



**South China Sea: A Triangle of Dispute  
Between China, Southeast Asia and India**

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### **Abstract**

The South China Sea is most disputed in terms of its geopolitical location and geoeconomic importance, making it strategically relevant in global politics. The South China Sea is a blue water strategic dispute for fishing and natural resources which involves territorial and maritime claims within the region. The South China Sea have the most longstanding dispute between China and Southeast Asian nations in international affairs. It is one of the busiest waterways and strategically crucial for commercial and military exercises. However, many non-claimant countries, including India and the US, want the South China Sea to remain an international water body in accordance with the United Nation's freedom of navigation operation law. The region has been growing significantly for India's trade-economic linkages with East Asian nations and the Asia-pacific region. India's presence in the sea is based on economic, strategic, and diplomatic interests and a long term vision to emerge as a capable regional actor for Southeast Asian countries against rising China's domination in the region.

**Keywords:** South China Sea Dispute, China, Southeast Asia, India's Strategic Interests and International Law of the Sea.

## **Introduction**

The South China Sea (SCS) is a marginal sea part of the Pacific Ocean that extends from the Strait of Malacca in the Southwest and to the strait of Taiwan in the Northeast. The geopolitical location and geostrategic relevance of the sea in world politics emerged as the most longstanding disputes between China and Southeast Asian Countries for commercial and military exercises. The overlapping claims over SCS of China and littoral states Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei have remained disputed for decades. Growing China's assertiveness in the region increased the interest and influence of the non-claimant countries in the sea. In July 2020, the United States Secretary Pompeo released a statement on strengthening the US's position in the SCS. The statement challenged China's claims in resources-rich waters of the SCS and called those claims are "completely unlawful" (McLaughlin 2020).

The territorial disputes over land and sea areas are actually beneficial for trade and the survival of littoral countries, especially for mineral resources and protein gain from fishing activity in the region. The SCS territorial dispute is based on four major archipelagos: 'The Pratas, Macclesfield Bank, Paracels and Spratlys'. The eight states are competing with each other to claim their maritime boundary and territorial features of the sea, which includes hundreds of 'islands, islets, cays, reefs, rocks, shoals and banks' compromise within these four archipelagos, which falls under the jurisdiction of sovereign states of China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, the Philippine, and Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore (Puri and Sahgal 2011: 438). Consequently, the increasing conflict and rivalry in the sea is basically an economic competition; however, the sea also reflects the sovereign identity and cultural values of some states.

Each state's territorial claims in the South China Sea clash with other states' jurisdiction. Such as the dispute between Malaysia and Singapore based on their strategic claims over Pisang Island and Pulau Batu Puteh. China, Taiwan and Vietnam's claims of sovereignty clash over the Paracels Islands. Moreover, China and Taiwan are contesting over their overlapping claims on Pratas Island and Macclesfield Bank. Whereas Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia justified some portion of claims on these four archipelagos, while Vietnam, Taiwan and China

claim on entire archipelagos. China's claim to the nine-dash line (which stretches as far as 2000 km from the mainland) clashes with each other claims in the sea. The reasons for the dispute are the national interests of the concerned states in the jurisdiction of fishing areas, crude oil and natural gas in some parts of the sea. Therefore, littoral states are trying to protect their maritime rights. However, China provokes its claim on the sea is based on its ancient history, which claims almost 80 per cent of the waterways. Vietnam claims sovereignty over the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands based on inheritance grounds which clashes with the Philippines's claims on the Spratly archipelago. Malaysia and Brunei claimed sovereignty rights in Southern parts of the sea and some on the Spratly Islands. Indonesia's claim to the sea only comes under its exclusive special economic zone. Over the decades, these claimant countries competing with each other and have seized control over many of rafts, rocks and islands in the sea (South China Morning Post 2019).

