



INDIA'S MARITIME GATEWAY TO THE PACIFIC: SOUTH CHINA SEA

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea interests and strategies of India are examined in this article (SCS). It begins by highlighting India's maritime interests and discussing how the SCS relates to them. The article then looks at some of the crucial components of India's expanding regional policy initiatives. According to the report, India looks to be legitimately emerging as a crucial element in the strategic discourse of this region as a result of a significant increase of its interaction with the South China Sea littoral states. If India can maintain its high economic development rate and uphold the framework of partnership that it has established in the region, it might be a beneficial security partner for a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

INTRODUCTION

In a "arena of rising contention," the South China Sea (SCS) disputes are one of the most challenging regional conflicts in the Asia Pacific. In fact, some academics say that for the next 20 years, the conflict in the South China Sea would likely continue to pose the greatest danger to regional peace and security in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The roots of the SCS issues include territorial sovereignty, disagreements over energy, the importance of the location, threats to maritime security, and overlapping maritime claims. The SCS is a major topic of discussion in modern international relations and strategic studies since it is one of the most significant seas in the world from a geopolitical, economic, and strategic standpoint. Additionally, it is still perceived as a potential source of friction and is getting more tumultuous. Due to their strategic and economic interests in the SCS, both extra-regional nations like India and regional nations like China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia are concerned about security in the area. Regional and global security will be threatened by any confrontation in the SCS.

India is actively seeking a muscular marine diplomacy, but its growing role in the SCS is increasingly important to India's foreign policy. Additionally, via its consistent engagement and partnerships, India is drawing more attention from the SCS littoral states and providing these states with strategic opportunities. India has become more vocal in expressing its support for both the peaceful settlement of territorial issues between Beijing and its maritime neighbours as well as freedom of navigation in the SCS.

INDIAN MARITIME OBJECTIVES

India is dependent on the Indian Ocean due to its peninsular nature, which has a long, open coastline and a resource-rich, very productive littoral. Due to India's heavy reliance on marine trade, the sea has a tremendous impact on the country's future. Undoubtedly, the Indian Ocean serves as both a major trade route and a zone of international security. Delhi is aware of the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia for defending the Indian peninsula. Only 90 miles separate a few of India's island provinces from the Straits of Malacca.

Indeed, only maritime trade is responsible for India's success. The Indian Ocean is crucial to India since there are few land routes out of the Indian subcontinent and they offer little opportunity for commerce. India's lifelines are concentrated there, and the freedom of that large water body is essential to the country's future. As a result, India's industrial development, commercial prosperity, and stable political structure are all insured by a secure and safe Indian Ocean and the huge Indian seashore.

India is driven to look across the ocean, well beyond its own littoral, for more expansive maritime domain awareness due to its reliance on the security of the Indian Ocean and its need to monitor and, if necessary, check the naval activity of other powers. India's government views the Indian Ocean as a marine region for the Indian navy to command and police because of the country's growing reliance on imported oil and natural gas to power its economic expansion.



INDIA'S MARITIME STRATEGIC INTEREST IN SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea is one of the most vital commercial routes in the world, stretching from Singapore and the Strait of Malacca in the south-west to the Strait of Taiwan in the north-east. Asia's coastline, which stretches from Ca Mau, the southernmost tip of Vietnam, to Taiwan Strait, the south-west coast of Taiwan, the west coast of the Philippines, which extends to Balabac Island, the north coasts of Sabah, Brunei, and Sarawak, the northern façade of Indonesia's Kepulauan Natuna, and peninsular Malaysia, form its borders. The SCS covers a total area of about 804,000 square nautical miles. The sea has important economic, geopolitical, and political importance and is full with resources.

Geoffrey Till, a professor of maritime history, claims that sea power has four essential and interrelated characteristics: the sea as a means of trade and as a resource, in terms of what is found within its waters; the sea as a means of informational and cultural exchange; and the sea as a means of dominion. All of these qualities are present in the SCS.

The SCS is a critical territory for the peace, stability, and growth of the Asia-Pacific region. There are competing claims made by many countries to territorial sovereignty. More significantly, the region is essential to the agendas of many countries, especially India, because of its abundance of natural resources and ideal location.

