



# MARITIME PERSPECTIVES 2024

## EASTERN SEGMENT OF THE INDO-PACIFIC: MARITIME POWER-PLAY

Edited by:

Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan

Captain Kamlesh K Agnihotri

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**Editors: Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan and Captain Kamlesh K Agnihotri**

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## Foreword

The Indo-Pacific Region, extending from the western shore of the Americas to the shores of eastern Africa, forms about two-third of the Earth's surface and incorporates within it an equivalent share of oceanic extent, global population, resources, and GDP. This expansive region is also beset with a commensurate set of geopolitical contestations, simmering tensions, underlying fault lines, and consequent potential for conflict and instability. If the Pacific Ocean were to be considered to be the 'eastern segment' and the Indian Ocean to be the 'western segment' — it would be evident that there is a considerable difference in the nature, spatial spread of maritime security challenges, and major players involved in these two segments.

Critical security issues in the western segment of the Indo-Pacific, for instance, are generally localised in terms of their spatial spread. Moreover, barring 'energy security', which has global implications arising largely from the instability in the Persian Gulf and its environs, most other security issues are either bilateral ones or, at most, have a knock-on impact that is felt in the immediate proximate neighbourhood of the two States involved. Within this segment, it is non-State actors — although these are occasionally supported by State actors as in the case of the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008 — that are largely responsible for spreading instability and threatening maritime security in the western segment.

In contrast, security challenges that threaten the freedom, openness and stability in the eastern segment of the Indo-Pacific, range from the east coast of Russia, cover the broad extent of the East- and the South China Seas, and also extend to the tiny Pacific Island countries stretching well into the southern Pacific Ocean. Here, contentious sovereignty and/or overlapping maritime claims amongst a variety of State actors — including but not limited to China, Japan, Philippines, Russia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam — complicate the regional situation. Several of these

contending States have adopted inflexible positions that are at the root of the largely unstable geopolitical environment and have resulted in disputes becoming difficult to resolve.

This volume of Maritime Perspectives-2024, entitled “*Eastern Segment of the Indo-Pacific: Maritime Power-Play*”, seeks to provide an overview of the prevailing contemporary geopolitical situation in the Pacific Ocean littoral, with specific focus being laid upon the tenuous maritime security situation arising out of the proactive actions taken by various State parties involved, in order to safeguard their perceived maritime rights and interests, and to justify their often-rigid stances.

Accordingly, the first of the four sections of this volume identifies the East China Sea as a ‘hotbed’ where the dark clouds of coercion and confrontation are casting ominous shadows, with the first article cautioning the public at large about the perils of a China-centric world order. The second one examines the volatile situation prevailing in and around Taiwan over the last couple of years and explores the options that India could follow to secure its own interests in the event that a China-Taiwan conflict does, in fact, break out. The finer nuances of cultural differences between China and Japan, in respect of “face” — and the intensity of distress caused should one lose it on whatever account — have also been analysed within this section so as to provide specific pointers for Indian foreign policy interlocutors in dealing with these countries. The remainder of the section draws the attention of the reader to East Asia and first offers an analysis of the summarised version of the ‘Defence of Japan 2024’ White Paper. This is followed by a critique of Dr Jagannath Panda’s edited book, “*Scaling India-Japan Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and beyond 2025: Corridors, Connectivity and Contours*”, which highlights the role and place of India in Japan’s thought-process regarding maritime connectivity and security. The section’s last offering is a critical review of the shifting foreign policy priorities of South Korea over last decade, as detailed in the absorbing book entitled, “*South Korea’s Wild Ride: The Big Shifts In Foreign Policy From 2013 to 2022*” by Gilbert Rozman, Sue Mi Teri, and Eun A Jo.

The second Section of this volume focuses upon the brinkmanship being played out in the South China Sea (SCS), which holds the potential for some serious

escalation. Accordingly, the first article of this section draws attention to the aggressive moves by China in the SCS in Beijing's ongoing effort to create a sequential series of "new normals" through the persistent use of 'grey zone' operations and explains quite how adverse the impact of these is upon the maritime security of States such as the Philippines and Vietnam. The next article outlines the lessons that India must draw from the prevalent situation in the SCS, so as to be able to secure its own national interests. This is followed by a piece that explains how and why US involvement in SCS affairs increased significantly once the relatively 'neutral' policy and hands-off approach of the Obama administration was radically altered by the presidency of Donald Trump. As was the case with the first section, the second one, too, has, as its closing piece, a critical review, this time of one of the "Red Book" series published by the USA's "China Maritime Studies Institute", penned by Scott Bentley and entitled, *"The Maritime Fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific: Indonesia and Malaysia Respond to China's Creeping Expansion in the South China Sea"*.

The third Section examines varying Indian perspectives on the centrality of ASEAN and its constituents, with the articles herein exploring how this centrality might be leveraged by India to enhance maritime connectivity and ensure "free, open and secure" seas that would facilitate its maritime trade- and energy flows. The opening article of this section looks at the creation of the new so-called 'SQUAD' construct — between the US, Australia, Japan and the Philippines — to enhance the maritime security in the western Pacific in the face of persistent Chinese revisionist behaviour. This is followed by an examination of the options and means of increasing maritime trade connectivity between India and Vietnam in order to maximise the potential of the bilateral relationship. Bringing the third section to a close is, once again, a critical review, this one being of the book entitled, *"Thirty Years of ASEAN-India Relations: Towards Indo-Pacific"*, by Dr Prabir De, which underscores the imperative for India to leverage ASEAN centrality so as to further its own national interests in the Indo-Pacific.

The fourth Section has only a single article, but a particularly interesting one by an erstwhile Micronesian policymaker. It highlights the dilemma faced by Micronesia as its constituent States oscillate between the US-Australia combine on one hand and

overbearing Chinese pressure on the other — a political maelstrom that typifies the constraints, compulsions, and inadequacy of viable options for small island nations of the South Pacific as they grapple with the pulls and pressures of ongoing great-power influence operations.

Thus, three distinct threads emerge from the articles covered in this volume of the *Maritime Perspectives 2024*: (1) the increasingly disturbing maritime expansionist agenda being pursued by China within western and southern Pacific; (2) the response strategies of the affected parties and concerned stakeholders; and (3) the relevance of ASEAN for countries such as the United States and India in their common endeavour to balance the Chinese propensity for unilaterally changing the *status-quo* in the region.

It has been the endeavour of the NMF to present these strands in as comprehensive manner as possible through this publication, so as to enable students of international relations and the larger maritime-security community to be better informed with regard to the heightened instability quotient in this eastern segment of the Indo-Pacific Region. It will, hopefully, help them in appreciating the consequent risks to the global economic and maritime security, should the situation take a turn for the worse.

*Happy Reading!*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pradeep Chauhan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan**  
AVSM and Bar, VSM, IN (Retd)  
Director-General  
National Maritime Foundation

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# The Perils of a China-Centric World

*Captain Kamlesh K Agnihotri (Retd)*

When the Presidential Inauguration of May 20, 2024 passed off quite peacefully amidst the ongoing tenuous security situation across the Taiwan Strait, an anxious global community in general, and the administrative establishment of Taiwan in particular, did heave a veritable sigh of relief. However, that sense of reprieve was quite short-lived, with the People's Republic of China (PRC) engaging in an overtly threatening display of brinkmanship on May 23, 2024, by conducting naval and coast guard exercises at unprecedented scale in waters all around Taiwan. Concurrently, a large number of PLA Air Force aircraft also crossed the median line and deliberately violated the ADIZ of Taiwan. This show of force which has heightened the sense of alarm in Taiwan, though, was not wholly unanticipated, particularly in light of the PRC having adopted an overtly proactive stance over the past two years, since the visit of Ms. Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives in August 2022.

## **Evolution of China's hardline posture vis-à-vis Taiwan**

However, such a hardline posture has not come about, all of a sudden. Various official pronouncements, media articulations and White Papers of PRC have progressively ratcheted up the issue of national reunification, in tandem with the increasing diplomatic, informational, military and economic heft of the country. The PRC's White Paper of 1993 on '*The Taiwan Question and Reunification of China*' sought to emotionally link the origin of Taiwan question to the country being subjected to aggression, dismemberment and humiliation by the foreign powers during the last century. The paper went to great length to convince the World that "*peaceful*

*reunification was a set policy of the Chinese Government*”, though with addition of a caveat that “*any sovereign state is entitled to use any means it deems necessary, including military ones, to uphold its sovereignty and territorial integrity.*” The tone, tenor and language of that White Paper was almost entreating, seeking the understanding of the World towards its interpretation of the vexed issue. The PRC, then headed by President Jiang Zemin, had a GDP of less than \$450 Billion.

Come 2022, and Nancy Pelosi announced her visit to Taiwan. The PRC, in addition to cajoling, threatening, and militarily-posturing, to somehow convince the US to put off that visit; released another white Paper on August 10, 2022, titled ‘*The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era*’. The very title of this Paper connoted that the “*rejuvenated*” PRC of the ‘new era’, “*driven by an unstoppable force*”, considered this time as “*a new starting point for reunification*”. The stridency of the tone and the underlying aggression was quite evident from the blunt statement, viz. “*Taiwan is part of China – This is an indisputable fact*”; and that the Communist Party of China (CPC) would engage in “*resolute effort to realise China’s complete reunification.*”

Just the comparison of these two white papers, provides a broad insight into a much more aggressive stance adopted by the PRC. It is quite clear that the contemporary PRC under President and Party Secretary Xi Jinping, with a GDP exceeding \$ 17.5 Trillion, and having reduced the international diplomatic support for Taiwan to just 11 countries; seems to believe that this is perhaps the right moment for attempting reunification. Notwithstanding the ambiguity about PRC’s plans, the long-cherished wish of the country which sees reunification as its unfinished agenda; and the increasing conviction of the current leadership about the appropriateness of the timing and confidence in the nation’s capabilities to pull this off; does set the stage for ominous portends across the Taiwan Strait.

## **Taiwan Reunification – Impact on Global Order and Response Options**

In the event that such a cataclysmic eventuality was to actually come about, then how would the global security order be impacted? Since the Taiwan Strait and the adjoining East and South China Seas are critical sea lanes for global trade and energy

flow; the emergent situation will have dangerous ramifications for the whole Indo-Pacific region. Most countries whose economies are tightly linked to the PRC's 'panda hug' – particularly the ASEAN nations – will be faced with a Hobson's choice. The existing 'balance of power' model, wherein they sought national security guarantee from the US, while still maintaining huge economic dependency on China, will no longer be viable.

The US, on its part, would be hard-pressed to provide security umbrella to all its widely dispersed allies and partners. While the middle order countries may, somehow, manage to steer through the resultant geostrategic quagmire; the nations comprising the 'Global South' will be severely impacted. Most of these countries, inextricably weighed down within the PRC's debt diplomacy, and lacking the wherewithal to act independently in their national interest, would be left with no alternative, but to fall into the PRC's orbit. The mere thought of the consequent global order tilting irretrievably in favour of the PRC, is quite discomfiting.

It is then, no wonder that the affected stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region have been vehemently advocating for keeping the region 'free, open, and secure under the rubric of existing rules-based order. These very sentiments were publicly expressed by US President Joe Biden in June 2023 while welcoming the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi at the White House, when he emphasised the need for an 'open, secure and transparent' Indo-Pacific. India is also cognizant of this possible shift in the global order; and is thus equally concerned with its adverse ramifications. Prime Minister Modi, during his address to the US Congress on June 22, 2023 stated that “... *dark clouds of coercion and confrontation are casting their shadow in the Indo-Pacific...*” And it would not be entirely wrong to presume that such dark clouds are ominously rising from the Taiwan Strait, on account of PRC's quest for an ill-advised reunification.

India enjoys reasonably genuine respect amongst the 'Global South', cutting across political systems and ideological divides, due to its historical 'non-alignment' stance through the Cold War, and nuanced assertion of 'strategic autonomy' amidst the contemporary geostrategic upheavals, with their attendant pulls and pressures. New Delhi can therefore leverage this widespread goodwill to embark on the onerous

task of spreading awareness amongst the ‘Global South’ about the pitfalls of the changed world-order to their general detriment.

Prime Minister Modi, during the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue, outlined India’s vision for the Indo-Pacific region, being premised on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue, adherence to international rules/ laws, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the international seas. However, this noble vision can only come to fruition if the countries of the ‘Global South’ can first appreciate the perils of living in a PRC-centric world order; and then unitedly sally forth to prevent such a contingency from taking shape – with selfless guidance of India and due support from the good offices of countries like the US and ‘Global North’, wherever forthcoming.

03 June 2024

## **About the Author**

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# Securing India's Security Interests in a China-Taiwan Conflict

*Captain Kamlesh K Agnihotri (Retd)*

## Abstract

*Security situation across the Taiwan Strait is quite precariously poised, with China having adopted an overtly proactive stance over the past couple of years. The current hardline stance of China which considers this time as “a new starting point for reunification”, creates further portends for conflict. In this context, this article provides a brief overview of the evolving India-Taiwan relations; assesses the contours of China-Taiwan conflict; investigates the effect of such a contingency on India's interests in terms of quantum and intensity; and finally analyses the options available to New Delhi to mitigate, if not wholly address the consequential challenges.*

## Introduction

The nationalist Party (Kuomintang), having faced the brunt of the protracted civil war with the communists in mainland China in the 1940s, was forced to relocate to the island of Taiwan in 1949, along with around 1.2 million loyalists and followers. Taiwan's efforts to continue being the sole political entity representing a unified China received a huge setback when the United Nations (UN), vide its resolution number 2758, recognised the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the only legitimate authority representing whole of China; and removed Taiwan from the membership of the UN.<sup>1</sup> Establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States (US) and the PRC with effect from 01 January 1979<sup>2</sup>, and consequent closure of US diplomatic mission in Taipei, further eroded the status of Taiwan as an independent country.

All this while, China, having always considered Taiwan as its own territory, harboured clear intentions to reunify it at an opportune moment. China passed an 'Anti-Cessation Law' during the third Plenary of 10<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress (NPC) to the effect that the "... *State shall never allow the 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces to make Taiwan secede from China under any name or by any means;*"<sup>3</sup> and will "...*use non-peaceful means and other necessary measures*" – albeit as a last resort – to prevent Taiwan's cessation.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding the serious challenges to its very existence – both on account of lack of formal recognition by majority of countries across the globe, as also threats of reunification by China – Taiwan continues to function quite effectively as a sovereign State. It maintains its own national defense establishment and freely manages its foreign affairs. The main objective of Taiwan's foreign policy is to engender a favorable environment for national preservation and long-term development. Within the geopolitical constraints imposed upon it, Taiwan has reasonably vibrant economic and cultural relations with many countries of the world, including with India.

## **India-Taiwan Relations**

India-Taiwan interactions have been quite restrained, because India recognises the 'One China Policy' with the dispensation in Beijing being at its helm. However, with the establishment of Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre (TECC) in New Delhi in 1995 and the India-Taipei Association (ITA) in Taipei, both countries and their people started to engage more closely with each other.<sup>5</sup> After about a quarter century of diligent perseverance, the restrictions in many facets of bilateral engagements have gradually loosened. Many bilateral agreements have been signed between the organisations and entities from both sides to bolster trade, connectivity and technology cooperation. Some important agreements/ Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) are mentioned below:<sup>6</sup>

- 1) MOU on Scientific and Technological Cooperation – 2007
- 2) Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement – July 2011
- 3) Customs Mutual Assistance Agreement – July 2011

- 4) MOU on Small and Medium Sized Enterprises – December 2015
- 5) MOU between India's PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Taiwan Chamber of Commerce – June 2016
- 6) Air Services Agreement – September 2016
- 7) MOU on Promotion of Industry Collaboration – December 2017
- 8) MOU between Association of Indian Universities, and Taiwan Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education – 2019

With the above policy initiatives providing a veritable roadmap, India-Taiwan bilateral trade has grown considerably over the past decade. Significant progress was observed in the fields of trade, science and technology, critical supply chains, and education – particularly after the opening of a second TECC office in Chennai in 2012. The total trade figures for 2022 crossed USD 12.5 billion, rising from USD 10.5 billion in 2021, and USD 8.5 billion in 2020.<sup>7</sup> Taiwan has now decided to open a third TECC office in Mumbai, to further enhance trade and commerce.<sup>8</sup> Taiwan currently operates 26 Taiwan Education Centres (TEC) in India, which largely teach Chinese language to Indian students. Taiwan also offers language and academic fellowships to Indian scholars and students in Taiwanese universities and institutions.

While bilateral trade, investment and cultural relations have maintained a positive momentum; the conversations on ongoing geopolitical dynamics, national security and maritime order have been rather muted. This is probably on account of existing foreign policy constraints. However, India, in recent past, appears to have adopted a more nuanced position on these issues while seeking greater engagement with Taiwan. A scholar in fact, posits that the emergence of the Indo-Pacific construct, onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and China's aggressive behaviour were the main triggers responsible for transformational changes in India-Taiwan relations since 2020.<sup>9</sup>

Both countries have also shown the resolve to discuss the maritime security situation in the Indo-Pacific and the current challenges posed to the 'rules-based order' therein. Taiwan sees a great role for 'think-tank diplomacy as the fifth pillar' of

its 'New Southbound Policy (NSP)' of 2016 for establishing regional connections. Accordingly, the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF), a think tank affiliated to Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs', has built institutional linkages with India's National Maritime Foundation (NMF)<sup>10</sup> and the Observer Research Foundation (ORF).<sup>11</sup> The TAEF and ORF also held the first Taiwan-India Dialogue in October 2022 to discuss the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region, and the prospects of India-Taiwan partnership in such a scenario.<sup>12</sup> The Chairman of NMF also participated in the latest edition of the 'Ketagalan Forum: Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue-2023' organised by Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>13</sup>

### **China's Taiwan Unification Gambit – Portends for Conflict**

Security situation across the Taiwan Strait presents quite a tenuous picture, with China having adopted an overtly proactive stance over the past couple of years, particularly after the visit of Ms. Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives in August 2022. The overt display of increased Chinese naval maneuvers in the Strait, as also in waters surrounding Taiwan – with the PLA Air Force aircraft violating Taiwan's ADIZ and also flying across the median line virtually on a daily basis – has heightened the sense of alarm in Taiwan, and indeed across the Indo-Pacific region. High intensity of PLA's aggressive brinkmanship in Taiwan Strait was particularly noticeable on 17 September 2023 when a large number of PLA Navy ships were observed to be operating therein, along with many PLA Air Force (PLA AF) aircraft. 103 PLA AF aircraft flew in the Taiwan Strait on that day, of which 40 crossed the median line and violated Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in its south-western and south-eastern sectors. The intruding aircraft included the Sukhoi-30, J-10, J-11, J-16 modern fighters, along with Y-20 aerial refuellers and KJ-500 Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft.<sup>14</sup>

However, such a hardline posture adopted by China has not come about, all of a sudden. Various official pronouncements, media articulations and White Papers have progressively ratcheted up the issue of national reunification, in tandem with the increasing diplomatic, informational, military and economic heft of China. The Chinese White Paper of 1993 on 'The Taiwan Question and Reunification of China' sought to emotionally link the origin of Taiwan issue to the country being subjected

to aggression, dismemberment and humiliation by foreign powers during the last century.<sup>15</sup> The tone, tenor and language of that White Paper was almost entreating, seeking the understanding of the world towards Beijing's interpretation of the vexed issue. China, then headed by President Jiang Zemin, had a GDP of less than USD 500 Billion, with 157 countries having accepted the 'One China Principle.'

China released another White Paper titled 'The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era' in August 2022. The very title of this White Paper connoted that China had undergone "*historic transformation*" in the intervening three decades; and that the "*rejuvenated China of the new era*" considered this time as "*a new starting point for reunification*".<sup>16</sup> The stridency of tone and the hard line was quite evident from the terse business-like assertion: "*We will always be ready to respond with the use of force or other necessary means to interference by external forces...*"<sup>17</sup>

Comparison of these two white papers, provides a great insight into the evolving harder-line resolve of Chinese intent vis-a-vis Taiwan. It is quite apparent that the contemporary China under President and Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, with a GDP exceeding USD 17.5 Trillion, and having diplomatic relations with 181 countries, based on 'one-China Principle'; believes that this is perhaps the right moment for attempting 'reunification'.

Therefore, the question which troubles the strategic community worldwide is: Will China be emboldened by the 'special military operation' which Russia is progressing in Ukraine? The long-cherished wish of China which sees 'reunification' as its unfinished agenda; and in light of increasing conviction of the current Chinese leadership about the appropriateness of the timing and confidence in the nation's capabilities to pull this off; it could most likely happen, sooner rather than later. When and how is the only variable yet to be ascertained. There is though, considerable speculation in the global media with regard to this ominous event taking place within the timeline of 2027.<sup>18</sup>

## **Effect on Indian Interests**

If such a cataclysmic eventuality were to actually come about, then the global security order will certainly be impacted. Since the Taiwan Strait and the adjoining East

and South China Seas are critical sea lanes for global trade and energy flow; the emergent situation will have dangerous ramifications for the whole of Indo-Pacific region. India being a major stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific, both, geopolitically and economically, will also be affected to a great extent. The ongoing bilateral trade with Taiwan would certainly be disrupted in the short-to-medium term. Since more than 55 percent of India's bi-directional trade by volume passes through the International Sea Lanes (ISLs) of the Pacific Ocean, the resultant regional instability would pose serious risks to its safe transit. In addition, the fledgling technology collaboration and FDI with Taiwan would suffer huge setback.

None of these outcomes can, however, cause grave harm to India's national interests. An economically resurgent India having inbuilt diversity in its critical supply chains – can certainly take this setback in its stride. India instead, has to be mindful of its maritime security interests in proximate waters getting adversely affected as an indirect consequence of the Taiwan contingency. The benign-sounding role PLA Navy to “conduct international cooperation in distant waters” first articulated in its 2008 Defence White Paper,<sup>19</sup> has gradually evolved to “safeguarding of China's maritime rights and interests” – including those of overseas Chinese people, organisations and institutions – by 2019.<sup>20</sup>

The PLA Navy with more than 370 blue water ships has already surpassed the US Navy to become the largest in the world in terms of numbers; and is projected to grow to about 435 units by 2030.<sup>21</sup> In the contemporary geopolitical scenario, the bulk of this large Chinese naval force will be deployed in and around the Western Pacific Ocean. The Taiwan issue and long-standing security guarantee offered by the US by way of forward- and actively- deployed US Navy in the Pacific Ocean are, of course, the top concerns for Beijing. Considering the additional force requirement for dominance in other hotspots like the East and South China Seas, the immediate and emergent focus of the Chinese political and military leadership continues to be closer home.

At present, 6 to 8 PLA Navy ships are generally present in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These are often supplemented by 2 to 4 research, survey, hospital, intelligence collection and space-telemetry ships. This empirically works out to less

than five percent of PLA Navy's total force level – a number highly inadequate for any credible posturing. In the event of Taiwan getting reunified – whenever that happens – a major driver for employment of a large Chinese naval force in the Western Pacific Ocean would no longer exist. The subsequent deployment of PLA Navy then, would obviously be towards the Indian Ocean in large numbers. When this begins to happen in right earnest, the hitherto before prominence that the Indian Navy enjoyed in and around its primary areas of maritime interest would come under serious challenge. When seen in the context of strained bilateral relations on account of the flaring up of India-China boundary question in recent past – and the situation likely to remain so in foreseeable future – the Indian maritime security would definitely be threatened. To place the level of threat in perspective, even twenty percent of the PLA Navy's operationally employable warship inventory works out to more than 50 ships. China's pre-existing "*higher than mountains and deeper than oceans*" friendship with Pakistan<sup>22</sup> – which has been a troublesome neighbour all along in its own right – will further compound the threat quotient for India in the maritime domain. In this scenario, the capabilities and resolve of India's maritime security apparatus would be severely tested.

## Options for India

It is therefore in India's interest to ensure that Taiwan continues to exist as an independent State, free from overt threats of reunification. Since India is located so far away from Taiwan, it would be quite unrealistic for New Delhi to contribute militarily in case of a China-Taiwan conflict. Nonetheless, unconfirmed media reports have speculated that the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) had ordered a study within the Armed Forces about the scenarios of China attempting a reunification by force; and the possible options for the Indian Defence Forces in such a scenario.<sup>23</sup> However, various other options to indirectly mitigate the possibility of this 'reunification' contingency, can certainly be considered; and may in fact, already be under unstated implementation.

The Indian defence Force level and heightened posture along the 'line of actual control' (LAC) which has been in place since mid-2020, may occasionally be raised

further to coincide with specific events like in the run-up to Taiwan's national elections or when excessive Chinese brinkmanship in Taiwan Strait is observed. It will convey a strategic message of nuanced Indian solidarity with Taiwan, in addition to keeping the PLA second-guessing whether a second front from an opposite axis will go alive or not.

The issue of keeping the PLA busy on multiple fronts from different directions can also be actively considered by the QUAD grouping. Japan may be requested to become more proactive with respect to employment of its naval and Air Force assets off Senkaku islands and Chunxiao gas fields. The visible increase in Japan's proactive engagement with Philippines – with nearly half a billion USD loan to build five patrol vessels in addition to providing two large ships to its Coast Guard – in the context of Chinese aggressive posturing in the South China Sea is also a step in right direction.<sup>24</sup> Continual cross-strait passage of US naval ships coupled with the freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) around the Chinese claimed features in the Paracel and Spratly chain of islands<sup>25</sup> and air surveillance missions in the South China Sea will also continue to engage sizeable attention and effort of the PLA forces.

India has specifically rejected the so-called China-Pakistan 'Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is a part of Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), because the project ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>26</sup> Since part of CPEC passes through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK), India could formally start using the acronym CPOKEC (China Pakistan-occupied Kashmir Economic Corridor) to convey its opposition in a symbolic riposte. In fact, the usage of this nomenclature (CPOKEC) is already gaining traction in Indian geostrategic narrative.<sup>27</sup>

India must also proactively join the international community in every possible forum to oppose the attempts by China to unilaterally change the status quo in the South China Sea with regard to its illegal and unlawful claims on many features and associated maritime zones therein. In this regard, India's nuanced change in position with respect to the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favour of Philippines, wherein New Delhi called for “...*the need for peaceful settlement of*

*disputes and for 'adherence' to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea ...*” is a great step.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the changing geopolitical circumstances, India continues to retain its official 'One China policy'. Replying to a question in Rajya Sabha in December 2021 on whether Government was looking forward to augment its diplomatic, economic, trade and bilateral relationship with Taiwan to a strategic level; the Minister of State replied that the “*Government of India's policy on Taiwan was clear and consistent. The Government only facilitates and promotes interactions in areas of trade, investment, tourism, culture, education and people-to-people exchanges.*”<sup>29</sup>

However, in the currently changing geopolitical reality, both, India and Taiwan face an increasingly overbearing adversary – albeit in different domains – who believes in leveraging its comprehensive national power (CNP) to engage in a revisionist expansive agenda. It is therefore, just not an option for either country to accept the adversary's ploy to forge a 'new normal'. In such circumstances, it is for New Delhi to take a call whether or not, there should be a significant change of stance in India-Taiwan relations; and also to decide when, and by how much.

In the meanwhile, India must find ways and means within the confines of its existing foreign policy choices to safeguard its national interests by a combination of own endeavours, as also lending its support to multilateral organisations/forums which call for rules-based order and resolution of national disputes through dialogue and peaceful means. Because the antagonist must be made to realise that “*This is not an era of war*”, as Prime Minister Modi has publicly articulated at various global forums.<sup>30</sup>

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# Sino-Japanese Nuances of “Face” — Lessons For India

*Ms Krithi Ganesh*

China and Japan are the warp and weft yarns of a geopolitical tapestry woven across millennia. The two countries share a significant, enduring, and long-running history — marked by both vibrant cultural exchange and devastating conflict. In fact, the first recorded tributary missions to China have been traced back to the mid-first century and early second century. Consequently, from very early on, Japan absorbed Chinese influences in writing systems, art, and philosophy, forging a deep cultural bond. Philosophical traditions, including Confucianism and its various tenets, as well as the indirect flow of Buddhism through Korea, knocked on Japan’s eager doors, as the young country set about trying to instill and inculcate its very own traditions and culture. Trade flourished, with Japan often sending tribute to China, thereby acknowledging, and kowtowing to the latter’s cultural and economic power.

Gradually, however, Western powers and their military influence entered the collective consciousness of East Asia. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a turning point and Japan embarked upon a process of rapid and comprehensive “modernisation” over a mere two decades (known as the Meiji Restoration which lasted between 1868 and 1889), now considering China to be a stagnant culture. This shift fueled tensions, culminating in the brutal Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 that has left a dark stain on their shared past. While post-war efforts in the 1970s brought economic cooperation and diplomatic ties, historical wounds and regional competition remain. Today, these Asian giants stand as economic powerhouses, their intertwined pasts shaping their present and influencing the future of the East Asian region, and by extension, the Indo-Pacific region, too.

It is important to note that the influence of Korea was integral in fostering ties between the two countries, yet this particular paper will focus mainly on Sino-Japanese relations, and why the understanding of “face” in these relations is relevant to India.

## Why is “Face” Relevant?

Viewed through the lens of realism, the world order is considered to be in a perpetual state of anarchy, where no State is inherently benevolent in its intentions or actions. Power is the sole currency, resulting in all actions being driven by self-interest, with States either acting out of fear or embracing aggression. Where, then, does “face” fit in the larger picture of power relations between States? Perhaps the first consideration of relevance is the relationship between the terms ‘prestige’ and ‘power’. *“Prestige, rather than power, is the everyday currency of international relations, much as authority is the central ordering feature of domestic society.”*<sup>1</sup> Whereas ‘Power’ refers to the economic, military, and related capacities and capabilities of a State, ‘Prestige’ refers primarily to the *‘perceptions’* of other States with respect to the credibility afforded to a State’s projected capacities and capabilities, and the assessment of its ability and willingness to exercise its power to achieve its objectives.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, the former President of France, the late Charles de Gaulle, powerfully asserted that *“Authority doesn’t work without prestige, or prestige without distance”*.<sup>3</sup> He implied that in order for those at the helm to have an effective reign, both these elements ought to coexist. Prestige goes hand-in-hand with authority and power, fading to irrelevance the moment distance is disregarded. (Appropriate) distance acts as a segregator: it sows mystery and generates awe in its wake as it enchants the populace with prestigious authority. If, on the other hand, there was no distance maintained, the populace would eventually come to realise that those wielding power are no different than them — ordinary human beings needing physical and emotional sustenance to survive. This could lead to scorn and disdain. And, if it were the case that too much distance was maintained between the rulers and the ruled, the latter would eventually feel alienated and neglected, prompting rebellious attitudes. Such rebellious attitudes, stirred by disenchantment, could snowball into

rebellions in various forms, of which at least one might be supported by those with interests diverging-from or inimical-to the State.