The paper examined the causes of disputes over the South China Sea in a triangle between China, Southeast Asia, and India. And the paper tried to find answers to the questions; Why India is interfering in the disputes? Why is the South China Sea important for China? What are the overlapping claims between China and the Southeast Asian States? How these three in a triangle framework are trying to maintain their sovereignty and relevance of presence in the South China Sea?

### **The South China Sea: An Overview**

South China Sea (SCS) enrich in natural resources such as hydrocarbon gas, crude oil and protein, which fulfils the survival and trade-related needs of the sovereign states. Competition over these resources have increased sharp-edged conflict and contention among the claimant countries. Projection of cultural consciousness among the claimant countries with its adjoining seas fuels the dispute to protect their integrity and national inheritance, and sovereign territorial dispute. Overlapping claims on islands, reefs and rocks to justify authority over water and seabed and the proper use of international sea rights for the military exercise. However, territorial disputes among the six countries became worst over the period (Dutton 2011: 42). Tension and conflict have increased in the sea because of China's expansive claims, and

following the ‘strategy of delaying the resolution of the dispute’ (Fravel 2011: 292) has become more problematic. The delaying strategy of China explains that China’s intention is not to resolve the conflict but wants to delay it as much as it can to prepare itself to maximise the benefits.

### **China’s Claims and Interests in the South China Sea**

China’s movement and its claims in the SCS attract the world’s attention more than anyone. Regulation of Chinese forces and growing naval capabilities in the sea have considered China an assertive defensive power in global politics. Since the mid-1990s, China has followed a delaying strategy for managing its claim over the islands in the sea. The strategy helped China to make its claim more-stronger over the time. It also provided an opportunity for China to do a strategic analysis of other states’ jurisdictions and keep them away from strengthening their claims in the sea. From the mid- 2000s onwards, China has increased its efforts to secure its claim and deter others through military, diplomatic and administrative means. The primary objective of the strategy is to ‘threaten weaker states in the dispute and inherently destabilising’ them and ‘prevent escalation of tensions among the claimants’ states (Fravel 2011: 293).

China has considered the SCS a historical territory since its ancient times. Although, these ancient claims on the sea of China do not exist ‘centuries old’. So-called historical claims date back to 1947. When the leader of the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (also known as Kuomintang Party), Chiang Kai-shek, drew ‘eleven-dash line’ on Chinese maps of the South China Sea including outermost points of Islands, shoals and reefs under Chinese sovereignty (Malik 2013: 88). The U-shaped eleven-dash line became a nine-dash when communist party leader Mao Zedong (who defeated Nationalist Party in 1949) gave up China’s claims over the Gulf of Tonkin during a moment of communist camaraderie with Vietnam (Shukla, 2020). From 1949 until today, China has claimed everything that comes under the nine-dash-line. Most of China’s claims on these islands and adjacent water clash with the jurisdiction of other sovereign states; Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, which leads to territorial disputes among them. Contemporary China’s territorial claim speaks the same language it used to say that China has indisputable sovereignty over the Spratly Islands

and adjacent waters. However, China has remained unable to define the legal right to prove that claims marked on South China Sea maps.

The United Nations Conventions of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982) appeared as the most important event in developing international law in the 20th century. 'According to the provision of the Law of the Sea, the People's Republic of China (PRC) shall have sovereignty and Jurisdiction over its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of 200 nautical miles' (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1996).

In order to claim its maritime rights under UNCLOS, the People's Republic of China passed a Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone at the 24th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People's Congress on 25 February 1992. Article 1 of the Law 'is enacted for the People's Republic of China to exercise its sovereignty over its territorial sea and the control over its contiguous zone, and to safeguard its national security and its maritime rights and interests' (The Law on the Territorial Sea 1992). On behalf of article 2 of the law, the PRC included, 'the mainland of the People's Republic of China and its coastal islands; Taiwan and all islands appertaining thereto including the Diaoyu Islands; the Penghu Islands; the Dongsha Islands; the Xisha Islands; the Zhongsha Islands and the Nansha Islands; as well as all the other islands belonging to the People's Republic of China' (The Law on the Territorial Sea 1992).

