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## The 'China Factor' in India's Maritime Engagement with Southeast Asia

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The maritime domain has emerged as a prominent sphere of cooperation between India and Southeast Asia. This has come amid a shared interest in maintaining the free flow of maritime trade and transport, the need for a joint approach in addressing humanitarian disasters, and mutual concerns in combatting the scourge of maritime piracy, illicit trafficking, and the latent threat of maritime terrorism. However, at the heart of this engagement is the 'China factor'. As far back as the 11<sup>th</sup> century when the Indian Chola Dynasty conducted naval expeditions to Srivijaya in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula to protect the lucrative spice trade with Song China, China has been at the heart of India's strategic outlook towards Southeast Asia.[1] To be sure, this is rarely acknowledged in official discourse where diplomatic rhetoric often masks more competitive and confrontational aspects of the Sino-Indian relationship, particularly following the normalization of bilateral relations. Focusing on the post-Cold War period, this article will first provide an overview of the shifting perceptions and ambitions of the Indian Navy in Southeast Asia. It will then highlight how the 'China factor' or more specifically the perceived or actual rise of China's naval presence in Southeast Asia has been a catalyst for India's post-Cold War maritime engagement with the region.

### Shifting Perceptions and Ambitions

India's naval interaction with Southeast Asia has changed in the post-Cold War period amid the improved perceptions and expanded ambitions of the Indian Navy. Undergirding both of these developments is the 'China factor'.

#### *Improved Perceptions*

The Indian Navy has come a long way from the days of being perceived as a threat to regional stability and security. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, several Southeast Asian states voiced concerns over India's military modernisation efforts, particularly when seen in the context of New Delhi's close links with the Soviet Union and Vietnam.[2] Notably, several countries expressed fears about India's ambitions to build-up its naval capability on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands following the establishment of the FORTAN (Fortress Andaman and Nicobar) joint-services base at Port Blair in 1985. This prompted rhetoric of India maintaining a 'super and unsinkable aircraft carrier, only 80 miles west of the Straits of Malacca' that would be 'a springboard to project Indian naval power into the Malacca Straits and even into the South China Sea'.[3]

These concerns would gradually be assuaged as India demonstrated its status as a responsible naval power, as well as promoting greater transparency about its military modernisation efforts and reaffirming the absence of territorial ambitions in the region. This was complemented by changing security perceptions among Southeast Asian states that came to recognise the need for external support to protect their territorial waters from traditional and non-traditional security threats, which made them more receptive to engagement with the Indian Navy.

On India's part, the country stepped up cooperation with littoral states in the areas of military training, joint exercises, coordinated patrols, and port calls. While most maritime cooperation between India and Southeast Asia has taken place at a bilateral level, a growing number of initiatives have taken place at a multilateral level. Notably, several

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ASEAN member-states participate in the biennial *Milan* naval meetings that India has hosted since in 1995,[4] while India has also conducted joint naval exercises with Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia as part of the Search and Rescue Operations (*SAREX*) since 1997.[5] In the year 2000, the Indian Navy also conducted its first naval exercises in the South China Sea.[6]

India has also spearheaded several regional initiatives that have sought to strengthen maritime confidence-building. New Delhi was an architect of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) (originally known as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC)) that was established in 1997 and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), established in 2008 that includes several Southeast Asian states as members.[7] The emphasis on maritime security found newfound importance under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi when it unveiled the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative in 2015 as a means of strengthening maritime connectivity and developing the 'Blue Economy'.[8] This was complemented by a string of ASEAN-centric initiatives focussed on strengthening regional maritime cooperation. Notably, India was a founding member of the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Security Forum in 2012.

Humanitarian Assistance/ Disaster Relief (HADR) operations have also emerged as a catalyst for improving the image of the Indian Navy in the region, as noted by its assistance following the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and cyclone that struck Myanmar in 2008.[9] Naval cooperation with non-littoral states also served to reaffirm the Indian Navy's presence in the region.[10] For instance, the Indian Navy escorted US naval vessels transiting the Strait of Malacca as part of 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in 2002.[11]

## *Expanding Ambitions*

As well as improving its image, the Indian Navy has also expanded its ambitions amid the transformation from a largely brown-water coastal fleet to one with a growing blue-water power projection capability. At present, the Indian Navy comprises 140 vessels with plans for 200 vessels by 2050, including the country's first indigenously developed aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines.[12] This has come amid a broader transition in the Indian Navy's 'strategic role' beyond its traditional responsibility to protect the country's 7,000km coastline towards ensuring freedom of navigation along major sea-lines of communication.[13] Undergirding this is India's growing trade and resource needs. More than 90 per cent of India's total external trade by volume and 77 per cent by value, accounting for over 40 per cent of the country's GDP, transit the maritime domain.[14] This includes almost 80 per cent of the country's crude oil consumption, which transits international shipping lanes.[15]