The SCS is an ecology that is interrelated. It is one of the world's richest oceans in terms of marine life, including coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass beds, fish, and plants. It is crucial for the fishing industry of neighbouring nations since the sea provides 10% of the yearly worldwide fisheries catch. Fish and other seafood provide the coastal inhabitants with protein, which is also how they make a living. In actuality, both pelagic (surface-dwelling) and demersal (bottom-dwelling) species are abundant in the SCS. For the littoral states, the wide variety and ample supply of tuna and shrimp have unique significance. In order to distinguish themselves from the other biological resources taken from the oceans, these two species have given rise to entire enterprises. Additionally, tuna and shrimp are simple to process for value-added production (canning, filleting, fresh, frozen, and chilled processing), which opens up international markets. For the nations in the region, this has turned into significant foreign exchange profits and job prospects. But China has started enforcing fishing regulations in the disputed regions, raising severe maritime security issues and drawing criticism from other claimant states. China recently announced new fishing regulations that would take effect on January 1, 2014, raising concerns about its attempts to assert jurisdiction over all fishing-related disputes.

Oil and natural gas are abundant throughout the area, which has raised the possibility that the contested territory may contain large energy reserves. The SCS has proved and probable reserves of 190 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas and 11 billion barrels (bbl) of oil, according to estimations from the US

Energy Information Administration (EIA). Territorial disputes and a lack of exploration make it difficult for the EIA to assess oil and natural gas reserves accurately, which results in wide variations in reserve estimates throughout the region. The SCS oil deposits are thought to contain 16 trillion cubic metres of natural gas and between 23 and 30 billion tonnes of oil, according to the Chinese Ministry of Land and Resources. Additional hydrocarbon riches might potentially exist in other uncharted territories.

Most significantly, in terms of global shipping, the SCS holds a crucial geostrategic position. It is used for the majority of energy and raw material exports. As free and secure marine commons are crucial to global trade and economy, India and many other nations have an interest in safeguarding the water lanes that pass through the region. The SCS is a crucial maritime gateway and junction for shipping between the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

According to Selig S. Harrison, the South China Sea's location makes it clear how sensitive it is as a strategic waterway. Through the Malacca Strait, it links to the Indian Ocean to the southwest, and to the East China Sea to the northeast. Oil tankers travelling from the Persian Gulf to Japan and warships travelling from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean both use the sea passage that runs between the Paracels and Spratlys.

It seems sense that India would be very interested in the SCS. More particularly, remarks made by Indian politicians and leaders highlight India's need for "access" and "stability" in the SCS. Indian policymakers have made it obvious on numerous venues how much they are interested in the SCS and how they want to approach it. Indian policymakers have made it obvious on numerous venues how much they are interested in the SCS and how they want to approach it. Jitendra Singh, India's then-minister of state for defence, spoke during the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and said:

The maintenance of peace and security in the region is of vital interest, and sovereignty disputes must be resolved peacefully by all countries involved, in accordance with international law. The safety and security of the sea lanes of communication is of the utmost importance. According to accepted principles of international law, it is necessary to reiterate the importance of unhindered right of passage and other maritime rights. We reject the use of force or the threat of using it. We sincerely hope that all parties involved in disputes in the South China Sea will uphold the UNCLOS and the 2002 Declaration on Conduct in the South China Sea, and cooperate to ensure a peaceful resolution of all conflicts. We implore all parties involved to move these conversations forward in order to develop a code of conduct in the South China Sea based on mutual agreement.

Manmohan Singh, the prime minister of India, stated the following on October 10, 2013, in a speech at the 8th East Asia Summit in Brunei Darussalam:

For our collective regional objectives to be realised, a stable maritime environment is necessary. The fundamentals of



marine security, such as the right of passage, unhindered trade, adherence to international law, and peaceful resolution of maritime conflicts, should be reaffirmed. We applaud the concerned nations' united resolve to uphold and carry out the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and to work toward the establishment of a consensus-based Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. We also appreciate the creation of the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, which will work to strengthen current marine security-related international legislation through the development of maritime standards.

These official declarations, which were previously quoted, reaffirm India's focus on "peaceful dispute settlement" in order to fulfil "common regional goals." These claims also reflect the reasoning behind India's growing involvement in the SCS, according to Indian leaders. Delhi has stated its will to work for a regional security architecture that is cooperative and governed by rules in order to sustain peace and stability. Notably, Dr. Singh stated, "It will be in our mutual interest to work for a cooperative, inclusive, and rule-based security architecture that strengthens our collective security and regional and global stability," on October 24, 2013, during a speech at the Central Party School in Beijing.

C. Raja Mohan outlined five main explanations for India's rekindled interest in the SCS in his book *Samudra Manthan*. First, as trade between India and East Asia has grown, India has started to appreciate the value of its sea routes of communication beyond its immediate vicinity, especially the Western Pacific. Second, India seeks to reduce its reliance on powerful nations for maritime needs in the Western Pacific. Third, India worries that China's "new assertiveness" could turn the SCS into a "Chinese lake" by vehemently asserting its territorial claims. Fourth, India wants to maintain a presence to monitor any developments that can damage its national interest in all marine domains. And finally, the Indian Navy emphasises the value of a forward maritime presence and naval cooperation in thwarting possible foes.