According to this law, the PRC claimed full sovereignty over the Spratly (Nansha Island) and Parcel (Xisha Island) and other islands which is beyond its jurisdiction. China's claims over these islands clash with other Southeast Asian states' claims and their sovereignty rights. In order to establish its authority over these islands, in the 19th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Eighth National People's Congress on 15 May 1996, the PRC approved the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which affirms that, 'the innocent passage through a country's territorial sea make no prejudice to the right of a coastal country to demand, accordance with its laws or regulations, foreign ships of military purposes to obtain approval from the country or notify the country in advance for going through the country's territorial sea' (The Standing Committee of the Eighth National People's Congress 1996).



The United Nations Convention on Law of Sea turn out to be a most crucial document in dealing with maritime disputes by setting limits and rights of coastal countries and freedom of navigation for the international community. However, China passed many laws in accordance with the UNCLOS (China believes so) are actually violates the convention in many ways. For instance, the territorial claim marked by China overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZs) of other countries. The PRC passed law on Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf on 26 June 1998, which claimed more maritime rights beyond the 1992 laws. The 1998 maritime law provided the PRC to ‘exercises sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring, exploiting, conserving and managing natural resources in water areas above the seabed, in seabed and subsoil of the exclusive economic zone’ (Article 3) and exploring and ‘exploiting natural resources in the continental shelf’ (Article 4). The law permitted the PRC to ‘exercises jurisdiction in relation to construction and exploitation of artificial islands, installations and structures as well as maritime scientific research, protection and conservation of maritime environment in the exclusive economic zone’ and continental shelf (Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf 1998).

Recent, China’s Coast Guard Law became very disputed among the Southeast Asian countries and the rest of the world. China’s National People’s Congress passed a Coast Guard Law of the People’s Republic of China (CCG) on 22 January 2021 and which came into force on 1 February 2021. The CCG law authorises the Chinese government to regulate and ensure the vigilant performance of naval police forces in the sea to protect the ‘national sovereignty, security and maritime rights and interests of the country’. The law allowed the Chinese maritime forces to take all necessary steps to push back and stop all illegitimate activities of ‘foreign organisations and individuals from illegally infringing China’s national sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction at sea’ (Cruz 2021: 6). In other words, the law empowers China to enhance its power by using coercive measures (military weapons) to threaten its neighbourhood countries and change the status quo in the South China Sea. This law of China adopted in against of other countries’ movement in the sea, which will lead to a threat of armed conflict in upcoming years (Okada 2021).

China passed laws and provided historical interpretation to justify its claim in the South China Sea, leading to three disputes; first, overlapping claims on islands with other Southeast Asian

states' sovereignty rights and their claims on maritime resources; second, the operation of military exercises of six states and the United States interest within China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and third, China's enhancing capability in military supremacy by developing and deploying 'anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD)' weapons against the US military supremacy across the western pacific causes contention in the sea. Thus, it is a strategy-based maritime dispute, shifts the military balance and damages the national emotions of the six countries that share cultural and ethical values on all sides of the sea. Aside from economic importance and political involvement, sovereignty issues are attached from the security point of view. The Southeast Asian countries supported the US presence in the sea to maintain peace and stability in the region; however, from the US perspective, its presence in the sea is solely based on the self-interest of a clear passage route for the Navy and oil flow. Similarly, Japan and the Philippines (specific relations of these two countries in the sea) are also playing a more active role in a maritime dispute with China in the SCS (Swaine 2013).

### **The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**

With many overlapping claims, the SCS became a serious issue in international relations. The UNCLOS came into existence in 1994 and was established as a legal framework to balance the economic and security interests of coastal states with those of oceangoing nations. It has set the limit for coastal states with certain rights on land features and sea resources in internal waters, territorial waters, EEZ and Continental shelf. The internal waters cover all watercourses on the inland side of the baseline. The littoral state is allowed to set laws, regulate and use any resources freely. Other states have no right of passage within internal waters.