However, while discussing power and prestige in societies as a whole, it is important to recognise and acknowledge cultural differences between ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ nations and peoples. Individualist cultures, or “guilt-based cultures”,<sup>4</sup> tend to overlap with much of the Western world; generally, individualism does not place a great deal of emphasis on the group’s perception of the individual, favouring instead the individual’s interests over the group’s interests.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, collectivist cultures, or “shame-based cultures”,<sup>6</sup> are located in regions of the non-Western world; here, collectivism typically places the utmost significance on the group’s perception of the individual, favouring the group’s interests over the individual’s interests.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in Eastern societies, any ignominy attached to an individual member of a group tends to pervade and shame the group as a whole. In order to avoid such a situation, the group conditions its constituent individuals — pretty much from birth itself — that their behaviour must always be such as to avoid shaming the collective group. This group itself could be a family, a clan, or a wider association comprising several families or clans. Of course, actions by an individual that bring him or her glory also bring glory to the collective, and as a consequence, the collective conditions its individual members to act in such manner as would not merely avoid shame but bring glory. This correlation between the collective and its individual members is what is broadly known as “face”. In sharp contrast, the actions of an individual in most Western societies brings accolades or opprobrium (as the case may be) to him or her but not automatically to the collective. This is why it is frequently felt that the concept of “face” is more than merely honour or even respect but has a close correlation with ‘prestige’ since the latter is a function of collective perception, and that the concept of “face” is a socio-cultural facet that is largely alien to Western societies as also to those who use Western socio-cultural metrics of judgement.

Given that both Japan and China are generally considered to be collectivist, shame-based societies, “face” is a phenomenon evoking the utmost seriousness and gravity in both States. Both countries are known to lay emphasis on the group over the individual. Both cultures share some fundamental values including the privileging of societal harmony, an abiding respect for hierarchy, and a pronounced

sense of in-group loyalty. Yet, their conceptions and understandings of collectivism differ as a result of their distinct socio-cultural influences. Thus, in an article critically evaluating Geert Hofstede's six-dimension model of interpreting cultures, Ryh-song Yeh argues that Hofstede "*imposes his "mental programming" on the interpretation of other cultures*"<sup>8</sup> concerning the treatment of Japanese and Chinese values in his study. Yeh further asserts that the concept of family in both of these cultures differs as mentioned below:

"Hsu (1983) has indicated that, although there is no fundamental difference in the Chinese and Japanese kinship system, one difference is that "the Chinese kinship system provided for no more extension than the clan (the size of which is always limited because it is founded firmly on the principles of birth and marriage)". In Japan the existence of iemoto, "the Japanese kinship system provided for affiliation of men into much larger groupings across kinship lines, each founded primarily on the kin-tract principle" and "the kin-tract principle provides for voluntary entry into any grouping" (p. 373)."<sup>9</sup>

Yeh concludes that the Chinese are, in fact, individualistic when viewed from a societal perspective, while the Japanese are more collectivistic in this regard.<sup>10</sup> However, this criticism of Hofstede's work does not take away from the essence of his research — the group forms an important part of influencing behaviour in both these cultures.

## China's Concept of "Face"

China, according to the scholar Yutang Lin, is ruled by "*three sisters*"<sup>11</sup> — Face, Fate, and Favour. "Face", or *mien-tzu* as it is widely known in China, is not merely a physical or anatomical feature; it is a complex social currency signifying respect, honour, and reputation. It can be "given" through acts of respect, generosity, or achievement, "gained" through "*exemplary behavior, superior performance in some role (as in demonstrating one's competence, trustworthiness, or superior knowledge—particularly when done in modesty), or enhancement of status (as through ostentation or formal promotion to higher office)*",<sup>12</sup> and "lost" through public humiliation, failure, or disrespect. Maintaining "face" is crucial in all social interactions, from business deals to family gatherings. This social phenomenon deeply influences behaviour, shaping communication styles, decision-making, and even conflict resolution.

Understanding “face” is essential for navigating Chinese society effectively, fostering harmonious relationships, and avoiding unintentional incidents of offence.

One of the seminal articles on the conception of “face” was authored by Hsien Chin Hu in 1944 — *The Chinese Concepts of Face*, wherein it was argued that “face” has not one, but *two* separate entities in Chinese culture — *lien* and *mien-tzu*. *Lien*, according to Hu, is “*a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalized sanction*”,<sup>13</sup> and the loss of *lien* brings about a profound sense of shame as well as public ostracization. In many cases, this (perceived) loss of *lien* has led to people taking their lives, the taint of the loss being too much to bear. *Mien-tzu*, on the other hand, is “*a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation*”,<sup>14</sup> and can be gained, gifted, or lost through a variety of means. However, Hu’s interpretation of *mien-tzu* shows that there are several layers as well as levels to this entity, suggesting that there are degrees of loss of *mien-tzu*, and it can be regained gradually too. In sharp contrast, *lien* does not incorporate any provision of reform or redressal, which is why its perceived loss is quite so grave.<sup>15</sup>

In 1976, David Yau-fai Ho conceptualised his own take on the subject matter — *On the Concept of Face*. In this article, he acknowledges Hu’s distinction between *lien* and *mien-tzu* in terms of judging “face” while rejecting Hu’s view that these distinctions are clear-cut in a linguistic sense, arguing instead that these “*terms are interchangeable in some contexts*”.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Ho criticises previous writers for their simplistic analysis of the subject, accusing them of treating the loss and gain of “face” as opposite outcomes without enough discernment between *lien* and *mien-tzu*.<sup>17</sup> He argues that while *mien-tzu* can be spoken of as being gained and lost, *lien* can only be spoken of as being lost. This is because “*regardless of one’s station in life, one is expected to behave in accordance with the precepts of the culture*”.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, *lien* is expected to be maintained at all times, considering that “*having lien is a prerequisite for achieving dignity*”<sup>19</sup>, thereby implying that *lien* is even more basic than dignity.

Further, Ho asserts that “face” is not a “personality variable”, meaning that it is not “*an attribute located within the individual*”.<sup>20</sup> Instead, it is what others have identified and extended to the person in question. However, despite *mien-tzu* being subject to several interpretations by the collective, it is simultaneously an individual’s

“claim”<sup>21</sup> as well. In this regard, Hui-Ching Chang and Richard Holt suggest that individuals “*may vary in their attitudes toward their own mien-tzu*”,<sup>22</sup> with several linguistic expressions conveying an individual’s sensitivity regarding their *mien-tzu*. The degree of an individual’s “face-lovingness” impacts his/her trajectory in society; as *mien-tzu* can be accumulated. It is always possible to move up the social ladder, by any means whatsoever (including unfair means), thereby feeding into the individual’s love for their own face. This can be seen as an individualistic trait in Chinese society, thus differing from the collectivism that has always been associated with the culture. This also stands at odds with what “face” would look like in Japan, as is discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

## Japan’s Concept of “Face”

Although the term for (social) “face” — *mentsu* — in Japanese culture has been borrowed from the Chinese counterpart *mien-tzu*, the phenomenon itself is not quite the same. Japan has historically been a military-ruled feudal society, with strict hierarchies, held together by a profound sense of honour and shame. China, on the other hand, has been governed by civilians since 200 BC.<sup>23</sup> It is crucial to understand the difference in the societal structures as they determine the variations of “face” in both cultures. In Japan, the role of the samurai/warrior’s sense of honour drives behaviour and mannerisms. It is even argued that *mentsu* was considered secondary to warriors’ “honour” — a samurai would commit *seppuku/hara-kiri* to maintain honour.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Kiyoko Sueda implies that *mentsu* (“little honour”) is merely *one* aspect “*contributing to an individual’s reputation in the community in daily life*”,<sup>25</sup> as the “warrior’s honour” (“big honour”) supersedes everything. *Mentsu*, or “little honour”, only gained prominence with the decline of the warrior class, suggesting that it became prevalent post the Meiji Restoration Era. Against this backdrop, Chun-Chi Lin and Susumu Yamaguchi opine that *mentsu* can be defined as an individual’s public image that is dependent upon his/her fulfilment of expected social roles.<sup>26</sup>

Given that Japan is a “shame-based society”, it comes as no surprise that there are several terms for “face”, each of which has its own distinct nuance, based on the

context. Some such terms are *kao*, *menboku*, and *tai-men*, all of which are sometimes used interchangeably along with *mentsu*. *Kao* literally translates to “face” and can refer to (1) the physical part of the body; (2) a person’s name, status, or fame; or (3) social face.<sup>27</sup> Of these, “social face” can be further divided into two categories: *mentsu* and *tai-men*. *Mentsu* is — quite incorrectly, in the opinion of this author — considered the equivalent of the Chinese *mien-tzu*, while *tai-men*<sup>28</sup> refers to the “appearance one presents to others”.<sup>29</sup>

Instead, *mentsu* can be differentiated from three similar social psychological concepts: self-esteem, impression management/self-presentation, and public self-consciousness.<sup>30</sup> According to Lin and Yamaguchi, *mentsu* is representative of an individual’s social image, while self-esteem represents an individual’s internal self-image; individuals can maintain, save or protect their own *mentsu* as well as others’ *mentsu*, while impression management is concerned only with the self; and finally, *mentsu* is concerned with the fulfilment of social roles as per societal expectations as well as being attentive to how an individual is perceived in public (by the public), while public self-consciousness is limited to an individual’s degree of attentiveness to perception in public.<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting to note that despite being employed in everyday communication and idiomatic expressions, the terms *menboku*, *tai-men*, *mentsu*, and *kao* have not been “employed as effective terms to explain Japanese social behavior”.<sup>32</sup> Seiichi Morisaki and William Gudykunst give the following reasoning...

“We believe there is at least one plausible explanation for the lack of emphasis on face in explaining Japanese communication. Many Japanese who write on Japanese society and communication tend to look for “unique” aspects of Japanese culture. This line of work often is referred to as *nihonjinron* (literally discussions of the Japanese). Since the origin of the concept of face is Chinese..., writers looking for unique aspects of Japanese culture would not focus on face.”<sup>33</sup>

Akio Yabuuchi adds that the “*foci of consciousness in their social behavior are different*”,<sup>34</sup> with the key concepts for explaining Chinese social behaviour being *mien-tzu* and *guanxi* (relation), whereas those for Japanese are *haji* (shame) and *giri* (duty/obligation).<sup>35</sup>

## Comparing “Face” in China and Japan: *Mien-tzu* versus *Mentsu*

As explained above, the drivers for social behaviour and mannerisms in China are different from those in Japan. These differences explain their different societal structures, even though both societies privilege collectivism over individualism. Although Confucianism has indeed, permeated deeply into Japanese society and culture, not all aspects have been absorbed. This has led to a split in terms of thought processes in China and Japan, impacting the various nuances of “face”.

Based on Yabuuchi’s theory that Chinese social behaviour can be explained by *mien-tzu* and *guanxi*, Yeh’s assertion that the Chinese are individualistic from a societal point of view can be better understood. Yeh argues that one of the factors leading to the failure of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution was the “*strong Chinese family orientation*”,<sup>36</sup> This may seem strange at surface value — how does having a strong family orientation imply being individualistic, when the family itself is a group? Yet, Yeh suggests that “*Mao strongly condemned the selfish behaviour that places self-interest above that of the group and the excessive devotion to one’s own family*”,<sup>37</sup> as Mao’s own ethos was anti-individualistic or pro-collectivistic. This implies that in Chinese society, the family is not really considered part of the “group” and is seen, instead as being an extension of the “individual”, rendering the prioritisation of the family a “selfish” act. In similar fashion, losing or gaining *mien-tzu* could be viewed as a “family affair” (by extension), since gaining *mien-tzu* would impact an individual and his/her “inner circle” (*guanxi*) positively, while losing *mien-tzu* would hurt the individual and his/her “inner circle”. This could be one of the reasons for the ruling Communist Party of China trying its very best to instill a sense of nationalism in the Chinese populace, in an attempt to revive some of Mao Zedong’s pro-collectivistic ideologies and fuse them with “Xi-Jinping Thought”.

On the other hand, *haji* and *giri* are factors that have deeply impacted Japanese social behaviour,<sup>38</sup> implying that the Japanese are more collectivistic than the Chinese. For one, the conflict between “loyalty” and “filial piety” does not exist in Japan as it does in China; since as per Yeh, the Japanese are known to privilege loyalty to their organisations over their families.<sup>39</sup> This, in turn, implies that the Japanese do not

necessarily discriminate on the basis of kinship and blood relations, which could have been one of the reasons why Japan was able to pave the way for modernisation and industrialisation after contact with the West, as the country truly espoused the ethos of collectivism and working towards the betterment of the group (*giri*). Moreover, this loyalty towards the organisation stemmed from a historical sense of duty/obligation (*on*) towards ‘The Emperor’, parents, and ancestors, as well as one’s work.<sup>40</sup> Should *mentsu* be lost, a profound sense of shame (*haji*) would engulf the individual for failing to have fulfilled social expectations. However, the degree of *mentsu* loss also depends on the status of the “audience”. If *mentsu* were to be lost in front of a junior/subordinate, the sense of shame would be greater as compared to a loss of *mentsu* in the presence of a senior/superior or peer.

Moreover, there is a fundamental difference in the terms, *mien-tzu* and *mentsu*. The Chinese *mien-tzu*, being a reputation achieved through doing well in life, permits the ascension of the social ladder through ostentation and/or success. There is no apparent morality tied to *mien-tzu*, given that Hu ascribes the internalised social and moral sanction to *lien*. This contrasts with the Japanese *mentsu*, which serves as the public image dependent on the expected fulfilment of social roles. Japan’s *mentsu*, unlike China’s *mien-tzu*, appears to have some of the aspects of *lien*, rendering a much more challenging ascent up the societal hierarchy, especially since there is no concept of “giving *mentsu*”. Therefore, this comparison throws light on the differences in social mobility in both cultures.

Table 1 displays the universal or *etic* component of “face” across various cultures and regions — representing individuals’ public images — and summarises some of the similarities and differences between *mien-tzu* and *mentsu*. The culture-specific or *emic* component of “face” presents a more precise overview of the characteristics, highlighting the main aspects of *mien-tzu* and *lien*; *mentsu*; and *negative face*. This is not to say that the aspects that are not emphasised are absent in the culturally “unique” concepts of face; the characteristics mentioned are simply the most dominant ones in their respective concepts.

**Table 1: Common and Unique Components of “Face”**

Components	Characteristics	
Etic	Individuals’ public image	
Emic	China	<i>Mien-tzu</i> emphasises individuals’ power. <i>Lien</i> emphasises individuals’ morality
	Japan	<i>Mentsu</i> emphasises individuals’ fulfilment of their social role or position
	West	<i>Negative face</i> emphasises individuals’ freedom and personal territory

*Source: Adapted from Chun-Chi Lin and Susumu Yamaguchi, “Japanese Folk Concept of Mentsu: An Indigenous Approach from Psychological Perspectives.” 347.*

## Culture Clash?

Having contributed extensively to the development of Japanese culture, China historically viewed Japan as “*an inferior, younger brother*”,<sup>41</sup> and the latter paid obeisance and participated in the tributary system over several centuries. During the Qing dynasty however, after the Western powers reached Chinese waters, Japanese subservience appears to have been shattered once and for all. The Japanese saw how the British forced the Chinese court to open their ports and markets and accept trade in opium. Although this led to the two Opium Wars, the Japanese no longer saw the Chinese as being inherently superior. Having paid due respect to the various dynasties of pre-Qing China, the Japanese no longer considered the Chinese to have any “face” worth saving — a perception that was reinforced following the Qing dynasty’s downfall and the advent of the subsequent Chinese ‘Century of Humiliation’.

Moreover, the Japanese seem to have adapted to Western influence better, as they were far more open to improving their own political and military systems,<sup>42</sup> given that their sense of collectivism ensured that the group prospered. China, by contrast, was not as adroit, preferring to stick by what felt familiar, leading to further losses of “face” — beginning with Japan’s imperial ambitions and triumphs over Taiwan and some regions of Manchuria through the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Gradually, Japan’s imperialism led to further encroachment into Chinese territory in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

During this period of Japanese occupation in China, one of the first incidents that led to a Japanese “hands-on” policy was the Hankou Incident, which took place on 03 April 1927. Clashes between Japanese marines and the locals led to a mob attack against the Japanese Concession. This resulted in the deployment of 200 Japanese marines to maintain order and safeguard the Concession. This was then followed by Chinese guards firing at the marines instead of the mob, leading to the Japanese marines firing at the uncontrolled mob. Shortly thereafter, the Japanese

Figures 1 and 2: Clippings from The Argus, dated 06 April 1927

**JAPANESE ATTACKED.**

**HANKOW INCIDENT.**

**More Warships Arrive.**

**Fears in Peking and Tientsin.**

SHANGHAI, April 4.

A serious situation has developed at Hankow, resulting in the evacuation of the Japanese residents and their transference to Shanghai in steamers convoyed by gunboats. A clash between Chinese and the Japanese marines occurred on Sunday. Following a mob attack against the marines, hordes of labourers stormed the Japanese concession and committed acts of violence, necessitating the landing of 200 Japanese marines, who drove the mob from the concession. The clash resulted in the death of several Chinese. The situation was critical in the evening. The residents took refuge on the steamers during the conflict. Several Japanese marines were carried off by the mob, and their whereabouts are not known. A marine later was found dead. His mutilated body was floating in the river.

The Chinese were surrounded and held back by the marines. The Japanese admiral refused a request by the Chinese authorities to withdraw the marines. Then the Chinese guards of the eighth army surrounded the concession to check the mob, but instead fired on the marines.

Japanese destroyers and cruisers were despatched to Hankow by the Japanese to assist in the evacuation.

Other reports state that the mob got out of hand, and it was feared that there would be looting in the concession. The Japanese fired on the mob for the first time since the trouble in China began. Hitherto Japan has adopted the “hands off” policy.

It is expected that the evacuation from Hankow of all Japanese except the staffs of two firms, which are surrounded by pickets, will be completed soon. Already there are five Japanese warships at Hankow, and three others are hastening there. Three will leave to-morrow morning, escorting three Japanese steamers, which are taking food supplies.

Source: Trove Australia<sup>43</sup>

were evacuated from Hankou. Images at Figure 1 and 2 narrate the details of the incident.

In addition, there was the Nanking Incident in March 1927, which had occurred even prior to the events in Hankou. The Kuomintang (KMT) and its army (the

National Revolutionary Army, or the NRA) captured Nanking, following which there were clashes with the foreign forces present there, including the British, Americans, and Japanese.<sup>44</sup> Although reparations were demanded from the National/Cantonese government of South China for the looting and killing of foreigners, these two incidents were perceived in Japan as losses of “face” or *mentsu*. By losing these “battles” to people whom they deemed inferior, there was a significant sense of collective shame (*haji*) among the Japanese for not being able to carry out their duty (*giri*). This was perceived as a loss of *mentsu*. On the other hand, these very incidents would have simultaneously led some Chinese to gain *mien-tzu*, for having successfully exploited a chink in the Japanese armour. Nevertheless, any such gain of *mien-tzu* was extremely short-lived, given the horrific Nanjing Massacre which lasted from December 1937 to January 1938, just prior to the Second World War, wherein tens of thousands of Chinese citizens were raped and slaughtered by soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army. The city had been the capital of the Nationalist Chinese from 1928 to 1937. It was utterly destroyed and razed to the ground, following which the Japanese made it the capital of their Chinese puppet government.<sup>45</sup> While the Japanese soldiers may have been following their *giri*, it is unclear whether it affected their *mentsu*, at least among the Japanese populace. The Chinese, however, would have definitely lost their *mien-tzu*, having succumbed to the Japanese carnage, while those who survived had to see the city corrupted by being proclaimed the capital of the Chinese puppet government. On the other hand, the Chinese who may have tried to stand their ground, would have died maintaining their *lien*.

The end of the Second World War saw Imperial Japan utterly defeated, which is when the United States decided to take the overpowered country under her wing, thereby “saving” Japan from the clutches of the communist winds blowing from the northwest. Due to the United States’ interference in Japan’s foreign policy, there were no substantial relations established with Communist China until 1972.<sup>46</sup> For a decade, Japan and China enjoyed friendly relations, with the former offering official development assistance (ODA) to the latter in order “to promote China’s economic development and entry into the international economic order”.<sup>47</sup>

However, relations between the countries soured in the 1980s, owing to a surge in Chinese nationalism and anti-Japanese sentiment, as well as improved relations

between China and the Soviet Union. The anti-Japanese sentiment was a result of two key events:

1. Japanese high school history textbooks were revised to tone down Japanese aggression against China during World War 2, and;
2. In August 1985, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone made an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine, where the so-indicted “Class-A” war criminals are entombed.<sup>48</sup>

These moves may have been a deliberate attempt to sabotage a newly emerging China’s *mien-tzu* facet of “face”. In addition, the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea has been roiling both countries for several decades now, particularly since the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) has suggested that the East China Sea houses between one and two trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves.<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to note that Taiwan had initially staked a claim to the islands, following which China started making its claim as well. While China claims these islands based on history, Japan claims these islands based on *terra nullius* (territory belonging to no one).<sup>50</sup> Consequently, Beijing views Japan’s claims as a threat to its sovereignty, both historical and territorial, and by extension, a threat to China’s *mien-tzu*. On the other hand, Japan’s claims to the islands may well be driven primarily by Tokyo’s aim of enhancing the country’s development as well as that of the Japanese people; and these disputes could be seen as a roadblock in her *giri*, which is a threat to Japan’s *mentsu*.

### **Why should India Bother?**

Despite India not having a sense of “face” similar to that of China’s *mien-tzu* or Japan’s *mentsu*, it is crucial for New Delhi to study these East Asian neighbours’ relations, if for no other reason than to ascertain its own standing as well as formulate policy, and make decisions favourable to India with regard to the countries in question. A few of the more prominent reasons why India needs to carefully examine the East Asian concept of “face” are:

Building Strategic Alliances: Studying Sino-Japanese relations would help India understand potential alliances and partnerships that could emerge amidst the shifting regional security landscape (and seascape) within the Indo-Pacific.

Managing Historical Disputes: Historical tensions between China and Japan offer useful lessons for India in New Delhi's own dealings with China, highlighting both, the pitfalls to avoid and potentially successful strategies to navigate through complex relationships. Moreover, understanding "face" can be a powerful tool in terms of negotiating Indian interests. Likewise, studying Japan through the lens of *mentsu* would provide India with invaluable lessons on how best to leverage India's relations with Japan.

Multilateral Engagement: China and Japan have a history of both cooperation and conflict. Observing their interactions within multilateral organisations can inform and inspire India's approach to regional diplomacy.

Analysing India's Interests: It is in India's best short-term interest for China to remain preoccupied with the South and East China Seas issues, as this would buy New Delhi the precious time that is needed for India to build its capacities and capabilities, especially in terms of her naval and space power. Understanding and internalising the distinction between "face" as applicable to Japan and China, would be a hugely useful lever for India.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the relevance of studying how "face" shapes China and Japan's relations lies in recognising its power as a societal force in the Asian context. It is not merely about cultural etiquette, but about understanding the deep-seated values that influence decision-making, conflict resolution, and social power structures. By grasping the intricate interplay of face within the Sino-Japanese relationship, valuable insights can be gained from which broader geopolitical dynamics may be analysed. This knowledge also offers insights into potential flashpoints, negotiation tactics, and strategies for building trust — all of which are essential tools for navigating the complexities of diplomacy, business, and multilateral collaborations within the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

Indian policymakers would be well advised to comprehend and internalise the dynamics of "face" that deeply influence Indian relations with Japan and China.

Studying how each of these nations — one a partner and the other an adversary — react when subjected to deep social stimuli, provides India with an invaluable lens. While understanding “face” is, of course, crucial for building trust, facilitating constructive dialogue, and fostering mutually beneficial agreements, can it be a “Pavlovian bell” that New Delhi might ring — or withhold from ringing — at will to produce predetermined reactions and responses in Beijing? This tantalising possibility currently engages and informs ongoing research at the National Maritime Foundation.

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## About the Author

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# Defence of Japan- 2024 (Digest): A Critical Review

*Captain Kamlesh K Agnihotri (Retd) and Ms Aashima Kapoor*

Japan's 25<sup>th</sup> Defence Minister, Mr Kihara Minoru, released the latest edition of the nation's Defence White Paper, "Defence of Japan 2024", marking the 50<sup>th</sup> issue since the first edition was published, in 1970.<sup>1</sup> This milestone coincides with the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Self-Defence Forces (SDF), which was founded on 01 July 1954. It is important to note that only a brief summary of the document, in the form of a 'digest', is currently available to the public. This will hereinafter be referred to as the 'DOJ-24 Digest'.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, annual editions of Japan's Defence White Papers have provided vital insights into the nation's defence posture and evolving strategic priorities in consonance with the changing geopolitical environment. This document initially provides an overview of the challenges facing the international community, and significantly, notes that many States do not share universal values or political and economic systems. The inevitable interaction between such States with opposing worldviews, contrasting governance systems and differing international relations outlooks — which cannot be avoided because of the dynamics of an increasingly globalised environment — often presents grounds for increased global instability. The 2024 edition also emphasises the development of Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) as a critical component of Japan's strategy to protect itself from missile threats, particularly from North Korea and China. Additionally, it addresses growing threats in cyberspace and other domains, alongside emerging global security issues, such as information warfare and climate change.

The major highlights concerning Japan's national security, as discerned from the "DOJ-24 Digest", have been analysed under the following heads:

- China as an adversary of Japan
- Japan’s Self-Defence Capability Assessment
- Threat-mitigating strategies, including collaboration with the US and like-minded countries

## China as an adversary of Japan

The Japanese Defence Minister expressed particular concern over China’s growing missile capabilities, noting that Beijing was developing new-generation offensive weapons, including shore-launched anti-ship missiles with a range of 1,000 km, and hypersonic missiles with a range of 500 km. He specifically flagged the ongoing Chinese activities of establishing military bases to consolidate its territorial claims, and challenging international maritime laws, as “*efforts to create a fait accompli*” situation.<sup>3</sup>

In the same vein, the “DOJ-24 Digest” elaborates upon China’s growing military activities, particularly around the Senkaku Islands, the Sea of Japan, and the western Pacific Ocean. China’s extension of its influence beyond the First Island Chain, to the Second Island Chain, which includes Japan’s Ogasawara Islands (near Okinawa) and Guam, is also highlighted as a major concern.<sup>4</sup> The persistent militarisation by China and its hardline postures are noted as serious concerns for Japan, especially in ‘grey zone’ situations involving territorial disputes, particularly around the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea.

The “DOJ-24 Digest” also accords considerable attention to Chinese coercive activities around Taiwan, as well as the PLA Air Force’s intrusions into Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). This emphasis may be attributed to Minister Kihara’s pro-Taiwan inclination and his background, which includes his participation in an unofficial Japanese delegation to Taiwan in 2022.<sup>5</sup> This delegation met with Taiwanese officials to discuss evacuation plans for Japanese citizens in the event of a Chinese invasion. The Digest also expresses concern over increasing military cooperation between China and Russia, highlighting recurring joint air force and naval exercises around Japan as implicit demonstrations of ‘force’.

## Japan Self-Defence Capability-Assessment

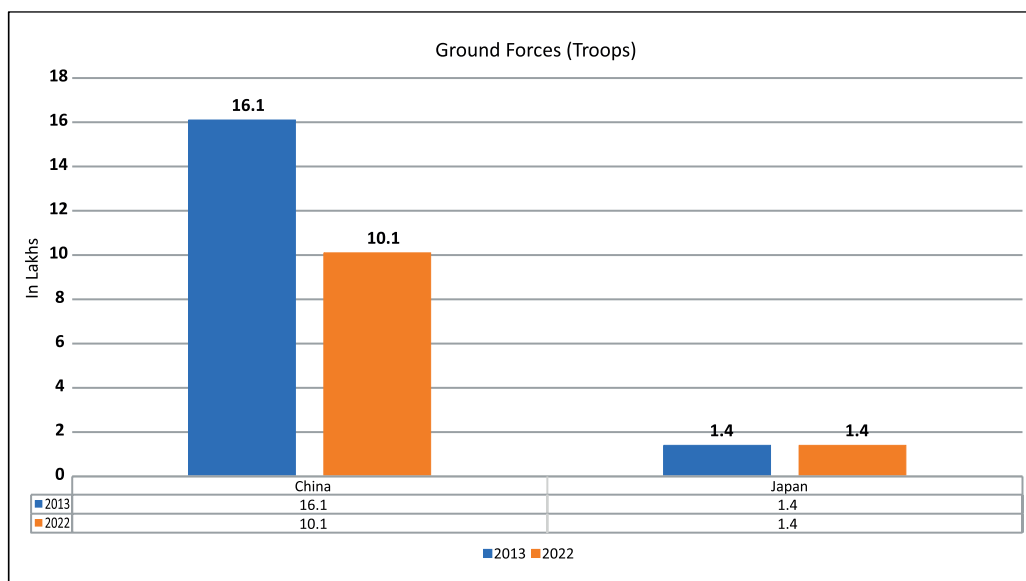
The above comments of the Japanese Defence Minister, duly acknowledging China's increased military capabilities, and expressing a willingness to address this challenge which includes the development of 'stand-off defence capabilities, certainly signifies a shift away from Japan's 'exclusively defence-oriented' post-World War II policy, towards a more assertive stance. While Japan's pacifist Constitution limits the recourse to any direct military action, the country is exploring alternative strategies to enhance its defence capabilities without compromising its principles. Obviously, however, this is easier said than done.

The 'DOJ-24 Digest' reflects Japan's commitment to increasing its defence expenditure to two percent of its GDP, to generally align with NATO standards. Accordingly, the Japanese government's plan to raise the defence budget to 43 trillion Yen (about US\$ 273 billion) over five years, starting in Fiscal 2023, aims to bolster Japan's defence posture. However, certain Japanese media reports, indicate that about 130 billion Yen (US\$ 804 million) from the allocated fund, may have gone unspent in 2023.<sup>6</sup> This inability to expend the budgeted amount could suggest the existence of systemic problems with regard to budget utilisation and the related implementation plans.

The 'DOJ-24 Digest' particularly focuses on several critical areas that need to be addressed, in order to bolster Japan's national security. These include an urgent need to address the recruitment and staffing concerns for its SDF. This issue has gained prominence in view of Japan's severe human resource shortage, exacerbated by an ageing population and declining birth rate. The resultant demographic crisis has led to fierce nationwide competition amongst various employers, for scarce human resources, making it extremely difficult for the SDF to attract and retain domain-specific talent. A comparative analysis of Japan's and China's military capabilities over a period of nine years from 2013 to 2022, specifically in terms of troop strength, is shown in Figure 1.