Since about 55% of India's trade with the Asia Pacific region goes through the South China Sea, India has well-established maritime strategic interests in the area. "The entire Indian Ocean region spanning from the East African coast to the South China Sea is critical to our international trade, energy, and national security interests," stated India's then-foreign secretary Ranjan Mathai in an address at the National Defence College. Added him:

The development of a regional, economic, and security architecture is taking place in the Asia Pacific area. We are taking part in the East Asia Summit process, ADMM Plus, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and other forums. The long-term interests of the region as a whole are served by an open, equitable, and inclusive regional architecture. Our long-term economic, development, and security interests are served by our strategic alliances with Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and other Asia Pacific nations.

With this resurgence of interest in the SCS, certain key aspects of India's strategy can be listed.

First, the right to free navigation: India has a keen interest in preserving this right in the South China Sea. India emphasises "unimpeded right of passage" quite explicitly. It is crucial for the Asia Pacific region's stability and economic growth.

Second, peaceful dispute resolution opposes the use or threat of force in settling conflicting claims. India emphasises the necessity of upholding regional peace and stability.

Last but not least, India insists on the observance of international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the peaceful settlement of conflicts.

Although the SCS conflict has been ongoing for years, recent developments have raised concerns, endangering regional peace and security. The national legislation on the baseline bill by the Philippines and the submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf by various claimant states were two significant developments that sparked controversy in the SCS in 2009. The dispute between China and the US over China's so-called "core interest" declaration and Hillary Clinton's subsequent "national interest" counter-statement further deteriorated the situation. The SCS disagreements have all of a sudden resurfaced as a hotspot in this area, attracting attention and causing alarm in the international community, particularly India. Two specific incidents in the tumultuous waters, one on July 22, 2011, when China cautioned India's warship INS *Airavat* after it paid a friendship visit, and the second in September 2011, when China objected to oil exploration by India's public sector company, Oil and Natural Gas Commission *Videsh* (OVL), in Vietnam's territorial waters, give Delhi the impetus to deepen its engagement.

INDIA'S POLICY OF SOUTH CHINA SEA

India is aiming to deepen its connections with ASEAN nations in recognition of the strategic importance of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean for the defence of the Indian peninsula. As was already mentioned, the Strait of Malacca is geographically close to several of India's island provinces. K. M. Panikkar claims:

The Peninsula of Malaya is the upper jaw, and the protruding point of Sumatra is the lower jaw, making the Gulf of Malacca resemble the mouth of a crocodile. The Nicobar Islands have the ability to control the Gulf's entrance, and Singapore Island controls its narrow end.

In fact, India needs the ASEAN nations as allies.

Although economics has been the primary and apparent factor in drawing India and ASEAN together, their shared security concerns are strengthening the alliance. In order to realise ASEAN's aspirations to be a global power and defend itself from external threats, India thinks that a tight collaboration with ASEAN is necessary for its strategic interests. India's "Look East Policy" (LEP) has led to an increase in engagement with Southeast Asian nations.³¹ The regional, economic, and security architecture in the Asia Pacific region is evolving.



The LEP is a crucial tool in India's foreign policy discourse to address issues brought on by China's ascent. Former Indian Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal writes:

As it evolved, the Look East Policy of India included a strategic Chinese component. The ASEAN nations also wanted to more effectively integrate India into the region to achieve a better balance with China's presence there. India has been conscious of the China factor in its desire to increase its footprint in this region of Asia.

India and the ASEAN nations have complementary strategic and economic objectives. The annual report of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs states:

In recent years, India's relations with the nations in South East Asia and the Pacific have seen a considerable transition. Our interaction with individual nations, both bilaterally and regionally, has gained fresh pace as a result of the expansion and strengthening of our Look East Policy, the region's consistent trend of economic growth and stability, and the ongoing geopolitical shift towards Asia.

India's relations with the nations are described as being multidimensional and forward-looking, and they have developed a strategic dimension with five of them (Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam) as well as with ASEAN. India has maintained frequent marine connections with the Indian Ocean's littoral republics. After a millennia-long pause, the LEP was an effort to revive a venerable connection. Through the LEP, India reimagined a historical reality for the new millennium, reviving a relationship that had been somewhat inactive and apathetic.