Similarly, the territorial water limit is no more than 12 nautical miles, and sovereign states are permitted to set laws and regulate and use any resources. However, Innocent passage in the territorial sea of a state permits 'ships of all States, whether coastal or land-locked, enjoy the right of innocent passage through the territorial sea' (Article 17 of Section 3 of part II UNCLOS 1982: 30). It allows the movement of other states through innocent passage zone. Whereas the Economic Exclusive Zone (mentioned in Part V of UNCLOS) 'is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea' (Article 55 UNCLOS 1982: 43) does not extend beyond 200

nautical miles from the coastline. The EEZ counts under the international water, but the coastal countries have the right to obtain natural resources within this zone. However, ‘the continental shelf of a coastal State comprises the seabed and subsoil of the submarine area that extend beyond its territorial sea’ (Article 76 in part VI of UNCLOS 1982: 53) and adjoining to a coastal state’s shore. It extends beyond 200 nautical miles from the territorial sea until the natural prolongation ends. The coastal states have the right to exploit minerals and non-living material in the subsoil of their continental shelf to exclude others.

China is a strategic player in international politics, which acts strategically and rationally on the matter of national security, sovereignty and interests of the country. China’s laws conflict with the UNCLOS; however, China claims that it is consistent with the UNCLOS. China has always used denying language to broaden its interests and authority over the sea features and resources against the other claimant countries in the sea. China is concerned about its security and fears the politics of expanse water has been used to attack from Southeast Asia in the past. Simultaneously, China’s increasing domination in the SCS has been seen as the hegemony of China over Southeast Asia. In 2009, China released its South China Sea map, in which it claims on everything that falls under the Nine-dash-line. In 2011, China in United Nations Commission affirmed that Spratly Island is fully entitled to territorial waters within its EEZ and Continental shelf. China is more concerned about its economic benefits and national security. The Southeast Asian countries provided economic and cultural importance to the sea, while China claimed on the entire sea on the bases of its ancient interpretation. Unresolved conflict is increasingly becoming more violent rivalry between the Southeast Asian countries and China. Over the recent years, China has enhanced its military presence, claiming more on maritime resources and extending its claim to other sovereign state jurisdictions. Consequently, increasing conflict attracted other countries’ attention, muddling between the claimant countries and seeking their own interests.

### **Southeast Asian Countries Interests and Claims in the South China Sea**

Territorial claims of the Southeast Asian Countries in the South China Sea are the most enduring security issues. The Southeast Asian countries provide historical and legal

interpretations to justify their strategic interests, rights and claims on land features in the SCS to sustain peace and stability in the region. China invokes history to prove that the Nan Sha area of Spratlys Island and Xi Sha area of Paracels Island (both sides of Taiwan Straits) belong to China since the Han Dynasty. Furthermore, since 1947, China has claimed the entire expanse that comes under the U-shaped line. In the Declaration on the Territorial Sea (1958), China comprises the Spratlys, the Paracels and Macclesfield Bank under China's territories.

Similarly, Vietnam's claims on land features (the Spratlys and the Paracels) in the sea come under its 'virtue of discovery, use and occupation'. There were clashes between China and South Vietnam over the Paracels in 1974. With the help of a harmonious relationship with North Vietnam which was under the protection of their ally Soviet Union, Chinese troops evicted the South Vietnamese troops, and they seized control over half of the Paracels. In 1975 North Vietnam seized control over Spratlys which was occupied by the South Vietnamese troops. In the 1988 Naval battle in the Spratlys, China marked its victory over Vietnam in the Spratlys. The Philippine claims in the sea are based on Tomás Cloma's claim in the South China Sea, which he named 'freedomland'. Filipino group had been sailing in the SCS since 1947, but in 1958, Cloma and his group marked a formal claim on the freedomland on their own, rather than of the Philippine Government. The Philippines considered the area of Spratlys as part of *res nullius*, meaning that which is not belong to anyone. From that onwards, the Martial Law Regime under President Ferdinand E. Marcos claimed the part of the Spratlys area off the west coast of the Philippine island of Palawan, making it a municipality in Palawan province. Thus, whatever claim was made by the Cloma Philippines is called a historical claim (Hong 2013: 28-30).