Even a perfunctory glance at the SDF's current manpower situation vis-à-vis Japan's envisioned military capabilities reveals a troubling trend. Japan's ground

**Figure 1: Comparison of Ground Force Troops – China and Japan**



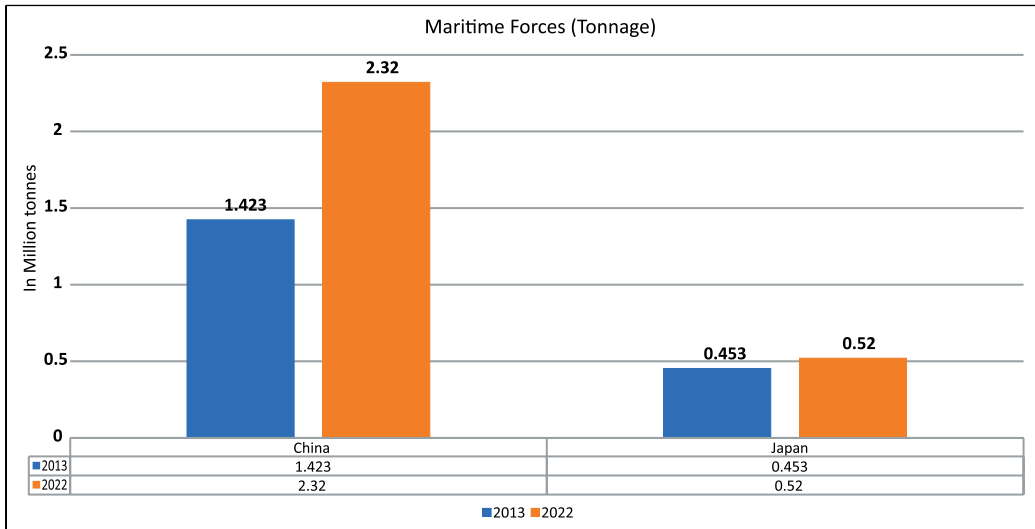
*Source: Data from DOJ-24 Digest; Graphic by Authors*

force troop strength has remained virtually unchanged over the past nine years. It is also evident from Figure 1 that, in terms of ground force troops' strength, while Japan has maintained 1.4 lakh troops, China, despite a reduction of close to 6 lakh army personnel as part of its ongoing reforms, still has a significantly larger number of approximately 10.1 lakh. When viewed through the lens of China being Japan's primary adversary, this huge troop imbalance presents Tokyo with quite a dismal scenario — one with obvious and ominous portents. In terms of absolute numbers, the troop strength deficit works out to an astounding 8.7 Lakhs.

Further, a comparison of two specific parameters — naval ship tonnage and the number of aircraft in their air forces — between Chinese and Japanese military capabilities is presented in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.

It may be seen from Figure 2 that Japan's warship tonnage has increased slightly, from 0.453 million tonnes in 2013 to 0.52 million tonnes in 2022 — an increase of 14.8 percent. In contrast, China's maritime forces have expanded by 63 percent in total tonnage in conformance with Beijing's extensive naval build-up. When seen in

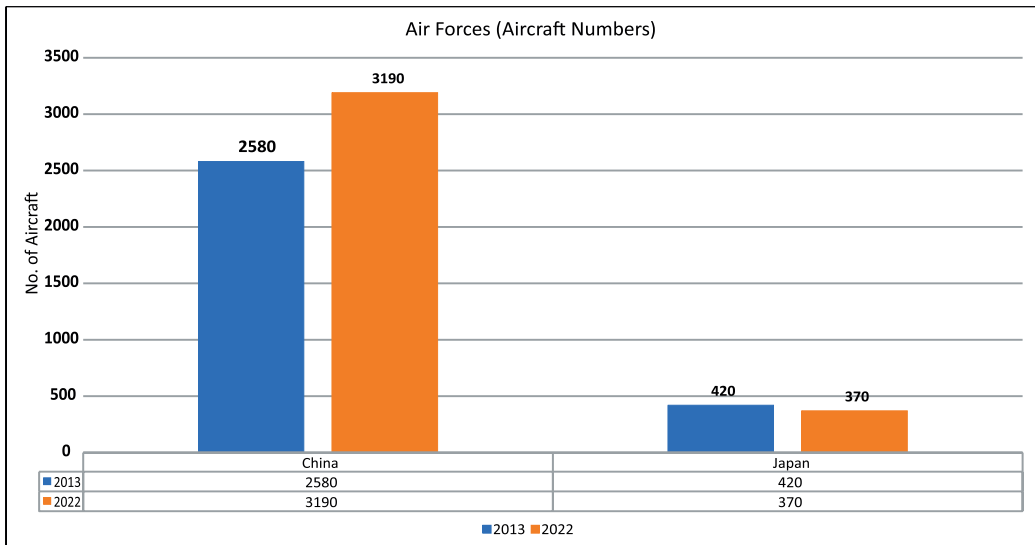
**Figure 2: Comparison of Warship Tonnage – China and Japan**



*Source: Data from DOJ-24 Digest; Graphic by the Authors*

terms of absolute numbers, an increase of 897,000 tonnes (0.897 million tonnes) in the PLA navy as against a modest increase of 67,000 tonnes (0.067 million tonnes) in the JMSDF — a quantitative differential of more than 13 times — the comparison

**Figure 3: Comparison of Numbers of Aircraft– Chinese and Japanese Air Forces**



*Source: Data from DOJ-24 Digest; Graphic by Authors*

presents quite a telling picture. This rapidly widening trend, when dovetailed into the holistic ongoing expansion of China's military capabilities and commensurate manpower and viewed against the backdrop of assertive military and grey zone tactics employed by the Chinese maritime forces in the areas of mutual disputes, assumes disconcerting dimensions.

As regards their respective air forces, Japan has in fact, seen a decline in the number of aircraft, reducing from 420 in 2013 to 370 in 2022. On the other hand, China's Air Force aircraft numbers have grown from 2580 in 2013 to 3190 in 2022, an increase of 23.64 percent. In terms of absolute numbers, an increase of 610 aircraft in the PLA Air Force against a decrease of 50 aircraft in the JASDF, shows an alarmingly widening gap in their respective inventories. This reflects the PLA Air Force's focus on enhancing its aerial combat capabilities, while those of the JASDF are clearly diminishing. This decline may point to challenges in maintaining or upgrading Japan's aerial capabilities, possibly influenced by budgetary limitations, or shift in strategic priorities.

It is fairly evident from the above indicative comparison of just three key parameters mentioned in the 'DOJ-24 Digest' — strength of ground troops, tonnage of warships, and numbers of Air Force aircraft — that there is growing disparity between the military capabilities of China and Japan. While the quality of certain Japanese military hardware may well be better than that of China, the ever-increasing quantitative gap will probably make up for any relative qualitative differential. If this statement is considered to be a 'given', then Japan surely must have other viable strategies to mitigate the threat that China — and possibly North Korea or even Russia in tandem — may pose to its national security.

## **Threat-Mitigating Strategies**

While the 'DOJ-24 Digest' outlines some Japanese responses to a potential Chinese aggression, including the development of "counter-attack capabilities" — which suggests a more assertive posture under new Defence Minister Kihara's leadership — Japan ultimately appears to rely rather heavily on the United States for strengthening its national defence through joint deterrence and response capabilities. At the same

time, it seeks collaboration with *“likeminded countries and others”*, although this is seen as a secondary line of action.

## **Japan-US Defence Collaboration Arrangement**

The ‘DOJ-24 Digest’ emphasises the critical importance of the US-Japan alliance, describing it as the cornerstone of Japan’s national security strategy. This enduring alliance has been instrumental in shaping Japan’s defence policies and providing a viable response to regional threats. At the recent US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (SCC) meeting in Tokyo in July 2024, Japan’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Yoko Kamikawa, and the Minister of Defence, Minoru Kihara, along with their American counterparts, Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin, emphasised the vital role of the US-Japan alliance in maintaining peace, security and prosperity, not only in the Indo-Pacific, but globally as well. The discussions involved intensive consultations on the roles and missions of the alliance to enhance deterrence and response capabilities.<sup>7</sup>

The US officials acknowledged the increasingly tenuous security environment in the western Pacific, caused by the actions of certain regional actors, and reiterated the United States’ unwavering commitment to Japan’s defence under Article V of the US-Japan “Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security”, which includes the provision of a nuclear umbrella for Japan’s defence, if necessary.<sup>8</sup> The interlocutors also highlighted Japan’s ongoing efforts to bolster its defence, including the increase in its defence budget, the establishment of a “Japan Self-Defence Forces’ Joint Operations Command” (JJOC), a manifestly increased focus upon cybersecurity, and the development of counterstrike capabilities.

## **Collaboration with Likeminded Countries**

The strategy of collaborating with *“likeminded countries and others”* towards the achievement of Japan’s defence objectives — when compared to its holistic and all-encompassing security arrangements with the US — appears to have been included in the ‘DOJ-24 digest’ as an afterthought. This broad assertion stems from the fact that South Korea is the only country mentioned as a ‘likeminded’ one.

While the ‘DOJ-24 digest’ does refer to Tokyo engaging with many other countries in “... *multilateral and multi-layered defense cooperation...*” with an aim to “... *create a security environment that does not tolerate unilateral changes to status quo ...*”— without specifically naming China — it does not make any mention of multilateral fora such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meet Plus (ADMM+). There is just a passing mention of its ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) construct, with the assertion that the Japanese SDF has been contributing towards multilateral anti-piracy measures to ensure maritime security.

## India’s Standing in Japan’s National Security Calculus

As indicated earlier, the ‘DOJ-24 Digest’ mentions only South Korea by name but is silent in terms of specifying other “*likeminded countries*”. Further, while the QUAD is mentioned in the context of the US playing a stellar role therein, the omission of India and Australia — which are the other two poles in the QUAD construct — is quite conspicuous. Consequently, it does leave the Indian strategic community more than a little perplexed about the possible enabling role that Japan envisages for India, as regards regional security in general, and its national security calculus in particular. In fact, the Indian Ocean — where India, as a resident power of consequence, considers itself to be the preferred maritime security partner and first responder — finds no mention at all in the ‘DOJ-24 Digest’. To extend this observation further, there is only a single mention of the Gulf of Aden and the Somali offshore area in the context of ongoing counter-piracy operations. This tends to give the impression that the Indian Ocean itself forms just a minuscule part, if any, of Japan’s maritime security concerns.

To be fair, the ‘Defence of Japan-2023’ White Paper did mention India as an important country with whom Japan was progressing substantive defence cooperation activities.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Japan also considered “*defence equipment and technology cooperation*” as an important facet of its “*special strategic and global partnership*” with India.<sup>11</sup> A joint statement issued after the conclusion of the third India-Japan 2+2 (Foreign and Defence Ministers) meeting on 20 August 2024, in fact, noted the satisfactory progress of various ongoing bilateral multi-layered forums

— Defence Policy Dialogue, Foreign Office Consultations (FOC), Vice Minister/ Foreign Secretary level Dialogue, the Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Dialogue, the Cyber Dialogue, the India-Japan Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism, being some of them.<sup>12</sup> Further, the Foreign and Defence Ministers of both sides “... expressed their satisfaction with the seventh India-Japan Joint Working Group on Defence Equipment and Technology Cooperation” and also “... concurred on accelerating future cooperation in defence equipment and technology.”<sup>13</sup>

However, there is very little information on specific cooperative activities being pursued within the above bilateral mechanisms. While participation in some combined Air Force exercises like the ‘TARANG SHAKTI-2024’ and combined Naval exercises such as ‘JIMEX’ and ‘MALABAR’, mentioned in the ‘Joint Statement’ do appear in the public domain, the much-required acceleration in “*defence equipment and technology cooperation*”, has still not acquired any significant momentum. Notwithstanding the mention of India in the ‘Defence of Japan-2023’ White Paper in positive terms, and similar thought-process discernible from the ‘Joint Statement’ post the just concluded India-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meet, Indian strategic analysts often wonder as to why the commitments mentioned on paper so unequivocally do not translate into any substantial and meaningful practical defence cooperation on the ground.

## Conclusion

The ‘DOJ-24 Digest’ presents a bird’s eye view of the challenges that Japan faces, and its defence strategies in an increasingly complex regional security environment. It highlights the threats posed by China, North Korea, and Russia, underscores the importance of the US-Japan alliance, and outlines Japan’s own efforts to enhance its defence capabilities. The extensive attention given to the US partnership — especially the reliance on the US nuclear umbrella as a key deterrent — highlights Japan’s dependence on American military power and support. This reliance contrasts with the symbolic ‘Swordsmith’ image depicted on the cover page of the ‘DOJ-24 Digest’ that tacitly implies a more autonomous approach to its national security. This contradiction raises doubts about the coherence of Japan’s defence narrative and

appears to potentially overshadow the country's own initiatives and contributions in this direction. The document nevertheless reveals areas where Japan needs to strengthen its internal governance, and address systemic human resource issues within the Defence Ministry and SDF. Japan well realises that as it navigates these challenges, it will need to balance its present overreliance on US support and will have to make strenuous efforts to bolster its own indigenous defence capabilities so as to ensure a coherent and sustainable defence strategy for the future.

It is felt that the 'DOJ-24 Digest' could have better aligned its thematic elements to reflect a more balanced portrayal of Japan's defence strategy and its partnership with the US. One must of course, be mindful of the fact that this document is only a brief summary of the main "Defence of Japan-2024" White Paper which, as seen from the previous editions, often runs into 700-800 pages, is likely to cover these critical issues in far greater detail. Consequently, this article, which offers a critical review of the 'DOJ-24 Digest' alone, can, at best, be taken as an initial indicative piece. There would, of course, be a need for an updated and comprehensive review once the entire text of the "Defense of Japan-2024" White Paper is placed in the public domain.

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## A Critique of the Book

# Scaling India-Japan Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and beyond 2025: Corridors, Connectivity and Contours

Edited by Dr Jagannath P Panda; KW Publisher, New Delhi, 2020. 366 pages, ISBN 978-93-89137-29-3. (Hardcover)

*Ms Aashima Kapoor*

Amongst the most promising bilateral relations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the “India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership”, which is *special* in many ways and *global* in its implications. In this regard, “*Scaling India-Japan Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and Beyond 2025: Corridors, Connectivity and Contours*”, edited by Dr Jagannath P Panda, is an anthology of articles by a variety of subject-matter experts, each of whom have penned a chapter that explores the many facets of India and Japan’s common interest in building maritime connectivity and quality infrastructure, transparently and inclusively, within the Indo-Pacific. The book fundamentally posits a “win-win” scenario for India and Japan due to the several policy fields in which convergence between the two maritime democracies has steadily been established. The book is segmented into four thematic sections, which address (1) inter-continental connectivity, (2) bilateral perceptions associated with the use of crucial resources and technology, (3) economic imperatives, and (4) maritime cooperation.

Dr Jagannath Panda, who currently heads the Stockholm Centre for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA), is an acknowledged scholar of international renown, and was, at the time of publication of this book, a research fellow and

Centre Coordinator for East Asia at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi. The book is an offshoot of the India-Japan Symposium, that was held at the MP-IDSA in December 2018 (at which point in time the prefix “MP” had not yet been added to the “IDSA”).

The first section, *“Connectivity, Corridors, and Contours: The Inter-Continental Context”*, incorporates two chapters. The first, by Jagannath Panda and Mrittika Guha Sarkar, is entitled, *“Framing a Eurasia Link in India-Japan Global Ties”*, and examines the strategic prospects of aligning Eurasian and Indo-Pacific frameworks to enhance global security and political architecture. The authors feel that a ‘Eurasian’ framework of cooperation is missing in India-Japan mechanisms. Arguing that a ‘global’ partnership can hardly be confined to the Indo-Pacific maritime expanse alone, they advocate the inclusion of Japan in strategic and economic initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. The authors also recommend that earlier Japanese policies, such as Hashimoto Ryutaro’s “Eurasian Diplomacy” be revisited and revitalised. The chapter makes for interesting reading but might have stood out better had the authors offered a set of more granular recommendations.

The other chapter comprising this section is *“Innovation, Value Chain, and Structural Linkages in Asia-Africa Growth Corridor”* authored by Srabani Roy Choudhury. She delves into the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), highlighting the collaborative potential between India, Japan, and African nations in key focus areas such as agriculture, health, and production networks. While India brings to the table its historical presence, manpower, capability, and competence to undertake business and developmental projects, it lacks the necessary capital and high-end technology that Japan brings to bear. The author extensively explores opportunities across a variety of sectors, and this makes for absorbing reading. Although the author presents a fairly comprehensive overview of the analysis of the AAGC, there is once again an absence of adequate detail, making the chapter long in terms of ‘nobility of intent’ but a trifle short in terms of specificity.

The second section, *“Bilateral Perceptions and Strategic Significance: Resources and Technology”*, delves into the strategic imperatives of the bilateral relationship. KV Kesavan’s *“Infrastructure Connectivity and Corridors in Prime Minister Modi’s Japan*

*Policy*” expounds upon the manner in which India’s Act East Policy under Prime Minister Modi, driven by the need to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has led to significant infrastructure and technological projects. Ryohei Kasai’s *“Connectivity and Corridors in Shinzo Abe’s Indo-Pacific Foreign Policy: 2025 and Beyond”*, on the other hand, highlights Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy and highlights its emphasis on infrastructure to maintain regional stability. The strategic foresight of Prime Minister Modi and the late Prime Minister Abe in leveraging the strengths of their respective countries to foster regional stability and economic growth is given due acknowledgement and praise. The detailed analysis of ongoing and proposed projects demonstrates the potential long-term benefits of India-Japan collaboration for regional development and global economic integration.

The next chapter within this section is by AD Gnanagurunathan, who focuses upon *“Technology and Resource Imperatives in India-Japan Relations”* and examines bilateral technological cooperation aimed at addressing resource challenges. The author strongly espouses the value of India-Japan cooperation in space, exemplified by joint missions such as the Lunar Polar Exploration (LUPEX) mission, which aims to explore the moon’s southern pole and combines ISRO’s own lunar mission expertise with JAXA’s advanced rover-technology. He points out that dyadic cooperation in satellite technology is already enhancing disaster management and environmental monitoring at a global level; and apart from positioning both nations as key players in global space technology, is fostering a new era of space diplomacy.

This is followed by Shamshad A Khan’s *“Role of Forums and Institutional Mechanisms in the India-Japan Partnership of Prosperity”*, which evaluates the importance of bilateral and multilateral forums in deepening the strategic partnership. He competently places the bilateral relationship within the broader geopolitical context involving other like-minded nations. Khan explains that maritime exercises such as JIMEX and MALABAR, along with strategic dialogues and frameworks such as the QUAD and BIMSTEC, are central to enhancing maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight and crucial to counter China’s growing influence in the region. Investments in infrastructure, particularly in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and in ports across South Asia, such as Bangladesh’s port of Matarbari — a natural gateway to both South and Southeast Asia — highlight Japan’s commitment

to enhancing regional stability and economic integration. This cooperation extends beyond the security realm and includes humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, showcasing a multifaceted approach to regional challenges. The incorporation of other nations into this strategic framework, particularly through the QUAD, underscores the importance of collaborative efforts to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. Thus, the strategic alignment and complementary strengths of both nations, along with their partnerships with other like-minded countries, are shown to be critical in promoting sustainable development and stability in the region.

The third section, *“Financing Projects and Policies: The Economic Imperatives”*, focuses upon the economic dynamics of the partnership, emphasising China’s influence as a pivotal economic force in the region. Ravi Prasad Narayanan’s chapter, entitled *“The Asian Context: Chinese Economy and India-Japan Ties”*, examines how China’s “One Belt One Road Initiative” (OBOR), a strategic counter to the US pivot towards Asia, has reshaped regional economic policies, pushing India and Japan closer in trade, defence, and security. Narayanan suggests that China’s focus on development, contrasted with the USA’s emphasis on economic liberalisation, has allowed Beijing to fill the void left by US disengagement from regional multilateralism. This geopolitical shift, he feels, necessitates a robust India-Japan partnership to balance China’s growing influence.

The second chapter of this section is by Takashi Terada and is entitled, *“Prospects of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiatives and India-Japan Partnership”*. It explores the evolving geopolitical dynamics between China, the US, India, and Japan. Terada argues that China’s initiatives such as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) and the “Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership” (RCEP) pose significant challenges to regional stability and economic governance and recommends a high degree of sophistication in the strategic responses of India and Japan, involving careful balancing to support a *“Free and Open Indo-Pacific”* (FOIP). He cautions against a reduced emphasis on multilateralism, explaining that a return to an inward-leaning regional economy would adversely impact the much-needed trilateral cooperation between the US, India, and Japan. Terada’s insights offer a comprehensive understanding of the shifting geopolitical climate within the Indo-Pacific and makes for excellent reading.

Another good read is Titli Basu who, in her following chapter on *“International Financing, Infrastructure, and Statecraft: Japan’s Role in India’s Modernisation”*, argues that Japan’s infrastructure-financing, facilitated through institutions like the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), plays a crucial role in India’s modernisation. She highlights that Japan’s strategic investments in Indian infrastructure not only foster economic development but also enhance Japan’s own geopolitical standing in the Indo-Pacific. Basu contends that Japan must leverage its position in multilateral development banks to support India’s integration into regional value chains and industrial networks, thus addressing the *“infrastructure imbalance”* in Asia, and countering China’s dominance. Both chapters underscore the intricate balance of power and the strategic economic collaborations essential for maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

In the fourth and final chapter of this section, entitled *“Infrastructure Investment: EPQI, BRI and the Emerging Asian Contest”*, Amrita Jash explores the competitive nature of Japan’s “Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure” (EPQI) and China’s BRI, which reflects the broader geopolitical contest between the two countries. Notably, Jash examines the role of India in this dynamic, particularly in the context of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), showing how overlapping interests have created a complex landscape of near-simultaneous cooperation and competition. By dissecting the operational aspects and strategic motivations underpinning the EPQI, the BRI, and the AAGC, she adds considerable depth to the understanding of regional dynamics.

The book’s final section explores the convergence of maritime interests between India and Japan. Abhay Kumar Singh, in his chapter, *“India-Japan Strategic Partnership: Imperatives for Ensuring ‘Good Order at Sea’ in the Indo-Pacific”*, highlights the historical and strategic synergy in maritime Asia, emphasising the importance of maintaining *“Good Order at Sea”* for both nations to pursue their strategic and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific. Kenta Aoki’s chapter is tantalisingly entitled, *“Chabahar: The Fault-line in India-Japan Infrastructure Cooperation”*. In it, Aoki examines the strategic complexities of the Chabahar port project and argues that although it serves as a counter to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan nexus, aligning with India’s “Connect Central Asia” policy, Japan’s

own commitment to Chabahar is far less robust. This, the author feels, is partly due to Tokyo's strategic compulsions vis-à-vis the US, potentially allowing Beijing to expand its influence should Iran seek Chinese assistance for the port's development.

Takuya Shimodaira's chapter, "*China's Maritime Policy in the Bay of Bengal: How does it Affect India's and Japan's Maritime Interests?*" analyses China's expanding naval presence in the Bay of Bengal and its implications for India and Japan. Shimodaira highlights the strategic responses needed to counter China's "Maritime Silk Road" (MSR) and calls for enhanced connectivity through BIMSTEC and potential cooperation with the Quad. Madhuchanda Ghosh's brings up the tail of the book, with the chapter "*India and Japan in the Bay of Bengal: Strategic Convergence to Maritime Security*". Like Shimodaira before her, she, too highlights the importance of the Bay of Bengal within the context of India-Japan cooperation in their mutual pursuit of their complementary security interests. Whereas Shimodaira had focused upon mini-lateral and multilateral constructs ranging from the QUAD to the EU and BIMSTEC, Ghosh proceeds along a more bilateral trajectory as evidenced by her dilation upon "*the US Factor*" in countering China's naval expansion and ensure regional maritime security. Together, these chapters provide a comprehensive analysis of the strategic maritime dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, emphasising the critical role of India-Japan collaboration in maintaining regional stability and security.

Overall, the book offers its readers a systematic and detailed set of analyses that are enriched by data, graphs, and maps. As such, it is a hugely useful guide for anyone seeking to understand the complexities of India-Japan collaboration, from uncovering shared challenges to seizing opportunities. The book could certainly have benefited from an exploration of how best India and Japan could leverage 'soft diplomacy' and the value that is to be found in the promotion of Japanese and Indian cultural riches, through language education, art (even including 'anime'), and so forth. 'Soft diplomacy' plays a crucial role in the strengthening of bilateral ties and fostering mutual understanding. The Japan Foundation, for instance, is a key player in Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts in India, offering inexpensive Japanese language courses and organising a variety of cultural events that go a long way in bridging cultural gaps and promoting a deeper appreciation of Japanese culture among Indians. The same is true of the 'brand positioning' of India and its culture within Japan, so as to

replace negative impressions with positive ones. The book would have been enriched by an exploration of this facet.

Even within the structure of the book as it presently obtains, one wishes that there was a greater degree of specificity in the earlier chapters and that they contained less of broad generalities, especially where ‘way-ahead’ recommendations are concerned. That said, the later chapters, especially those that have deliberated on the port of Chabahar are very timely, indeed, given the long-term agreement that has been signed between India and Iran on 14 May 2024. All in all, “*Scaling India-Japan Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and Beyond 2025: Corridors, Connectivity, and Contours*” makes for compelling reading, and is a valuable supplement to any researcher’s understanding of regional geopolitics within the Indo-Pacific.

25 May 2024

### **About the Reviewer**

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## Book Review

# South Korea's Wild Ride: The Big Shifts in Foreign Policy From 2013 to 2022

Authors: Gilbert Rozman, Sue Mi Teri, and Eun A Jo

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*Ms Yukti Panwar*

The book “*South Korea's Wild Ride: The Big Shifts in Foreign Policy from 2013 to 2022*”, written by Gilbert Rozman, Sue Mi Teri and Eun A Jo, focuses on the tidal changes in the foreign policy of South Korea from 2013 to 2022. It addresses the presidential terms of Park Geun-hye, Moon Jae-in, and the transition into President Yoon Seok-yeol's term in 2022. It focuses both on the external and domestic factors that impact Seoul's foreign policy. The authors present a unique synthesis of Seoul's foreign policy, blending the influence of North Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the US, with Seoul's domestic politics, plagued by factionalism and a deeply divided yet highly aware society. Further, the book stresses the role of leadership in the discourse surrounding foreign policy, demonstrating how it changes depending on the party or ideology to which the President belongs. Given that South Korea is often called a “Swing State” due to the drastic shifts in its approach to geopolitical issues with the change in the ruling party, it is not too much of a stretch to term the turbulent period of 2013 to 2022 as a “wild ride” for South Korean politics and foreign policy.

The book is divided into three epochal parts but instead of these epochs being defined by the three presidential terms of Park Geun-hye (2013-17), Moon Jae-in

(2017-2022), and Yoon Seok-yeol (2022 onwards), the authors have deliberately chosen the three epochs as 2013-15, 2016-19, and 2020-22. This choice highlights the fact that 2016 and 2020 were years when the existing foreign policy framework was inadequate to address the needs of Seoul, thus necessitating a reshaping of its foreign policy. It calls attention to a curious circumstance, in that this trend took shape in the middle of the presidential terms of Park Geun-hye as well as Moon Jae-in, suggesting a shift in narrative in domestic politics as well. The authors also masterfully bring forth South Korea's hope that it is the key to solving the issues of Northeast Asia, despite having little maneuvering room in their foreign policy in the face of the hostile environment of the region. They aptly identify the "three forces" that were the driving factors behind the shifts in foreign policy: "*leadership changes, geopolitical factors, and a refocus on economic security.*"<sup>1</sup>

Part I is entitled "*South Korea in the Hot Seat, 2013 – 15*", and describes how Park Geun-hye started shifting the country's foreign policy initiatives with respect to North Korea and the four great powers (the US, China, Japan and Russia), after succeeding President Lee Myung-bak in 2013. She established "*a new conservative narrative*" — countering the prevailing progressive one. This demonstrates the domestic political divide vis-à-vis foreign policy during this period. The book focuses on the evolution of "*trustpolitik*", Park's policy towards North Korea, from 2013 to 2015. Under this policy, Park had pushed for strengthening deterrence against Pyongyang while retaining focus upon building trust and having regular dialogues. This approach also entailed Park "courting China" to handle North Korea. However, by 2015 it was apparent that South Korea could not rely upon China to support it, in addressing its core threat to national security.

Around this time, China, the US, Japan and Russia, were launching policy initiatives with Northeast Asia as an area of focus. The Park administration believed that these initiatives, combined with its own policy initiative, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) would create an opportune moment for South Korea to gain flexibility in its foreign policy choices. This flexibility in foreign policy choices would then enable Seoul to assert its influence in Northeast Asia, facilitating the desired shifts in regional dynamics. However, by 2015, all these calculations had failed. The authors also remark on Park's sustained but ultimately futile attempts to garner support from the US and China for her policy initiatives

towards North Korea. Finally, they introduce the element of historical legacy and its impact upon Seoul's relations with China and Japan — especially the manner in which the administration's thinking evolved over these three years with respect to both the nations.

Part II, entitled “*South Korea's High Stakes Diplomacy, 2016 – 2019*”, starts with the Park government's disillusionment after witnessing the failure of her foreign policy initiatives in 2015. This was most evident in the case of North Korea and China. This forced Park's hand, and she had little option but to make necessary corrections. As a result, 2016 became a year of remarkable shift, as Park significantly altered her North Korea policy. This led to the installation of the US-made Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system in South Korea. This highlighted Park's policy-tilt towards the US, but invited condemnation from Russia, North Korea and China. China's boycott of South Korean businesses in response to this development led to major brunt being borne by the Korean economy. 2016-17 also marked the beginning of President Donald Trump's term, which was the catalyst in the USA's disruptive approach towards Northeast Asia. The US-China rivalry had begun hardening in this period.

2017 also witnessed the impeachment of President Park, and the subsequent election of President Moon, who was the first president from the progressive faction after nine years of conservative rule in South Korea. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to look at 2016 and 2017 as years that marked a paradigm shift in South Korean foreign policy. The early part of Moon's term was filled with suspicion or fear from established powers in Northeast Asia. He pushed aggressively for engaging with North Korea again — and this resulted in several high-optic events in 2018 — the inter-Korean Summit, the two US-North Korea Summits, and many more. During this time, South Korea increasingly envisioned itself as a major economic power and sought to leveraging this for geopolitical gains in Northeast Asia. However, in 2019, the Moon administration was brought to earth in what might be termed a hard landing, when Kim Jong-un went back on his 'promises' of denuclearisation and recommenced missile testing, following a breakdown in talks with Trump. Russia, too, was becoming increasingly close to North Korea. As the country progresses through the current year (2024), this is fast becoming a point of major concern for Seoul.

