

# India's Incremental Balancing in the South China Sea

Written by David Scott

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DAVID SCOTT, JUL 26 2015

Despite not being geographically in the South China Sea, India is increasingly being recognised as an actor in the balance of power in the South China Sea (Muni 2011; Puri and Sahgal 2011; Sakhuja 2011; Kaushiva 2012; Salil 2013; Majumdar 2013; Chaturvedy 2014; Baruah 2014; Chaturvedy 2015). The reasons for India's involvement remain twofold – entwined geopolitical China concerns and geoeconomic energy security concerns (Das 2013; Scott 2013).

### India's Strategic Interest

At the government level the South China Sea has been classified as within India's *extended neighbourhood* for over a decade, for the first time in February 2004 by Yashwant Sinha the then *External Affairs* Minister. When formulated in the mid-1990s, India's *Look East* Policy originally focused on economic cooperation in Southeast Asia channelled through ASEAN. However, a *Look East-2* focus in the 2000s cast India's horizons more widely across the South China Sea into the Western Pacific/East Asia, with more overt security consideration. Accordingly, the Indian Navy's 2007 doctrine statement *India's Maritime Military Strategy* defined the South China Sea as an area of "strategic interest" to India. This leaves India with interests to be gained, maintained and if necessary defended – primarily through the Indian navy's unilateral presence and bilateral security arrangements. India's Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Joshi made that clear in December 2012 when he announced that the Indian navy could and would be deployed to the South China Sea to defend Indian energy security interests there. By 2013, the increasing adoption of the *Indo-Pacific* as a strategic framework for India gave the South China Sea closer geopolitical relevance for India. Narendra Modi's arrival in power in May 2014 saw his *Act East* readiness to strengthen India's military and economic position in the South China Sea cutting across China's own drive across the South China Sea (Chang 2015).

### India's "Balancing"

In international relations (IR) terms, India is *hedging* towards China; simultaneously pursuing economic *engagement* together with military *balancing*. A further two-level analysis is in play whereby there is some global China-India political cooperation with regard to restraining US unipolarity and replacing it with a more multipolar system, and with regard to restructuring some international economic institutions. However, at the regional level security competition between India and China is far more apparent. The South China Sea is an acute example of this regional level friction now being seen between these two Asian giants (Baruah 2015). Indian unease with Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea is why India has started to raise the South China issue at various regional settings like the India-ASEAN Delhi Dialogue in 2014 and 2015, the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2014, and the East Asia Summit in 2013 and 2014. Chinese actions in the South China Sea continued to attract Indian criticism in 2015; especially China's *Great Wall of Sand* atolls to islands reclamation-militarisation project (Chaudhury 2015a), and China's rejection of the Philippines taking the South China Sea issue to the UNCLOS tribunal (Valente 2015).

India's balancing partly consists of *internal balancing* whereby India is building up its own military strength. This has been most effective in the maritime sphere with the creation of a blue water navy increasingly able to operate at a distance, beyond the Indian Ocean into the South China Sea. India's projection of maritime power into the South China Sea is further underpinned by its build up of the Andaman and Nicobar Command, which functions as a Far

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East Naval Command (FENC) looking down the Strait of Malacca into the South China Sea. The inauguration in July 2012 of the air marine station at INS Baaz, the most southerly point of the Andaman islands, enables India to conduct surveillance operations into the South China Sea.

Admittedly, India is not really able to block China from appearing in the Indian Ocean, but it can respond by going into China's backyard of the South China Sea, as an example of *lateral pressure theory* (Weimar 2013). The Indian navy has been deploying through the South China Sea since 2000, generally twice a year, which has involved its own unilateral practicing, as well as bilateral port calls and exercises with local actors, particularly Vietnam. Such deployments attract Chinese criticism, as with the so-called *INS Shardul* incident of July 2011, where the Indian ship was supposedly radioed from nearby Chinese vessels to vacate these "Chinese" waters. India though continues to deploy into such disputed waters, and China continues to warn India about such appearances (Patranobis 2015).

India's balancing also consists of *external balancing* whereby India has been strengthening security links with other countries who are similarly concerned about China. Such balancing is already noticeable in the South China Sea, primarily through strengthened military and maritime arrangements with Vietnam, and secondarily through strengthened military and maritime links with the Philippines. This China-centric balancing is also noticeable outside the South China Sea where India has established security partnerships with the US, Australia and Japan – with such wider partnerships starting to be applied to the South China Sea.

This range of external balancing is not classic Cold War hard explicit containment alliances, but rather represent new post-Cold War soft implicit balancing partnerships. Nevertheless, India's strategic-military arrangements with Vietnam, the US, Japan and Australia are implicitly China-centric, with an unstated but nevertheless apparent China-focus, and with increasing significance for the balance of power in the South China Sea.

