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## The Indo-Pacific Pivot: Assessing India's Position in the South China Sea

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### Abstract

As the Indo-Pacific region gains prominence with each passing year, the South China Sea's strategic significance for the surrounding states and the entire world is undeniable. This region not only serves as a crucial maritime corridor for international trade but also possesses vast untapped natural resources, making it a focal point of geopolitical interests and regional security dynamics. This paper sheds light on India's diplomatic, unilateral and collective initiatives with coastal nations of South China Sea, underscoring the principal contentions and military activities in the area. It does so by using the concepts of dominant power and geopolitical shifts, accentuating the interactions among major world powers like China, India, and the USA. Furthermore, it investigates India's commercial pursuits, such as energy ventures and commerce, and the transition in its policy from a stance of neutrality to one of engaged participation under the guidance of Prime Minister Modi. It delineates the progression of India's approach from a stance of relative detachment to one of proactive engagement in the South China Sea, with an emphasis on bolstering defense cooperation and forging strategic alliances. The paper concludes with an analysis of the strategic dynamics among India, China, and the United States, highlighting India's commitment to preserving regional balance and ensuring security.

**Keywords** – South China Sea, power transition theory, freedom of navigation, strategic interests.

### Introduction

In the realm of modern political analysis, a maxim frequently misattributed to Alfred Thayer Mahan has captured the focus of both Chinese and Indian strategists: "Control of the Indian Ocean equates to dominance over Asia." This maritime zone is central to the global seascape in the current century, with its strategic significance poised to shape global destiny. Scholars and analysts have been captivated by this prescient anticipation of the Indian Ocean's role, evidenced by its echoed sentiments in Indian state publications. The fascination with this assertion arises from its spurious nature; what is often presented as Mahan's vision has been modified to reflect the contemporary narrative of shifting security paradigms in key Asian maritime territories, namely the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and East China Sea. Morgenthau asserts that the objective of states should extend beyond achieving power parity; they should aim for a power preponderance. This principle is underpinned by the belief that nations should relentlessly pursue the highest degree of power available within the constraints of their circumstances (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 210). The strategic actions of Napoleon's France in the 1813 peace talks exemplify this approach. In a balance of power context, pre-emptive warfare is justified as a means to preserve and defend the current system from rising powers that threaten to disrupt the balance. Power structures are intrinsically dynamic, tending towards imbalance, which necessitates

continuous competition among states for the elusive equilibrium, often leading to conflict. (Sheehan, 2000, p. 14).

The inherent dynamics of state relations necessitate continuous competition for power equilibrium, a state which historically can lead to conflict. The Battle of Sybota in 433 BC serves as an illustrative example, where Athens, with its superior naval capabilities, faced a strategic dilemma. The deteriorating relationship between Corcyra and Corinth, a Spartan ally, prompted Corcyra to seek Athenian assistance. Athens, aware that supporting Corcyra might incite war with Sparta, also understood that their economic well-being and strategic advantage were reliant on their naval strength and maritime trade. The potential acquisition of Corcyra's navy by Corinth posed a direct threat to Athenian dominance at sea. Thus, Athens made the calculated decision to support Corcyra. The indecisive outcome of the battle notwithstanding, the conflict at Sybota is recognized as a critical catalyst for the onset of the Peloponnesian War. (Kagan, 1989, p. 251).

AFK Organski critiqued traditional balance of power constructs as inadequate representations of both logical theory and empirical observation. In opposition to the established doctrine, Organski proposed the power transition theory, asserting that global tranquillity is sustained not by a balance but by the pre-eminence of a few powerful nations. Organski argued that equal distribution of resources and capabilities among nations increases the likelihood of conflict, whereas peace is more likely when there is a clear hierarchy in national power. He posited that the instigators of aggression are often powerful yet dissatisfied nations, challenging the notion that weaker states are more prone to initiate hostilities. (Organski & Kugler, 1980, p. 19). Power transition theory posits a hierarchical structure in global politics, with a single 'dominant' state at the apex, followed by 'great and intermediate powers', and 'small powers'. During a phase where power is balanced between a 'challenger' and a 'dominant' state, the probability of conflict increases. This is attributed to the challenger's desire to rectify perceived injustices and achieve its 'deserved' global status, as noted by (Tammen, 2008, p. 326). The dominant state, conversely, is disinclined to cede its position of authority. (Tammen 2008) specifies that this period of parity begins when the challenger reaches 80% of the defender's power and persists until the challenger surpasses the defender, achieving 120% of the former rival's strength. Organski's framework is particularly relevant when examining the dynamics between current global powers such as China and the United States, and potentially, the future interplay between India and China, depending on the evolution of the Asian geopolitical landscape. According to power transition theory, the current power dynamics in the Indian Ocean are marked by a hierarchy, with the United States as the preeminent naval force. While relations among India, China, and the United States are generally stable, tensions exist. China's rise to a position of power comparable to that of the United States raises concerns about potential conflicts. Preliminary assessments of the interactions between these states suggest that the United States seeks to preserve the status quo with China, which in turn maintains a similar stance towards India. India, therefore, appears to be the most dissatisfied with its regional influence and is likely to pursue strategies to improve its standing against China. Meanwhile, China is focused on enhancing its power relative to the United States, which is intent on maintaining the existing balance. Although China does not typically uphold the status quo in international affairs, it benefits if India does not succeed in increasing its regional influence. Despite the low likelihood of achieving power parity among the three nations soon, the essential question is whether a balance of power is developing in the Indian Ocean, where each state checks the others to prevent dominance, or if a shift in power will occur, enabling a new power to rise to prominence. (Hornat, 2016)