This "forward-leaning" maritime strategy has become evident at the doctrinal level with India's 2004 maritime strategy proclaiming the 'arc from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca as a legitimate area of interest' for the Indian Navy.[16] While the country's 2015 maritime security strategy defined the South and East China Seas and Western Pacific as secondary areas of interest to the Indian Navy, 'choke-points' leading to and from the Indian Ocean, including the Malacca, Singapore, Sunda and Lombok straits were included among the primary areas of interest.[17] Additionally, the South China Sea acquired significance as a 'maritime gateway' between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific.[18]

While the primary focus of the Indian Navy has been the Indian Ocean Region, the broader Indo-Pacific has also acquired importance as illustrated by the growing number of Indian naval deployments to the wider region.[19] This has been complemented by the establishment of the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), the country's first joint tri-services command, in 2001.[20] Referred to as India's 'window into East and Southeast Asia', the ANC together with the Eastern Command headquartered in Visakhapatnam corrected for a traditional bias in favour of the Western Command in Mumbai.[21]

## **The 'China Factor'**

Undergirding the improved image of the Indian Navy in Southeast Asia and expansion of India's maritime ambitions in the region is the 'China factor'. This has come amid a broader transformation in the Sino-Indian relationship from a largely continental-based interaction that was confined to their disputed land border to an increasingly maritime-

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based interaction in which both countries have emerged as major naval powers with ambitions and capabilities to project power into each other's maritime peripheries (i.e. India in the South China Sea (SCS) and China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)).[22] These developments have resulted in a proclivity by both countries to regard the maritime domain in increasingly Mahanian terms with an emphasis on competitive naval diplomacy, while moving away from a traditionally defensive maritime posture.[23]

Elaborating on this, India has maintained dual interests in its maritime engagement with Southeast Asia with respect to China; one related to protecting India's intrinsic interests in the SCS and the other related to counter-balancing Chinese encroachments into the IOR.

## *1. Responding to growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea*

As India has developed growing interests in the SCS, it has also become more concerned about the possibility that China could potentially threaten these interests.[24] This has come amid China's increasingly assertive posture in the maritime domain, as illustrated by its expansive 'nine-dash line' territorial claims in the SCS and the country's strengthening naval capabilities.

These developments have fuelled a perception in New Delhi that India's largely benign maritime capabilities could support ASEAN in its efforts to counter-balance China's growing naval presence in Southeast Asia, which has been perceived in more ominous terms. The perceived threat of China's naval ambitions was also seen by some as a means to dilute concerns about India's naval capabilities, which as noted earlier was a prominent issue among some Southeast Asian states in the early post-Cold War period. As such, India sought to leverage concerns about China by Southeast Asian states in order to strengthen its own engagement with the region.[25] In doing so, challenging China's growing maritime assertiveness offered a means for India and Southeast Asia to find common ground while prompting regional powers to become more receptive to an expanded Indian naval presence in the region.

In this context, India has developed an increasingly vocal position on Chinese assertiveness in the SCS. While not a party to the maritime territorial disputes in the region, India has nonetheless outlined that it has stakes in ensuring their peaceful resolution. Even official discourses, while couched in more diplomatic language, increasingly challenged China's assertive posture in the SCS while alluding to support the position of the other Southeast Asian claimant states (over that of China). For instance, at the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in 2012, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh noted that, 'as maritime nations, India and ASEAN nations should intensify their engagement for maritime security and safety, for freedom of navigation and for peaceful settlement of maritime disputes in accordance with international law'.[26] The same year, Indian External Affairs Minister SM Krishna noted that, 'nobody has unilateral control over it [the SCS] and India is capable of safeguarding its interests'.[27] Then Defence Minister AK Antony also pledged that in order 'to ensure the uninterrupted and safe passage for its ships for trade, India will keep visiting these waters for naval exercises to protect its core areas of interest'.[28]

Indian military officials have also become more willing to articulate India's maritime interests in the SCS through the prism of China's assertive behaviour. Responding to China's opposition to Indian offshore energy interests in the SCS, Vice Admiral Joshi, then commander of the Western Naval Command and subsequent chief of naval staff, noted in 2011 that the 'Indian Navy will protect any Indian asset worldwide including [Indian national oil company] ONGC Videsh assets in the South China Sea', adding that the Indian Navy was holding exercises in preparation for such a contingency.[29]

