

# The Geopolitics of South China Sea: Its implications for India

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## *Abstract*

China claims almost the entire South China Sea as its sovereign territory and it has stoutly and assiduously asserted its stake in recent years. Besides building up and fortifying reefs and islands within the disputed area, China has dispatched survey ships to assert mineral rights and deployed large numbers of coast guard to the sea. Till very recently in the middle of the global coronavirus pandemic, China has been busy increasing its presence and working steadily to modernise and expand its navy to protect what it calls its 'sovereign territory'. At this very juncture, India is also continuously expanding its reach in the South China Sea region which in itself has become a crucial factor in her foreign policy. Time and again, India has reiterated its interest in the freedom of navigation beyond an exclusive economic zone (E.E.Z) which stretches from the coast to 200 nautical miles into the sea. This paper analyses the geopolitical realities of the areas surrounding South China Sea along with their implications upon India.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, Geopolitics, Conflicts, Sovereignty, China, India.

## **Introduction**

The South China Sea is located at the western edge of the Pacific Ocean, to Asia's southeast. It is a marginal sea that is part of the Pacific Ocean surrounded by several countries which extends from the Strait of Malacca in the Southwest to the strait of Taiwan in the Northeast. It encompasses an area of about 1.4 million square miles and contains a collection of reefs, islands and atolls including the Spratly Islands to the south, Paracel Islands to the north, Pratas Islands in the northeast and Scarborough Shoal in the central east. The South China Sea has, of late, turned into an area of growing conflicts due to divergent territorial claims of different countries.

China has been claiming the historic control of over 85% of South China Sea, while countries like Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia also have been making competing claims. The territorial disputes over the South China Sea have become a major flashpoint in the Southeast Asian region. The territorial claims over this region are not subjected to easy legal resolution and with its increasing importance; the geopolitics of the region has become more and more perplexed and problematic. China has claimed almost the entire region of South China Sea through the self proclaimed nine-dash line map. The recent activities like dredging and creating artificial islands especially in the hotly contested areas of Spratly Islands and deploying surface to air missile on Woody Islands within the Paracel Island groups began to flare up the issue to a much larger extent.

The claims made by the disputing parties can be separated into historical, claims of discovery, occupation and on the extension of sovereign jurisdiction under the interpretation of the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The disputes are also markedly in part by

nationalist propaganda in which the claimants attach symbolic values to the South China Sea and its islands. This region is also tinged with great power politics whereby China and United States begin to jolt each other for control of the region. The latter's Asia Pivot policy, to a great extent, is influenced by its desires to make a more prominent role in the regions surrounding South China Sea. Over this burning geopolitical situation, India is also keeping a close eye towards the region by considering all its implications for the country's national interest in general and foreign policy in particular.

### **Importance of the South China Sea**

The South China Sea is a key commercial thoroughfare connecting Asia with Europe and Africa and its seabed is rich with natural resources. It is a major shipping route, almost all countries of the world have a stake in it and one third of the global shipping passes through the sea. It is by far one of the busiest international waterways and is rich in hydrocarbons, marine resources and is believed to possess huge potential of natural resources such as oil and gas in addition to the plentiful fish resources. It was therefore that the sea accounts for ten per cent of the world's fisheries which makes it a key source of food for hundreds of millions of people. It is also estimated that the Strait of Malacca that links Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean via South China Sea handles four times as much oil as Suez Canal of Egypt did.

In such scenario, freedom of navigations in the South China Sea proves to be highly crucial for linking the seaborne trade of the northeast Asia with the rest of the World. Its geographical importance may also be ascertained by the facts that it furnishes living and mineral resources to the littoral states by the abundant fishing activity in the region. Hence, any measure curtailing the freedom of navigation in the region will have a huge implication in the international seaborne trade and commerce.

### **Historical accounts of the Dispute**

The South China Sea region was largely quiet during the first half of the twentieth century as its littoral states focused their attention to other issues and problems. Till the end of the Second World War, no claimant state occupied a single island in the entire South China Sea. However, in 1946 and 1947, China established itself on several parts of the Spratley Islands and Woody Islands respectively. And China captured Woody Islands two weeks before the French and Vietnamese intended to send troops to capture the same. However, even at this stage, the South China Sea was not considered as a priority area by the claimants because they were more or less engaging in some other issues and conflicts which were considered to be relatively more important than the sea dispute.