Part III, entitled “*South Korea Sobers up, 2020 – 2022*”, describes how the period between 2020 and 2022 became yet another watershed moment for South Korean foreign policy. It not only marked the beginning of President Yoon Seok-Yeol’s term but also witnessed unprecedented levels of provocations by North Korea. South Korea and the US struggled to find an effective solution to deal with this situation. The authors note that due to global attention being focused upon the Russia-Ukraine war, Seoul was unable to mobilise support from the international community in terms of dealing with Pyongyang. COVID-19 was another source of major disruption for the world, and Seoul was no exception to its geopolitical impact. In 2022, although Seoul’s relations with Russia tanked due to the Ukraine war, its relations with Japan improved significantly. Relations with the US, too, gained momentum as President Yoon was in favour of establishing an “*Indo-Pacific Framework*”. Yoon is treading carefully with China. His approach with Beijing brings traces of ambiguity in Seoul’s Indo-Pacific strategy. As the authors have noted, “*the years 2020 – 22 revealed both the changing ambitions and lingering limitations of South Korean foreign policy.*”<sup>2</sup>

The failure of the authors to extensively address the New Southern Policy (NSP) and the New Northern Policy (NNP), which were introduced in 2017, and later evolved into Seoul’s Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022), is surprising. Russia, Central Asia and East Europe are the areas of focus for NNP, while Southeast Asia and India are the areas of focus for NSP. Both these policies aimed at expanding the reach of South Korea’s foreign policy beyond Northeast Asia. They also signified a shift in the foreign policy, which is something that deserved more attention in the book.

The authors’ compendious writing style allows for the book’s modest length without compromising its quality and substance. They have flawlessly encapsulated the complex nature of Northeast Asian geopolitics, inter-Korean relations, Korean foreign policy, and domestic politics. While some readers may find the prose dense, demanding much time and attention, it is a must-read for all who are interested in South Korea’s foreign policy and the regional dynamics of Northeast Asia.

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## About the Reviewer

Ms Yukti Panwar was a Junior Research Associate (JRA) at National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi, India. Her research focused upon the manner in which the maritime geostrategies of India are impacted by those of Japan and South Korea. She also delved into the larger context of Indo-Pacific and the burgeoning challenges within this region. She can be reached at ea1.nmf@gmail.com .

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*Brinkmanship in the  
South China Sea*



# China's Aggressive Moves in the South China Sea: Escalating Tensions and the Urgency For Action

*Ms. Apila Sangtam and Mr. Viet Hoang*

## Abstract

*China's actions in the South China Sea and claim of maritime territories in the region have been a cause of concern for littoral nations, for a while. However, ever since the construction of artificial islands in SCS, China's actions are perceived as violative of international law, specifically the charter of UNCLOS. In addition, the islands being converted to military bases, by virtue of which Beijing is laying claims in the SCS and its resources, especially, energy resources, has become a reason for further insecurity among nations in the ASEAN region. Routine patrols of PLA Navy's vessels and other maritime surveillance vessels disguised as scientific research vessels, are increasingly venturing into SCS and beyond. This is likely going to cause geopolitical instability in a region that acts a gateway to the Indian Ocean from the Pacific Ocean, and will have a bearing on the SLOCs passing through. It is therefore necessary for nations in the region, specifically in ASEAN, to work together, showcasing collective action, to ensure there is no disruption to trade; and commerce and more importantly, ensure further escalation and geopolitical contestations is avoided. ASEAN with emerging economies and home to several resources, is pivotal to the stability of the larger Indo-Pacific region. Ongoing conflicts in West Asia, particularly in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea have already impacted trade. And the escalation of conflict in SCS, will result in supply chain disruptions and significant economic impact. This paper discusses the opportunities for synergies in terms of collective action among ASEAN states as well as likeminded partners in the broader Indo-Pacific region.*

The South China Sea (SCS) is currently witnessing a significant escalation of tensions as China actively pursues a series of provocative actions aimed at destabilising the region's current status quo. It has been reported that China increasingly utilises its artificial islands as bases to bully the ASEAN nations sharing maritime boundaries in the SCS, and to curtail their access to offshore resources –

oil, gas, and fisheries.<sup>1</sup> Beijing's claims to these resources across much of the SCS<sup>2</sup> are widely considered as *ultra vires* the UNCLOS, including unlawful conduct under the guise of Marine Scientific Research (MSR) activities in the SCS and the Western Pacific Ocean. These activities involving survey vessels, inclusive of the *Xiang Yang Hong 3*, *Shi Yan 6*, and *Haiyang Dizhi 10* have raised concerns as they have been perceived as spearheading China's dominance in the region. Beijing's wrongful interpretation of the provisions of the UNCLOS and the 'use of force' in the SCS violates both the sovereignty and sovereign rights of nations dependent on the SCS and its resources.

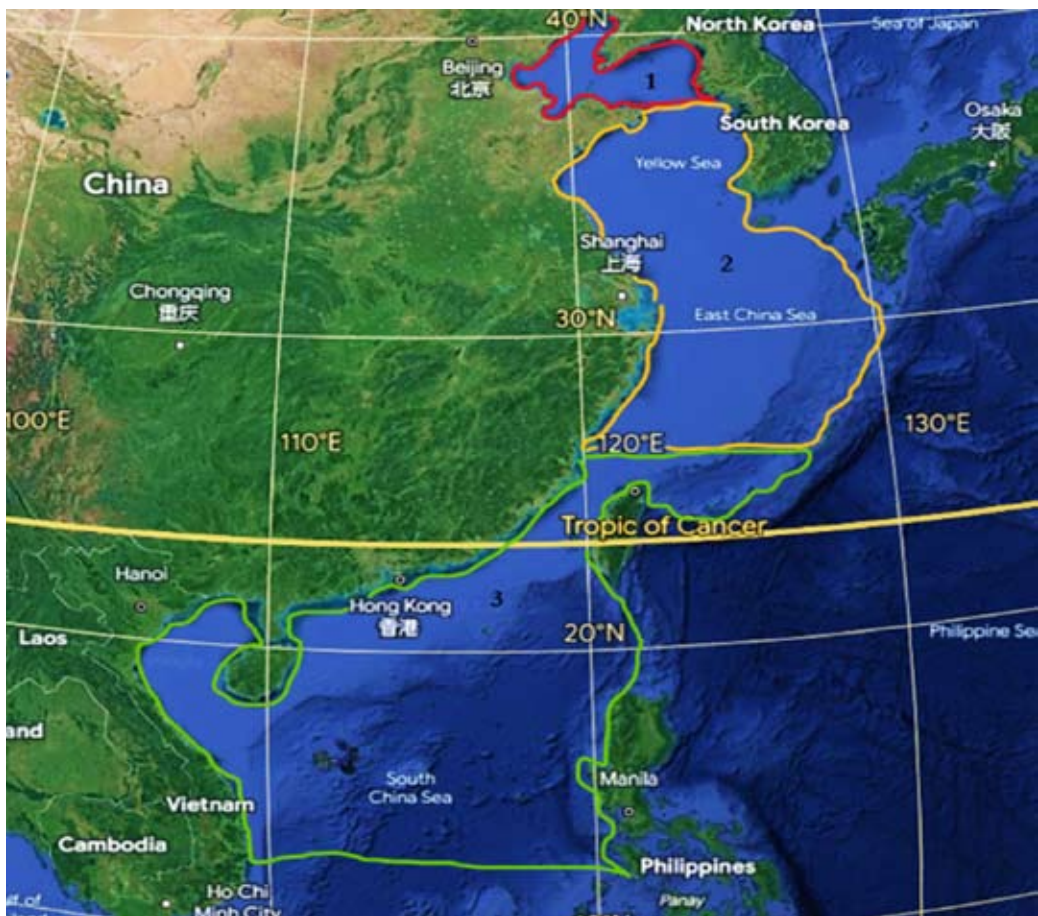
Even China's alleged claim of the 'nine-dash line' along the islands in SCS considered as 'invalid' in law, prove that Beijing has no legal right to impose its will on the region unilaterally. However, China's 'invalid' claims were challenged by the Philippines in the SCS Arbitration wherein the arbitral tribunal decided that much of the PRC's claims are *ultra vires* the international law.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, recent reports show that China has been carrying out exploration activities in the EEZs of ASEAN nations during the period of the unilateral fishing ban, thus violating the sovereign rights of these nations. Considering the recent surge in China's aggressive moves in the SCS, this article analyses the increase in China's infringements upon the EEZs in the SCS and its dominance in the region. Thence, the imperative to re-examine China's aggression in the SCS and the urgency for a collective action amongst ASEAN nations in finalising the Code of Conduct feels both timely and urgent.

## **China's maritime assertiveness and harassment in contested waters**

China's ulterior motive appears to be achieving complete sovereignty and control over the South China Sea (SCS), an area where there are contested maritime claims with ASEAN nations. China's maritime assertiveness is evident in its annual unilateral fishing ban announced on 13 March 2023.<sup>4</sup> Notably, this endeavour was strategically timed to coincide with the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME-2023) which successfully concluded in the SCS on 08 May 2023. The unilateral fishing ban announced by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs on 'Adjusting the Fishing Rest System in the Marine Summer Season' through Circular [2023] No. 1 mentions the following moratoriums:

1. The waters of the Bohai Sea and the Yellow Sea north of 35 degrees north latitude are suspended from 12:00 on May 1st to 12:00 on September 1.
2. The waters of the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea between 35 degrees north latitude and 26 degrees 30 minutes north latitude are suspended from 12:00 on May 1 to 12:00 on September 16.
3. The East China Sea and the South China Sea from 26°30' north latitude to 12° north latitude are suspended from 12:00 on May 1 to 12:00 on August 16 (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1:** Extent of Fishing Moratoriums defined in the Chinese Circular



*Source: Authors' creation using Google Earth*

Despite the circular aiming to “*strengthen the protection of marine fishery resources and promote the harmonious co-existence between man and nature*”, China’s recent engagement in the SCS contradicts this notion. For instance, during the AIME 2023 exercise, it was reported that Chinese militia boats were manoeuvring amidst the naval formations in the area where the drills were being conducted. The Indian authorities were able to track the movements of at least five militia boats, and a Chinese research vessel assisting these boats. Later, the Chinese boats were identified as belonging to the *Qiong Sansha Yu* militia fleet, consisting of commercial fishing boats that cooperate with Chinese authorities for political objectives in the South China Sea.<sup>6</sup> Also, on 07 May 2023, Chinese vessel *Xiang Yang Hong 10* along with its support vessel entered Vietnam’s EEZ, remaining there for almost a month. They were forced to leave following the protests from Hanoi.<sup>7</sup> Further, in June 2023, a Philippine Navy (PN) patrol aircraft spotted Chinese Distant Water Fishing Fleets (DWFFs) guarded by the China Coast Guard (CCG) and People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels over the Iroquois Reef, located within the Philippines EEZ.<sup>8</sup>

China has also been identifying and naming underwater features in the SCS, and in the Indian Ocean under the guise of MSR and claiming sovereignty over these features, thus violating Article 241 of the UNCLOS which clearly prohibits member States from using MSR to claim any part of the marine environment or its resources.<sup>9</sup>

## **China’s Harassment Activities in the SCS**

On 16 July 2023, the fishermen of Thitu Island stated that they still experience harassment in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) from the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessels in the area. These fishermen were forced to alter their fishing routes to steer clear of areas occupied by the Chinese militia and coast guard to avoid further harassment.<sup>10</sup> However, tensions flared up on 05 August 2023, after six Chinese coast guard vessels and two maritime militia ships intercepted two smaller Philippine boats that were en route to resupply troops stationed at *BRP Sierra Madre*, near the Second Thomas Shoal. Three corvettes of the PLAN were also present in the area during the incident. The Chinese ships separated one of the boats in a ‘dangerous manoeuvre’ before firing a water cannon. These vessels also fired water cannons at the Philippine coastguard ships.<sup>11</sup> This increase in China’s harassment activities and

alleged claims is due to the lack of a unified response, and deep divisions among the ASEAN member states – how to obtain redressal against the growing harassment. The fear of potential retaliation from China and the growing assertiveness in the SCS was not challenged by the Southeast Asian countries until the Philippines decided to take China to arbitration under Annex VII of the UNCLOS.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that few Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia do not have any direct maritime territorial claims with China makes it more challenging for the ASEAN nations to reach a consensus on voicing opposition to China's 'use of force' in the area. This is also another reason for the delay in finalising the Code of Conduct (COC). According to Ian Storey, an expert at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, the COC negotiation process has made no progress since 2002.<sup>13</sup> Surprisingly, Beijing turned its attention back to the COC negotiations during the SCS arbitral proceedings. The same year, China initiated land reclamation and construction operations on seven reefs under its control in the Spratly Islands, aiming to transform them into substantial military installations.<sup>14</sup> China's action in this context is perceived as a breach of trust and a display of double standards, creating challenges for ASEAN nations in attaining a comprehensive and efficacious agreement on the Code of Conduct (COC). Le Thu Huong, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute also stated that *"the COC has become a 'holy grail', highly desired but unattainable. A major concern should be that this holy grail could turn into a tool for China to legitimise its actions in the South China Sea by engaging in the process while subverting its spirit"*.<sup>15</sup>

## **China's Strategic Exploration Activities**

China has taken a multifaceted approach in the SCS, deploying three distinct groups – (1) survey vessels exploring the contested waters, (2) a combination of militia, coast guard, and naval ship formations encroaching upon the ASEAN nation's EEZ, and (3) Chinese scholar delegations engaging in diplomatic discussions.<sup>16</sup>

## **Chinese Survey Vessels Exploring the Contested Waters**

China has strategically deployed six survey vessels to conduct extensive exploration activities in areas of the SCS with the highest potential for oil and gas resources.

Among these vessels, survey ship named *Haiyang Dizhi 4* (HDYZ-4) commenced its mission in early April and lasted till 19 April 2023.<sup>17</sup> Its designated operational area spanned the overlapping EEZ between Vietnam and Malaysia, including the continental shelf.<sup>18</sup> This is, however, not a new occurrence as these vessels have been engaging in surveys and intimidation of Southeast Asian states. For instance, back in April 2020, the *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, accompanied by several CCG (China Coast Guard) and militia vessels, conducted surveys in a specific area of the Malaysian continental shelf, close to where the *West Capella* drill ship is located.<sup>19</sup> Throughout this period, they persistently harassed the drill ship and its supply vessels. However, Malaysia showed disapproval to these activities by conducting regular patrols in the area using its navy and law enforcement ships.<sup>20</sup>

Further, in April 2023, Chinese survey vessels, *Jia Geng* and *Haiyang Dizhi 720*, came in close proximity to the Dongsha Islands, located within Taiwan's EEZ.<sup>21</sup> On 27 April 2023, *Jia Geng* changed course, and navigated to the Vanguard Bank, subsequently encroaching upon Malaysia's EEZ. On 01 May 2023, the vessel was found navigating within Indonesia's EEZ. This incident highlighted China's disregard for the provisions of UNCLOS. However, to worsen the situation, two additional survey vessels entered the scene, namely *Xiangyanghong 14* and *Xiangyanghong 10*. The former have been conducting surveys near the Namyt Reef and the West Reef, part of the Spratly Islands since 30 April 2023. Notably, *Xiangyanghong 10*, accompanied by Chinese coast guard forces, had taken position near the Vanguard Bank since 07 May 2023. Tensions increased with the arrival of *Xiangyanghong 31* on 12 May 2023, as it navigated towards the area where the EEZs of Vietnam and the Philippines overlap, specifically near the Subi Reef.<sup>22</sup> This concerted effort by China emphasizes its unwavering focus on exploring specific areas encompassed within the contested waters having significant quantities of oil and gas reserves.

A submerged feature in the SCS, the Vanguard Bank, also known as *Wan'an Tan* in China,<sup>23</sup> is of remarkable significance as it contains an estimated 5 billion tons of oil, of which approximately 2 billion tons are considered economically viable reserves. China's *Wan'an Tan* projects are aimed at exploring and exploiting these resources.<sup>24</sup> Vanguard Bank, a pivotal focal point in the SCS, boasting the largest reserves of oil is estimated to hold between 23 to 30 billion tons of oil.<sup>25</sup> As a result, it becomes apparent that all survey vessels conduct surveys this area, with particular attention

given to *Xiang Yang Hong10* due to its substantial deep-sea surveys capabilities, and escorted by militia and naval ships.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Chinese survey vessels have been found retrieving buoys with an aim to prevent the Philippines from asserting control in areas near the Whitsun Reef. In essence, China’s survey ships are actively gathering data in the SCS and closing the data loop within the entire “EEZ belt” of all involved nations, ensuring a comprehensive dataset from all relevant parties. A Representative list of Chinese Vessels Infringing upon the EEZ of ASEAN Nations in 2020-2023 timeframe is mentioned at Table 1.

Name of the Ship	Types of Vessels and Year	Places visited in SE Asia	Purpose of Visit
Haiyang Dizhi 4	Vessel in the Research Segment, built-in 1980	The incursion into Vietnam’s EEZ on 15 March 2023 for more than 17 hours Vietnamese waters on 14 June 2020	The ship was conducting an operation Oil exploration
Haiyang Dizhi 8	Research and Survey Vessel built in 2017. (Displacement 2368 t DWT)	Malaysia’s EEZ near Beting Patinggi Ali (Luconia Shoals) waters for two weeks since 21 June 2023 Haiyang Dizhi 8 visited an area of the South China Sea that lies approximately 145 nautical miles off the coast of Sarawak on 20 June 2023	Conducting seabed research within Malaysia’s EEZ in areas rich in oil and gas resources Conducting research operations in an area of the South China Sea, which is causing concerns for Malaysia as it’s considered within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ)
Haiyang Dizhi 10	Research and Survey Vessel built in 2017 (Displacement 845 t DWT)	Criss-crossing the North Natuna Sea in Indonesia’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) on 5 October 2021	Unlawful research according to Indonesian Researcher at the Indonesia Ocean Justice Initiative (IOJI)
Jia Geng and Haiyang Dizhi 720	Research/Survey Vessel that was built in 2017	Encroached into Malaysia’s EEZ on 30 April 2023	Surveying
Xiangyanghong 14, Xiangyanghong 10, Xiangyanghong 31	Research/Survey Vessel that was built in 2016	Conducting operations between Namyit Reef and West Reef of the Spratly Islands since 30 April 2023 Sailing in Vietnam’s EEZ from 7 May to 4 June 2023	Navigates towards the shared exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of Vietnam and the Philippines, specifically in the vicinity of Subi Reef Operated primarily around joint oil and gas operations led by Russian and Vietnamese firms

CCG 5901 (The world's largest coast guard vessel with 165 meters)	Patrol Vessel built in 2016	Sailing near Natuna Sea's Tuna Bloc and Vietnamese Chim Sao fields since December 30th as reported on 15 January 2023  Operated near Vanguard Bank on 8 June 2023	Monitoring the resource-rich maritime area. This area is claimed by both China and Indonesia  Obtaining valuable information for economic development and military intelligence
CCG5205 Zhaojun WPS Ex 44111 (101 meters)	Patrol Vessel built in 2015	Encountered in the vicinity of Ayungin Shoal and Sabina Shoal in the West Philippine Sea on 14 February 2023  Chinese ship CCG5205 and Vietnamese vessel Kiem Ngu 278 had a close encounter in the South China Sea's disputed waters near Vanguard Bank on 26 March 2023	Asserting maritime claims and conducting surveillance  The Chinese vessel's presence relates to the Vietnam-China territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands and seabed resources
Da Yang Yi Hao	Research Vessel built in 2019	The ship surveyed the West Philippine Sea area by November 22, followed the Kyushu-Palau Ridge underwater feature, and had entered Palau's EEZ by November 30, 2021	Conducting underwater surveys and data collection

## China's Three Forces: Militia, Coast Guard, and Navy

According to the CSIS report (2021),<sup>27</sup> the majority of China's militia vessels cannot be directly linked to the Chinese government through the publicly available information on ownership networks, but they are easily identified through photos and videos, data from ship-to-ship automatic identification systems (AIS), and other tell-tale behaviour like 'rafting-up' by tying multiple boats together.<sup>28</sup> China has strategically deployed three forces simultaneously, each serving distinct purposes. Notably, there is a clear distinction between civilian entities, such as maritime militia ships, coast guard vessels, and naval ships. This division allows for the calculated execution of a plan that aims to normalize confrontations within the invalid 'nine-dash line' using tactics associated with grey hulls. The first aspect involves China's maritime militia force, which maintains a constant presence and fulfils dual functions within the scope of encirclement operations. The first function is to establish blockades around

uninhabited features in the central region of the invalid ‘nine-dash line’. For instance, on 23 April 2023, a concentrated deployment of over 100 ships surrounding the Whitsun Reef and 18 ships near Sabina Shoal was reported. The subsequent role involves safeguarding the innermost perimeter while providing escort services for maritime survey vessels or areas under China’s illicit control within the South China Sea. This is evident from the Chinese military’s involvement in escorting the militia ships that were found to be intimidating the naval formations during the recently concluded AIME-2023.

The second aspect is the pivotal role of the Chinese Coast Guard. With law enforcement responsibilities, this force actively engages in “encroachment” activities to support the Chinese militia, countering the presence of law enforcement ships from ASEAN nations. Notably, two Chinese coast guard ships, namely *CCG4303* and *CCG5305*, have been found consistently providing escort to the survey vessel *Xiang Yang Hong10* in Vietnam’s Vanguard Bank in mid-May 2023.

The third aspect includes the PLAN which maintains a significant presence in the outermost perimeter, although not directly involved in the operations conducted by the militia and coast guard. However, two activities must be highlighted – firstly, self-exercises were announced in certain areas of the South China Sea on 27 April 2023, and secondly, bilateral exercises between China and Singapore took place from 28 April to 01 May 2023, specifically near the southern tip of the South China Sea, in an area claimed by China. These exercises aim to promote openness and mutual understanding in the maritime domain. However, on 23 April 2023, a group of unidentified Chinese naval ships were detected near Thitu Island, indicating their support for the Chinese coast guard’s activities. The final group consist of maritime survey ships and patrol boats. Although these groups can operate independently, their activities demonstrate a high level of coordination and sophistication.

The observations at Table 1 indicate that the Chinese have assigned specific roles to each unit within the three forces: militias (to enforce a siege), coast guard and navy (to encroach and the use of force). The possibility for the forces to coordinate and collaborate in the future to enhance China’s strategy in the SCS could become a ‘headache’ for ASEAN nations.

## Chinese Scholarly Delegations Engaging in Diplomatic Discussions

Even though the role of the third group often goes unnoticed despite its significance, China recently dispatched three delegations as part of the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPI) to engage in bilateral discussions with ASEAN nations involved in dialogue mechanisms pertaining to the South China Sea. It is noteworthy to mention that the Director of SCSPI led a delegation that visited the Philippines from 02 April to 05 April 2023,<sup>29</sup> engaged in a dialogue with Indonesian CSIS scholars in Indonesia on 06 April 2023,<sup>30</sup> followed by a visit to Malaysia from April 10 to 12, and finally visiting Singapore on 13 April and 14 April 2023.<sup>31</sup> However, it seems that the delegation failed to create any traction as there was an increase in Chinese ships conducting survey activities in the SCS as early as 15 April 2023.

China's adherence to the "three warfare(s)"<sup>32</sup> strategy includes utilizing scholarly exchanges to gain insights into ASEAN nations and assess their influence. This approach aids in understanding battlefield dynamics and determining optimal timing for maneuvers. Even though the *Xiang Yang Hong10* survey ship encroached upon Vietnam's EEZ on 07 May 2023, it took until 25 May 2023 for Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to formally request the ship, along with the accompanying coast guard ships and fishing vessels, to exit Vietnam's EEZ.<sup>33</sup> Vietnam is observed to have utilized a variety of channels and means to press its legal standpoints and build up a coalition to counter the legal warfare.<sup>34</sup> Vietnam's standpoint is a clear example of the difficulties faced by island nations in the SCS to uphold the rules-based order, while also retaliating against China.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Malaysia and Indonesia in collaboration with Vietnam are adopting a similar approach in dealing with China's grey zone tactics in the South China Sea. However, this strategy seems to be ineffective. Cameron Smith, an Australian expert on regional security, emphasizes the importance of proactive initiatives in warfare, as advocated by Sun Tzu. Instead of reacting to China's moves, maritime nations should take the lead, shifting the liability onto China. The Philippines' lawsuit against China exemplifies this approach, which should become the norm rather than the exception.

## Conclusion

The approach of leveraging global public opinion regarding China's escalating maritime assertiveness and harassment within the SCS, which encompasses the (1) frequent targeting of fishermen, (2) imposing unilateral fishing bans which overlap with ASEAN nations EEZ, (3) strategy of conducting exploration activities by means of MSR, and (4) using three warfare(s) strategy, could prove advantageous for countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, as they grapple with increasing threats from China. Notably, both these nations have embarked on a path of cooperation, having negotiated an agreement concerning territorial assertions in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, the details of this agreement, though already in motion, remain concealed from the public eye.<sup>36</sup> However, to garner support and shed light on the situation, both Vietnam and the Philippines could contemplate leveraging international public opinion. This strategic move could involve revealing the specificities of the ongoing agreement while also re-examining China's aggressive moves in the SCS and the urgency in finalizing the COC to uphold the principles of justice and sovereignty.

By exposing China's actions through international channels, these countries can potentially elevate the discourse around the South China Sea disputes. Engaging the global community's attention might lead to increased diplomatic pressure on China, encouraging adherence to established international frameworks and regulations. Consequently, the act of harnessing international public opinion could emerge as a vital tool in safeguarding the interests of ASEAN nations and maintaining the stability of the region. An essential step entails bringing attention to the encroachment of Vietnam's EEZ by a Chinese vessel conducting MSR and claiming sovereignty over submerged features in the SCS which violates the provisions of the UNCLOS. This action has the potential to adversely affect China's standing, as it raises 'claims' about its adherence to international maritime laws and regulations.

Countries especially Vietnam and the Philippines should also focus on fostering cooperation with environmental groups in enhancing capacity-building for directing policy towards fisheries protection and conservation in the SCS, consistent with international law. This approach has the best prospects for garnering wider support within ASEAN, given the priority it accords to thwarting illegal fishing.

Even though the ASEAN nations are joining forces to counter China's aggressive moves in the SCS, recent research by the CSIS reveals that about 300 Chinese maritime militia vessels are actively patrolling the disputed Spratly Islands, often engaging in aggressive actions like intentionally colliding with foreign ships, highlighting China's assertive pursuit of territorial claims.<sup>37</sup> This situation raises concerns, especially for ASEAN nations having territorial disputes with China, as the prolonged delay in the COC negotiations poses a dilemma — *Can the ASEAN nations rely on China's commitment to a conclusive agreement amidst persistent incidents of harassment?*

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# Lessons for India from the South China Sea

*Captain KS Vikramaditya, IN*

China's aggression in the South China Sea (SCS) has once again become evident, especially with recent images and videos showing Chinese Coast Guard personnel using crude weapons<sup>1</sup>, roughly akin those used during the Galwan clash on India's Northern borders in 2020, to intimidate Philippine supply missions to their outpost at the Second Thomas Shoal. While there has been a lot of commentary on China's actions in the SCS, it would be wise to re-examine and critically analyse the origin of the issue, the actions of some main players, and the lessons that can be learned, especially considering the increasing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and growing maritime competition with India.

## Background

China's rise on the global stage, if not yet as a "great" power, then at least as a "major" one, is undeniable. The implications of China's rise are widely debated and closely watched. On the one hand, there is the widely expressed Chinese view that the country's rise is benign<sup>2</sup> and purely economic, which justifies its increasing visibility and what others call aggression as simply a necessity to safeguard its trade and economic interests. On the other, there is the long-held view of China watchers and experts, especially in the Western strategic and intelligence community, that China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have hegemonic and revisionist ambitions. They believe that beyond just consolidating its power, the CCP seeks to reshape the existing world order according to what might be termed Chinese standards, values, and norms, and return China to a position of strength, prosperity, and global leadership<sup>3</sup>.

Given the situation at the time and China's relative weakness compared to the existing balance of power, China under Deng Xiaoping pursued its ambitions under the well-known dictum, "*hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead.*" This approach is similar to George Washington's advice to his countrymen to avoid "*entangling alliances*", since these were just a means to an end and not the end itself. While China continued to build its strength under this dictum during the leadership of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, it seems, believed that the circumstances that restrained his predecessors had changed<sup>4</sup>, and China was now ready to engage with the world from a position of strength. The rise of President Xi thus marks a point of inflection, where China's approach and actions on the world stage, which unlike Russia, previously aimed to project a positive and benign image, have now become increasingly aggressive and confrontational.

## **Influence Operations**

The primary manifestation of China's aggression is in the form of what are increasingly being called '*Influence Operations*'. As the term suggests, *Influence Operations* are aimed at inducing or reinforcing desired attitudes and behaviour from the target, which could be an individual, a group, a country, a region, or even the entire globe. What sets *Influence Operations* apart from other means of conventional conflict is that these are ubiquitous and perpetually ongoing across the entire '*DIME*' (Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic) paradigm. The importance of *Influence Operations* in Chinese strategic thinking can be better understood through the highly regarded book "Unrestricted Warfare"<sup>5</sup> by two PLA colonels (who later became Generals). The book suggests the continuous and simultaneous use of all means, both military and non-military, lethal and non-lethal, to compel an adversary to accept one's interests.

**The "Three Warfares".** The "Three Warfares" doctrine, formulated in 2003, includes "public opinion (media) warfare", "psychological warfare", and "legal warfare" (lawfare). This doctrine outlines the core of China's political warfare in both war and peace<sup>6</sup> and is likely the most common means of exerting influence.

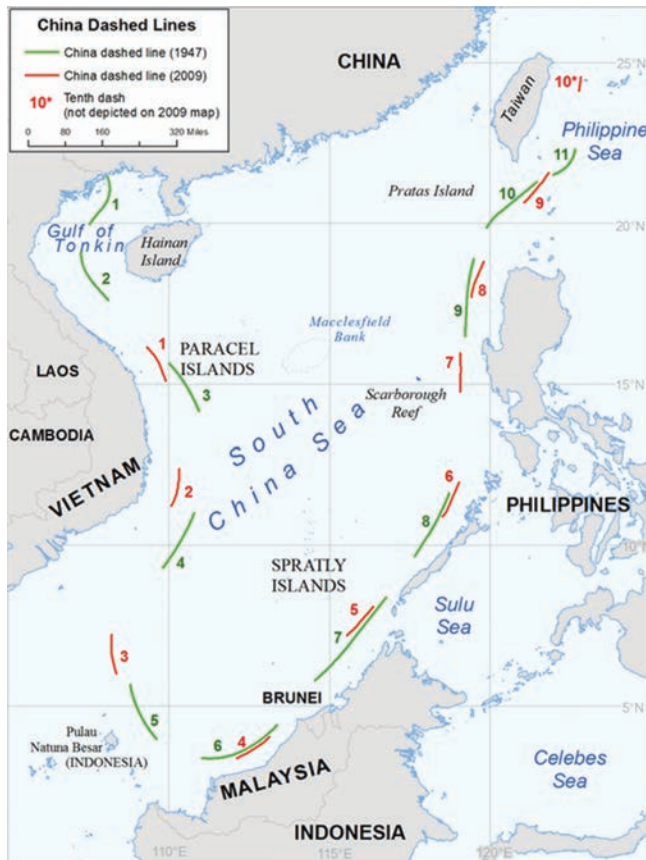
This article will examine China's use of "*Lawfare*" in the maritime domain, mainly in the South China Sea (SCS). It will also analyse the US reaction to ongoing Chinese aggression in this region and attempt to draw lessons for India, as well as suggest potential courses of action.