Scholarly discourse often suggests that China's foreign policy is designed to strategically encircle India. (Wojczewski, 2016; Freeman, 2018; Mohan & Abraham, 2020). Chinese authorities contend that India's

strategic alignment with the United States, Japan, and Australia within the framework of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is a countermeasure to China's burgeoning influence. Analysts in China perceive India's rise as inexorable, attributing it to the nation's substantial population, robust economic growth, nuclear arsenal, and expanding influence in the developing world. Consequently, Beijing has endeavoured to curtail India's engagement in East Asian geopolitics. Rehman (2009) observes that China's approach is designed to deflect India's focus away from East Asia, thereby constraining its geopolitical reach to South Asia. This strategy is manifested in China's consistent efforts to side-line New Delhi in East Asian multilateral settings. Recent geopolitical actions by India, particularly under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, indicate a readiness to embrace risk and engage more assertively on the global stage. This is exemplified by India's response to the 2020 Ladakh border conflict, which Indian authorities attribute to unexpected Chinese military incursions into the disputed region. In response to the evolving geopolitical landscape, India has implemented a series of countermeasures, which encompass the mobilization of supplementary military forces, the prohibition of several Chinese mobile applications including TikTok, and the establishment of stringent regulatory frameworks impeding Chinese enterprises' participation in Indian infrastructural endeavours. Notwithstanding these developments, experts such as Madan (2020) assert that India's strategic posture vis-à-vis China has exhibited substantial continuity since the year 2008.

### Historical Context

Traditionally, India has maintained a stance of neutrality in the territorial and maritime disputes within the South China Sea (SCS), involving China and Southeast Asian nations. (Jawli, 2016) Despite the underlying regional tensions and security dilemmas, India refrained from aligning with any party and eschewed provocative statements that might antagonize China. However, recent shifts indicate a transformation in India's strategic approach. The Act East Policy and the broader Indo-Pacific vision have galvanized India's more proactive engagement in the SCS. India acknowledges the critical importance of upholding a rule-based order and ensuring the freedom of navigation within these pivotal maritime corridors. India's strategic interests transcend neutrality, as it seeks to actively engage with the region.

India's involvement in the SCS is underpinned by significant geopolitical, geostrategic, and economic considerations. Despite its non-littoral status, India's interactions with SCS littoral states encompass naval exercises, strategic partnerships, energy exploration, and diplomatic initiatives. India's reliance on unfettered access to the SCS for its trade, commerce, and naval operations underscores the importance of these sea lanes. With the Indian Navy's operations extending into the Western Pacific, safeguarding transit through these waters is imperative. India perceives the Indo-Pacific as an integrated maritime domain, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at its nucleus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Act East policy emphasizes collaboration with ASEAN member states and the Southeast Asian maritime domain as instrumental to India's developmental trajectory. India's diplomatic posture is not confrontational but rather conciliatory, engaging with the region through naval deployments, exercises, and fortified ties with SCS littoral states. Amid escalating tensions between ASEAN countries and China, India positions itself as a constructive regional actor, fostering stability and seeking conciliation in the face of disputes. Additionally, India endorses the prerogative of littoral states to exploit resources within their Exclusive Economic Zones, as sanctioned by international law. (Singh, 2012) These positions have significantly influenced India's diplomatic relations with the SCS littoral states, fostering enhanced defence cooperation, joint naval exercises, and burgeoning commercial interactions (Mohan, 2008). India's proactive engagement with states such as

Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia reflects its resolve to fortify alliances and counterbalance the ascending regional influence of China.

