

India's Strategic Engagement in the South China Sea

The South China Sea (SCS) is a marginal sea of about 800,000 square kilometers in the western Pacific Ocean enclosed by various Asian states mainly China, Taiwan, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam. It is also the cynosure of one of Asia's long-standing geopolitical contentions, namely the SCS dispute. The presence of an estimated 3.6 billion barrels of petroleum and other liquids and 40.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves are the original bone of contention among the developing littoral states of the SCS. This area is connected to the world by important trade entryways like the Strait of Malacca which sees an upwards of \$3 trillion worth of trade pass through each year.

DR SS BINDRA

The author is a Professor, Amity Institute of International Studies

DEVINA SINGH

The corresponding author is a Research Scholar, Amity Institute of International Studies. Email: devinasingh0111@gmail.com

As India's influence and share of the global stage gains prominence a number of its policies and approaches stand revised accordingly. Globally but more so in Asia, India's continuous commitment to the ideals of democracy and harmonious coexistence and non-interference has achieved it the acknowledgment and support of many of its neighbours. As of April 2024, India is the fifth largest economy in the world, with a GDP of \$3.9 trillion (nominal), putting it right behind the economies of developed nations like the US, Germany, and Japan (IMF, 2024).

India has been intensifying its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with both sides working to implement the ASEAN-India Plan of Action (2021-2025) and develop a new plan for 2026-2030. (Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2018). Countries like Indonesia and Vietnam have viewed

India's influence in the region more favorably, reflecting the strengthening of India's strategic and economic ties with Southeast Asian nations (Aswani et al., 2021).

India is often regarded as a preferred strategic partner compared to other accomplished counterparts in the region, such as China. This preference is highlighted even more in the South China Sea (SCS) dispute. Up until recently, India had maintained a cautious and balanced approach in line with its non-interference ideals. However, due to China's aggressive pursuits in the SCS disputes, India has shifted from its previously neutral stance to one that expresses support for and alignment with the freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes as per international law.

While India does not have any direct territorial claims in the region, it has sought to enhance strategic partnerships with countries in the

region to promote stability and security. Despite this, India has refrained from taking an overtly confrontational stance towards China, opting instead to maintain diplomatic channels for dialogue and cooperation and supporting its allies via dialogues, diplomacy and military agreements.

India's Strategic Interests in the SCS

The SCS holds significant strategic importance for India due to its economic, security, and geopolitical interests. Economically, the SCS is a vital maritime trade route, with a considerable portion of global trade passing through its waters. For India, the Malacca Strait, which connects the Indian Ocean to the SCS, is particularly crucial as it is a major artery for Indian trade with East Asia. As per Bhatt's (2023) conclusive findings, "over 80 percent of India's trade is dependent upon sea lines of communication ... India finds strong market and trade synergies with Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN as much as it does with China."

Ensuring the freedom of navigation and overflight in the SCS is thus essential for India's economic prosperity and energy security. India's Act East Policy, aimed at enhancing economic and strategic ties with East Asian countries, further underscores the strategic importance of the SCS. As part of this policy, India has been strengthening its engagement with countries in the region, including Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, all of which have territorial disputes with China in the SCS. These partnerships aim to enhance maritime security, promote economic cooperation, and counter Chinese dominance in the region.

India's deepening defence and economic ties with these countries pave the way for further enhancing India's strategic presence in the region. Any disruption in the region could have far-reaching consequences for India's security and maritime interests. India has therefore been advocating for a rules-based order in the region, based on the principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The escalating tensions and militarisation in the SCS by China have raised concerns about the potential for conflict and disruption of maritime trade. The fragility of the geopolitical structure in the

SCS threatens the strategic and economic stability that India has nurtured with neighbouring states over decades and so the change of policies in the SCS dispute comes at a crucial turning point time.

As a major regional power, India's evolving stance on the SCS reflects its growing role and influence in shaping the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region.