## **The Territorial Conflict in the South China Sea**

The Nine Dash Line. It is well known that China has promulgated a "nine dash line" that covers almost 85% of the South China Sea (SCS) (there are varying estimates in contemporary literature). What is perhaps less known is that the first instance of such lines appearing in popular discourse was through a map entitled, "Map of South China Sea Islands," published in 1947 by the Nationalist Government of the Republic of China. Further research indicates that this map was based on another one entitled, "Map of Chinese Islands in the South China Sea" (*Zhongguo nanshai daoyu tu*), published in 1935 by the Republic of China's Land and Water Maps Inspection Committee. The 1947 map had eleven dashes. The maps published by the People's Republic of China (PRC) simply followed these older maps. However, PRC maps, based on a rapprochement with communist Vietnam, removed the two dashes that were earlier depicted within the Gulf of Tonkin, thus showing nine dashes instead of eleven<sup>7</sup>. Modern Chinese maps published since 1984, have been depicting a 10<sup>th</sup> dash, located to the east of Taiwan.

Opposition to Chinese Claims. While China may have believed that the above maps were generally accepted by the other coastal States of the region, what disrupted this assumption was a joint submission by Vietnam and Malaysia on 06 May 2009, to the "Commission on the Limits of Continental Shelf" (CLCS), claiming an extended continental shelf in the southern part of the SCS. This was followed by a separate submission by Vietnam in the area north of its joint submission with Malaysia. Malaysia then indicated that it too would be making a partial submission in the same area as Vietnam. While the Philippines did not make a separate submission at that time, it officially informed the CLCS that the submissions of both Vietnam and Malaysia overlapped the legal continental shelf of the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> The positions taken by these three ASEAN States presented a serious challenge to

Figure 1: Comparison of Dashed Line in 2009 and 1947 Maps



Source: US Dept of State - *China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*<sup>8</sup>

China’s prospective use and exploitation of resources in the area. On 07 May 2009, within a day of the above-mentioned joint submission, China submitted two *Notes Verbale* (NV) to the UN Secretary General stating:

“China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof (see attached map). The above position is consistently held by the Chinese government and is widely known by the international community.”

This was the first time that the ‘Nine Dash Line’ map, encompassing approximately two million square kilometres of maritime space, was submitted to the UN by China.

Figure 2: China's Dashed-Line Map from Notes Verbales of 2009



Source: US Dept of State - *China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*<sup>10</sup>

This led to a series of protests from the three ASEAN countries mentioned earlier, and from Indonesia as well. China responded to these protests with another NV<sup>11</sup> on 14 April 2011, which reiterated the first sentence of the 2009 NV above and added: *“China’s sovereignty and related rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea are supported by abundant historical and legal evidence.”*

It would be appropriate to consider the above sequence of events as the “reference timeframe” of the commencement of the territorial conflicts in the SCS as are known today.

**Inconsistencies in the Chinese Position.** China has never clarified the legal basis or nature of its claims, nor has it published any geographical coordinates for the nine (or ten) dashes. Additionally, there are recurring geographical inconsistencies in the position and depiction of the dashed lines among the various maps published, first by the ROC, and later by the PRC. As a result, it is very difficult to determine a conclusive figure or estimate of Chinese claims in the SCS. Another area of contention is that these dashes are much closer to the mainland coasts and coastal islands of the littoral States of the SCS than to the SCS islands over which China claims sovereignty. For instance, “Dash #3” is 75 nautical miles from the closest Indonesian island, Pulau Sekatung, but almost 235 nautical miles from the Spratly Island.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 3:** Distances between Dashes and Land Features



*Source: US Dept of State - China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea<sup>13</sup>*

**Contradictory Claims.** All the island groups in the SCS have multiple claimants, with overlapping maritime zones and legal continental shelves (in accordance with UNCLOS). For example, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, each claim the entire Spratly group of islands, with portions also being claimed by Malaysia and the Philippines. Brunei claims a legal Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf overlap over the Spratly group.<sup>14</sup>

**UNCLOS.** While this article does not intend to undertake a detailed analysis of Chinese claims, it is important to highlight a few (among many) inconsistencies that severely challenge the accepted legal regime put forth by the LOS Convention. The following are relevant:

- (a) A majority of the ‘dashes’ fall within 200 nautical miles of the coasts of other littoral States in the region.

- (b) As mentioned earlier, Chinese sovereignty over land features is severely contested, requiring the mutual delimitation of overlapping and contested maritime boundaries.
- (c) For an island to be legally recognised as such, it should be above water at high tide. While an island has the same entitlement to maritime zones as other coastal territory, a rock that cannot sustain human habitation or economic life on its own is not considered an island and is only entitled to a territorial sea and a contiguous zone, but not an EEZ or legal continental shelf.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, a low tide elevation (LTE) that lies wholly outside the territorial sea of the State concerned is only entitled to a 500-metre “safety zone”. Most land features in the SCS do not qualify as islands.
- (d) The burden of establishing a historical claim lies with the claimant. The United States, based on the views of influential international legal authorities such as the International Court of Justice, and a study on Historic Waters and Bays commissioned by the Conference that adopted the 1958 Geneva Conventions on the law of the sea, has taken the view that for a historic claim to be valid, the claimant should have been exercising effective and continuous authority over the body of water in question, and there should have been acquiescence by other states in the exercise of that authority.<sup>16</sup> China clearly does not meet the necessary conditions of either having exercised continuous authority or acquiescence by other countries.

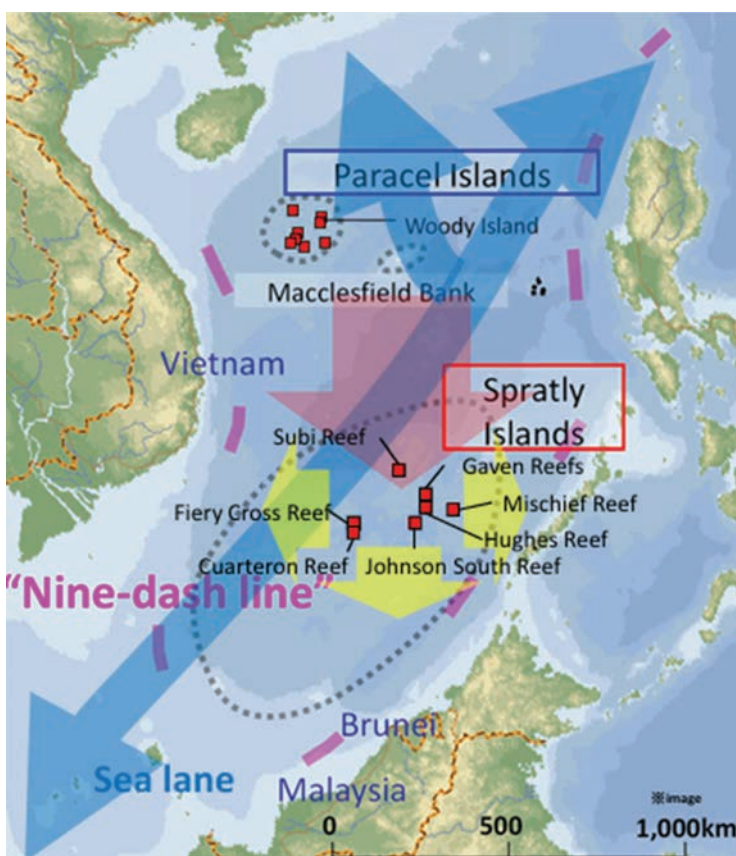
## China’s Artificial Islands

*“If the facts are against you, argue the law. If the law is against you, argue the facts. If the law and the facts are against you, pound the table and yell like hell”.*<sup>17</sup>

– Carl Sandburg, American poet and writer

**China’s Outposts in the Spratly Islands.** The above adage perfectly reflects Chinese actions. While China has been advising all coastal States in the region to maintain peace, it has been busy pouring sand in the SCS. In 2013, China began dredging sand from the sea floor and dumping it on several rocks and low-tide elevations

Figure 4: China's Artificial Islands

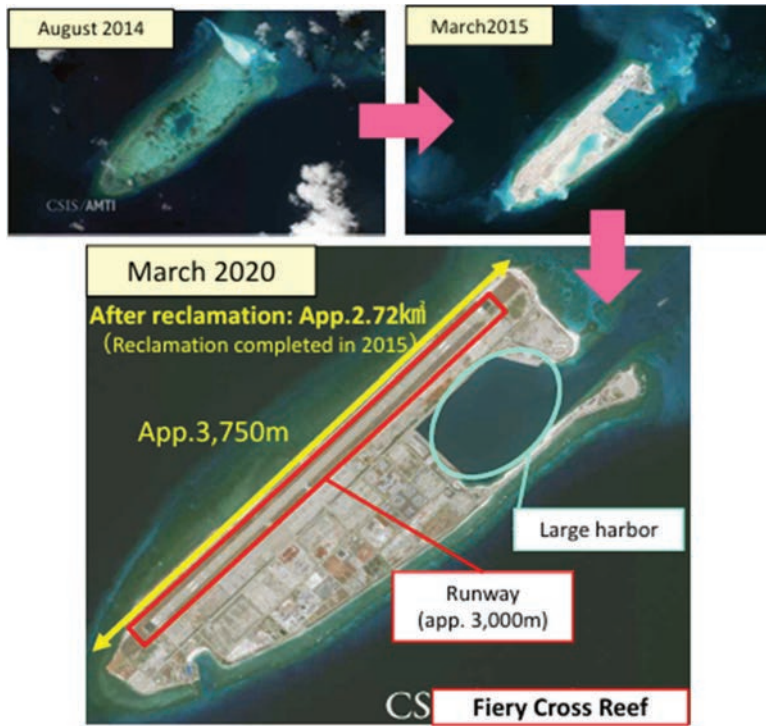


Source: Japan Ministry of Defence<sup>19</sup>

in the Spratly islands. Between December 2013 and October 2015, China built artificial islands and outposts covering about 3,000 acres on seven coral reefs in the southern part of the SCS<sup>18</sup>, namely, Fiery Cross, Mischief, Subi, Cuarteron, Gavin, Hughes, and Johnson reefs.

Amongst these, Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi reefs are particularly significant as these outposts now host substantial Chinese military infrastructure such as runways and helipads, naval port facilities, surveillance radars, air defence and anti-ship missiles, and troops.<sup>20</sup> However, contrary to popular belief, it is not only China that has reclaimed and fortified features in the Spratly Islands. Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam all occupy features that have been developed into outposts with

Figure 5: Chinese Reclamation on Fiery Cross Reef



Source: Japan Ministry of Defence<sup>22</sup>

military infrastructure, and some have also undertaken reclamation activities. The scale, on the other hand, is vastly different. While China reclaimed over 3,000 acres in about eighteen months, the other four countries together reclaimed less than 150 acres in the same period.<sup>21</sup> The US response to these activities was muted at best, possibly recognising that a sovereign country is the highest entity in the international legal system, and Washington did not distinguish between Chinese efforts and those of the other coastal states in the SCS.

### ‘Lawfare’ Related Implications of Chinese Reclamations in the SCS

While the artificial islands in the SCS provide China with geostrategic benefits such as platforms for power projection, a potential deep-water bastion for nuclear submarines, and a permanent foothold in a vital waterway, what may be even more important is the strengthening of China’s claim to territory, rich seabed resources,

and fisheries in the Spratly Islands. It is widely believed that China aims to assert its *de facto* sovereignty in the region and also strengthen its claim to the EEZ adjoining its coastline and all its islands in the SCS, under the aegis of UNCLOS.<sup>23</sup> Another conclusion that could be drawn is that China believes that, over time, its presence on the seven outposts in the Spratly group of islands will get normalised, resulting in the fulfilment of the two necessary conditions — effective and continuous authority, and acquiescence by other states — for acceptance of its historical claims. Chinese claims would then not only enjoy *de facto* but also *de jure* recognition.

**Excessive Chinese Maritime Claims.** Claims in the SCS, combined with some of China's national laws (whose legality is in question), provided the foundation for asserting additional maritime rights that are problematic from a legal standpoint. These are primarily of three types: prior authorisation or notification for warships to exercise innocent passage, prohibition of military activities in the EEZ, and the drawing of straight baselines even when geographic conditions for doing so are not satisfied.<sup>24</sup> According to the US Department of State, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, the illegal use of straight baselines has resulted in sea areas of more than 3,190 square nautical miles and 1,150 square nautical miles being wrongly classified as 'territorial sea' and 'internal waters' respectively, instead of their correct classification as 'high seas'. Further, large areas have been classified as 'internal waters' that should be categorised as 'territorial sea'. Also, the use of archipelagic straight baselines around the Paracel Islands has resulted in China incorrectly claiming a huge sea area that should have been classified as 'high seas' as 'internal waters'. The low-water line of the islands and reefs therein ought to have been used to form the correct baseline.<sup>25</sup>

## US Response

The power differential between China and the other states in the SCS is simply too large for the latter — either individually or even collectively — to influence China's intentions and actions. This, along with the strategic importance of the region and the heavy reliance of Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Japan on the US security umbrella, has made the US the *de facto* net security provider of choice in the SCS. Thwarting Chinese designs and aggression in the SCS is not feasible without



active US involvement. Therefore, the US stance and response thereto regarding increasing Chinese assertiveness (as described in previous sections) in the SCS, merits examination.

Since the 1990s, the US has held to the belief that as China became more powerful and prosperous, it would, in its own interest, willingly accept and adopt the international rules-based order. The intent, in the words of US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, in 2005, was to mould China into “a responsible stakeholder”.<sup>26</sup> The continuation of this aspect of US foreign policy was further exemplified by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s statement in Beijing in September 2012 that “our two nations are trying to do something that has never been done in history, which is to write a new answer to the question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet”.<sup>27</sup> This obviously referred to the implications of shifting power dynamics in the international system and the danger of falling into “the Thucydides Trap”.<sup>28</sup>

Continuing this policy, US President Barack Obama, during a joint press conference with President Xi Jinping in September 2015, stated, “the United States welcomes the rise of a China that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and a responsible player in global affairs”.<sup>29</sup> However, neither the US nor any of its allies, or any international construct for that matter, clarified the consequences should China choose not to live up to the western concept of a “responsible nation”. It may be surmised that the predominant American intent at that time was to avoid conflict. As a result, every time China violated its ‘rules-based order’ obligations, the US took steps to de-escalate the situation and reduce tensions, essentially allowing China to continuously make incremental gains,<sup>30</sup> much like the practice of ‘salami slicing’ on India’s Northern borders. Would it then be out of order to state that US risk-aversion laid the foundation for the current situation — with China on the cusp of near-total control over the SCS?

## **Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS)**

US Freedom of Navigation (FON) operations began in the post-World War II period, which saw the birth of several new coastal States and an increasing number

of maritime claims. This was especially relevant in the 1960s and 1970s, when even States that had traditionally defended free seas began to view the oceans as a resource rather than as the world's highways. The FON program was established in 1979 to preserve US navigational freedoms and demonstrate non-acceptance of excessive maritime claims by coastal states.<sup>31</sup>

China and the US have fundamental differences regarding UNCLOS. While the US, backed by precedence and the support of most nations, has long advocated for open seas with a focus on maritime sovereignty, China has interpreted UNCLOS far more restrictively and selectively, especially regarding the operations of foreign military vessels in its territorial sea and EEZ. Although the US was alarmed by China's artificial islands, it was legally constrained (or had constrained itself) from contesting Chinese actions since they were technically not prohibited by UNCLOS. It can also be assumed that the US, to avoid escalating tensions, was reluctant to conduct FONOPS at this stage. However, US concerns about excessive Chinese maritime claims were confirmed when a US P-8 patrol aircraft in May 2015, even though operating more than 12 nautical miles from one of the artificial islands in the Spratly group, was ordered to leave China's 'military alert zone' (a term without any legal standing) by the PLA, thus providing the required rationale and urgency for FONOPS.<sup>32</sup>

The world has become accustomed to US FONOPS over the years. This raises the question of why this subject requires further discussion. However, analysing the first FONOP mission is important for assessing whether more could have been done to thwart increasing Chinese aggression, and what lessons India and the world should draw. The first FONOP after the construction of the artificial islands under discussion was undertaken on 27 October 2015, by an *Arleigh Burke* Class guided-missile Destroyer, the USS *Lassen*, which transited within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef (and also a few features claimed by other countries). It is important to highlight that Subi Reef is an artificial island built on a low tide elevation, and as such, is not entitled to UNCLOS-defined maritime zones, other than a safety zone of 500 metres. An analysis of the ship's transit indicates that it was the US intention to assert its right of innocent passage without prior notification, thus opposing China's demand for the latter. However, innocent passage is a concept relevant only to the

territorial sea. Thus, by claiming innocent passage, the ship effectively gave credence to the assumption that Subi Reef was entitled to a territorial sea. Many US experts at that time believed this could be used by China in the near future to claim a ‘territorial sea’ around Subi Reef,<sup>33</sup> something China had avoided doing thus far. Considering China’s tendency to ‘creep forward,’ it is not overly imaginative to suggest that over time, China could even claim the status of an ‘island’ for Subi Reef, with its own contiguous zone and an EEZ. Should the USS *Lassen* have undertaken manoeuvres and activities that are prohibited by UNCLOS within the territorial sea, is a question that then assumes significance.

## Issues of Legality

**Status of Subi Reef.** As mentioned above, Subi Reef is a Low Tide Elevation (LTE). According to UNCLOS, the low tide mark of an LTE, which is situated wholly or partially within 12 nautical miles of the mainland or an island, may be used as the baseline for measuring the breadth of the territorial sea<sup>34</sup> — in other words, it may be used to ‘extend’ the territorial sea of the main or parent feature. In this case, Subi Reef is situated within 12 nautical miles of a feature called Sandy Cay and could be assumed to have a 12 nautical mile territorial sea, generated by Sandy Cay.

**Analysis of the First FONOP.** Considering the above, one could argue that since the US recognised that Subi Reef lay within a legal territorial sea, the intent of the FONOP was not to challenge the existence of the territorial sea, but to exercise freedom of navigation in accordance with UNCLOS.<sup>35</sup> However, a few issues merit examination. First, Sandy Cay is a rock and not an island. Its territorial sea cannot be used under the ‘bump out’ provision in relation to Subi Reef. Secondly, for Subi Reef to have a territorial sea, both Subi Reef and Sandy Cay (the parent feature) would need to be legally possessed by the same country since the maritime entitlements of one country cannot be used to generate entitlements for another country. Here, Sandy Cay was (and is) unoccupied and was claimed by China, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Thirdly, as per Article 3 of UNCLOS, a territorial sea must be established. It requires affirmative action and is not automatic. None of the affected states, including China, have ever established a territorial sea in the Spratly

Islands. Analysing US actions, it can be theorised that China's intentional use of confusion and ambiguity over its claims ended up tying the US in legal knots and wrangles<sup>36</sup>, resulting in a substantial dilution of the initial intent of the mission. An issue that perhaps requires deliberation is whether there was a lack of clarity amongst US planners regarding UNCLOS, while planning this important FONOP.

**US Neutrality.** An assessment of US actions in the aforementioned sections brings to light a concerted effort to stay neutral in the SCS, whether it be by transiting during its FONOP within 12 nautical miles of features claimed by other coastal States of the SCS, or in its response (or lack thereof) to the reclamation efforts by China and these other States. However, in terms of economic power, industrial capability, and military strength, there exists a vast difference between China and the other coastal states of the SCS, individually and even collectively. Such a rigid interpretation of neutrality or equality by the US severely disadvantaged the other SCS coastal States and has, today, put them, along with other stakeholders and the US itself, in a very difficult position.

**Equality Amongst Equals.** The Supreme Court of India has consciously avoided interpreting the equality clause laid down in the Indian Constitution in its literal meaning. Instead, in many judgments, the Hon'ble Supreme Court has upheld the principle of 'relative equality' that promotes equality amongst equals. The Court has even stated that *"to treat unequals differently according to their inequality is not only permitted but required"*.<sup>37</sup> While it may be debated whether this provision and interpretation of jurisprudence could be applied to the international legal system, there is probably no better example of inequality than in the SCS. Should the US then, as the preeminent broker of security in the region, have exercised 'affirmative action', as it does so resolutely at the domestic level?

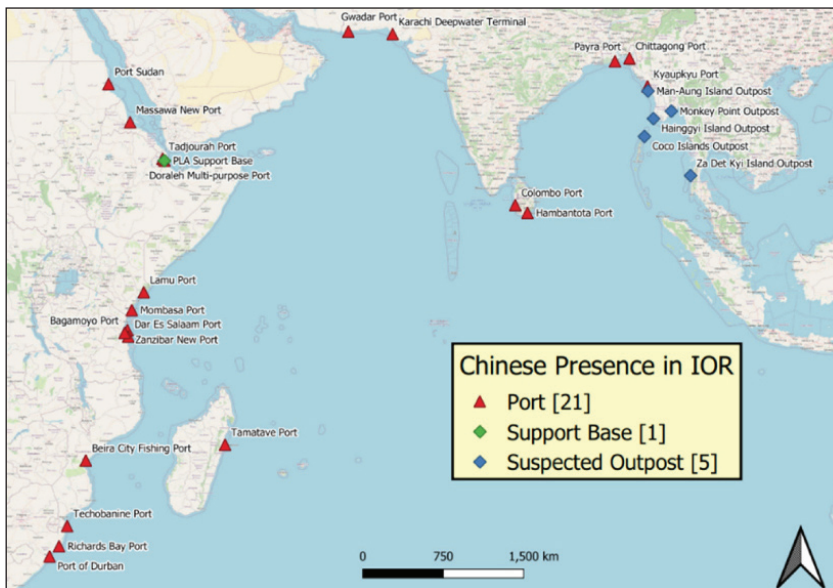
## **Increasing Chinese Presence in the IOR**

China has significant interests in the Indian Ocean. Even though China is considered a rank outsider in this sub-region of the Indo-Pacific, it does have close and longstanding relations with many coastal States in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In fact, unlike the traditional powers of the IOR, China is the only country

in the world that has an embassy in all six island countries in this region: Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros.<sup>38</sup> China has also emerged as a credible security and economic partner across large parts of the IOR, including in Africa. Its much-discussed “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) has increased China’s footprint and influence, and has enabled it to make strategic inroads into many IOR countries. Overall, China enjoys a perceptual benefit that has come mainly at the expense of the traditional global power, the United States,<sup>39</sup> and given the disruptive impact of China’s role in India’s immediate neighbourhood, some would say, at the expense of India as well.

The Indian Ocean is China’s main trading route with Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and South- and Southeast Asia. It is no surprise that China’s first overseas logistic base was established in Djibouti. In pursuit of its geoeconomic and non-geoeconomic goals, China has been constantly increasing its military (PLA Navy) presence in the IOR since 2008, including creating dual-use infrastructure. In addition to its listening outposts, mainly in Myanmar, it is estimated that China has financed, built, and/or operated more than 21 ports in the IOR.<sup>40</sup>

**Figure 7: Chinese Presence in the IOR**



Source: Organisation for Research on China and Asia<sup>41</sup>

Given New Delhi's strained relationship with Beijing, especially after the 2020 developments on India's northern borders, China's increasing maritime presence in the IOR is a cause for considerable concern. This is even more relevant since all of India's maritime neighbours are economically fragile and are under heavy Chinese debt (and hence influence). Of these, while Pakistan is openly hostile to India, the attitude of some others fluctuates according to the government in power.

## Lessons from the SCS and What India Could Do

Although the geography of India's maritime neighbourhood and China's direct influence therein is quite different from that in the SCS, there are several similarities, too. Are there lessons from the SCS that could be applied in the IOR?

**Procrastination is not an Option.** China's disruptive and damaging influence in India's maritime neighbourhood is likely to be a long-term issue. As in the SCS, '*lawfare*' will play a major role in China's attempts to change the *status quo* in its favour. The current situation in the SCS can be partly attributed to a delayed response to Chinese activities. Even benign Chinese activities thus need to be seen from a long-term perspective in terms of whether these could at some stage disturb the existing normal. In addition to affirmative action across the entire DIME paradigm along with, if required, actions that visibly leverage India's relative advantage (geographical and naval capability) in the IOR, these then need to be called out at the earliest and repeatedly thereon, at all the relevant multinational institutions and fora.

Although most of India's maritime boundaries, other than with Pakistan (especially near the Sir Creek area), are adequately delineated (maritime boundaries cannot be demarcated), overlapping interpretations and interests with other coastal states, especially regarding the EEZs, are always a possibility. This is especially relevant since with several of these littorals, including Indonesia, there are EEZs that are demarcated based on the median lines/ historical waters principles.

**Clear Enunciation of Red Lines.** In the above situation, China's reclamation and construction of an artificial feature on an LTE within 12 nautical miles of either the mainland or an island of any of India's maritime neighbours could, due to the

Figure 8: Exclusive Economic Zone of India



Source: Wikipedia<sup>42</sup>

applicability of the “bumping out of the territorial sea principle” result in a significant reduction of the Indian EEZ. In certain areas, such as the Coco Islands, this could give China a strategic advantage. The surreptitious construction of an LTE where none exists, and its development into an artificial structure, or the development of an artificial structure toward the extremities of the EEZ, in a position where it could provide an operational advantage (for example, close to Minicoy), are entirely feasible scenarios. While India might not be able to conduct detailed hydrographic surveys in such areas, a sharp lookout must be kept for any signs of such possibilities. Calling out such attempts along with increased presence in the area could have sufficient deterrent value. While sharp power could be used in a graded manner for strategic posturing

(to deter China), it may be more effective to clearly and unambiguously indicate India's red lines to the maritime neighbour in question. Starting with diplomatic engagement, progressing to economic nudging (or the possibility thereof), and even military posturing if required, supported by an effective information campaign that clearly conveys India's intent, would likely achieve the desired results.

**Strengthening Legal Expertise and Coordination.** Another lesson from the US actions in the SCS is the dangers of an inadequate appreciation and application of UNCLOS. The 27 October 2015 FONOP was probably planned and conducted in a hurry (due to the P-8 incident) without adequate focus on legal issues. China's propensity for 'lawfare' makes close coordination between operational planners and legal experts mandatory. This is even more relevant now that the BBNJ Treaty will soon come into force. The time has come for the Government of India to establish a dedicated legal cell that specialises in maritime law, and works closely with the various maritime law enforcement agencies, including in the planning of operations.

**Countering the Use of Chinese Names.** Although this has not been discussed in previous sections, a tactic of growing importance used by China in incrementally asserting its claims is, assigning Chinese names to disputed features. China has used this tactic to support its contention that the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh is disputed and is part of South Tibet, and thus belongs to China. In 2018, China assigned standard names to twenty-five islands and reefs as well as fifty-five undersea geographic entities in the SCS, in a move widely hailed in China for reaffirming sovereignty in the region.<sup>43</sup> China has now assigned names to nine seabed features in the Indian Ocean. While this is currently projected as a symbol of soft power, the use of these names to make historical claims later cannot be discounted. India would do well to follow such events closely and counter Chinese narratives by assigning its own names and reinforcing the correct historical perspective.

**Narrative Building.** It is vital to counter Chinese narratives from the initial stages with a strong and dynamic counternarrative. It would be prudent for India to establish a formal and dedicated structure that closely follows and analyses Chinese actions and their implications, especially those with the potential to be used for 'lawfare' and integrate this into an effective information-management structure.

This structure should disseminate the correct perspective and dynamically adjust the counternarrative, especially in the maritime domain.

**Visibly Resolute Response.** The Indian experience on its northern borders and an examination of events in the SCS over the past decade indicate that China views the exercise of restraint and efforts to de-escalate by others as signs of weakness and opportunities to strengthen its own position. While the coastal States of the SCS may not be able to aggressively counter Chinese provocations (due to the power differential), relatively stronger countries such as India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and obviously the US, need to put in place suitable deterrent measures. These could include joint SOPs, collective economic measures, increased presence in areas of concern, and joint information and diplomatic campaigns. Such posturing in and of itself would have substantial deterrent value.

**There is No Substitute for Friends.** China's main disadvantages are its maritime geography and the fact that when it looks out seawards, it finds very few friends. These, along with China's assertive tendencies, are the perfect recipe for isolation in the international order. New Delhi needs to leverage these strategic weaknesses, and the geographical advantage India enjoys in the Indian Ocean, by strengthening regional trust and synergy through enhancing the effectiveness of constructs such as BIMSTEC and IORA; developing a strategic relationship with ASEAN, including in the security domain; and leveraging opportunities provided by the QUAD, IONS, and the MILAN series of engagements. In this context, India's reassertion of its full acceptance of the 2016 award of the Arbitral Tribunal<sup>44</sup> in favour of the Philippines, during the recently concluded QUAD Foreign Ministers Meeting in Tokyo on 29 July 2024, is extremely relevant.<sup>45</sup>

**Maritime Militia.** While this article does not intend to detail the concept and functioning of China's 'Maritime Militia', also called the 'People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia' (PAFMM), the issue merits mention due to its frequent use by Beijing to strengthen Chinese maritime claims. The PAFMM comprises two main categories: (1) at least a hundred purpose-built boats that look like fishing vessels, and (2) actual fishing boats drafted into China's missions. These assets routinely intrude into foreign EEZs, block access to disputed reefs and islands, and conduct dangerous

manoeuvres, including in the vicinity of naval vessels.<sup>46</sup> The PAFMM often serves quasi-military missions such as ‘presence’, and enforces the Nine Dash Line. China maintains a large number of research and survey vessels and a significant fishing fleet (500 to 600 vessels) in the IOR, all of which can have dual utility. Taking a cue from the Philippines, India must start calling out and publishing suspected activities of these vessels that are beyond normal. It may be prudent for the IFC-IOR, in conjunction with other regional IFCs, to start including a section on the PAFMM in their periodic reports.

**The Burden of History.** Finally, and at the risk of repetition, the two necessary conditions for the validity of historical claims — “effective and continuous authority, and acquiescence by other States” — in view of China’s propensity to twist history to its advantage, bear reiteration. India is surrounded by small countries in several of which China enjoys pervasive influence that is damaging to India. India must, therefore, always remain conscious of these two necessary conditions and take timely and continuing action to ensure these conditions are not met.

## Conclusion

China’s geostrategies devised to pursue Beijing’s geoeconomic and non-geoeconomic goals require access to the Indian Ocean. While this may seem logical at first glance, China’s tendency to view the oceans in territorial terms is disconcerting, to say the least. The India-China relationship, even at its best, is an uneasy and brittle one, and currently, it is openly hostile. In this context, China’s disregard for the ‘rules-based order’, its increasing assertiveness, the rapid expansion of its navy, and its undue influence in India’s maritime neighbourhood, make its growing presence in the Indian Ocean uncomfortable.

This article has analysed Chinese actions in the South China Sea, particularly its use of “lawfare”, and the effectiveness or lack thereof of the responses from other actors involved. The aim has been to draw lessons and make recommendations relevant to India.