India's policy on the SCS conflict has evolved from a historically neutral stance to a more engaged posture under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This transition is manifested in India's augmented defence collaboration with claimant states and a shift from its previous neutral position regarding the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling on the SCS. Noteworthy endeavours include collaborative military exercises with principal allies, including the United States, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Australia, and Indonesia, as well as escalated arms sales and support to the Philippines and Vietnam. While these developments primarily aim to safeguard India's economic interests, they are not explicitly intended as a measure to constrain China. Recent pronouncements by Indian officials, including External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, have reaffirmed India's support for the Philippines' sovereignty in the SCS and indicated an inclination towards enhanced defence and security cooperation. (Haidar, 2024) China remains apprehensive about India's expanding role, perceiving it as a potential disruptor of regional equilibrium, akin to the influence exerted by the United States.

### **India's strategic interests in SCS**

India's strategic objectives in the South China Sea (SCS) are characterized by significant geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations. The country's policy in the SCS is informed by a strategic framework that incorporates the "extended neighbourhood" and "Indo-Pacific" concepts, thereby integrating the region into India's broader strategic vision. The term "extended neighbourhood," introduced into the Indian policy lexicon in 2000, refers to areas beyond South Asia where India aims to protect and promote its national interests. As a result, the SCS has been included within this strategic framework. For instance, in 2004, India's then External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, expressed India's strategic vision of an extended neighbourhood that encompasses the SCS. This view is consistent with the Indian Navy's 2007 strategic doctrine, which recognizes the SCS as a significant blue water region of strategic interest to India. Given its location at the confluence of the Eastern Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, the SCS serves as a crucial maritime link between these vital bodies of water. (Scott, 2013).

In the realm of modern strategic discourse, the term "Indo-Pacific" has been progressively embraced by Indian, American, and Australian analysts to delineate the continuous maritime stretch. Shyam Saran has highlighted the ascension of "Indo-Pacific" within India's strategic vernacular, denoting the broadening of India's security horizons to include the Western Pacific. This geopolitical notion is further corroborated by the perceived "Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indo-Pacific," as noted by scholars such as C. Raja Mohan. The strategic import of the Indo-Pacific region was discreetly accentuated by the erstwhile Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during the 2012 ASEAN India Summit, where he accentuated the region's pivotal role in India's economic and strategic ambitions.

Rehman (2009) articulates those Southeast Asian countries, notably Singapore and the Philippines, recognize the strategic advantage of India's involvement in the region as a balancing force, especially with the potential reduction of the United States' military presence. India's prowess eclipses that of the individual Southeast Asian contenders embroiled in the South China Sea (SCS) conflict. Confronted with China's aggressive stance, India has demonstrated its military determination, as evidenced by the dispatch of a warship to the disputed waters in June 2020. Notwithstanding official repudiations of any ambition to counterbalance China, conjecture persists regarding India's intentions to pre-empt Chinese supremacy in the SCS. David Scott

suggests that India's "Look East" policy, which was originally focused on trade, has transitioned into a subtle form of counterpoise against China. India stands ready to join forces with other significant powers to prevent Beijing from establishing control over the SCS, a move that would enable Chinese naval forces to dominate the strategic juncture at the Strait of Malacca, bordering the Indian Ocean. The "Look East" policy has evolved into an "Act East" strategy. During the 2021 Raisina Dialogue, Admiral Karambir Singh, Chief of the Indian Navy, hinted at China's tactic of augmenting its sway in tandem with its commercial ventures, indicating India's apprehension about the possibility of China's actions in the SCS being mirrored in the Indian Ocean. (Singh, 2021).

The South China Sea (SCS) holds critical geostrategic value for India, serving as the principal maritime conduit that connects East Asia with the Indian Ocean and functioning as the eastern gateway to the Indian Ocean. The strategic necessity of unhindered access to the Malacca Strait and the SCS has been progressively emphasized by India. Within the framework of the Indian Maritime Military Strategy, the SCS is delineated as a "secondary area" of operational focus for the Indian Navy, underscoring its essential strategic importance to India's geopolitical interests. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which house India's first joint command, are instrumental in advancing India's naval reach into Southeast Asia. Situated near Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia, these islands are strategic assets that bolster India's capacity to project naval power in the region. Nonetheless, India's ability to extend its naval projection beyond the Indian Ocean is still in its infancy, hindered by geographical impediments and the lack of forward bases, though this is mitigated to some extent by access to facilities in Singapore and Vietnam.

In addition to geopolitical factors, India's economic interests in the SCS are substantial, particularly concerning the security of maritime pathways that are crucial to the nation's maritime trade. Indian energy corporations are actively involved in exploration endeavours in the SCS, thereby deepening India's economic engagement in the area.

India's "Look East" policy, initially devised for economic engagement, has gradually integrated a security dimension. Since the 1990s, India has participated in joint naval exercises with Southeast Asian countries to advance its strategic objectives. Notably, India and Singapore have conducted regular naval exercises, with the Singapore-Indian Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) occurring in the South China Sea (SCS) for the first time in 2005, in a non-disputed zone. India has strengthened its defence ties with Thailand through joint naval patrols and has established bilateral defence agreements with Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, and Indonesia, while also providing military support to Myanmar.