The second half of the twentieth century, however, witnessed an increasing interest and attention in the South China Sea. In 1955, China and Taiwan established themselves on several key islands. However, this effort cooled down till 1970. By the early 1970s, interest of the claimants in the South China sea began to flare up which was primarily spurred by several indications that the South China Sea contained significant amount of oil and gas reserves. It was then that the Philippines moved first and followed shortly by China which launched seaborne attacks on several islands in the sea. China then seized several features of the Paracel Islands from the control of South Vietnam during a brief war known as the battle of the Paracel Islands which took place on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1974 where several Vietnamese soldiers were killed. South and North Vietnam responded to it by reinforcing their remaining garrisons and seized several other unoccupied features. Then violence flared up

once again in 1988 when China moved into the Spratley Islands and occupied the Johnson Reef in which they killed several Vietnamese sailors along the process.

Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2012. Under this declaration, the parties promised to exercise self restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and effect peace and stability and to handle their difference in a constructive manner. For some period, this declaration had put the conflict at bay. However, the then prevailing peaceful situation was put to an end on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2009 when China submitted a map containing the 'nine-dash line' to the United Nations. Through this map, china claimed all the land features in the South China Sea and vast majority of its waters. Since the publication of this so called nine-dash line, tensions are building up in the region once again. China is becoming more assertive in dealing with the issue in the South China Sea and other claimants particularly Vietnam and the Philippines view the recent activities of China in the region with unease and suspicion.

### **India and the South China Sea**

Although India is a non-claimant country of the South China Sea Islands, it is concerned with the development in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is strategically important for India both in terms of trade and other economic perspectives. It is estimated that about 55 per cent of the sea bound trade of India passes through the South China Sea. Due to this reason, freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is of utmost importance for the sustenance of the growing Indian economy. India is worried that if the situation arises whereby China controls this region, it will dictate maritime traffic both civilian and military. Former India's External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna argued that the South China Sea is the property of the world and thus nobody has a unilateral control over it. He also stressed that India is capable enough of safeguarding its interests.

India considered its relation with ASEAN as an important factor which could spur her economic growth. For this reason, India has launched the Look East Policy in 1991 which was upgraded in 2014 as Act East Policy which seeks India's larger engagement in the Southeast Asian nations. Stability of the South China Sea is vital for India because any major conflict in the South China Sea region is bound to impact India's economic interests. India of the view that the South China Sea region is a key to its energy security and that the conflict must be resolved peacefully as per international laws.

India has been actively engaging with Vietnam in the exploration of oil and natural gas in the South China Sea region. Indian state owned company name ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) had in 2006 signed a contract with Petro Vietnam of Vietnam to jointly explore sector 127 and 128 in the Phu Khanh Basin. Later in September 2011, it signed three deals to jointly explore oil and natural gas in these blocks. However, this oil exploration project off the Vietnam coast has been objected by China by asserting that the blocks are under their sovereign control and are within the so called nine-dash line area. Despite varying claims, the OVL decided to restart the oil exploration after a brief gap claiming that the area was under the sovereign control of Vietnam and contended that the blocks lie within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic zone and Continental Shelf. It is unfortunate that China viewed India's growing bilateral relationship with countries like Vietnam, Indonesia and its strategic cooperation with Japan as an attempt on the part of India to consolidate and assert itself in the Chinese own backyard.

Nevertheless, India is not interested in seeking any confrontation with China as such. However, India is also attempting to build a strong trade and economic partnership with ASEAN and East Asian countries in order to secure its markets and transportation linkages through the security of the sea lanes. The security and stability of the region is also vital from the Indian naval perspective because of it being strategically located between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific Ocean. India is now operating closely with the United States and Japan which necessitates the secure access to the Western Pacific via South China Sea even more critical. David Scott (2013) argued that China is not yet an Indian Ocean power but is investing a lot in building up infrastructure in and around the Indian Ocean which led some Indian analysts termed 'String of pearls' policy which aimed at encircling India particularly in the South Asian region. In opposition to this move, India is attempting to project itself as 'powerful' in the South China Sea region and this power projection is the crux of the two countries' strategic rivalries.