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# Transforming US Policy in the South China Sea Under the Trump Administration

*Mr Pham Cao Cuong*

## Abstract

*In July 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a speech rejecting China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. This statement marked a new change in US policy toward this important strategic water, from a 'neutral' to an 'involvement' stance in the South China Sea (SCS). It also shows the US's determination to promote its principles of freedom of navigation and overflight and form a rules-based order. The article tries to analyse and evaluate changes in US policy towards the South China Sea, especially since US President Donald Trump came to power, with the following contents: the change in the US stance on the South China Sea issue; the active engagement of the Trump administration in the South China Sea with measures from the White House and the US Congress; the impacts on Vietnam from the change of US policy towards the South China Sea.*

## The Evolution of US Stance on the South China Sea

Strategically, the South China Sea (known as the Eastern Sea in Vietnam) is significant in US interests. This area has many international sea lanes, connecting the Middle East and Southeast Asia through Japan, Korea, and China. International cargo ships in this area must pass through Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits. America has many interests in deploying its activities in the SCS, such as oil, gas exploration and exploitation with ASEAN countries. Militarily, the SCS retains an important role in moving US military forces from the Western Pacific to the Indian and Gulf regions. Furthermore, the US can use the SCS as a transshipment point and operational area for US air and naval forces between military bases in Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Gulf region. According to Surin Maisikrod, China could

spread its wings by controlling the Spratlys to cover almost half of Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Jag Mohan Malik pointed out that: Whoever controls the Spratly Islands also gains a strategic trump card in the region because the islands are considered strategic bases for sea-lane defence, interdiction, and surveillance of surface vessels and submarines.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, any conflict in the SCS might threaten US strategic interests. Japan's security and economic interests would also be threatened.

Due to its importance, during the 1970s of the 20th century, the primary goal of US policy toward the SCS was merely to maintain freedom of movement while maintaining a neutral stance towards territorial disputes in the SCS. According to Kenneth J. Conboy, the US position at that time was: '*completely neutral on the disputes in the SCS.*'<sup>3</sup> At this time, to counter the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia, the United States pursued strategic rapprochement with China<sup>4</sup>, considering it as a 'partner' to balance the Soviet Union. That was why the United States expressed non-intervention and did not even voice its criticism against China's activities in the SCS, including the Chinese capture of Vietnam's Parcel island in January 1974. In response to the Chinese occupation of the Parcel Islands, the US State Department only insisted that the South China Sea disputes were 'for the claimants to settle among themselves.'<sup>5</sup>

However, after the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with the rise of China, transformed the regional strategic landscape and contributed to the change in the US perception of the SCS. Indeed, China's rise during the 1990s in economic and military power gave the country momentum to expand its strategic space and seek to reinforce its ambitions in the SCS. In the US perception, the PRC would become its '*potential competitor,*'<sup>6</sup> challenging its security interests in the South China Sea. This has led to changes in the US stance on territorial disputes in the SCS, including China's irrational and excessive claims. Significantly, China's militarization actions in the SCS are a source of great concern in the region. According to Scott Snyder, the US shifted from passive to active neutrality. Accordingly, a steady US policy of 'active neutrality was the surest sign of support for preventive diplomacy that the United States could offer to deter potential conflicts in the South China Sea.'<sup>7</sup> In that context, the SCS became an area of strategic competition between the US and China. It has also become an international issue and a security concern for many ASEAN members and other great powers.

To be sure, if China's economic development is considered a success and praised by many countries around the world, especially in Southeast Asia, China's ambitions and activities in the SCS can be seen as a 'strategic setback'<sup>8</sup>; when Beijing has tried to create a security challenge in the region, threatening the rights and sovereignty of other countries. China's ambitions in the SCS were more or less revealed during the 1970s and 1980s, but it has become more apparent since the mid-1990s. Indeed, the lack of transparency in China's military modernization program contributed significantly to the '*China threat*'<sup>9</sup> theory in the West and caused concerns among Southeast Asian countries. The fact that China took over Mischief Reef, claimed by the Philippines in February 1995, exacerbated the perception of the Chinese 'threat' in Southeast Asia.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the Spratly disputes, the US position was generally reflected in the statement of Admiral Charles Larson, Commander-in-Chief, US Pacific Command, in his interview in Malaysia in October 1991, in which he outlined five points as follows:

The US maintained a non-committal stance as there was no interest for the US to intervene; It was a regional issue, and the US had no contingency plan to go to the Spratlys in the event of conflict; It would be up to the countries concerned (to work together) and regional groupings (such as ASEAN) to find a solution; The US preferred that the claimants resolve the issue through political channels rather than by military means; and if China and Vietnam became hostile in asserting their claims, the US might work with ASEAN, the Soviet Union and other nations under the auspices of the United Nations to ensure that the aggressor followed accepted international behavior.<sup>11</sup>

After China occupied the Mischief Reef on February 6, 1995, the Clinton administration reacted cautiously and confined itself to a reiteration of its long-standing policy on the South China Sea. The State Department Spokeswoman Christine Shelly stated: *The US strongly opposes the threat or use of military force to assert any nation's claim. The US takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims and is willing to assist in the peaceful resolution of the dispute.*<sup>12</sup>

Under the Bush and Obama administrations, the US stance on the South China Sea remained unchanged and did not constitute a fundamental shift as compared to the previous administrations. After the collision between a US Navy surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter jet in April 2001<sup>13</sup>, many US strategists expressed concern about the freedom of navigation and over-flights in the South China Sea.

However, the US policy did not deter Chinese territorial ambitions in the South China Sea and its expansion to the South. Meanwhile, China has regarded the SCS as a sphere of influence and buffer zone<sup>14</sup> belonging to its national interests. Under the Bush administration, the PRC took advantage of the US focus on the global war on terror to expand its influence in the South China Sea<sup>15</sup>. During this time, China increasingly consolidated its border and tightened its claims to the South China Sea. As Mark J. Valencia pointed out, China was determined to consolidate its border and control its claimed areas as part of its drive to re-establish a '*Greater China*' and regain its historical role as the dominant power in Asia.<sup>16</sup> Also, according to Valencia:

‘To defend itself from perceived threats, China wanted to establish a protective sphere in its surrounding seas and embarked on an aggressive campaign to acquire and develop conventional weapons and capabilities that would allow it to assert control over the islands and eventually the entire South China Sea.’<sup>17</sup>

In facing a ‘rising China,’ the United States has actively engaged with South China Sea issues. During this time, the US perceived that the territorial disputes in the South China Sea would become more critical to the US since it was closely associated with American interests, especially the freedom of movement of US ships and airplanes. To this end, the United States increased its presence in Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea, through a forward-deployment strategy.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the US strengthened its military relations with ASEAN states, conducted multilateral and bilateral military exercises, increased US Navy ships’ access to regional ports, and rapidly re-engaged with the region. Moreover, the United States directly or indirectly sought to engage with the SCS to protect its regional interests.

Unlike the Bush administration, Obama’s policy in the South China Sea seemed more assertive as former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that ‘the US has returned.’<sup>19</sup> The events of USNS Impeccable being ‘harassed’ by some Chinese ships in March 2009,<sup>20</sup> and the aircraft carrier USS John S. McCain colliding with a Chinese submarine in June 2009 in the SCS, concerned Washington.<sup>21</sup> US officials said China wanted to express its intention to dominate and control the entire South China Sea through these actions.<sup>22</sup> Under the Obama administration, the US policy toward the South China Sea was first expressed in the statement of US Secretary of

State Hillary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) held on 24 July 2010, in Hanoi. It demonstrated the US commitment to its allies and partners through the policy of re-engagement with Southeast Asia. The US stance on the SCS could be highlighted as follows:

The US has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea. We support a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the various territorial disputes without coercion. We oppose the use or threat of force by any claimant. While the US does not take sides on the competing territorial disputes over land features in the South China Sea, we believe claimants should pursue their territorial claims and accompanying rights to maritime space in accordance with the UN convention on the law of the sea.<sup>23</sup>

To achieve its goals in the SCS, the US sought to strengthen its relations with ASEAN and its member states. At the same time, the US upheld the leading role of ASEAN in dispute settlement, strengthening ASEAN's capacity to balance with the rise of China. Indeed, the US commitment to ensuring freedom of navigation and maintaining the region's status quo and stability has reassured ASEAN nations that the US would not stand aside from the regional situation. Accordingly, the US advocates dispute resolution in the South China Sea by peaceful means, in compliance with international law, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Declaration of Conduct on the South China Sea between China and ASEAN (DoC) adopted in 2002. At the same time, Washington actively supports negotiations between ASEAN and China on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) to prevent and manage disputes.

The United States also deployed security-defence cooperation with ASEAN countries to enhance its ability to counterbalance China. The US and ASEAN countries also conducted dozens of military drills (about two-thirds of the exercises in Asia), revitalizing many security and military agreements with countries in the region. As a result, the US continued to use Clark air base and Subic Bay naval base in the Philippines.<sup>24</sup> The US is also allowed to use Thai military facilities, implementing the first phase of the Agreement to build a sizeable deep-water port for the US military in Singapore and jointly deploying military exercises in the SCS. During the Obama administration, the US Navy also conducted several freedom of

navigation operations (FONOP) to challenge China's territorial claims in the SCS. During his time, there were about two FONOPs in 2015, three in 2016, six in 2017, and five in 2018.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, compared with the Clinton and Bush administrations, the territorial disputes in the SCS received more attention from the Obama administration and the US Congress. This change was due to the Obama administration's desire to 'return to Southeast Asia',<sup>26</sup> regarding Southeast Asia as a place of strategic importance in its strategy toward the region. The US's interest in the SCS was evident in the US congressional hearings in which the US House of Representatives called for the Obama administration to take hard-handed measures on China: '*The time has come for the United States to take a strong stance against China's harassment before these actions escalate into hostile confrontation.*'<sup>27</sup>

However, although the Obama administration emphasized the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and open access to Asia's maritime commons and regarded it as a 'national interest',<sup>28</sup> the US policy in the SCS did not appear to be strong enough. Daniel Russel, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, US Department of State, in a hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate in May 2015, also confirmed that:

The East and South China Seas are important to global commerce and regional stability. Their economic and strategic significance means that handling territorial and maritime issues in these waters by various parties could have economic and security consequences for US national interests.<sup>29</sup>

Due to the lack of a coherent US policy toward the SCS, Beijing even took advantage of this opportunity to militarise the SCS. In contrast, the US policy did not prevent China from building artificial islands in the SCS and militarizing them into regional outposts. This militarisation in the SCS's artificial islands jeopardises the US military force and its security strategy, because it would limit US naval access to the region. To some extent, the US engagement policy with Beijing has shown its failure to contain China's coercive actions and territorial ambitions in the SCS. The absence of other strict measures casts doubts on the part of Southeast Asian countries about the US's commitment to maintaining the region's status quo in the face of China's economic and military rise. The failure of the Obama administration

also lacked a specific and comprehensive policy on the SCS, lack of resources, and inconsistency between the views of the Department of Defence and the White House in the common perception of the SCS.

## Active Engagement Under the Trump Administration

With the slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ or ‘America First,’ President Trump also embarked on the new US strategic framework for the region called ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific.’<sup>30</sup> The National Security Strategy (NSS), released in December 2017, affirms the importance of the Indo-Pacific region to the interests of the US.<sup>31</sup> It also regards China as a potential threat, attempting to erode American security and prosperity and seeking to displace the US in the Indo-Pacific region. To deal with China, the Trump administration called on the US to take priority actions to protect its interests and deal with challenges from China in the SCS.

## US Principles in Its South China Sea Policy

**National interest:** As for the US, the SCS has a critical strategic role in its regional interests. The SCS lies in the strategic sea lanes of communication and is supposed to have potential petroleum and natural gas reserves. It is the world’s second-busiest international sea lane, with more than 80 percent of the world’s trade passing through this area. All shipping must pass through the region’s ‘chokepoints’ straits: Malacca, the Sunda Strait, the Lombok, and Makassar Straits.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it is also a gateway between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, where more than 80 percent of the oil for Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan flows through the area.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, this lane is also critical to the movement of US forces from the Western to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Indeed, the US considers the SCS as a transit point and operational area for its Navy and Air Force between military bases in Asia and the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf areas.

The SCS also plays a vital role in maintaining regional order for the Trump administration. To maintain its hegemonic position in the Western Pacific region, the US must protect the regional alliance system, especially its key allies, including

Japan and South Korea, which have been severely challenged by the rise of China. If the SCS falls under Chinese control, the US alliance system in the region will be eroded, thereby affecting the US presence in the western Pacific. Therefore, the US considers the SCS vital to its national interest.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the Trump administration intends to establish a US naval force in the SCS to increase its steady regional presence. The US also advocated the establishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), including Japan, Australia, and India, into a military alliance<sup>35</sup> to deal with challenges from China.

**Rules-based order:** The concept of ‘rules-based order’ was formed, based on the world order created after the Second World War with the United Nations (UN) establishment and a series of financial institutions, including Bretton Woods. These ‘rules’ include various issues and activities, such as the initiation and conduct of war, international trade and international development, execution of inter-state diplomacy, sea and overflight, and the rights of people and communities. The rules-based order is based on the perception that sovereign states agree to be bound by rules, and in the event of international conflict, the initiation and enforcement of legislation are subject to the UN Security Council. The US approach stems from the belief that maintaining an international system in which independent and sovereign states compete with each other based on a standard set of rules, ultimately also serves the interests of the US, even though countries sometimes disagree with each other and compete with the US.

The rise of China posed challenges, and the most serious challenge was to weaken the hegemonic position and interests of the US in the region and, at the same time, seek to replace the US as a regional leader.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the PRC’s activities in the SCS over the past decades, especially the construction of artificial islands and even threatening to establish an air defence identification zone in the SCS,<sup>37</sup> is likely to upset the regional balance of power and endanger US interests in the region. Therefore, The Trump administration urges China to adhere to a ‘rules-based order’ through compliance with UNCLOS 1982.<sup>38</sup> This US approach originates from beliefs in maintaining a regional order in which independent, and sovereign states can compete on a common principle, even though many countries disagree and compete with the US. The US wants to promote compliance with the unanimous

ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA or Tribunal),<sup>39</sup> in which the US rejects China's 'nine-dash line' claim covering the entire SCS.

**Non-use of force or coercion:** The US believes that the use of force or the threat of force is contrary to the basic principles of the United Nations. A key element in the international order created and operated by the US since the Second World War is that, force and coercion should not be seen as a tool to settle disputes between countries and, indeed, not as routine measures or first resort. This principle is also wholly consistent with the UN Charter, which clearly states regulations on the peaceful settlement of international disputes and is welcomed and enforced by many countries worldwide. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter also prohibits countries from the threat or use of force targeting any state or dealing with disputed issues. In addition, UNCLOS 1982 also sets out a fundamental principle for the parties involved. Accordingly, states must use peaceful means to settle disputes, not force or threaten to use force to resolve conflicts.

The US has frequently expressed concern about China's actions in the SCS and opposed a so-called principle of 'might make right' in the SCS. Many Trump administration officials have taken the stance of 'no use of force' or 'coercion' to resolve territorial disputes in the SCS. The then US Secretary of Defense, James Mattis also repeatedly warned China about resolving disputes peacefully, and condemned Beijing's military use of 'intimidation or coercion' for dispute settlement and the militarization of artificial islands in the SCS. He even warned of possible 'consequences' if China continued to use this method in the SCS.<sup>40</sup> The DoC, released in 2002, also mentions that the parties reaffirmed their commitment to abide by the basic principles of international law and settling disputes peacefully, without force, through friendly consultations and negotiations between the countries directly concerned.<sup>41</sup>

**Freedom of navigation:** The principle of freedom of the seas as proclaimed in the Freedom of Navigation Report (FON) of the US Department of Defense means all rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea and airspace, including for warships and military aircraft, are guaranteed to all states under international law'.<sup>42</sup> For the US, the freedom of the seas is essential to ensure access in a crisis. The US is therefore

committed to ensuring the freedom and openness of access to the waters to protect the stable economic order that has long served Asia-Pacific countries and maintain US forces' ability to respond as needed. Although not a claimant in the SCS, the US maintains that freedom of navigation is at the core of national maritime policy. The US considers freedom of navigation in international waters, including exclusive economic zones (EEZs), an inalienable right of all states. The US will continue to pursue its national interest in the SCS in this regard.

The US insists on the importance of US national interest in finding a peaceful resolution for resolving disputes and freedom of navigation and overflight in the contested areas of the SCS.<sup>43</sup> The US stance on freedom of navigation was also confirmed by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as she insisted that the US has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the SCS.<sup>44</sup> The US position on 'freedom of navigation was also affirmed by US President Trump during his meeting with China's President Xi Jinping when he visited Beijing in November 2017. Accordingly, President Trump underscored the critical importance of the peaceful resolution of disputes, unimpeded lawful commerce, and respecting international law in the East and South China Sea. He also insisted on free navigation, overflight, and other legal uses of the sea and raised concerns about militarizing outposts in the South China Sea.<sup>45</sup>

## Sea power Strategy

When examining the Indo-Pacific vision initiated by President Donald Trump in November 2017, it is easy to recognise the role of the sea and oceans in the US strategy. The Trump administration returned to its previous approach and thinking that attaches great importance to naval power in the overall US military might. The thought of 'sea power' is quite evident in the strategic document: *'From the Sea: Preparing the Naval Service for the 21st Century'* published by the US Navy Department in September 1992. Indeed, by that time, the US National Security Strategy shifted from focusing on a global threat to regional challenges and opportunities. US naval forces, therefore, would participate in a significant component of this strategy,

including strategic deterrence and defence, forward presence, crisis response, and reconstitution. Based on that, The US naval forces should provide a powerful yet discreet presence; strategic deterrence; control of the seas; extended and continuous on-scene crisis response; precise project power from the sea; and sealift in case of larger-scale warfighting. By transforming the strategy's objective from 'open-ocean warfighting on the sea' to 'joint operations conducted from the sea,' the US worked out new directions for its navy force, such as building up a naval expeditionary force, shape up for joint operations, operating forward from the sea, and tailored for national needs.<sup>46</sup> With these new trends, it can be noted that US naval strategy manifested the transition from conducting an independent, broad-based naval warfighting to a form of sea support for land and air forces, from activities based 'on the sea' to 'from the sea'; shifting 'forward deployment' to 'forward presence,' and from 'conducting main battles at sea' to 'dealing with regional conflicts'.

The US naval strategy continued to be updated and amended in 2015, to cope with the rise of China. In the report '*A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready*' published in August 2015,<sup>47</sup> the US Navy continues to consider 'ownership at sea' as one of the five main functions of the Navy. According to this document, US maritime strategy insisted on two central principles: forward naval presence and building a more robust naval force. The US forward naval presence requires new missions, such as defending the homeland, deterring conflict, responding to crises, defeating aggression, protecting the maritime commons, strengthening partnerships, and providing humanitarian assistance and disaster response. In this strategy, the US also set maritime priorities in facing a situation of constrained resources. The expansion of forward naval presence in this area would also advance US warfighting capabilities and strengthen its alliances and partners as part of its attempt to build and sustain regional capacities to deal with local maritime security challenges. At the same time, the US also announced the '*Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*' with three critical objectives, including safeguarding the freedom of the seas, deterring conflict and coercion, and promoting adherence to international law and standards.<sup>48</sup>

The sea-power strategy continued to be upgraded and updated under US President Donald Trump. In January 2017, the US Navy released the document

*'Strategy of War Forces at Sea: The Return of Sea Control,'* which emphasized the need for US naval forces to pursue a new concept of *'distribution of power'* to carry out the strategy of mastering the waters.<sup>49</sup> According to this document, the US Navy must adjust to the changing security environment in facing near-peer competitors, hostile foreign governments, and well-armed, non-state militant groups. The strategy insisted on returning to sea control and implementing *'distributed lethality,'* an important principle for achieving and sustaining sea control. To do this, the US must increase surface forces' offensive and defensive capability, and invest in its resource to modernise the future navy force.

According to Vice Admiral Thomas S. Rowden, the Commander of the US Navy's Surface Forces, the US would transform from the command of the sea to local sea control.<sup>50</sup> However, he insisted that sea control does not mean command of all the waters all the time. Instead, it is the capability and capacity to impose localised control of the sea when and where it is required.<sup>51</sup> Previously, the command of the sea referred to the ability to move merchantmen and armies through the sea at will. This strategy helped the US to deal with threats in many parts of the world over the past decades. It also secured the flow of commerce and created the relatively peaceful waters for even US competitors. However, in the changing strategic landscape of the world, the US Naval force should shift from the command of the sea to local sea control. Local sea control means having the platforms and weapons to regulate access to a localised sea area.<sup>52</sup> On that basis, the Trump administration showed its determination to rebuild a strong regional navy. He realised that the US Navy would have to become a dominant force that no competitor could challenge.<sup>53</sup>

## **Tough Stance from the White House**

To implement its SCS strategy, the US constantly pressurises China, especially from the White House and the US Department of State. During previous US administrations, when making statements about the situation in the South China Sea, it was rare for US officials to answer directly on this issue, even if they were cautious when speaking about China. However, when the perception of China's *'threat'* was made public in many strategic documents (the NSS released in November 2017), US officials

seemed to be ‘*unlocked*’ in condemning China with rather harsh words. Former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, while testifying before the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee, expressed an adamant stance on China: “*We are going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops and, second, your access to those islands also is not going to be allowed*”.<sup>54</sup> He even bluntly insisted: “*China cannot be allowed to use its artificial islands to coerce its neighbours or limit freedom of navigation or overflight in the South China Sea*”.<sup>55</sup> He also called on limiting China’s access to and use of its artificial islands to pose a threat to the US or its allies and partners.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, US officials have increasingly taken another hard stance toward China. On 09 April 2020, the US Department of Defense also expressed concerns over the China Coast Guard vessel’s collision with and sinking of a Vietnam fishing vessel in the vicinity of the Parcel Islands. It also stated that China’s behaviour contrasted with the US’s vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the US would continue supporting efforts by its allies and partners to ensure freedom of navigation and economic opportunity in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the concerns of US officials have grown after China took advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to continue illegal actions in the SCS. Further, on 18 April 2020, China blatantly announced the establishment of the so-called districts of ‘*Xisha*’ and ‘*Nansha*’ in ‘*Sansha*’ City, Hainan province, violating international law and Vietnam’s sovereignty rights over Truong Sa (Spratly) and Hoang Sa (Parcel) archipelagos.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Vietnam established its sovereignty over these two archipelagos long ago. Also, on 19 April 2020, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs announced the renaming of dozens of islands and reefs in the South China Sea, including some deep inside Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone.<sup>59</sup>

Among US senior officials, Pompeo’s statements regarding the SCS were crucial and caught the international media’s attention since it marked a turning point in President Trump’s policy toward the SCS. On 24 April 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo strongly criticized the PRC’s activities in the SCS, including its unilateral announcement of administrative districts in Hainan province, the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel, and building ‘research stations’ on Fieri Cross Reef and Subi Reef. In addition, Pompeo condemned China for its deployment of maritime militia around the Spratly Islands and dispatching a flotilla to intimidate

other claimants from engaging in offshore hydrocarbon development. He even accused China of exploiting the world's focus on the Covid-19 crisis to continue its provocative behaviour, leveraging military pressure, and coercing its neighbours in the SCS. He spoke forthrightly against China's bullying tactics, and said other states would hold them accountable.<sup>60</sup>

The US opposition to China's illegal claims in the SCS is growing stronger, demonstrating the change in US policy towards the SCS. On 01 June 2020, the US Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Kelly Craft, sent a note to the UN General Secretary, Antonio Guterres, denying the Note Verbale No. CML/14/2019 of the PRC dated 12 December 2019, regarding the submission by Malaysia to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) dated 12 December 2019.<sup>61</sup> In this note, the US rejected the PRC's maritime claims since it was inconsistent with international law in UNCLOS 1982. It means that the US objected to all of China's maritime claims, including its historic rights in the South China Sea, internal waters between the dispersed islands China claims in the SCS, the claim of marine zones, and claims that exceed the maritime entitlements. The US again urged China to conform its maritime claims to international law as reflected in the Convention to comply with the Tribunal's 12 July 2016 decision, and to cease its provocative activities in the South China Sea.<sup>62</sup>

One of the most noteworthy statements was of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on 13 July 2020, which marked a clear shift in US policy on the South China Sea. Accordingly, the US announced its position on China's maritime claims in the SCS with Tribunal's decision: "*The PRC cannot lawfully assert a maritime claim – including any Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claims derived from Scarborough Reef and the Spratly Islands vis-a-vis the Philippines in areas that the Tribunal found to be in the Philippines' EEZ or on its continental shelf.*"

As Beijing has failed to put forth a lawful, coherent maritime claim in the South China Sea, the United States rejects any PRC claim to waters beyond a 12-nautical mile territorial sea derived from islands it claims in the Spratly Islands (without prejudice to other states' sovereignty claims over such islands). As such, the United States rejects any PRC maritime claim in the waters surrounding Vanguard Bank

(off Vietnam), Luconia Shoals (off Malaysia), waters in Brunei's EEZ, and Natuna Besar (off Indonesia). The PRC has no lawful territorial or maritime claim to (or derived from) James Shoal, an entirely submerged feature only 50 nautical miles from Malaysia and some 1,000 nautical miles from China's coast.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, US officials, especially the State Department, made harsh statements to China, creating a strong public reaction against China's militarisation activities in the SCS. These statements clearly show that the US wants to challenge Beijing's ambitions in the SCS while demonstrating its strong commitment to countries in the region.

### **Increased Pressure from the US Congress**

Under the Trump administration, the US Congress played a significant role in demonstrating a tough stance on the SCS issue. As the legislature of America, laws proposed or passed by US lawmakers at the bicameral Congress play a significant role in curbing China's actions in the SCS. During the Trump administration, the US Congress submitted many necessary drafts, resolutions, and laws related to the SCS.

Act H.R.2621 - 115th Congress (2017-2018), also known as *Strengthening Security in the Indo-Asia-Pacific Act*, was announced at the Commission on 24 May 2017. The House of Representatives referred it to the Asia and Pacific Subcommittee on 27 June 2017. The Bill reiterates that the obligation to enforce the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) award in The Hague in July 2016 on China's claims (nine-dash line) in the South China Sea is invalid under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This Bill clearly states: "*The United States has a national interest in maintaining freedom of navigation, freedom of seas, respect for international law, and unimpeded legal commerce in the SCS*". The Bill also reiterates the 04 February 2017 statement by former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis: "*Freedom of navigation is absolute whether it is commercial shipping or by the US Navy. The United States remains active in international waters and navigates through international waters appropriately*".<sup>64</sup>

Next is the H.R.5515 - 115th Congress (2017-2018), known as *John S. McCain National Defence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019*, which was first presented to

the House Armed Forces Committee on 13 April 2018. The Act officially became Law (No. 115-232) on 13 August 2018, with many provisions aimed at China's activities in the SCS. Accordingly, if Beijing does not immediately stop the militarisation of artificial islands and reefs in the SCS, China will not be invited to participate in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) naval exercises held every two years. In addition, China was asked to cease all land reclamation activities in the South China Sea, remove all weapons from its land reclamation sites, take actions toward stabilising the region in a consistent four-year track record, and not further have any other new constructions on islands and reefs in the SCS. The United States requires China to withdraw its installed missiles and electronic equipment to be considered for participation in the RIMPAC exercise. The Bill even warns China's against continuing to militarise the islands in preparation for the third world war.<sup>65</sup>

Another Bill, S.659 - Congressional 115 (2017-2018), called *the South China Sea and East China Sea Sanctions Act of 2017*, was sponsored by Senator Marco Rubio and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations of the US Senate. This Bill expressed the sense of Congress that: the US opposes actions by the government of any country to interfere in the unrestricted use of waters and airspace in the South China Sea or the East China Sea. It also confirmed that China should not continue to pursue illegitimate claims and militarise an area essential to global security. The Bill also announced that the US should expand freedom of navigation operations and overflights and respond to Chinese provocations with commensurate actions. The US should oppose unilateral Chinese actions to undermine Japan's control of the Senkaku Islands.<sup>66</sup> The Act also calls for the US President to impose sanctions on the US-based property of individuals and entities regarding any Chinese person contributing to development projects in disputed areas in the SCS; any Chinese person that has engaged in actions or policies threatening the peace or stability of contested areas of the SCS or disputed areas of the East China Sea administered by Japan or the Republic of Korea; and any person that is owned or acting on behalf of such person, or provides such person with financial, material, technological, or other support.<sup>67</sup>

The Bill also prohibits US entities from investing or insuring projects involving sanctioned entities in the above seas. In addition, the US President will also impose

bans and restrictions on correspondence accounts and payments relating to sanctioned entities if the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) determines that China has taken some actions, such as declaring an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the SCS. In addition, the Bill also requires the Government Publishing Office not to publish any documents describing disputed territories in both waters as part of China, with some limited exceptions. US flag vessels or aircraft may not take any action that implies recognition of China's claim to disputed territories.

Moreover, there were many other acts and bills issued by the US Congress that tightened its pressure on China regarding the SCS, such as *S.Res.157* - A resolution recognising the ASEAN and its ten members for 50 years, dated 05/04/2017,<sup>68</sup> *H.Res.311* - Reaffirming the 40 years of relations between the US and ASEAN dated 05/03/2017,<sup>69</sup> *H.Res.339* - Calling upon the US Senate to give its advice and consent to ratify the UNCLOS dated 05/18/2017,<sup>70</sup> *S.Res.598* - A resolution calling upon the US Senate to give its advice and consent to ratify the UNCLOS dated 07/30/2018,<sup>71</sup> *H.R.6828* - Southeast Asia Strategy Act,<sup>72</sup> *H.R.2176* - Asia-Pacific Defence Commission Act dated 04/26/2017.<sup>73</sup> These Acts represented a shift in US policy toward the South China Sea under the Trump administration. It also demonstrated America's determination to put pressure on China, introducing a series of sanctions against China and forcing Beijing to consider before taking action to escalate tensions in the South China Sea.

## **Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)**

Under President Trump's leadership, the US intensified its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge Chinese claims in the SCS. The United States has deployed the FONOP operation since 2013 with two annual procedures to deal with the challenges of Chinese sovereignty in the SCS. Each year, the US ships have about 600-700 days of operation in the SCS, but since 2017, this number has increased but did not exceed 900 days.<sup>74</sup> According to the Commander of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Scott Swift, 'the ultimate goal of US policy in the SCS is to show strength through presence.' However, the US general rejected aiming 'against' China. The Donald Trump administration conducted more FONOPs than that

President Obama's administration. From October 2015 to November 2016, the Obama administration ran four FONOPs in the SCS; the last time was in October 2016. However, the number of FONOPs increased dramatically under the Trump administration. From May 2017 to September 2020, the US conducted 23 operations in the SCS. There were four FONOPs in 2017, five in 2018, eight in 2019, and nine in 2020.<sup>75</sup> In reality, the number of US FONOPs may be even higher than the number that has been publicly announced.

