. At this juncture, India being a maritime nation has seriously been aware of the security dilemma in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea is located at the crossroad of Southeast Asia. Besides its strategic location serving as a crucial international waterway, the South China Sea is

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estimated to possess a rich reserve of hydrocarbons. As such, the South China Sea stimulated dissent among the littoral states and became the flashpoint of the region. In recent years with China claiming the majority of the water, other rival claimants in the South China Sea hailed China as a jeopardy of peace and security in the South China Sea. In this situation, India is a maritime nation and an energy deficit country though not a claimant state has seriously been aware of the development of the conflict in the South China Sea.

India's Interests in the South China Sea

India has a rich maritime heritage. The records of Indian history provide the extravagance of India's maritime tradition. In a matter of fact, a country moving forward in leaps and bounds in the 21st century cannot disregard the significance of developing sharp-witted maritime policy (Brewster, 2010). As Rajiv Sikri, the former Secretary in India's Foreign Ministry, commented: "If India aspires to be a great power, then the only direction in which India's strategic influence can spread is across the seas" (Brewster, 2010).

The continental transformation ushered in right after the end of the cold war prominently had many discernible arrangements in the global strategies of different countries. With this, numerous new-fangled security problems facing countries, non-governmental and international organizations cropped up immensely. In tandem with this, the post-cold war era heralded dawn for India in such a way that India reaches a whole new different perspective from an idealistic driven foreign policy to a further pragmatic form. As an offshoot, India reallocates her foreign policy choices to enhance her international status by broadening bilateral and multilateral relations and emphasizing constructive engagements with her counterparts. Since then, India developed a taste of enlarging her sphere of international relations by focusing more on the eastern side of her neighbors. Reformed India in the post-1990 hammer out the country to be the tenth largest economy in the world and third largest in Asia. As such, any major development or crippling emanate in any form, in any part of the Asian region cannot be overlooked for a country having an aspiration to be a major player in the Asian continent like India.

The conflicts in the South China Sea are no exception to India's attention. Corresponding to the rising tension in the South China Sea, China ostensibly pursues an assertive policy, henceforth India remained precautious that the South China Sea got transformed into a Chinese lake. India thus fosters intense inquisitiveness in the South China Sea disputes. India is not a South China Sea littoral state and abstain from territorial or maritime claims within it. But India has meticulously been aware of the developments in the contested South China Sea. Furthermore, recent years developments witness India's increasing sphere of activities in the South China Sea. The reasons are many which can be broadly categorized as under:

India's Geostrategic Location

The natural environment of India places her to be physically a maritime nation, with a stretched coastline of over 7,500 kilometers. Scores of India trade and commerce depend on the medium of waterway transport. The Indian Ocean ocean is a link to

various chokepoints. The Indian Maritime Military Strategy identifies the South China Sea as a 'secondary area' of operational interest for the Indian Navy. Since the opening up of India's economy and the thriving trade relations between India and her eastern neighbors, the South China Sea sits at the center of this hub, linking the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. As such, any development changing upon the South China Sea is of top-notch consequential to India's security perspective.

Freedom of Navigation

Subject to the United Nations Conventions on the Laws of Sea (UNCLOS), states must be given the right of transit passage to ensure freedom of navigation and the openness of sea lanes, given the fact that the South China Sea is the traffic artery connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, nearly all airlines or shipping routes through the South China Sea must go through the Spratly Islands, with numerous islands and reefs spreading throughout international sea lanes (Yang, 2012). India being the 76th signatory of UNCLOS 1982 (ratified on 29th June 1995) has vehemently been aware of the security of the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) in the vital shipping lanes in the South China Sea. All the South China Sea littorals are also signatories of the UNCLOS. India remains predominantly a maritime trading nation and its economy are heavily dependent on the seas for the conduct of trade. More than 90% of India's trade by volume and 70% by value are transported over the seas (Indian Maritime Doctrine, 2009, 2016). There are estimates that nearly 25 percent (and growing) of this sea-bound trade passes through the South China Sea (Majumdar, 2013). According to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, the total bilateral merchandise trade of India and ASEAN in 2019 amounted to US\$ 96.79 billion, which is expected to increase in the coming years. The South China Sea is a strategic waterway of the East-West trade. On this account, any major confrontation in the South China Sea stake a claim by any one country and formulating maritime jurisdiction would seriously disrupt the security of the SLOC. This in turn would certainly hamper India's geopolitical, and economic interests. Therefore, taking into consideration all these instances, maintaining freedom of navigation pitches up India's top priority in the South China Sea.