In regard to others, Malaysia claims on exclusive economic zones and continental shelves eastwards from the Malay Peninsula and westwards from Sabah and Sarawak. Malaysia's most of the claims on land overlap with China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, which have already occupied a number of them. At the same time, Brunei Darussalam claims on the continental shelf and an 'exclusive fishing zone' from its coastline, an area that totally overlaps with the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf that are projected from East Malaysia. Thus, the claim area clashes with other claimant countries' claims (Severino 2010: 37-41).

China's mightiest position stretching in the vast expanse of the South China Sea and its sovereignty claim on territorial water and historical claim on islands under its jurisdiction clashes with others sovereignty claims of Southeast Asian countries. It involves Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei in the dispute. China and Taiwan both have overlapping claims related to the SCS: Dongsha (Pratas Islands), Xisha (the Paracel Islands), Zhongsha (Macclesfield Bank) and Nansha (Spratly Islands). Vietnam dominates on the western shores of the SCS and claims indisputable sovereignty on the entire Spratly and Paracel Islands. Malaysia claims territorial sovereignty over twelve southern sides of Spratly islands. Similarly, the Philippines sovereignty claims in many of the eastern side islands of Spratly. Brunei's claims are based on its location within the EEZ, and it claimed its sovereignty right over Louisa Reef (Dutton 2011: 43-8). Thus the major issue of dispute between these states is overlapping claims on most of the islands, which falls under the other state's territorial zone. Therefore, over the years, the claimant countries under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) shared interests in the region to maintain peaceful regional order, and they blamed assertive China's position in the SCS. They share mutual consideration that China is playing an expansionist card to 'rise as dominant player in Asia' (Kim 2015: 119).

Under the shed of 'China threat' the ASEAN countries depended on military and diplomatic relationships with the US and other big power in the region. They supported the US to 'return' to Asia against China's domination. These Southeast Asian countries somehow more arrayed against China's position in the sea; therefore, they favoured other big power such as India, and Japan's involvement in regulating its position in the SCS became a 'focal point for big power rivalry' (Hong 2013: 27). China is growing its modern military base to maintain its status to protect its rights and claim in the sea against the US hegemony for security and stability in the SCS region. 'These conflicting claims are likely to become even more acute as Asia's spiralling energy demands- energy consumption is expected to double by 2030, with China accounting for half that growth-make, the South China Sea the ever more central guarantor of the region's economic strength' (Kaplan 2011: 82).

The building military and naval activities of China and Southeast Asian countries have increased the defence budget over the years, which is higher than the European defence budget. Realist views China is chasing to get more powerful to replace the US position in the world

older. The rapidly growing economy and increasing budget expense on defence created a sense of threat among the Western power that 'China will try to use its growing influence to reshape the rules and institutions of the international system to better serve its interests, and other states in the system especially the declining hegemon-will start to see China as a growing security threat' (Ikenberry 2008: 23). In changing power dynamics, China will become aggressive to seize more power and territory in the sea region. Continuously, emerging as an 'Asian giant' will try to preserve its status quo power in the international system. Realists see the SCS dispute as a ground for a litmus test for China's threat theory. Therefore, increasing arms imports, deploying naval forces, and the presence of big power to counter-invade China and visa-versa is a new Cold War in the Twenty-first century. From the Chinese point of view, its increasing power in the SCS is wholly based on defensive aspects. However, offensive realism sees that China perceives power to maximise through expansion to grow strong relative power against other great powers (Kim 2015: 110-12). According to Mearsheimer, rising China's economy will 'translate its economic might into military might'. If it happened so, there 'would be an intense security competition between China and its rivals, with the ever-present danger of great-power war hanging over them' (Mearsheimer 2001: 4).