More recently, speaking in 2014 Prime Minister Modi called on claimant states to abide by 'international law and norms on maritime issues', adding that India and ASEAN are 'both keen to enhance our cooperation in advancing balance, peace and stability in the region'.[30] In a later speech in 2018, Modi took a more emphatic position. Without mentioning China by name, he implicitly condemned the country's aggressive behavior by calling for 'a common rules-based order for the region' that 'must equally apply to all individually as well as to the global commons' and 'believe in sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength'.[31]

India's increasingly vocal position has been accompanied by bolder actions as New Delhi pursued deepening

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relations with several claimant states to the maritime territorial disputes. Notably, Vietnam and India strengthened maritime cooperation during a period of renewed tensions in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. This included India equipping Vietnam with naval patrol boats, as well as providing training to the country in underwater warfare to support its expanding fleet of submarines.[32] The Indian Navy also gained permanent berthing rights at Nha Trang port, which was projected as a means of extending India's 'sustainable maritime presence' in the SCS.[33] The joint statement concluded between both countries in 2014 referred to maintaining freedom of over-flight, which notably came in the aftermath of China's declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea the previous year.[34] India also extended a \$500 million line of credit to Vietnam for defence purchases while it announced the sale of four offshore patrol vessels to the country in 2014, one month after the deployment of a Chinese oilrig into waters claimed by Vietnam.[35] This alignment between both countries in the maritime domain also extended to the energy sector as Vietnam granted exploration rights in disputed waters to Indian national oil company ONGC Videsh.[36]

India has also deepened relations with other claimant states to the maritime territorial disputes in the SCS. For instance, while India's official position has been to take a neutral position on sovereignty claims in the SCS, the statement issued after the meeting between the foreign ministers of the Philippines and India in 2015 made specific reference to the 'West Philippine Sea', which alluded to India's implicit recognition of the Philippines' position on the dispute.[37] India also voiced support for the Philippines' decision to refer its dispute with China to the arbitration tribunal of UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) in 2013.[38] When the tribunal subsequently ruled in favour of the Philippines in 2016, New Delhi noted that 'India, as a State Party to the UNCLOS, urges all parties to show utmost respect for UNCLOS'.[39]

Finally, India has developed an alignment with other major regional and global powers in challenging China's assertive behaviour in the maritime domain. Notably, the 'US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region' concluded in 2015 called 'on all parties [to the maritime territorial disputes in the SCS] to avoid the threat or use of force and pursue resolution of the territorial and maritime disputes through all peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea'.[40] The joint statement concluded between both countries also made reference to 'safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea'.[41] This was notably the first time both countries made such an explicit reference to the SCS territorial disputes in a bilateral context.

## *2. Counter-balancing Chinese encroachments into the Indian Ocean Region*

The second aspect of India's maritime engagement with Southeast Asia in the context of the 'China factor' is the need to counterbalance China in the IOR by stepping up India's presence in the SCS. This comes as New Delhi has developed a proclivity to equate its security concerns in South Asia with those in Southeast Asia while seeing the IOR and Western Pacific as a single strategic space centered on the SCS.

Fuelling this strategic inter-linkage between the IOR and SCS is a perception that China is increasingly encroaching into India's maritime space in the IOR. This has come as Beijing has developed a growing emphasis on naval power projection beyond the so-called first and second 'island-chains' into the realm of 'far sea defense', 'far-sea operations' or 'open seas protection'.[42] While references to China's so-called 'string of pearls' strategy tend to exaggerate the threat of the Chinese naval presence in the IOR, there have been genuine concerns that China's development of port infrastructure in several countries (including Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) could become a precursor to a more assertive naval posture in the future.[43] This narrative moved beyond the realm of rhetoric when China began its anti-piracy mission in the Indian Ocean in 2008 and established its first permanent military outpost (termed an overseas logistics facility) in Djibouti in 2016.[44]

These developments prompted several scholars to make a case for India to counter-balance Chinese encroachments into the IOR by strengthening India's presence in the SCS. This has taken the form of several narratives, ranging from deterring and delaying China's entry into the IOR by stepping up India's presence in the SCS, to leveraging India's geo-strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean and the western approaches of the Strait of