Energy Security

As specified by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, the South China Sea holds an estimated 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil in proved and probable reserves, with much more potentially undiscovered. Numerous attempting explorations were made by the claimant states and oft-times with external countries. India depends on oil for over 33% of her energy needs, and imports almost 70% of that. Growth in energy demand in India is likely to be among the highest in the world among large countries (Energy Security Outlook: Defining a secure and sustainable energy future for India, 2015). India's concern over energy security is overwhelming and its demand is one of the highest in the world. Here again, the South China Sea has been a focal spot for an energy deficit country like India.

As a Checkmate to China

India and China, the two Asian giants hold a crucial position in shaping the dynamics of the geopolitical, security, and economic scenario of the Indo-Pacific region. Remarkably, the two countries are in constant competition, where the policies and actions of one pose a reason for uneasiness and at times a regarded reaction by the other can be a witness. Being an economic rising country, prolonged unsettled border conflicts, clashing foreign and defense policies, etc. all shaped Indo-China relations today endowed with competition, mutual distrust, and antipathy. In recent days border clashes in Doklam and Galwan have further intensified tensions between the two countries. Today, conflicting maritime policies added another point of divergence in Indo-China relations. All these factors prompted India to have a strategic interest in the South China Sea disputes, where China, the most powerful claimant of the sea claims the majority to the South China Sea.

For ages, India's maritime approach remains the Indian Ocean centered. Meanwhile, China's rise equipped with invigorating historical maritime trade routes, pushing forward an amplified orchestrated maritime modus operandi intensely developed long term implications on India's foreign policy. In the Indo-China political game of tit for tat strategy, the South China Sea offers an avenue from the strategic reprisal for India.

India's Policies and Activities in the South China Sea

As a nation with a highly dependent on overseas trade, India has to ensure that all its connectivity such as air, sea, and land routes are safe and secure. As an offshoot, the policies and activities adopted by India have been exerted in the following ways:

Indian Naval Strategy

With the rise of India as a premier maritime power, the Indian Navy is truly a useful instrument and a pragmatic workforce in the interplay of India's foreign policy today. India has signed defense ties with Brunei, Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. True remains the case to India's maritime policy towards the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea in particular by engaging in several bilateral and multilateral projects. As an accomplishment to Act East Policy, the Indian Naval Ship paid friendly visits to countries of Southeast Asia, participated in several joint naval exercises, and held naval interactions mostly with countries of Vietnam, Philippines, and Brunei in the South China Sea over the years. This has helped develop a congenial atmosphere for India in the maritime realm and maintained cordial relationships with these countries.

Increasing India's defense ties with littoral states of the South China Sea and frequent Indian Navy patrols clearly shows its naval prowess, the freedom to use the South China Sea which can be regarded as a quid-pro-quo or hostile security environment to Chinese strategy in the Indian Ocean. To further aggravate China, Indian Navy has deployed its warship in the South China Sea in August 2020. Hence, India's maritime engagement with Southeast Asian states and its activities in the South China Sea compound the problems of Indo-China relations.