In contrast, for the liberalists, China's opening trade market and economic interaction with other nations encouraged China to hold the big power post in the 'regional hierarchy' in East Asia (Kang 2005: 552). China's unprecedented economic development and expansion of its military is a sharp example of economic interdependence 'between the nation's economy and the global economy' (Hudda 2015: 4). Indeed, China is an influencing actor in the East Asian region, and East Asian states seek benefits from its rise. However, it is not posing any kind of threat against the US, regional and global order. According to Ikenberry 'The rise of China does not have to trigger a wrenching hegemonic transition. The US-Chinese power transition can be very different from those of the past because China faces an international order that is fundamentally different from those that past rising states confronted' (Ikenberry 2008: 24). Liberalists are optimistic that the rise of China will bring peace and stability to the region. And also, China's emergence in global politics will bring a bright future to Asia. Though China's domestic policies are an internal matter of Southeast Asia however, the US is increasing its dominance in the region; in reality, the 'United States, not China, might be the problem in the future' (Kaplan 2011: 85).

## **India's Interest in the South China Sea**

China's growing strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region are perceived as a security threat against India's naval position in the region. India is a regional leader in South Asia. However, through its Act East policy (Earlier Look East Policy) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) playing a strategic role through economic and diplomatic cooperation with ASEAN and Southeast Asia, East Asia and Asian Pacific countries to defend the international maritime law in accordance with the UNCLOS and deter China's supremacy in the South China Sea. India's economic, diplomatic and strategic interests with like-minded countries like the US, Japan and Australia forced India to maintain its presence in the SCS for three reasons, first, SCS as international water for freedom of navigation, second, security and strategic influence on Southeast Asian Countries, and third, stand against China's assertive status quo in the SCS.

For the above reasons and peaceful resolution of disputes in the SCS, India wants to stake its step in securing the sea. India is an extra-regional power, and its enhancing strategic-military cooperation with seaside states of the SCS has increased its presence in the sea through the deployment of a naval navy, visits and exercises in the sea. India is geographically not located in the sea, but in a geopolitical and geoeconomic sense, India operates in the sea as a regional player. 'India's role and encounters with China in the South China Sea are but part of a bigger picture of India-China relations. It is with China that India relations are the most important yet most complicated in Asia' (Scott 2013: 52).

For defence operational activity and diplomatic dialogue in the SCS, India developed its economic cooperation and security relationships with IOR, the Southeast Asian states and other regional global actors to ensure peace and stability in the region. In reality, India wants to maintain a great power status quo in the Indo-Pacific region and encounter China's interest in the SCS. India's Maritime Military Strategy described the SCS as a strategic interest for India. India wants to establish a code of conduct for freedom of navigation and exploration of

resources. Over the years, India has developed its navigational presence in the sea for oil exploitation through littoral states. India's building defence cooperation with Vietnam and capacity-building and training, exchange visits of delegations, naval and coast guard ship visits and defence relations with the Philippines, encouraging bilateral and multilateral engagement with the Southeast Asian Countries. The Southeast Asian countries supported India's presence as a regional actor with like-minded states in the South China Sea (Saha 2021: 11-12). However, China's increasing presence in the IOR and its assertiveness in the SCS became a serious concern for India. Likewise, India's growing appearance in the SCS turns into a serious concern for China.

“Though, the South China Sea presents a specific region to test such India-China rhetoric overt there being ‘enough space’ for them both, and in them having ‘common interests’. India-China relations may be peaceful in a formal with India's involvement in the South China Sea become a further such friction point between them, a ‘provocation’ in the eyes of the PRC media” (Scott 2013: 52, Cited in Dai 2012).