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Malacca to compensate for China's geo-strategic advantage along the disputed land border with India, and developing a strategic partnership with Vietnam and other like-minded states in Southeast Asia as a counter-balance to China's "all-weather" friendship with Pakistan and deepening relations with other states in South Asia. These narratives have become more entrenched in recent years as an expanded 'Indo-Pacific' strategic geography has blurred the divide and strengthened inter-linkages between the IOR and Western Pacific.[45]

Going through each of these narratives, an early concern that was expressed by some Indian policymakers and strategic elites was that China's assertive posture in the SCS could become a harbinger of its eventual behaviour in the IOR. In other words, there was a belief that once China was able to consolidate its position in the SCS, it would be in a better position to project power into the IOR.[46] These fears were confirmed following China's reported deployment of strategic bombers to the reclaimed islands of the SCS, which strengthened China's power projection capabilities.[47] As such, one of India's objectives in establishing a presence in the SCS is to deter and delay China's projection of power into the IOR.[48] As China has come to strengthen its naval presence in the IOR, a counter-projection strategy has also taken hold with calls for strengthening India's presence in the SCS in response to the PLA Navy's growing deployments into the IOR.[49]

A related narrative that has gained some traction over time is that India should seek to counter-balance China's assertiveness along their disputed land border by ramping up its presence in the maritime domain, including the SCS. This "horizontal escalation" is premised on the idea that India can match China's geo-strategic advantage on land through its own geo-strategic advantage in the maritime domain.[50] This debate gained momentum in the aftermath of a string of tensions along the Sino-Indian border, which prompted some to argue that strengthening India's naval capabilities to interdict Chinese commercial shipping would be a more effective means of challenging Beijing by exploiting its weakness in the maritime domain rather than challenging China along the land border where India was in a disadvantageous position.[51]

This strategic inter-linkage between the IOR and SCS extended to India's maritime diplomacy with several Southeast Asian states. India's engagement with Indonesia and Myanmar is significant in this respect as both countries straddle the IOR and SCS and thus share India's perception of both maritime regions as a single strategic space.[52] The counter-balancing narrative is also evident in calls for strengthening India's strategic partnership with Vietnam as a parallel to China's "all-weather" relationship with Pakistan.[53]

## Conclusion

To be sure, while India has become more vocal in challenging China's maritime assertiveness, it still remains a distant and reluctant balancer. This is demonstrated by the contrast between words of Indian strategic elites and policymakers and the actions of the Indian Navy in the SCS that remains confined to benign and largely constabulary operations. The rhetoric of a Sino-Indian naval rivalry in the SCS is still outweighed by the reality of India's limited naval power projection capabilities in the region. As such, despite taking an increasingly vocal position in defence of its maritime interests in the SCS, India continues to maintain a cautious approach. This has been reflected in the Indian government's reluctance to transfer (or admit transferring) sensitive military technology to claimant states of the maritime territorial disputes in the region. For instance, New Delhi denied the reported sale the *Brahmos* supersonic cruise missile to Vietnam in 2017 in the belief that 'the sale would antagonise China'. [54] Similarly, despite echoing the position taken by the United States on the maritime territorial disputes in the region, India has yet to translate these words into actions by joining US-led Freedom of Navigation patrols in the disputed waters.[55]

Moreover, the rise of China and India as major naval powers does not preclude the possibility of both countries developing a more cooperative dynamic in protecting the maritime 'global commons'. The coordination between both countries on their anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 has been seen by some as evidence of the potential for a more cooperative dynamic in the Sino-Indian maritime relationship. The fact that more than 85 per cent of Chinese oil imports flow through the Indian Ocean while more than 50 per cent of India's trade goes through the Malacca and Singapore Straits alludes to the possibility of a mutual interdependence forming between both countries in the maritime domain. This prompted former Indian National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon to propose a "Maritime Global Concert" in which China, India and the region's other major naval powers would have a collective

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responsibility to protect public goods in the maritime domain.[56]

At the same time, the lack of trust in the Sino-Indian relationship has served to limit the level of real and substantive cooperation in the maritime domain.[57] Evidence of this can be found in the lack of progress in the nascent 'India-China Maritime Dialogue' that was established in 2016.[58] India has also remained wary of China's 'Maritime Silk Road' concept, which has been seen by some as a strategy of encircling India. This was a partial catalyst of India's decision to boycott China's first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017.[59] Finally, as noted, China's increasingly assertive behaviour in the South China Sea has been seen by some as an opportunity, as it has encouraged regional powers to draw India into the SCS as a 'secondary balancer'.

As such, whether as a partner or a rival, the 'China factor' has been a key consideration in India's maritime engagement with Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War period. This is only likely to grow as both countries continue to expand their maritime interests and capabilities.

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