The US military's freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea are considered an indicator to gauge the US resolve in the SCS issue. The deployment of group of ships to the South China Sea is part of the FONOP activity that the US has deployed over the years. Accordingly, US warships entered within 12 nautical miles of artificial islands China built illegally in the SCS. The goal of this campaign is one of many measures for the United States to reject China's unreasonable sovereignty claims in the South China Sea while promoting a rules-based order in the SCS.

Speaking to the press, White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders stated: "*We are aware of China's militarization of the SCS. We express our concerns directly to China, and there will be immediate and long-term consequences*".<sup>76</sup> Responding to the USS Decatur being harassed and obstructed by the Chinese ship Luyang (within 45 yards of the Decatur), US Vice President Mike Pence expressed firm opposition and stated his intent to continue with FONOPs: "*Despite this reckless harassment, US ships and aircraft will continue to fly and sail wherever the law allows and following our national interests demand. We will not be intimidated or stand down*".<sup>77</sup>

The US 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which included specific provisions for dealing with the challenges coming from China, especially in the South China Sea, was passed in Congress by a relatively high rate of 344/81. In addition, the US House of Representatives continues to support the US Navy's FONOPs in the SCS. At the same time, it also asked the US Department of Defense to develop a plan to deploy this operation more frequently. The US House of Representatives also gave the Department of Defense a deadline to submit to Congress a report assessing the situation of US military forces in the Pacific and plans

to deploy strategic forces and reorganize the structure to meet priority objectives for the national interest.

Also, in response to a rising China, the Trump administration planned to increase the cost of its defense budget. Accordingly, the number of US naval ships would be increased from 290 to 350.<sup>78</sup> To contain China's ambitions in the SCS, the Trump administration planned to modernise its naval force. According to Donald Trump's statement, the United States intends to increase the number of aircraft carriers from 10 to 12 and the number of warships from 275 to 350. In fact, over the years, the size of the US Navy has been reviewed to reflect the actual situation of the new context. On that basis, on 15 December 2016, the US Navy released a Force Structure Assessment (FSA) report outlining a new force structure goal to maintain a fleet of ships, including 355 units of all types.<sup>79</sup> With these ships in mind, from 2017, the annual US budget for shipbuilding was envisaged to increase by about US\$4.6-5.1 billion per year for the next 30 years.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, maintaining this fleet of 355 ships would take an average of US\$11-23 billion per year compared to the current cost of maintaining 308 ships. It does not include additional charges for equipping weapon systems for aircraft and ships.

## Implications For Vietnam

The change in US strategy towards the SCS has had an impact on Vietnam. Through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, the relationship between the United States and Vietnam has been strengthened in the economic field and defence cooperation. The US strategy towards the SCS is set in a vision of the Indo-Pacific region in which the United States tends to attach importance to maritime security in the SCS. Therefore, the United States has a policy of supporting maritime capacity building for Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam. In 2017, Vietnam received the first *Hamilton* class ship from the United States to strengthen the Vietnam Coast Guard force.<sup>81</sup> During deployment, the US side handed Vietnam six *Metal Shark* high-speed patrol boats and two Hamilton-class ships.<sup>82</sup> The second patrol vessel John Midgett was also handed over to the Vietnamese side.<sup>83</sup> Currently, the United States has only two of the 12 Hamilton-class patrol boats left, the Douglas Munro

(WHEC 724) and Mellon (WHEC 717). Recently, US Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper said that the US planned to transfer the 3rd patrol ship to Vietnam to improve its maritime security capabilities.<sup>84</sup>

In the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) framework, the United States sold five *ScanEagle* reconnaissance aircraft worth US\$9.7 million to Vietnam.<sup>85</sup> Vietnam was even invited to participate in significant RIMPAC or SEACAT maritime security exercises led by the US in coordination with countries worldwide. In 2018, Vietnam participated in the RIMPAC, the largest naval exercise in the United States, with the participation of 25 different countries. Vietnam's participation in this exercise aims to improve the officers' combat skills, create a naval connection, and exchanges with countries worldwide. In addition, the two sides also promoted the exchange of delegations at all levels and maintained bilateral dialogue mechanisms and contacts at regional forums. In August 2017, Vietnamese Defence Minister Ngo Xuan Lich visited the United States.<sup>86</sup> In October 2017, US Defense Secretary James Mattis visited Vietnam. The two sides also approved the three-year Plan of Action for Defence Cooperation for 2018-2020.<sup>87</sup> By March 2018, the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier had docked at the port of Da Nang, Vietnam, for the first time.<sup>88</sup> In March 2020, the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt docked in Da Nang during a 5-day visit to Vietnam.<sup>89</sup> This visit celebrated the 25th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States. The US policy change in the SCS has helped Vietnam have a stronger voice and gather support from other countries on the issue of sovereignty and territory.

On the other hand, the change in US strategy towards the SCS has also created challenges for Vietnam. While increasing US-China strategic rivalry, increasing US engagement in the Indo-Pacific could increase the tension in the regional security situation, especially regarding regional security in the South China Sea. In the region, Vietnam has a long historical relationship with China. Vietnam has been seen as China's 'buffer zone' to extend its influence to the South. Therefore, this rivalry will strongly affect Vietnam when the US-China relationship becomes tense. On the other hand, the US attaching importance to the South China Sea issue also contributes to countering China's illegal claims, and also reduces China's militarisation efforts therein. This helps Vietnam to continue strengthening its claims based on its

territorial sovereignty, and prevent China's intention to isolate Vietnam in the SCS issue.

To some extent, the US's increased interest in the SCS is making strategic competition in this area more intense, causing it to become a 'hot spot.' The UK and France have recently conducted FONOPs in the SCS. In June 2018, the two countries announced they would send warships to the region in response to China's growing presence in the SCS. Many exercises involving the US with regional countries also occurred in the SCS. The conduct of these exercises aims to challenge China's illegal sovereignty claims and demonstrate the US commitment to regional allies and partners. However, the participation of other countries' warships in exercises in the SCS will likely turn this area into a potential flash point and may fuel an arms race. Additionally, the changes in US policy toward the SCS and the shifting of the regional landscape would place Vietnam under pressure to upgrade its US relations to a 'strategic partnership.' In the visits to Vietnam in July and August 2021, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin<sup>90</sup> and US Vice President Kamala Harris also called for raising its bilateral ties to a 'strategic partnership' with Vietnam.<sup>91</sup>

Adapting national interests to major countries' policy adjustment processes is crucial for Vietnam. An effort to grasp priorities in changes of the US policy toward the SCS requires Vietnam to have a bright, flexible, and proactive strategy in the SCS issue. Vietnam continues to adhere to the principle of dispute settlement by peaceful means; does not use or threaten to use force; complies with the regulations of international law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982. In the 2019 National Defense White Paper, Vietnam promulgated a 'four-nos and one-depend' defence strategy to protect its national interests in the SCS.<sup>92</sup> The four nos mean no military alliances, no siding with one country against another, no foreign military bases, and no using or threatening to use force in international relations. Meanwhile, one-depend carries implications that, depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defence and military ties with other countries.<sup>93</sup>

Traditionally, Vietnam's approach to China in dealing with the SCS seems to be unchangeable. According to Carlyle A. Thayer, on the one hand, Vietnam has

maintained a strategy of ‘cooperation and struggle’ with China over disputed areas in the SCS.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, it can be observed that Vietnam is undertaking a ‘hedging strategy’ toward China. Le Hong Hiep noted that Vietnam’s approach toward China could be characterised as a calibrated mixture of deference and defiance.<sup>95</sup> By expanding its foreign relations with great and middle powers, Vietnam has sought to balance its relations with the PRC and contain the Chinese territorial ambitions in the South China Sea. Although, in the current context, when strategic competition is fierce and non-traditional security issues have a direct and substantial impact on countries (such as the Covid-19 pandemic), Vietnam’s policy is to balance relations with major countries, take advantage of current opportunities for economic development, and contribute to peace and stability in the region. The 13th National Party Congress outlined Viet Nam’s development orientation for the 2021-2030 period stated that:

Continuing to implement the foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, multilateralization, and diversification of international relations; proactively and positively integrating into the world comprehensively, extensively, and effectively; maintaining a peaceful and stable environment, constantly promoting Viet Nam’s international position and prestige.<sup>96</sup>

In addition, the current context sets these goals for Vietnam: to strengthen the construction, consolidation, and perfection of the all-people national defence; promote the defence posture of people’s war at sea more firmly, associated with the construction and development of the marine economy; and protect national interests, marine resources, and ecological environment. Building a revolutionary and modern naval force to protect the sovereignty over the sea, islands firmly, and in continental shelf is an objective requirement following the strategic directions of the Party, State, and aspirations of the Vietnamese people.

## **Conclusion**

It is quite evident that the US policy towards the SCS has changed significantly under the Trump administration. Accordingly, the Trump administration has become more involved in the SCS issue. The US has spoken out against China’s territorial ambitions, challenging China’s claims and rejecting China’s ‘nine-dash line’ in the

South China Sea. The strong voice from the US authorities, such as the White House, the State Department, and the Department of Defense, has created a unified, strong stance against China's behaviour and cohesiveness in the SCS. The role of the US Congress under President Trump is very significant when it comes to many bills and acts against China in the SCS.

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## Book Review

### **The Maritime Fulcrum of The Indo-Pacific: Indonesia and Malaysia Respond to China's Creeping Expansion in The South China Sea (Red Book No. 17)**

**Author: Scott Bentley. Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College Press,  
2023. 118 Pages ISBN 978-1-935352-80**

*Mr Chemi Rigzin*

The southern part of the South China Sea – from Indonesia's Natuna Islands to the South Luconia Shoals – holds greater significance than the more widely discussed Spratly or Paracel Island groups that lie further to the North. The critical importance of this area emanates from the dense International Shipping Lanes that pass through it, linking the Pacific Ocean with the Indian Ocean, thus making it crucial for international maritime trade. As two important littoral countries of the South China Sea, Indonesia and Malaysia are faced with China's growing assertiveness in this region.

Scott Bentley, from China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) of the US Naval War College, tries to deliver an intricate and insightful analysis of Malaysia's and Indonesia's strategic responses to China's growing influence in the region. He offers readers an understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by Southeast Asian nations. One of the most compelling aspects of Bentley's work is his exploration of the nuanced approaches adopted by Malaysia and Indonesia in dealing with China's assertiveness. He delves into the leadership styles and historical contexts that shape these nations' responses. For instance, he highlights Prime Minister Mahathir's blend

of assertiveness and diplomacy, rooted in a commitment to safeguarding Malaysia's sovereignty while avoiding unnecessary confrontation. Similarly, he illuminates President Joko Widodo's symbolic gestures and strategic shifts in Indonesia's approach, demonstrating a careful balance between assertive actions and diplomatic maneuvers.

Throughout the report, Bentley navigates the intricate geopolitical landscape of the South China Sea, emphasising its multifaceted significance. He elucidates the economic importance of the region for international trade and navigation, while also shedding light on its development into a geopolitical flashpoint. His analysis of China's expansionist ambitions and their implications for regional stability provides readers with valuable insights into the broader strategic implications of China's actions. A particularly intriguing facet relates to Malaysia and Indonesia's efforts to modernise their maritime capabilities in response to China's growing presence. He details the acquisitions of submarines, corvettes, and maritime patrol aircraft, illustrating the concerted efforts of both nations to enhance their defence capabilities. Additionally, the author explores the construction of naval facilities and maritime law enforcement centers, underscoring Malaysia and Indonesia's determination to protect their respective interests in the South China Sea.

The initial part of the report covers Indonesia's strategic outlook, its concerns with China's influence, and its efforts to strengthen its maritime defence posture in response to regional geopolitical dynamics. While Indonesia's actions are portrayed as defensive responses to China's expanding influence, a closer inspection reveals complexities and potential pitfalls in its approach. It highlights the concerns of Indonesian officials, including senior military and government figures, regarding China's expansionist actions and its potential threat to Indonesia's regional leadership.

Central to the narrative are Indonesia's resolute actions to safeguard its sovereignty and assert its claims in the face of China's maritime expansion. The author illustrates Indonesia's determination by highlighting instances of interception of Chinese fishing vessels operating within Indonesia's claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the 'nine-dash line', successfully arresting Chinese fishermen and detaining their vessels

for operating in disputed areas. Indonesia's interception of Chinese fishing vessels within its claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) was justified under international law. However, the repeated use of low-level military force, including firing upon Chinese fishing vessels, raises concerns about the escalation of tensions in the region. The author posits that such confrontations risk triggering larger conflicts and undermining efforts towards a peaceful resolution of maritime disputes. For example, the massive operational deployment of navy and coast guard ships in January 2020, ostensibly to challenge China's presence in the South China Sea, carried inherent risks. While demonstrating Indonesia's resolve, such displays of military power could have inadvertently escalated tensions and provoked countermeasures from China.

The report claims that Indonesia's reliance on diplomatic protests to challenge China's claims, while a legitimate avenue, may lack teeth without broader international support. China's dismissive attitude towards such protests sheds light on the limitations of diplomatic channels in resolving complex territorial disputes. China's retaliatory actions, including interference with Indonesian maritime law enforcement efforts, have resulted in numerous incidents at sea, exacerbating tensions in the region. The author opines that while Indonesia's efforts to protect its sovereignty and assert its claims in the South China Sea are understandable, given China's assertiveness; a more cautious and nuanced approach may be warranted. Balancing assertiveness with diplomacy and engagement could help mitigate risks and foster regional stability.

The subsequent half of the report provides an insightful exploration of Malaysia's diplomatic and military strategies in response to China's escalating presence and assertiveness in the South China Sea. It offers a comprehensive overview of Malaysia's historical and contemporary responses, focusing on Prime Minister Mahathir's leadership and the country's strategic approach to maritime defence. One of the document's strengths lies in its examination of Prime Minister Mahathir's concerns about China's influence and behaviour in the region, as it highlights his staunch opposition to colonialism, which shapes his worldview and influences Malaysia's response to China's actions. Through a blend of quiet diplomacy and firm assertion, Malaysia seeks to safeguard its interests while maintaining regional stability.

The report adeptly outlines Malaysia's shift towards a more assertive approach, particularly through hydrocarbon exploration in the disputed areas of the South

China Sea. It emphasises the subtle yet discernible shift in Malaysia's stance, driven by growing concerns over China's long-term intentions and threat perceptions. This nuanced portrayal adds much-needed depth to the understanding of Malaysia's evolving response to China's assertiveness.

By highlighting Prime Minister Mahathir's leadership, historical context, and strategic imperatives, the author underscores Malaysia's commitment to maintaining regional stability while addressing the complexities of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, his exploration of Malaysia's maritime modernisation efforts and emphasis on self-reliance in defence capabilities offers important considerations for policymakers and defence planners navigating the evolving geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia.

However, while Bentley's work offers valuable insights into Malaysia's and Indonesia's assertive actions, it could have benefitted from a more critical examination of the potential risks and consequences of escalation. A deeper exploration of the broader geopolitical context and the regional implications of Malaysia and Indonesia's responses would have provided readers with a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in the South China Sea.

This notwithstanding, "The Maritime Fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific" is a captivating and informative read for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand the evolving dynamics of maritime security in that part of the Indo-Pacific region. Readers are treated to a comprehensive analysis of Malaysia's and Indonesia's strategic responses to China's expanding influence in the South China Sea. The author navigates the complex geopolitical landscape of the region with finesse, offering valuable insights into the historical, economic, and geopolitical factors shaping these nations' approaches. Bentley's thorough analysis and nuanced perspectives make this report an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the geopolitics of Southeast Asia and China's growing influence in the region.

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*Leveraging ASEAN Centrality  
in the Indo-Pacific –  
India's Viewpoints*



# The Formation of Indo-Pacific “SQUAD”: A View From India

*Captain (Dr) Gurpreet S Khurana, IN (Retd)*

The characteristically dynamic Indo-Pacific region witnessed another seminal geopolitical development on 02 May 2024. At the headquarters of its Indo-Pacific Command (INDO-PACOM) in Hawaii, the United States (US) teamed up with its two regional allies, Australia and Japan, to form a new grouping amongst them, which Pentagon nicknamed (the Indo-Pacific) “SQUAD”.<sup>1</sup> The SQUAD joins the two other minilateral groups raised by the US earlier as part of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, viz., the “Quadrilateral Dialogue” (QUAD) involving Australia, India, Japan and the US; and the AUKUS alliance comprising Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US. It is a well-known fact that these geopolitical groupings are meant to temper China’s increasing politico-military assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region.

The formation of SQUAD follows a series of confrontations between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea (SCS) that have occurred since August 2023. It began with ships of the China Coast Guard (CCG) — acting in concert with those of the Chinese maritime militia and the PLA Navy providing distant-support — using water cannons and floating barriers against small Filipino vessels. The CCG’s aim was to prevent the routine resupply mission to the Filipino military outpost of the BRP *Sierra Madre* on the Second Thomas Shoal (of the disputed Spratly Islands), which is located within the Philippines’ 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).<sup>2</sup> Ostensibly, the trigger for the SQUAD was the escalation by China, in March 2024, when the water-cannon of the CCG ships caused damage to the Filipino vessels and even injuries to the personnel onboard.<sup>3</sup> This led to combined

military exercises and naval patrols in the SCS, in early-April 2024, amongst the four nations. Reacting to these combined maneuvers, China's *Global Times* cited a Chinese military expert saying,

“The US is clearly trying to rally its allies — Japan and Australia — to support the Philippines, encourage the Philippines to engage in more military provocations in the South China Sea, exacerbate the complexity of the regional situation, and then find excuses to strengthen the military presence of the US, Japan and Australia in the South China Sea”.<sup>4</sup>

The four-nation combined military maneuvers in the SCS were followed by the Hawaii meeting of their Defence heads on 02 May 2024, as mentioned above, leading to the formation of SQUAD. Reacting to this development, China's *South China Morning Post* stated that the SQUAD could lead to “elevating the Philippines’ status beyond that of a junior partner”.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the validity of such assertion is debatable, the US did declare its intent to upgrade Manila’s military defences by providing a US\$ 35 billion investment over next few years. The specific terms of security assistance to the Philippines by the other three SQUAD partners are also being discussed. From Manila’s perspective, therefore, the participation of the Philippines in the SQUAD will provide some much-needed pushback against Beijing’s actions in the SCS, and reinforce the deterrence being attempted by Manila.

The decision of the US and its regional allies to involve the Philippines in this new exclusive grouping (SQUAD) is unlikely to have been taken overnight. It is far more likely to have been based upon profound deliberations over the past few years, not merely in respect of developments in SCS, but beyond these to the risk posed by China to the rules-based order in the broader Indo-Pacific. Whereas the precise origin of the SQUAD is not known, the June 2023 meeting among the four (SQUAD) nations in Singapore on the sidelines of the Shangri La Dialogue was certainly an important ‘waypoint’. It is also known that this meeting was preceded by related discussions in the White House much earlier, albeit involving only the US, Australia, and Japan.<sup>6</sup>

As an advocate of international law and a rules-based order, India is a key geopolitical player in the Indo-Pacific, and an acknowledged partner of Australia, Japan, and the US in the QUAD. Further, India has vital geopolitical — including

gocioeconomic — stakes, specifically in the SCS, which necessitates a benign and secure environment in this strategically-located waterbody. This policy brief aims to analyse, from an Indian perspective, the deeper rationale that may have driven the US and its three Indo-Pacific allies to form the SQUAD — despite the existence of the QUAD and AUKUS — along with its purpose and likely characteristics. The analysis would also factor India’s own geopolitical interests and identify New Delhi’s concerns emanating from this development.

## **China’s ‘Lawfare’**

The SQUAD flows out of China’s historic maritime claims in the SCS, as represented by its “nine-dash line”. The 2016 verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) had invalidated this claim in the Philippines-China legal case.<sup>7</sup> This notwithstanding, since the legal proceedings were initiated in 2013, China has intensified its ‘lawfare’ activities to interpret international law in its favour. These activities include China’s land reclamation in the SCS ‘reefs’ to alter their legal status to ‘islands’,<sup>8</sup> its cartographic ‘aggression’ to reinforce its SCS claims,<sup>9</sup> and its ‘grey-zone’ operations involving the CCG and its State-controlled fishing boats (maritime militia) to functionally assert these claims, as has been mentioned earlier.

Notably, China has been using a variety of forms of lawfare against India, too, ranging from promulgating maps showing the India’s provincial state of Arunachal Pradesh as Chinese territory<sup>10</sup>; its ‘salami-slicing’ across the India-China land border, which led to the May 2020 bloody military confrontation in the Galwan Valley (Ladakh);<sup>11</sup> and its military surveys in Indian maritime zones using research ships, underwater gliders, and its maritime militia in the guise of its distant-water fishing fleet.<sup>12</sup>

## **India’s Stakes in SCS**

India’s key interests in the SCS may be broadly summarised as the increasing proportion of its seaborne merchandise trade moving east (about 55 percent of its total trade<sup>13</sup>) and the safety of Indian seafarers manning the numerous merchant

vessels that transit the SCS. India has also been making efforts to diversify the sources of its hydrocarbon imports to the east, as exemplified by India's stakes in Vietnamese EEZ and the development of the Chennai-Vladivostok maritime trade and energy corridor, which passes through the SCS.<sup>14</sup> China's objection to India-Vietnam cooperation on oil exploration in 2011,<sup>15</sup> and its disruptive actions in Vietnam's EEZ since 2014,<sup>16</sup> exemplify the risk to India's interests in the SCS.

Also, China's "Maritime Police Law" of April 2021 imposes a variety of restrictions on navigational freedoms within "the sea areas within the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China", presumably within the nine-dash line, and empowers the CCG to enforce this national law.<sup>17</sup> This implies that India's naval mobility in much of the SCS could well be restricted. Additionally, in the ongoing negotiations over the SCS Code of Conduct between the ASEAN and China, the latter seeks a veto power over the conduct of military exercises and resource-prospecting in SCS by the ASEAN States in cooperation with third-parties such as India.<sup>18</sup> This reinforces the risk to India's legitimate rights and interests in the SCS — rights that have been bestowed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982 (UNCLOS).

In any case, the fructification of China's SCS claim would have adverse ramifications for India's national security. It would not only embolden Beijing to push its own territorial claims against India but would also extend China's naval reach southwards towards the southeast Asian maritime chokepoints and the Indian Ocean.

## **Is QUAD or India Insignificant in the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the US?**

The QUAD is the oldest minilateral grouping in the Indo-Pacific architecture and it has successfully endured China's skepticism, derision, objections, and geopolitical stratagems. It was initially formed in 2007 and revived a decade later in response to China's increased politico-military assertiveness in the SCS,<sup>19</sup> which was even then already spilling over into the Indian Ocean. The QUAD has held out much promise in terms of its ability to temper China's behaviour, including through programmes such as the 'Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness' (IP-MDA),<sup>20</sup>

‘Supply Chain Resilience Initiative’ (SCRI),<sup>21</sup> and six ‘leader-led’ working groups — on health security, climate, critical and emerging technology, space, infrastructure and cyber.<sup>22</sup>

In spatial terms too, the QUAD’s outreach has expanded to encompass not just ASEAN but much beyond SE Asia to incorporate the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).<sup>23</sup> Until recently, there were even speculations that the membership of the QUAD might be expanded to accommodate other willing partners such as South Korea.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the formation of SQUAD leads to a few valid questions. Why did the US go beyond the QUAD to raise more exclusive forums such as AUKUS and the SQUAD? Why was the QUAD itself not expanded instead? Has the QUAD lost relevance for the US? If so, is the SQUAD an alternative to the QUAD?

Furthermore, amongst QUAD’s constituent States, India is the only one excluded in the SQUAD. It was similarly excluded in the formation of AUKUS. This has led to further speculation. For instance, the title of a Malaysian news-report says, “U.S. replaces India with Philippines, as Quad becomes Squad”.<sup>25</sup> So, has the Philippines displaced India in the US Indo-Pacific strategy? Is this an indication that the US is losing trust in India as a reliable partner? Above all, does India run the risk of being marginalised in the Indo-Pacific construct?

To address these questions, it is essential to examine the timelines of relevant key-developments within the Indo-Pacific. This exercise is necessary to comprehend the strategic motivations and imperatives of the US and India, which led to the shaping of the QUAD’s agenda, and the formation of AUKUS, in the first place.

### **QUAD: For *‘Holistic’* Security**

The QUAD (2.0) was revived in November 2017, concurrently with the ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy announced by then US President Donald Trump during his Asia tour. Its implicit but nevertheless clear purpose was China’s strategic containment, and its focus was on ‘hard’ military security.<sup>26</sup> From the Indian perspective, this was not conducive for regional stability as it was likely to polarise the Indo-Pacific,

making it “another theater of the ‘Thucydides Trap’, in which rising and established powers fight to impose their dominance”.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, while articulating India’s “Indo-Pacific Vision” at the June 2018 Shangri La Dialogue, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi implicitly distanced India from the divisive nature of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, and attempted to assuage regional anxieties relating to the Indo-Pacific concept. He said that, “Indo-Pacific was not a strategy directed against any country; it is “a positive one (with) many elements (of security)”.<sup>28</sup> What this connotes is that ‘security’ refers to a multitude of issues beyond the military dimension alone, such as human safety and healthcare, logistic connectivity, environmental preservation, climate change, and the management of emerging technologies.

In subsequent years, India also tried to correct the misperception of the QUAD being a quasi-military alliance. For this reason, it was initially reluctant to incorporate Australia into the series of naval exercises that bear the generic name MALABAR, which were expanded in 2015 from the bilateral (India-US) level to the trilateral (India-US-Japan) format.<sup>29</sup> Australia’s inclusion would have reinforced China’s allegation that the QUAD was aspiring to be ‘an Asian NATO’.<sup>30</sup> However, after the Galwan Valley clash with China in May 2020, India was compelled to accommodate Australia in MALABAR to reinforce its own deterrence against China.<sup>31</sup> Hence, although Exercise MALABAR was not a QUAD event per-se, the fact that it incorporated all four constituent states of the QUAD, carried an unmistakable message.

This notwithstanding, India continued to push for a more holistic and benign security agenda for the QUAD. The wisdom of this approach was validated by the humanitarian crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21, when Indian warships transported vaccines and oxygen cylinders to countries across the Indo-Pacific, mainly under the QUAD banner.<sup>32</sup> By mid-2021, therefore, the US eventually relented, and “outlined a softer focus for QUAD”.<sup>33</sup> At the QUAD Leaders’ Summit held in September 2021, the agenda covered benign collaborative themes such as vaccines, digital connectivity, green shipping networks, resilient supply chains, and cyber-security.<sup>34</sup> This did not mean that the QUAD agenda was devoid of military cooperation. For instance, the ‘QUAD-level’ naval Exercise MALABAR continued. Also, in May 2023, the QUAD Chiefs of Defence Staff met in California to discuss military issues.<sup>35</sup> However, military security was not to be the sole objective of the QUAD.

The QUAD was not expanded because in its incorporation of India, diversity was already a ‘given’. India is not a military ally of the US and is the only one among the QUAD partners that shares a land border with China. Expanding the QUAD would have added to its complexity, leading to complications in reaching consensus. India itself was not in favour of its expansion, or even having it institutionalised, and sought to keep the grouping an informal consultative forum.

## **AUKUS: Military Security beyond QUAD**

Whereas India has had its say in shaping the QUAD’s agenda, America’s focus on ‘hard’ military approach against China did not wane. So, in September 2021, it turned to its two anglophone treaty allies, Australia and the UK, to raise the AUKUS grouping.<sup>36</sup> While promoting Australia as a suitable power to operate and build nuclear attack submarines (SSN), AUKUS was also meant to diversify America’s own strategic options into the hard military realm beyond the QUAD’s softer agenda. Australia’s SSN operations in the western Pacific would be a valuable supplement to the US forces seeking to constrain the PLA Navy’s operational freedom.

Notably, when the AUKUS was formed in 2021, and ASEAN States were divided on its merits, India saw it as a valuable tool within the broader Indo-Pacific architecture to supplement the QUAD’s deterrent ability against China. The value of AUKUS also lay in the fact that it would enable the QUAD to focus on ‘softer’ issues of Indo-Pacific collaboration.

In any event, AUKUS could not have involved India. Without a binding alliance commitment, the transfer of US SSNs or associated technology to New Delhi had been virtually inconceivable due to the stringency of US laws — notably the 1976 US Arms Export Control Act (AECA).<sup>37</sup> Even in the case of Australia, the US encountered serious challenges from its lawmakers. These challenges are still in the process of being resolved by ‘exemption legislation through a 2023 Bill presented to the US Congress called the ‘Torpedo Act’, which is yet to be enacted into law.<sup>38</sup>

AUKUS could potentially deliver on ‘hard security’ against China, but with a very long ‘gestation period’. Besides, India’s naval power has always been considered

to be adequately consequential to counter China in the Indian Ocean. So, the US had to push India again into delivering on ‘hard’ military collaboration. Seeing the scheduled visit of the Indian PM to the US in June 2023 as an opportunity, the US Senate’s ‘India Caucus’ proposed to the Congress that India be incorporated into a ‘NATO Plus’ grouping.<sup>39</sup> The PM’s visit did succeed in enabling expeditious US defence hardware transfers to India, much like those to USA’s defence treaty allies. However, the ‘NATO Plus’ proposal was firmly rejected by India.<sup>40</sup>

## **SQUAD: Military Security beyond AUKUS**

The formation of SQUAD, driven by America’s compelling (hard) security imperatives, may be seen in the aforementioned context. It is widely speculated that the letter ‘S’ in SQUAD stands for ‘Security’<sup>41</sup> but it is more likely to represent the SCS as the focus of SQUAD. In March of 2024, the US warned China that ‘Article IV’ of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft – including those of its Coast Guard – anywhere in the South China Sea.<sup>42</sup> However, through its grey-zone tactics, China has succeeded in keeping the escalation against Philippines below America’s ‘red-line’. This made it essential for the US to demonstrate to China — and to its regional allies and partners — that America’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific region has not waned despite its ongoing strategic compulsions relating to the wars in Ukraine and Palestine.

Unlike the QUAD’s broader scope, both spatially (encompassing the entire Indo-Pacific) and in terms of issues (holistic security), the SQUAD’s focus is likely to be on SCS and legal issues. This group is necessary to prevent China from misinterpreting international law in its favour. It could effectively supplement the US Navy’s Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) against China’s ‘excessive’ maritime claims.<sup>43</sup> The capability-enhancement and hardware-centric capacity-building of the Filipino military may only be a byproduct of such collaboration, as has been the case of US-India collaboration under the QUAD. With the Philippines being a relatively minor actor in regional affairs vis-à-vis India as a regional power, the prospect of the former displacing India in the US Indo-Pacific strategy — or in the new Indo-Pacific construct — is inconceivable.