India has an active naval presence in the South China Sea since its first deployment there in 2000. These deployments also include bilateral naval exercise, friendly port calls and transit through these waters. Indian navy had conducted bilateral 'Simbex' naval exercise with the Singapore navy since 1993 and often attends friendly port calls to littoral countries such as Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam which bring Indian Navy to the disputed water. An important policy undertaken by India to strengthened its linkages with the littoral countries of the South China Sea is the 'Milan' naval exercise which were held since 1995. In this naval exercise, a number of littoral countries including Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Vietnam and the Philippines were participating. This forged greater engagement and friendship between India and these countries which is vital for India's larger role in the South China Sea.

The Malabar Joint Naval Exercise conducted annually by India and United States since 1992 was joined by Japan in 2014. It acted as an instrument of assertion of India's growing engagement with the United States and Japan and was viewed by China with suspicion. The 'Malabar 2019' was held in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Japan. It was expected that this edition of naval exercise would encompass conduct of complex maritime operations in the surface, sub-surface and air domains and focus on Anti-Submarine Warfare, Anti-Air and Anti-Surface Firings and tactical scenario based exercise at Sea. According to officials, the objective of 'Malabar 2019', which is being conducted for the 33<sup>rd</sup> time, is to further strengthen naval ties between the three countries. The exercise also aims to enhance cooperation and inter-operability, based on shared values and principles, between the three navies.

The increasing naval exercises has been complemented by the expansion of Andaman and Nicobar Command with the establishment of the 'Naval Air Station' called INS Baaz in Campbell Bay on 31<sup>st</sup> July 2012 which is located closely from the Strait of Malacca which is regarded as India's window to East and Southeast Asian nations. This move is a strong signal of India's concerns over the current state of affairs in the Indian Ocean region and South China Sea.

India being a non claimant country on any part of the South China Sea is not a party to the dispute. However, given the importance of the South China Sea for India, India does not turn a blind eye on the dispute. India's stand as of today on South China Sea may be briefly mentioned. Firstly, the South China Sea dispute being a sovereign issue must be resolved by the surrounding claimant countries themselves. Secondly, India favours peaceful resolution of disputes, and opposes exploitation of force or threat of use of force to resolve competing claims. Thirdly, India considers freedom of navigation in the region as vital and therefore this freedom should be maintained. Fourthly, India insists on peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with

international law. Fifthly, India's interest in the South China Sea is purely commercial and Sixthly, freedom and safety of the sea lanes of communications should be maintained as per the international law.

### Conclusions

The South China Sea dispute unless solved in a meaningful way can lead to larger rivalry and tension which can harm not only the regional but also the global affairs. The involvement of powerful countries like United States and China in the dispute creates a dangerous atmosphere whereby the security of the whole region can be disturbed. The Chinese power posture in the region and its aggressive actions resulted not only in tensions, mistrust and conflict but also resulted in increasing militarisation in countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines. These countries felt insecure with the rising aggressive Chinese behaviour and were under pressure to modernise and upgrade their military capabilities. In order to ameliorate the rising tension China must stop its activities like militarisation of the islands, land reclamation policy and disputes must be solved through peaceful dialogue in consonance with the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS).

On the backdrop of mounting strategic importance of the South China Sea, India must increase and extend its partnership with the Southeast Asian countries. And Expansion and modernisation of naval infrastructure is also necessary to secure India's interest in the South China Sea. However, as India's interest in the region is of merely commercial, then it is imperatives for India to refrain from direct confrontation and conflict with the claimants particularly with that of China. Its present stands viz., freedom of navigation, peaceful resolution of disputes and strict adherence to the international law must be upheld and maintained by India in the future while pursuing its national interests in the region. At this stage, when it is talked about geopolitical dimension of the South China Sea, India should continue this stand.

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