## India's Partners for the South China Sea

With Vietnam, India's "diamond on the South China Sea" (Brewster 2009), India's *Cooperation Framework* agreement of 2003 and *strategic partnership* proclaimed in 2007 has become strengthened in its military side, in the wake of China's growing strength in the South China Sea. This partnership has been given teeth in recent years through military supplies, especially maritime, from India to Vietnam, which has attracted Chinese criticism (Bagchi 2014). Port facilities have also been extended by Vietnam to India at Cam Ranh Bay. The pace of India-Vietnam relations have quickened under the Modi administration (Thayer 2014), with a "pivot" (Karnad 2014) to Vietnam on the part of India, leaving an "axis" (Patil 2014) that is now implicitly China-centric. A significant development under the Modi administration is how the South China Sea has featured in their Joint Statements drawn up in President Mukherjee's trip to Vietnam in September 2014 and the visit by Vietnam's Prime Minister to India in October 2014. These Joint Statements' formulaic reiteration of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and adherence to international law, are an implicit criticism of China. The October 2014 visit also saw a slew of increased military assistance programmes by India to the Vietnamese navy.

Geopolitically, Vietnam serves as a barrier to Chinese domination of the South China Sea, from where Beijing would be able to project power up through the Strait of Malacca into the Indian Ocean. From India's point of view, Vietnam can put pressure on China's southern flanks, and give China a two-front challenge. India's "Vietnam card" against China in the South China Sea serves as some counterpart to China's "Pakistan Card" against India in the Indian Ocean.

Geoeconomically, India seeks access to oil fields in Vietnamese-controlled waters. The problem has been that some of these exploration plots have been in waters claimed by China. India says it is not taking sides on sovereignty issues in the South China Sea, but yet its decision to sign deals with Vietnam in disputed waters thereby implicitly support Vietnam's claimed position against China. This generated heated Chinese comments during 2011, with further fields in these disputed waters allocated to Indian exploration during the visit of the Vietnamese Prime Minister to India in October 2014. India's energy involvement, via Vietnam, in the South China Sea continues to rankle China (Parashar 2015b).

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In turn, India has moved into closer bilateral security links with the US, Japan and Australia. Of particular significance is how the South China Sea was a feature of India-US defence discussions in June 2015, when the Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter visited India and further India-US defence agreements were initialled (Chaudhury 2015). It is also significant that the US Pacific Command (PACOM) is now openly egging on India to maintain its presence in the South China Sea, "the South China seas are international waters and India should be able to operate freely wherever India wants to operate. If that means the South China Sea, then get in there and do that" (Harris cited in Som 2015). India has also embraced closer security links with Japan, including bilateral JIMEX Japan-India Maritime exercises in the Western Pacific (in 2012 and 2014) and in the Bay of Bengal (in 2013 and 2015). Finally, India has embraced closer security links with Australia, including naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal in September 2015.

In turn, India has been moving into these Indo-Pacific trilaterals. The India-Japan-US (IJUS) trilateral was formally set up in December 2011, and has been "revitalised" (Kapila 2014) in the wake of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. That mechanism already involving India in trilateral exercises with the US and Japanese navies in the Western Pacific (2007, 2009, 2013) and Bay of Bengal (2007, 2015). As part of its wider activism, the Modi administration also complemented its IJUS involvement with the India-Japan-Australia (IJA) trilateral set up at Foreign Secretary level in June 2015. This first IJA meeting was dominated by questions of maritime security, the South China Sea and desirability of holding trilateral naval exercises in the future. From an international relations point of view these Indo-Pacific trilaterals are further examples of what can be styled *minilateralism*, which is in-between bilateralism and multilateralism.

## Conclusions

Certain developments would affect India's role in the balance of power in the South China Sea, and which China would not welcome. A small but significant development would be if and when India starts carrying out such bilateral and trilateral exercises in the South China Sea with the US, Japan and Australia. Precedents for this are the exercise formats with them that India is already involved with in the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, and which those other three states have already conducted between themselves in the South China Sea in July 2011. Greater use of Cam Ranh deep water bay by the Indian navy would also be significant. A further development would be if and when India starts conducting fuller military exercises in the South China Sea with Vietnam. Precedents for India-Vietnam naval exercises are India's SIMBEX military exercises with Singapore in the South China Sea that have been a regular biannual feature since 2005 (Collin 2013), and Vietnam's participation in the 2010 MILAN exercises held by India in the Bay of Bengal. Finally, a further China-centric trilateral permutation with immediate relevance for the South China Sea would be the India-Japan-Vietnam format suggested by Panda (2014).

Admittedly, elements of engagement between India and China might develop some further momentum under the naval dialogue mechanism that was haltingly mooted in 2015. South China Sea matters would be an obvious agenda item for it, but there are little signs of that dialogue mechanism developing much impetus. Instead what is more likely is that India will increasingly impact on the South China Sea balance of power through its own increased presence and range of strategic security partnerships in the region. This is what IR *realism* would predict; exemplified in John Mearsheimer's speech in Sydney where he forecast future balancing behaviour as being "certain" (Mearsheimer 2010: 390) between India, Vietnam, the US, Japan and Australia in the face of China's regional rise. Five years on and this *strategic geometry* is coming to pass in the South China Sea, and in which India is doing its bit.

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**David Scott** is a member and writer at the Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC). He has written widely on two broad fronts; firstly Indo-Pacific security issues with particular regard to Indian and Chinese foreign policy, secondly Buddhism, as a current feature of Indian and Chinese diplomacy and historically within East-West Encounters.