Raja Mohan says it well:

A stronger Indian contribution to peace and stability in Southeast Asia is becoming more popular in the area despite the new strategic uncertainty. Hopes for a more prominent Indian security presence in Southeast Asia have grown as a result of perceptions of India's development and rising military capabilities in the area.

In fact, India has strengthened its "strategic partnership" with a number of nations in the Asia Pacific area since the formal articulation of the strategic dimension of the LEP by External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha in 2003. Mr. Sinha said in his speech at Harvard University:

India's Look East Policy's initial phase was heavily invested in trade and investment ties with ASEAN countries. With ASEAN at its centre, the new phase of this policy is distinguished by an extended meaning of "east" that ranges from Australia to East Asia. The new phase also signifies a transition from commerce to broader economic and security challenges, such as coordinated counterterrorism measures and combined efforts to secure maritime lanes.

The protection of maritime routes has become a key component of India's Look East Policy. A navy is not intended for the defence of the coast, according to Mr. Panikkar. It is necessary to defend the coast from land. The goal of a navy is to establish dominance over a sea area in order to stop enemy ships from sailing toward the coast or interfering with trade and

commerce. He continues by saying that the protection of the seas, which are essential to India's defence, is the Indian navy's primary duty.

From nation to nation, the content of India's partnerships in the east differs. Regular high-level political visits between India and East Asian nations to discuss broader concerns of regional and global security and to strengthen vital bilateral collaboration in the fields of defence, security, and economic activities are a significant aspect of this partnership. India has formed strategic alliances with several nations in the area, varied in depth and intensity, in addition to institutionalising routine meetings on foreign and defence affairs at the ministerial and senior official levels. India most recently established an ASEAN-India Center in New Delhi to further its efforts to cooperate with ASEAN nations. India has announced the establishment of a new mission for ASEAN and the installation of a separate ambassador for the area in order to advance this partnership.

More importantly, the Indian navy's role in the defence forces is becoming vital to India's overall policy. Nearly every nation in the East Asian region, including China, participates in frequent training exercises, visits, and other activities with the Indian navy and other armed services. India has established defence academies in some of these nations to provide ongoing training. India has begun providing the nations in the region with defence technology and equipment.

The Indian navy has more grounds to adopt an expeditionary mindset as a result of the expanding trade between India and Southeast Asian nations. In the 1990s, extensive bilateral and international interactions helped the Indian navy's new outward focus gain momentum. As previously mentioned, India increased its port calls in the region, increased its joint nava! Exercises with all of Southeast Asia, and welcomed ships from the region at its own ports. The Indian navy has taken part in a number of high-profile maritime operations in the area, including port calls, transit, combined naval drills, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief. Particularly noteworthy were the Indian navy's important contributions in the rescue efforts following the 2004 Asian tsunami and the 2008 cyclone that hit Myanmar.

India has constantly participated in cooperative naval exercises of various sizes in order to strengthen its ties in the maritime domain in a more significant way. Joint naval operations, which include multilateral operations like 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 operations like the Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercises (SIMBEX) since 1993, have become a catalyst for maritime confidence building.

The Indian navy has also been able to call at ports like Singapore, Vietnam, and other nations despite the lack of forward bases. With the opening of the "Naval Air Station" in Campbell Bay (INS Baaz) on July 31, 2012, which is seen as India's window into East and Southeast Asia, the Andaman and



Nicobar command was expanded. After INS Baaz was commissioned, Admiral Nirmal Verma, who was then the chief of the naval staff, stated that the archipelago, being 650 nautical miles away from our mainland, provides India with a critical geostrategic edge. The Islands not only give the country a strong presence in the Bay of Bengal, but they also act as our gateway to East and South East. The majority of the ships transporting important goods for East Asian economies lie astride some of the busiest shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean, he continued. INS Baaz is currently set up to fly light to heavy aircraft from a 3,500-foot-long runway for short-field operations. To allow for the free operation of all types of aircraft, including large aircraft, the runway will be gradually extended. Modern navigational aids and airfield instrumentation will also be added to the base. The increased military presence in the archipelago will give India's 600,000 sq km of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), or around 30% of the nation's overall EEZ of 2.01 million sq km, a strong security shield.

Former Indian chief of naval staff Admiral (Retd.) Arun Prakash said this while delivering the Y. B. Chavan Memorial Lecture at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA):

A favourable maritime environment has been created in the area thanks to the navy's international cooperation initiatives. Along with other outreach initiatives including drills, joint patrols, port calls, and flag-showing deployments, the navy also offers maritime protection upon request from its neighbours. Nearly all IOR nations have signed agreements allowing IN ships, submarines, and aircraft to quickly access refuelling and turnaround facilities.