Balancing Act: India's Approach to the South China Sea Dispute

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), in outlining India's foreign policy visions, aims, and objectives, has emphasized several key principles that guide India's approach to international relations, especially the SCS dispute. These principles are particularly relevant in the context of the South China Sea (SCS) disputes, where India's stance is shaped by its strategic interests and long-term objectives.

One of the central tenets of India's foreign policy is the concept of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. India seeks to maintain its independence and flexibility in foreign relations, avoiding entanglements in power blocs and alliances. This approach is evident in India's cautious and balanced stance on the SCS disputes, where it seeks to uphold the principles of international law while avoiding direct confrontation with China.

But at the same time, India also advocates for a pragmatic approach in its foreign policy, focusing on India's national interests and leveraging global contradictions to secure strategic advantages. In the context of the SCS, this pragmatic approach guides India's efforts to strengthen its strategic partnerships with countries in the region, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, to counterbalance China's growing influence and establish a rule-based environment that is conducive for regional stability and multilevel cooperation.

Another key objective of India's foreign policy, as highlighted by Jaishankar, is the promotion of a rules-based international order. India believes that upholding international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is crucial for promoting stability and security in the SCS region. India's support for a rules-based approach to the SCS disputes reflects its commitment to this principle.

Conclusion

India's strategic interest and presence in the SCS reflects a multifaceted approach driven by economic, security, and geopolitical imperatives. The region's significance as a vital maritime trade route, coupled with India's expanding economic ties with ASEAN and East Asia, underscores the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific for India's foreign policy objectives. India's Act East Policy acts as an important enduring link for promoting economic integration thus strengthening security cooperation in the region. The evolving dynamics in the SCS, marked by territorial disputes and great power competition, have tapped India's proactive engagement to safeguard its economic interests and contribute to flourishing regional stability. While India's presence in the SCS is not aimed at confrontation with China, it is a testimony of India's commitment to upholding international maritime law and ensuring freedom of navigation in the area. The recent oil and gas exploration agreement with Vietnam and the focus on joint maritime activities with like-minded partners highlight India's strategic imperative to secure its

maritime interests and contribute to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Moving forward, India's continued engagement in the SCS will be guided by the principles of inclusivity, peaceful resolution of disputes, and commitment to a fair and open maritime order, aligning with its broader vision of promoting regional security and economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. □

(Views are personal)

References

1. Aswani, R.S., Sajith, S., & Bhat, M.Y. (2021, July 13). *Realigning India's Vietnam Policy Through Cooperative Sustainable Development: a Geostrategic Counterbalancing to China in Indo-Pacific*. NCBI. Retrieved May 1, 2024, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8276536/>
2. Bhatt, P. (2023, June 26). *Indian Presence in the South China Sea: Strategic Compulsions - Institute for Security and Development Policy*. Institute for Security & Development Policy. Retrieved April 25, 2024, from <https://www.isdp.eu/indian-presence-in-the-south-china-sea-strategic-compulsions/>
3. IMF. (2024, April). *World Economic Outlook*. Retrieved May 10, 2024, from www.imf.org
4. Lok Sabha Secretariat. (2018, March). Members Reference Service Larrdis. In *Reference Note*. Lok Sabha.



Our New Publications

Wide range of Books on Gandhian Literature, Indian History, Personalities & Biographies, Speeches and Writings, Builders of Modern India, Art & Culture, Children's Literature

Publications Division
Ministry of Information & Broadcasting
Government of India
Soochna Bhawan, CGO Complex,
Lodhi Road New Delhi-110003

To buy online visit: www.bharatkosh.gov.in
For placing orders, please contact: Ph : 011-24365609, e-mail: businesswng@gmail.com
website: www.publicationsdivision.nic.in

e-Version of selected books available on Amazon and Google Play

[/dpd_india](https://www.instagram.com/dpd_india) [@DPD_India](https://twitter.com/DPD_India) [/publicationsdivision](https://www.facebook.com/publicationsdivision)