Energy Security

When anyone talks about India's focus and activities in the South China Sea, India's joint exploration of oil and gas with Vietnam in the South China Sea is definitely one of the important activities to deal with. India's exploration in Vietnam started as early as 1988 in association with the then Soviet Union (Majumdar, 2013). India-Vietnam collaboration in the energy sector embedded in the olden days. The Economic Times on 23rd August 2016 issue states that ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), the overseas arm of ONGC continues to own 45 percent stake in Vietnam's offshore Block 6.1 and its share of production was 2.023 billion cubic meters of gas and 0.036 million tons of condensate, the company in October 2014 signed an agreement to pick up to 50 percent stake in the two exploration blocks in the South China Sea (Economic Times, 2016). OVL took a 40 percent stake in Block 102/10 and 50 per cent in 106/10 that lie outside the sea territory claimed by China. In return, Petro Vietnam took half of OVL's 100 per cent stake in Block 128. The Vietnam-India joint exploration has been at the center of much controversy due to the location of the blocks in the disputed China-Vietnam claims in the South China Sea.

Defense Relations with ASEAN Members, Littoral States of the South China Sea

The rising economy of India has been endowed with growing defense and military buildup. According to the Global Fire Power in its 2020 Military Strength Ranking graded India's as 4th by military strength in the world. Expedient India's Foreign Policy device known as the Look East or Act East reinforces India to take collusive measures with East and Southeast Asian states. Moreover, the changing security political environment in East and Southeast Asia provides immense opportunities for India to present itself as a security shield for small nations in the region. It is thus important to formalize its relations with the South China Sea littoral states who are also members of ASEAN.

Malaysia

India's defense cooperation with Malaysia has largely been sustained by the Malaysia-India Defense Committee (MIDCOM) over the years. The operational interaction between the two navies has been in terms of high-level meetings and training interactions, regular visits by warships to each other's ports. India receives Malaysian naval officers for training on a regular basis. Also, the Indian Navy ships have regularly participated in the Lima series of exhibitions/ conferences hosted biennially at Langkawi by the Malaysian defense ministry (Strategic Affairs, 2020).

Vietnam

India-Vietnam defense ties were established way back in 1994. In June 2005, the Indian Navy gave 150 tones of warship components and other accessories worth \$ 10 million to the Vietnamese Navy. India and the Vietnamese Navy are also cooperating on establishing a satellite imagery station in Vietnam

worth \$0.5 million (Indian naval diplomacy in South-East Asia). The contours of India-Vietnamese strategic partnership were boosted, when in June 2011, in course of a meeting between Vietnamese and Indian senior naval officers, Vietnam offered India permanent berthing facilities at the port of Nga Trang. This gesture also assumed significance in the face of the fact that the Indian Navy became the only foreign navy to have been granted such privilege at a port other than Halong Bay near Hanoi, thereby not only facilitating the presence of the India Navy in the South China Sea but also enabling a great strategic role for India in Southeast Asia (India examining Vietnam's South China Sea oil blocks offer, 2014). With a boom in India and Vietnam bilateral defence relations with special stress on visits of naval warships to each other ports and the tensions in the South China Sea grew, China has been watchful and vigilant of India-Vietnam defence engagement. On the other hand, as Pakistan happens to be China's strong defence partner, many political analysts and observers viewed growing India-Vietnam relations as a reaction to China-Pakistan relations. In this context, Vietnam proved to be a great security partner for India as both India and Vietnam have the same territorial rival i.e. China.

Brunei

Recent international scenarios prove that small nations cannot be neglected. Likewise, improving defense relations with Brunei also bears a hand in India's Foreign Policy goals. In July 2011, India responded to the invitation of the Brunei government to send Indian warships to the first-ever international fleet review named Brunei Darussalam International Defence Exhibition and Conference (BRIDEX) (Strategic Affairs, 2020). The defence ties between the two nations include the exchange of officers for training and visits by warships. Brunei on 2nd February 2016 discussed with an Indian delegation led by Vice-President Hamid Ansari on Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea which has the potential to affect free maritime traffic in Southeast Asia with an aim of uninterrupted energy lanes between India and Southeast Asia. Brunei's main port, Muara, will become a major component of India's growing maritime partnership with Brunei (Bhattacharjee, 2016). February 2016 high-level meeting aims to promote the existing defense cooperation in a more systematic way including the exchange of visits at different levels, experience, information, training, trainers, etc., the conduct of joint military exercises, seminars, discussion, and cooperation between the defense industries.