The capability of the Indian navy is being gradually improved. The most recent and anticipated addition to the Indian navy is the aircraft-carrier INS Vikramaditya, but there have been a number of other important advancements. On August 9, 2013, in Visakhapatnam, the nuclear reactor of India's first ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) reached criticality. Three days later, in Kochi, the indigenous aircraft carrier was launched. In 2012, the Indian navy took delivery of a Russian nuclear-powered attack submarine under a 10-year lease. The Indian navy anticipates receiving seven stealth frigates, six diesel submarines, 30 additional warships, over 150 fighters, maritime patrol aircraft, and helicopters during the course of the next ten years in order to expand its maritime capability and reach. India still has a long way to go before it can be considered a trustworthy and accountable maritime force in the developing Asia Pacific security system. Indian maritime and military diplomacy is still in its infancy, as S. D. Muni rightly observes. When India's intended "amphibious warfare base" is fully completed in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands by 2020, its naval reach and capacity to share a greater security burden with its Fast Asian neighbours would be strengthened.

The Indian navy's involvement in attaining its foreign policy goals is explicitly stated in India's maritime strategy, titled "Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy." It states that using warships to promote domestic

foreign policy will be the Indian navy's primary responsibility in the twenty-first century. The Indian navy must project power and demonstrate presence during the protracted years of peace, spark collaborations with its maritime capability, foster confidence and foster interoperability through joint/combined operations, and provide international maritime support. The policy also emphasises the Indian navy's contribution to upholding tranquilly and peace in the Indian Ocean region as well as its ability to fulfil the demands of India's allies when necessary. "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," the Indian chief of naval staff claims in his foreword.

As previously mentioned, given the Indian navy's expanding 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, India's strategic interests in the SCS also stem from the importance of the sea as a crucial transit route. With various nations in the area during the past few years, including Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines, India has signed security cooperation agreements that have opened up new avenues for cooperation. The ASEAN nations have received military training from India. Under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, which also provides a defence training programme, all ASEAN nations are partners. Defence supplies and maintenance support are two aspects of India's military assistance to various ASEAN nations. India is aggressively pursuing ideas for combined defence production with Singapore and Indonesia. India is expanding its capacity and influence in order to protect its greater national interests.

More critically, Singapore, for example, has provided a favourable position for Indian forces travelling through from the Indian Ocean into the SCS, matching India's developing military relations with this region. Singapore and India work closely together on defence. They have further boosted defence cooperation with their pledge to protect open maritime routes for navigation. It portends well for a more stable and peaceful region as well as constructive interactions between the two nations. The South China Sea, a real Mediterranean of the Pacific, is under Vietnam's control, making it of tremendous strategic importance. The relationship between India and Vietnam predates any confrontation between China and Vietnam as well as between China and India, and is founded in part on a number of historical similarities. The strategic aspects of Indo-Vietnamese ties, which were first discussed in the 1980s, began to take shape in the 1990s as institutional and organised structures. With a focus on economic and strategic cooperation, bilateral ties between India and Vietnam have grown recent Years. Since the official establishment of a strategic alliance in 2007, India has gradually increased defence cooperation with Vietnam and entered into a line of credit agreement with



Vietnam for \$100 million to support the sale of strategic weapons and to enable defence procurement.

India has also committed to increase military education and support Vietnam's navy's attack capability. Vietnamese sailors are already receiving thorough underwater combat action instruction from India at the INS Satavahana in Visakhapatnam. Additionally, it might aid in Su-30MK2 fighter jet operator training for Vietnamese pilots. Vietnam is also looking at the idea of purchasing surveillance tools made in India, like unmanned aerial vehicles. India can be a huge asset in the modernization of the Vietnamese navy. However, Vietnam places a great importance on India's capabilities. Since 2000, Hanoi has embraced India's naval explorations of the South China Sea and granted frequent access to its port infrastructure. The Indian navy's strategic access in the SCS could be improved by having exclusive access to Vietnamese port facilities. In reality, India's aggressive naval engagement with Vietnam may assist advance India's interests in the area.

In 2012, Chief Admiral D. K. Joshi of the Indian Navy made the following remarks on the eve of Navy Day:

Not that we anticipate spending a lot of time in the South China Sea, but when the need arises—for instance, in circumstances where our nation's interests are at stake, such as ONGC Videsh, etc.—we will be asked to travel there, and we are ready for that. Are we getting ready for it? Are such drills being held here? The quick response is “yes”

The remarks made by Admiral Joshi highlight New Delhi's stance toward China's growing assertiveness in the SCS and show a stronger Indian maritime diplomacy.

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