Significantly, India has bolstered its naval relationships with the Philippines and Vietnam, both contenders in the SCS territorial dispute. The strategic alliance between India and Vietnam was underscored by the initiation of their Maritime Security Dialogue in 2019. During the 2012 Scarborough Reef standoff between China and the Philippines, India called for a peaceful resolution, marking a notable diplomatic intervention by New Delhi and provoking a stern rebuke from Beijing, which decried India's participation as meddling. India's naval engagement in Southeast Asia is generally viewed as benign, attributed to its non-claimant status in the SCS dispute and the absence of direct strategic or territorial aspirations, in stark contrast to China's aggressive stance. The Indian Navy's involvement in the region surpasses simple power projection; it also aims to cultivate soft power, demonstrated by its humanitarian aid during the 2004 tsunami and collaborative anti-piracy efforts with Indonesia and Thailand.

In conjunction with maritime collaborations, India has augmented its engagement in the energy sector with Southeast Asian nations. This includes joint ventures in offshore hydrocarbon exploration with Vietnam and the establishment of a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Malaysia. The Indian Navy has reiterated its dedication to safeguarding Indian interests globally, encompassing assets within the South China Sea (SCS). Investments by ONGC Videsh in Vietnamese offshore blocks, particularly block 128 which is situated within the ambit of China's unilateral nine-dash line claim, have sparked discord with Beijing (Pant, 2013).

Moreover, India has embarked on initiatives to market military equipment to Southeast Asian states, albeit with circumspect progress. A notable instance in 2019 involved India's overture to sell BrahMos missiles to Indonesia during territorial contentions over the Natuna islands in the SCS. The consummation of this deal remains pending, hindered by the joint Russian-Indian genesis of the BrahMos missiles and the looming prospect of U.S. sanctions against Russian military hardware. Vietnam's solicitation of India's support in the modernization of its defence inventory, inclusive of BrahMos missile procurement, has been met with a measured response from the Indian administration, indicative of a deliberate reticence to antagonize China. Hence, India's restrained military forays in the region can be ascribed to its prudent diplomatic posture vis-à-vis China. (Emmers, 2022)

**Conclusion-** The dynamic geopolitical landscape of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean indicates changing power relations and the strategic objectives of prominent nations such as China, India, and the United States. The delicate state of power equilibrium, poised for a significant transition, will determine the future of tranquillity and safety in these maritime zones. The success of maintaining peace will depend on the skilful diplomatic engagement and strategic choices of these influential states. The ongoing developments in these regions reflects the larger trends in global politics and the strategic postures of these nations on an international level. Historical parallels drawn from the Battle of Sybota and the Peloponnesian War underscore the enduring quest for naval dominance, bearing consequences as significant for the contemporary global order as they were for the classical epoch. India's departure from its historical stance of neutrality to a more assertive and proactive role in regional maritime affairs, particularly under the stewardship of Prime Minister Modi, signifies its intent to occupy a central position in the discourse on regional security and to champion a maritime framework grounded in the principles of rules-based order. This paradigm shift is evidenced by enhanced defence cooperation and the formation of strategic partnerships, reflecting India's commitment to protecting its sovereign interests and contributing to the stabilization of the region amidst China's burgeoning influence. The power transition theory suggests that the ambition for supremacy harboured by these sovereign entities may catalyse a reconfiguration of the existing balance, with the potential to disrupt the longstanding status quo within these critical maritime zones. The actions and policies of India, China, and the United States will continue to sculpt the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific, as each nation strives to assert its influence while navigating the complex interplay between collaboration and competition.

India's strategic engagement in the South China Sea is characterized by its geopolitical, geostrategic, and economic dimensions. The nation's policy, articulated within the 'extended neighbourhood' and 'Indo-Pacific' paradigms, exhibits a steadfast commitment to the defence of its maritime interests and the amplification of its influence within the region. India's naval exercises, defence partnerships, and commercial endeavours in Southeast Asia epitomize a dynamic approach aimed at securing its strategic imperatives. While India adopts a cautious posture in its military engagements to dodge direct confrontation with China, its initiatives indicate a firm resolve to consolidate its presence and safeguard its interests in the South China Sea.

This judicious strategy skilfully balances assertiveness with diplomacy, weighing the necessities of economic cooperation against the imperatives of security vigilance in an environment marked by complex territorial disputes and the ascendant trajectory of China's regional dominance. In essence, India's evolving policy in the South China Sea encapsulates a prudent navigation of the delicate equilibrium between forceful assertion and diplomatic negotiation in the service of its overarching national objectives.

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