Philippines

Indian and the Philippines navy hold frequent visits occasionally. With Look East policy gaining ground, India could not have ignored the Philippines with which the first defense cooperation agreement was signed in 2006 during the visit of then Indian President APJ Kalam. This has resulted in the goodwill

visit of the Indian naval warships to the Philippines in 2010, 2011, and 2012. At the height of the China-Philippines confrontation over the Scarborough Shoal, Indian warships visited the Philippines naval port in 2012, which off course also paid a visit to Shanghai. An Indian defense delegation had also visited Manila in May 2011 to discuss defense and naval cooperation and the first-ever Joint Defense Cooperation Committee meeting was held in Manila in January 2012 (Strategic Affairs, 2020). On 14 October 2015, the 3rd Meeting of the India-Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation was held in New Delhi. Many newspapers point out that the Joint statement of the Philippines and India purposefully call the South China Sea as the 'West Philippines Sea'. Interestingly, India slowly and steadily geared up defense cooperation with countries of the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei in tune with the 'Act East Policy'.

India-ASEAN Relations

India had long-established waterway connectivity with Southeast Asia. In the realm of maritime interaction, India and ASEAN interact with each other through subsequent meetings, conferences, workshops, official exchanges, and port visits. Stronger maritime connectivity between India and ASEAN is significant for enhancing connectivity among various economic corridors between the two regions. In various summits held between ASEAN and India, leaders constantly flagging up the nuts and bolts of maritime security in the region thereby bringing into play extensive maritime collaboration, boosting maritime engagements and, provides several ways of conceptualizing challenges and concerns which impels predicaments at sea. India is a member of the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, where the Forum is taking the plunge of different approaches to maritime safety and security in the region. ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee (ACCC) has opened a comprehensive dialogue with India in 2013 to enhance air, sea, and land connectivity between ASEAN and India (ASEAN-India Maritime Connectivity Report, 2014).

The Deccan Herald in its November 22, 2015 edition had reported that India had set up a state-of-the-art Data Reception and Tracking and Telemetry Station at Ho Chi Minh City. The satellite monitoring station will primarily help the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) to track satellites launched from India and receive data from them. It will, however, also be an important strategic asset for India in and around the South China Sea, which has been at the center of an escalating conflict between China and its maritime neighbors – Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines and, Taiwan. (Deccan Herald, 2015).

In a direct point to the conflict in the South China Sea, India not only shows its concern for freedom of navigation, and flight over in the South China Sea but time and again India's top government officials often proclaim that India hopes all parties in the disputed South China Sea be abode by the 2002 Declaration of Conduct of Parties and the universal principle of UNCLOS and that the disputes be resolved

peacefully by consensus at the earliest. A subtle shift can also be seen in India's position in the South China Sea by mentioning the necessity of freedom of navigation and overflight in a joint statement with the United States in November 2015.

Impact of India's Maritime Role in the South China Sea

The extension of India's strategic interests exerted preponderantly in its maritime security policy through various means in the Asia-Pacific rim is no small object for big power in the region like China. When recognized by Beijing that India in the era of globalization has targeted building ties with East and South East Asia and that India is strategically interested and making a presence in its conflicted South China Sea, a quick stiff reaction looms from its Chinese competitor. China objected noisily to India's oil exploration with Vietnamese in Vietnam's territorial claimed area of the South China Sea. The Global Times commented strongly describing India's deal with Vietnam as a serious political provocation and calling upon China to use every possible means to stop this (Majumdar, 2013). An influential Chinese Communist Party-run newspaper warned that "every means possible" should be used to stop India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC-Videsh) (Puri & Sahgal, 2011). In 2011, Beijing had warned OVL that its exploration activities off the Vietnam coast were illegal and violated China's sovereignty (Puri & Sahgal, 2011).