The dependency of Southeast Asian countries on India's role as a security provider in the region has become a challenge for India. According to David Scott, ‘Chinese control of the South China Sea would bring Chinese maritime forces to the Strait of Malacca chokepoint looking out onto the India Ocean and a point of entry into India's backyard’. The strait of Malacca is security horizons for India. It is a primary area of strategic interest for trade. ‘In other words, India may find that it is unable to block Chinese entry into the Indian Ocean but can counter-pressure by going into China's own maritime backyard of the South China Sea. This is a simple but potentially effective response’ (Scott 2013: 54). China's increasingly reaching to the Indian Ocean and setting its base posed a challenge for India's policy in the region. India and US both are agreed on China's ‘India Ocean objectives are subservient to its core maritime interests in the pacific’ (Singh 2016: 19).

China's growing aggressive behaviour and rising ambitions in the blue economy of Asia have provided a platform for the India-US relationship in the last few years. India and the US blamed China's claim as unreasonable and illegal according to international maritime law. Therefore, both the actors ‘affirm the importance of safeguarding maritime security and



ensuring freedom of navigation' (MEA 2015) and exercise the right to passage and overflight and patrol in the Asia-pacific and indo-pacific and especially in the SCS. They both advised the Southeast countries to avoid the 'threat or use of force and pursue resolution of territorial and maritime dispute through all peaceful means in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea' (MEA 2015). Therefore, through this regional vision, both the countries will be able to develop a framework to increase their bilateral and multilateral ties among 'Asian power', 'to enable a better respond the diplomatic, economic and security challenges in the region' (MEA 2015).

As a result, India would like to restrain China's assertiveness in the Indian ocean and in the SCS. 'This involves the cessation of reclamation activities and assertive maritime patrolling'. However, India is also optimistic that the US and Southeast Asian countries will 'resort to milder military strategy in confronting China' (Singh 2016: 20). India needs to enhance its partnerships with Japan, Australia, and the US to encounter the Chinese military presence and strategic influence in the IOR and SCS regions.

## **Conclusion**

The South China Sea is the most disputed region in Asia, despite the fact that it holds economic and geostrategic importance. China has followed the delaying strategy to maintain its domination in the region. If China wants to resolve the conflict, it can be three ways; first, China's full sovereignty and historical claim in marked areas and islands. Second, no internationalisation of conflicts through maritime laws and US presence and influence in the process. And third, China's right to exploit the disputed territorial waters surrounding the islands. In this way, China would not like to resolve conflict at any cost. Because the Chinese government knows they are in a more favourable position right now. However, Southeast Asian countries are in a vulnerable condition. China's assertiveness and construction of artificial islands and building military camps threaten the sovereignty of these states. Most of the Southeast Asian states are welcoming India and other actors, such as the US, Japan, and Australia, engagement in the conflict. Though India's presence in the sea and bilateral and multilateral cooperation with these nations can pose a security concern for China, however, India alone will be a potentially invaluable balance for China. Therefore, they are in support of engaging other actors in the dispute.

In order to continue balancing its coercive efforts to maintain the status quo in the SCS, China tried to establish diplomatic engagement with ASEAN. Nevertheless, China supports establishing a regional security architecture and free-trade agreement through the regional comprehensive economic partnership. Together, China sees India's engagement with the Southeast Asian countries through a broader lens, which is a matter of concern but simultaneously, it offered an opportunity for India in terms of engaging with China, especially in energy exploration and trade. China is gaining allies and friends without any external hindrances. India should also better its relations without any inhibitions. The intensity of the exchanges and engagement needs to increase. It also has to be viewed in the context of China's rise and how India intends to deal with it in the Indian Ocean. The South China Sea is coercive diplomacy in which China's behaviour in the SCS matters most for Southeast Asian countries and India.

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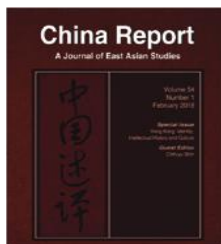


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