However, New Delhi, while recognizing the objections being raised from the Chinese part, still goes ahead with its policy of oil drilling with Vietnam. This is due to the fact that India officially regards the place where Vietnam and India's oil drilling is within the exclusive jurisdiction of Vietnam and strongly affirmed that India was doing it for commercial purposes and did not have any political gains. For enhancing maritime cooperation, the Indian Navy has paid friendly visits, joint naval exercises, etc. with littoral states of the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea for years now. However, China rests its eyes upon with displeasure due to its recognition that these areas fall within the nine-dash line. At this crossroads, India is beset with several negative side effects if it persists its activities in the South China Sea, India's increasing interests and attention generated to be one of the key factors that might risk bilateral ties between the two.

Impact on the Other Littoral States

As problems and complexities in the South China Sea get heightened, most of the South East Asian countries have eagerly been looking toward other regional powers to increase their sphere of attention and influence in the region. Bilateral and multilateral relations of this region with external powers have grown tremendously more than ever before. Meanwhile, countries of SouthEast Asia are the focal point of India's Look East policy. Thus, India's numerous cooperative measures towards this region have largely been welcomed by the South East Asian countries.

Countries of Vietnam and the Philippines, Brunei, Taiwan, Malaysia remained positive towards India's role in the Southeast Asian region and active field of operations in fulfillment of its Act East Policy. From the Vietnamese perspective, India's endeavors in the South China Sea through its oil exploration and naval engagements with Vietnam have been a

great step in improving the relations between the two. Government officials from Vietnam's side highly appreciate India's voice for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. With regard to the Philippines, the Government explicitly remains appreciative of India's support to the decision of the International tribunal of July 2016 in the South China Sea dispute. Both the Philippines and Vietnam clearly affirm their willingness to deepen and widen ties with India. With regard to Malaysia, facts are undeniable that Malaysia showed permissiveness and well-mannered, unlike Vietnam and the Philippines. This could presumably be attributable to Malaysia's heavily dependent on the Chinese economy and its booming ties in the economic sector. However, India wins the support of Malaysia as far as India – Malaysia relations and India- ASEAN relations are concerned. Nonetheless, it becomes clear that Malaysia while maintaining its claims in the South China Sea does not wish to harm its relations with both India and China. Thus, Malaysia stands in the midway by maintaining a balanced relationship between the two.

To this far, it can be assumed that China remains wary of internationalization of the disputes in the South China Sea and did not welcome any form of outside power presence and interference in the South China Sea. However, economically and militarily weaker parties of the disputes being supportive of cooperation with external powers in the Sea are a clear indication that Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Vietnam are attempting to publicize the disputes in the international picture. And India's role in the South China Sea being welcomed by the majority of the claimants can be regarded as an attempt to include a third country in the South Sea dispute.

Conclusion

The overall study thus brings the picture that the South China Sea dispute is not likely to resolve in the near future. The rising economic globalization further increases the dependence on the sea. The current situation proves that disputes in the South China Sea remain under the realm of external powers interference, which is immensely disapproved of by China. With the United States intervention, the South China Sea turns to be a flashpoint of big powers' political game today. Meanwhile, India has increasingly broadened its area of influence, and China terribly condemned any outside interference including India. What's worse is that external powers' interference heightened the tensions of the South China Sea dispute overwhelmingly. Therefore, to ameliorate the security environment, India could play a crucial role. As India holds scrupulous interests in the disputed South China Sea, it is undoubtedly clear that improving defense, maritime, energy and economic cooperation with the littoral states is a sine qua non for India.

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