## India-US: Convergence within Divergence

Nevertheless, the formation of the SQUAD represents a fundamental divergence between America's 'hard' *versus* India's 'soft' approach to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>44</sup> India's divergent foreign policy approach, as is evidenced by its continuing close ties with Russia (amidst the Ukraine War<sup>45</sup>) and Iran (the Chahbahar port long-term deal<sup>46</sup>) may have also contributed to the US diversifying its strategic options away from the QUAD and India. However, geopolitical and strategic realities would appear to justify the formation of SQUAD, as it did in the case of AUKUS.

As was true of AUKUS, the raising of SQUAD needs to be seen in context of the emerging concepts of 'plurilateralism' and 'minilateralism', which go beyond 'multilateralism' relating to large groupings that are often constrained in their ability to reach consensus. These concepts are also rooted in the rationale of international statecraft, which dictates that States diversify their choice of partners to whatever extent possible in order to de-risk their strategic stakes. India itself firmly believes in these concepts. Indeed, it is this belief that has led it to join various multilateral groupings beyond the QUAD such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) forum, and the RIC (Russia, India and China).<sup>47</sup> In the context of national security, Russia-Ukraine War validates the value of plurilateralism and minilateralism. Ukraine compromised its security interests by depending merely on the United Nations. This was a lesson learnt by other European States such as Finland and Sweden, which lost no time in applying for membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and were admitted into the NATO alliance in 2023 and 2024, respectively.<sup>48</sup> This is not to say, however, that India ought to join the NATO, since each State must be free to choose the kind of partners and relationships that it is comfortable with. This may be seen in context of the statement made by India's EAM, Dr S Jaishankar, who while speaking at the Raisina Dialogue in 2021, said, "Quad is not 'Asian NATO', India never had 'NATO mentality'".<sup>49</sup>

The formation of the SQUAD, therefore, ought to be seen in the context of a US attempt at de-risking through the diversification of exclusive groupings. The SQUAD, therefore, is not an alternative to QUAD but complementary to it. This is

evident in the view expressed by Ashley Tellis, “Where balancing China is concerned, the QUAD is only one arrow among many in the US quiver.”<sup>50</sup>

To some extent, the formation of the SQUAD may adversely impact India’s increasing geopolitical influence in the western Pacific. Such influence is necessary for India, not only to preserve, protect and promote its vital interests in the area, but also to further its broader normative aim of regional stability, as articulated in its Indo-Pacific Vision, and more specifically, its Act East Policy. It is, however, noteworthy that India is likely to remain central to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Indian Ocean, while also being in a favourable position to influence events in the critical maritime chokepoints leading to and from the Indian Ocean.

## **Conclusion**

In the foreseeable future, China is likely to remain America’s peer competitor, and therefore, India’s strategic relevance to the US is unlikely to diminish in the now well-established Indo-Pacific construct. On the other hand, India will need to bolster its deterrence against China, not only in conventional terms, but also in strategic ones (not necessarily limited to nuclear deterrence). This translates into a strategic convergence between India and the US, along with the treaty allies of the latter, which could be forged in any form, but is currently best represented by the QUAD. Other minilateral groupings that the US has forged — or is likely to forge in the foreseeable future — will not be detrimental to India’s broader interests in the context of its strategic deterrence against China and the regional balance of power.

The formation of the SQUAD needs to be viewed in India through a pragmatic lens. Akin to the deployment of Australian nuclear attack submarines in the western Pacific via AUKUS, the heightened military activities among the SQUAD partners in the SCS would compel China to focus upon its eastern maritime frontiers, thereby offsetting its strategic attention from the India-China border, and towards the Indian Ocean.

Of course, India’s specific geopolitical interests may not always coincide with those of its QUAD partners. Therefore, New Delhi would need to avoid being sidelined

in the affairs of the sub-region east of Malacca Straits. To achieve this, India is not devoid of alternative options. It has already raised its comprehensive security profile among littorals of the western Pacific such as the constituent States of ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, particularly through capability enhancement and hardware-centric capacity-building ability of ASEAN maritime forces. The transfer of military hardware such as corvettes and patrol vessels,<sup>51</sup> BrahMos missiles,<sup>52</sup> and Air-Defence Systems to the SCS disputant States of ASEAN, are cases in point. It is noteworthy that whereas both the US and India are committed to ‘ASEAN centrality’,<sup>53</sup> in their respective ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ conceptualisations of the Indo-Pacific, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is more closely aligned with India’s approach. This confers upon India, significant influence in the developments in the eastern part of Indo-Pacific, including in the SCS.

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# India-Vietnam Maritime Connectivity: Convergence of Interests

*Dr Do Thanh Hai and Ms Apila Sangtam*

## Abstract

*There is a shared recognition by India and Southeast Asian nations, including Vietnam, of the imperative to enhance land, air, and sea connectivity. Geopolitical concerns, spurred by China's Belt and Road Initiative, highlight the need for east-west corridors linking India and Southeast Asia. A growing interest in Vietnam-India maritime connectivity, driven by businesses and the private sector, prompts essential inquiries. The article seeks to identify factors driving the recent interest in direct shipping routes and analyses historical sluggishness in maritime connectivity development. This article will attempt to address: What and how can Vietnam and India provide support and devise strategies to aid in and sustain development and connectivity? The article is designed to approach these questions from a broader geopolitical context rather than from a technical point of view.*

The year 2022 witnessed two new developments between Vietnam and India in the maritime domain. In July 2022, the Vietnamese Maritime Corporation (VIMC) inaugurated a shipping route linking Vietnam, Malaysia, and India. This development has been hailed as one of the first direct maritime links between Vietnam and India. A month earlier, the Gujarat-based Adani Group expressed an interest in investing in Lien Chieu, a port located in central Vietnam. This project is expected to turn Lien Chieu into a port complex which could handle ships with a capacity of 100,000 DWT and container ships of up to 8,000 TEU. The total cargo going through these harbours would be 3.5-5 million tonnes per year.

These developments are phenomenal. For a long time, India and other nations in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, realised the need to enhance connectivity —

via land, air, and sea — through which the movement of goods would be fostered. China's proposal of the One Belt One Road initiative, also known as the Belt and Road Initiative, fuelled geopolitical concerns over the dearth of east-west corridors connecting India and Southeast Asia. Maritime cooperation is also one component of Vietnam and India's partnership. Several workshops and seminars were held with recommendations put up. However, the tangible outcomes were limited.

It is too premature to assess the feasibility and sustainability of the VIMC and Adani projects. However, the nascent interests in Vietnam-India maritime connectivity harboured by businesses and the private sector pose several pertinent questions. First and foremost, which factors have contributed to this interest in improved maritime connectivity between the two countries, particularly regarding direct shipping route? Why has maritime connectivity been slow to develop in the last few decades? There is a need to discuss whether these factors are temporal or sustainable. What and how can Vietnam and India provide support and devise strategies to aid with, and sustain development and connectivity?

## **The Concept of Maritime Connectivity**

Although the term has been widely used, 'maritime connectivity' has not been adequately defined. It often alludes to international freight traffic carried by the sea. In other words, it refers to the maritime transport of cargoes and people between ports, either directly or indirectly. Maritime connectivity is defined as the performance of shipping transport networks and comprises facets such as, among others, the number of destinations served, frequency of services, and logistics costs.<sup>1</sup>

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) proposed two indices to measure the breadth of maritime connectivity: the Liner Shipping Connectivity Index (LSCI) and Bilateral Liner Shipping Connectivity Index (BLSCI). The LSCI is an indicator of how well a country or port is connected to the global liner shipping services. It is measured by a combination of four factors, including the number of ships, the TEU capacity, the number of shipping companies, the number of services, and the size of ships. Meanwhile, the BLSCI represents how well two countries and ports are linked together; it is built on five elements. These

include the number of trans-shipments required from country A to country B; the number of direct services common to both countries A and B; the number of direct connections of countries A and B; the level of competition on services; and the size of the largest ships on the weakest route connecting country A and country B.<sup>2</sup>

According to Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, maritime connectivity is broader than shipping networks. It is composed of five distinct but interrelated elements, namely (i) the ports as nodes of maritime connectivity and logistics infrastructure; (ii) the medium which establishes the connectivity, either physical ones as waterway or digital connections; (iii) the ships which are physical platforms affecting the connectivity; (iv) the items which ships ferry — either cargo or human beings; (v) the policy frameworks that affect maritime connectivity in two countries. As a result, maritime connectivity exists in various forms, physical, and non-physical linkages — including procedural, cultural, or digital ones.<sup>3</sup>

Maritime connectivity has been driven by either geo-economic or non-geo-economic motivations, or both. Often, maritime connections are described as a function of interstate trade. It is estimated that 80 percent of international trade is sea-borne. As a result, the development of maritime transport linkages is believed to be driven by supply chain integration and the globalisation of production. From the national point of view, improved connectivity is seen as the most important strategy towards stimulating exports and plugging domestic economies to global supply chains, thereby accelerating economic growth, and reducing poverty.<sup>4</sup> Access to high-quality international shipping services provides a country with a competitive edge over those countries which are poorly connected.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, connectivity can also be driven by non-geo-economic goals. This means that it can be used not only to generate commercial dividends, but also expand political influence. American Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan has argued that global dominance is secured by the control of the seas, which allows the free movement of ships, goods, commerce, and military forces.<sup>6</sup> In the modern day, the construction of ports, highways, railways, or pipelines, as well as the establishment of free trade zones have potential impacts on the political landscape — redirecting the movements of goods and shaping political and security dependency and interdependency. Infrastructure nowadays has the power of shaping the flow of goods and information,

which has become a major element of strategic and security competition. In this light, maritime infrastructural development is not merely commercial design, but also involves security, political, and cultural implications.

## **New Great Game in Asia**

Since the end of the Cold War, connectivity has mostly been seen as a conduit of the global economy, driven by globalisation. The seas and oceans are regarded as mediums to connect people, companies, and countries together, enabling the delivery of goods and services to local, regional, and global markets. While it is considered as one part of logistics system, it is among the most important determinants of trade costs.<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that a 10 percent reduction in costs of transportation would result in a 20 percent increase in international trade. As a result, the UNCTAD has created and started data collection for the LSCI at the country-level annually since 2004. In this regard, countries struggled to enhance their LSCI as a measure to better their position in the interconnected globe. China served as the leader in upgrading its status in maritime connectivity. Its LSCI rose by 51 percent between 2006 and 2019, reflecting deeper integration of China into the global economy.<sup>8</sup>

Connectivity is also part of regional integration projects. Southeast Asian countries supported their regional integration projects through the adoption of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) in 2010. Defined as a key engine to establish the ASEAN community, the MPAC was designed to enhance connectivity among ASEAN members through three modes: physical, institutional, and people-to-people links. After years of integration through trade facilitation, ASEAN realised that the key to narrow development gaps among its members lay in infrastructural upgrade. Members who are well-connected to the global markets in the form of extremely high LSCIs are much better off than others. The first MPAC prioritised mega physical projects such as the pan-ASEAN highways, railways, and energy grids.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, it was not just aimed for intra-ASEAN connectedness but also to strengthen ASEAN linkages with the greater Pacific region.

The MPAC has progressed sluggishly due to a lack of actual funding and investment. ASEAN members have had no option but to rely on external partners

for funding their big-ticket wish-list projects. This forced ASEAN to adopt a new blueprint in 2016 which shifted focus onto soft connectivity. The Connectivity Master Plan 2025 specifies five priority areas, and these include sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence, and people mobility.<sup>10</sup> Though not really moving away from physical connectivity projects, the second plan clearly emphasises on developing enabling policies.

Interestingly, while ASEAN has struggled with its own vision, its idea of connectivity has diffused and transcended beyond its own region, becoming a buzz word with strong geopolitical connotations. Connectivity was put on the agenda of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM).<sup>11</sup> The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) also took it over and released a Connectivity Blueprint in 2014, which reflects the first MPAC's focus. Major powers in the region such as China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Australia also developed their own connectivity strategies. The US and the European Union later joined the game, signalling their interest in infrastructural development across the region.

Connectivity changed its nuance when a rising and assertive China took over the idea and made it a geopolitical gambit. October 2013 saw Chinese President Xi Jinping announcing the One Belt One Road scheme (OBOR) in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, which was said to be 'a bid to enhance regional connectivity and embrace a brighter future'. The 'belt' refers to the trans-Eurasia land links, which includes a vast network of roads, rails, pipelines, bridges, and other physical infrastructures in Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The road, which is short form for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, is described as a network of ports and maritime routes linking eastern China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The belt and road projects were financed by the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund. In 2016, OBOR was rebranded as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), perhaps to avoid any negative geopolitical connotations.

China's OBOR or BRI received an unexpectedly hearty welcome and enthusiasm. The first Belt and Road Forum in May 2017 was attended by 29 heads of state and representatives from 130 countries and 70 international organisations. Even Italy, a

G7 member, expressed support. Till date, 147 countries — or two thirds of the world population and 40 percent of global GDP — have indicated interest. China looked attractive for several reasons. First, the lack of funding for major infrastructural development in the region is chronic while traditional sponsors and loan providers including the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as Japan could not cater to all the needs. Second, China has been a remarkable leader in infrastructural build-up and economic development over the last two-three decades. Third, Beijing had a deep pocket with a foreign reserve of over US\$ 3000 billion. Four, as an alternative to existing fundings, China seemingly appeared ‘more flexible’ in giving loans, with less strings attached as compared to other lenders.

However, China’s ambitious plan had also equally stirred much suspicion, anxieties, and criticisms. First and foremost, concerns were voiced about ‘debt trap diplomacy’ as the Chinese avoid transparency about the terms and conditions of their loans. If the money was not properly spent or managed, not only would the projects be left incomplete, but the debtors would also go into default or eventually feel limited by their strategic options. Besides, many analysts opined that the China-led infrastructure would also entail geopolitical motives. As a rising power, Beijing has allegedly not only aimed to restructure trade links across the region but also tried to scale up its strategic expansions. China-sponsored infrastructural projects might be the ‘trojan horse’ for Beijing’s access to — or more permanent presence in — disputed territories. China’s relentless attempts to change the status quo in the South and East China Seas were seen as an indication of unsettling expansionism; and there were legitimate worries that China-built ports and other facilities could be used for both, civilian and naval deployment purposes.

In response to these developments, other big powers converged into a new geopolitical theatre — the Indo-Pacific. Together with shoring up their military presence, they tried to curtail Beijing’s increased political and economic clout by giving infrastructure-thirst a range of alternatives. Struggling to compete with Beijing, Washington adopted the ‘Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development’ (BUILD) Act in 2018 to set up the US International Development Finance Corporation (US DFC) — a new agency to channel private finance to

build infrastructure in developing countries in line with US foreign policy goals and national security interests. Despite traditionally being a builder in the region, Japan also stepped up its efforts, committing more than US\$ 300 billion from public and private funding to sponsor key projects in the region. Concerned about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which runs through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, New Delhi committed US\$ 3 billion to develop infrastructure in Afghanistan and beefed up its discussions on connectivity. In December 2021, the European Union adopted the Global Gateway, a US\$ 300 billion-infrastructure investment programme explicitly aimed to compete with the BRI.

As China has many advantages in the game due to its deep pockets and geographical proximity, other major powers coordinated and aligned their efforts to match China's infrastructure spending. In 2019, the US, Japan and Australia agreed to establish the 'Blue Dot Network' — an initiative aimed to advance a multi stakeholder framework for quality infrastructure promotion based on financial transparency, environmental sustainability, and impact on economic development.<sup>12</sup> In 2021, under the US leadership, the Group of Seven (G7) introduced the 'Build Back Better World' (B3W) initiative, which is said to be a values-driven, transparent, non-coercive and private sector-led infrastructure investment programme to compete with the BRI. Though some supporters claim that B3W acts as a competitor to BRI, many acknowledge that its lack of financing prevents it from acting as a serious challenger to China's initiative. One year after B3W was announced, commitments under the initiative totalled only US\$ 6 million. It had now been renamed as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII).

India actively engaged the region, and took a clear and decisive stance. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made public, his vision of the Indian Ocean through 'SAGAR' (Ocean in Sanskrit) — acronym for 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' — which is an all-encompassing programme to deepen India's relationship with its maritime neighbours. In 2017, India and Japan launched the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) — a plan to develop and connect ports from Myanmar to East Africa. Taking the idea of SAGAR further in 2018 at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, and in 2019 at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, Prime Minister Modi announced the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI) to support the building of a rules-based regional architecture resting on seven spokes. These spokes are maritime

security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building/resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology, academic cooperation; and trade connectivity/transport.

The infrastructure development push since 2013 in the region has shown that connectivity is no longer a commercial competition but also a political and ideological contestation. In a more polarised world, connectivity is not a vector for greater integration, but a measure for fragmentation, which has significant impacts on the security and development of all countries in the region.

### **India-Vietnam Maritime Connectivity**

India and Vietnam had maritime linkages since the ancient past, thanks to the outward orientation of the maritime kingdoms of Chola, Srivijaya, Majapahit, Malacca, and Temasek (Singapore). These kingdoms were great seaports and foci of communications which developed in response to the increasing volume of seaborne trade in Malay waters. Ancient maritime routes interlinked the far-east empires in China and Japan with kingdoms in the Indian Ocean via the South China Sea, while the passage through the Straits of Malacca also opened the region to the West Asian and the European empires. The southern part of Vietnam, which was considered a major producer of rice for its citizens and for traders, was a node of maritime trade across the region.

The maritime links were largely disrupted with the fall of ancient kingdoms and the arrival of Western colonisers. The consecutive wars isolated Vietnam by and large, from the global shipping networks and maritime connectivity, even though Southeast Asia emerged as the crossroads for trade, and a connection point of the global exchange circuit. Only once the communist leadership decided to open through Doi Moi, did Vietnam gradually plug into the global economy, with its maritime domain transforming from a security buffer to a connecting theatre. In 1988, Vietnam welcomed ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) — the international subsidiary of the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation of India — to explore hydrocarbons in three blocks, viz, 06, 12E and 19 in the Nam Con Son basin. OVL subsequently expanded its operations into blocks 127 and 128.<sup>13</sup>

Besides cooperation on offshore oil and gas exploration, Vietnam and India's maritime cooperation is heavily centered on the security aspect. Since 2000, the Indian Navy has paid regular port calls to Vietnam, and conducted joint activities with the Vietnamese People's Navy. Such cooperation has allowed India to be present in the South China Sea waters regularly. India has also supported Vietnam's maritime capacity building in many ways. In 2000, during the visit of Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes, the two countries concluded an agreement prescribing cooperation in many fields, including joint naval training. In 2007, New Delhi agreed to transfer 5000 items of naval spare parts for Vietnam to maintain its Petya-class ships.<sup>14</sup> Since 2011, India has been providing submarine training for the Vietnam People's Navy.

Increased maritime engagements between India and Vietnam have occurred in the context of China's greater activism and assertiveness in the South China Sea and in the Indian Ocean. In 2013, India announced that it would train about 500 Vietnamese sailors in 'comprehensive combat operations' in its modern training establishment, INS Satavahana in Visakhapatnam. In the same year, during the visit of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, India pledged to give US\$ 100 million line of credit to Vietnam for defence acquisition.<sup>15</sup> Later on, it became clear that Vietnam opted to use this credit line to build 12 high-speed guard boats for its border forces. In 2015, both countries also signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding' between Indian Coast Guard and Vietnam Coast Guard for establishment of collaborative relationship to combat transnational crime and develop mutual cooperation.<sup>16</sup> In 2016, during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Hanoi, India proposed to provide Vietnam with another credit line of US\$ 500 million to build the latter's maritime capacity. More recently, the two Defence Ministers also signed the 'Joint Vision Statement' on 08 June 2022, where Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh held bilateral talks with Vietnam's Minister of National Defence General Phan Van Giang in Hanoi to expand bilateral defence engagements and regional and global issues. India and Vietnam signed a 'Defence Partnership towards 2030' and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Mutual Logistics Support.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, connectivity is, by and large, a very weak link in the Vietnam-India maritime cooperation. The joint statement on the official visit of Indian Prime

Minister Narendra Modi to Vietnam in September 2016 indicated connectivity was an area for cooperation. It said:

“Both sides reiterated the importance of connectivity between Vietnam and India. They urged airlines of both sides to soon open direct flights between major cities of Vietnam and India. They sought to accelerate the establishment of direct shipping routes between the seaports of Vietnam and India. Both sides agreed on the need to further strengthen physical connectivity between India and ASEAN.”<sup>18</sup>

However, the progress was slow. No concrete projects were followed up by the Indian government. Direct flights were started in December 2019 while the first direct shipping routes began in July 2021. Reportedly, they have succeeded to a great extent thanks to the private sectors, rather than having been pushed by relevant authorities.

There have been discussions to promote connectivity within the framework of ASEAN-India cooperation. At the 13th India-ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made public a Line of Credit of US\$ 1 billion to finance the projects of physical and digital connectivity between India and ASEAN. In December 2017, ASEAN and India held the Connectivity Summit in New Delhi, which served as a forum to accelerate connectivity projects and map out new ideas and initiatives in the field. Connectivity also featured in the plan of action to implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for ‘Peace, Progress, and Shared Prosperity 2021-2025’. However, it mostly referred to the land link, particularly the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, with no reference to the shipping network. It was reported that the two sides are in the process of negotiating a maritime transport agreement, and India had a plan to set up a maritime transport working group to explore the feasibility of a shipping network with Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> Yet, no significant projects and progress were noted.

## **New Geopolitical Tailwinds**

The geopolitical shifts in the broader region gradually created new favourable parameters for greater interactions between Vietnam and India. Since Washington started the trade war with Beijing in 2018, multinational corporations have

pursued the China-plus-one strategy more rigorously to avoid collateral damage. Near-shoring and friend-shoring are major vectors for relocating supply chains. Disruptions occurring during the Covid-19 pandemic also intensified their efforts to seek alternative locations for their manufacturing bases to reduce dependence on China. Vietnam and India stood out among the prime destinations for China-plus-one shifts. It is observable that many big technology firms such as Apple and Samsung have explored or decided to expand production facilities in India and Vietnam, as well as in other Southeast Asian nations.

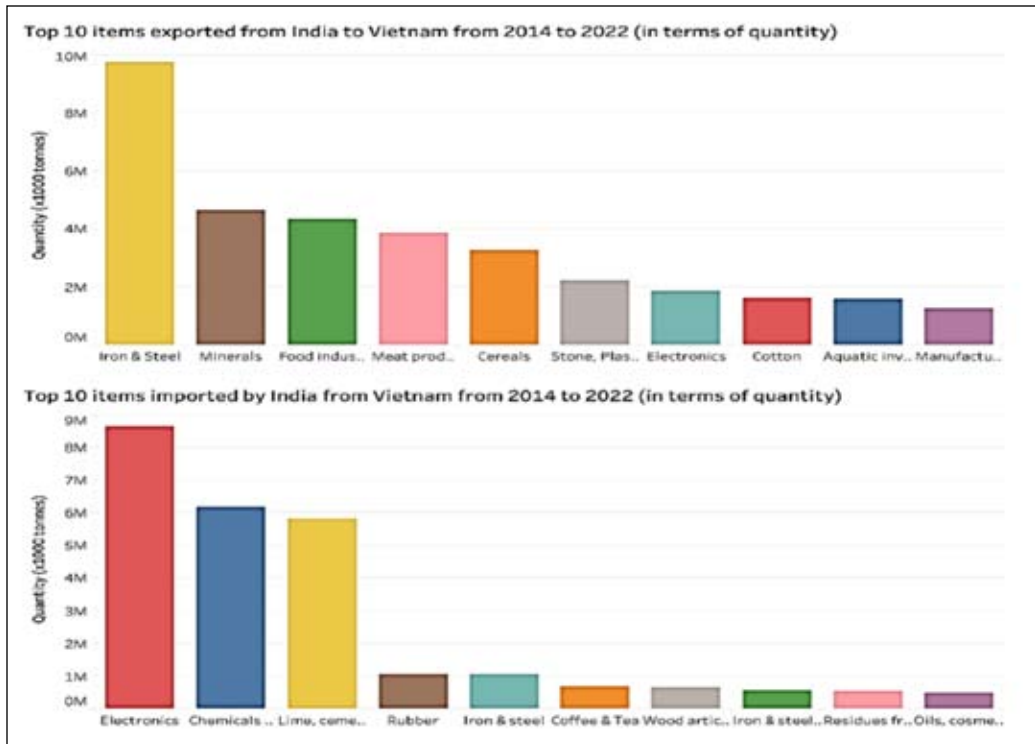
A survey by the German container logistics platform confirmed this trend. When asked about the shipping and supply chain industry, 67 percent of respondents out of 2,600 industry professionals from over 20 countries believed that India and Vietnam would rise as ‘functioning container shipping hubs’ in 2023.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the fundamentals of Vietnam and India’s economies are favourable for the emergence of new manufacturing hubs. India’s vast population and high birth rate make it both an attractive market as well as a manufacturing base for big technology firms.<sup>21</sup> Though its population is not as big as India’s or China’s, Vietnam has advantage of political stability and economic liberalisation with a comprehensive network of Free Trade Agreements, which give its exports greater market access to major markets such as ASEAN, UK, Japan, Australia and EU countries.<sup>22</sup> Salaries of workers in both countries are significantly lower than that of China. They both pursued aggressive policies to upgrade infrastructure, improve business environment, and provide incentives to attract manufacturing.

The trade ties between Vietnam and India have grown fast in recent years and have the potential to sustain the momentum. In 2022, according to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, bilateral trade between the two countries reached US\$ 15 billion — the target set by the two Prime Ministers in December 2020. Over last two decades, trade has recorded a 75-fold increase, from US\$ 200 million in 2000 to US\$ 15 billion in 2022. However, this figure is just about 2 percent of Vietnam’s foreign trade turnover, and 1.5 percent of India’s figure. Though many obstacles remain, there is clearly ample room for continued expansions in the years to come.

A closer look into the balance sheet shows Vietnam has gained higher market access in India, having a trade surplus with changing trade composition. According

to the commodity-wise trade data from the Indian Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Department of Commerce, the major commodities exported and imported by Vietnam to and from India are shown in Figure 1.

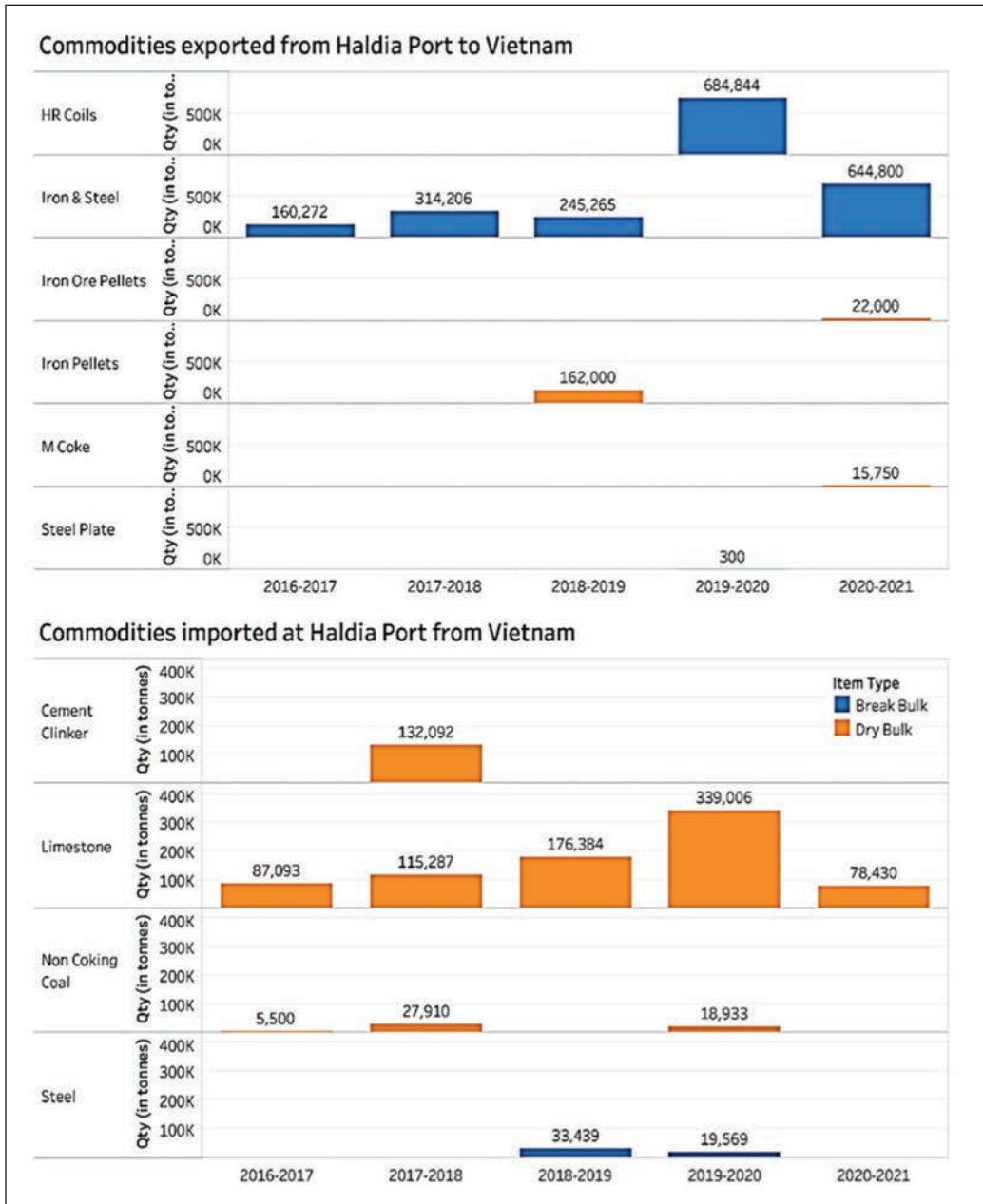
Figure 1: India-Vietnam Trade- Top 10 items of Import and Export



Source: Author's compilation based on data's available at Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Department of Commerce, Govt. of India

An examination of secondary data (Figure 2) of Haldia & Paradip Ports' administrative reports from 2015 to 2021 gives an overview of the major commodities that are traded through cargo ships between Vietnam and India. From the trade statistics, it can be concluded that while steel (2020-21) constitutes the highest exported commodity to Vietnam from Haldia Port, limestone (2020-21) constitutes the highest imported commodity at Haldia Port from Vietnam. Also, while iron and steel constitute the highest exported commodity from Paradip Port to Vietnam, coking coal, coal, FRM liquid and other dry bulk constitute the major commodities that are imported at Paradip Port from Vietnam.

Figure 2: Items of Import and Export from Haldia Port to Vietnam



Source: Author's compilation based on data at Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Department of Commerce, Govt. of India: <https://tradedat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/default>

India's overall exports for the year shot up 29.1 percent annually to 10.78 million tonnes. This was despite the finding by the ASEAN-India Centre that in 2021-22, the volume of India's maritime trade with Vietnam had increased to over 399,201 TEU in terms of exports and 115,236 TEU in terms of imports, generating over 250 feeder vessels in the process.

Both India and Vietnam were pursuing port-led socio-economic development. Yet detailed knowledge of each country's plans, extant and future plans for port infrastructure (incorporating both, greenfield and brownfield ports), etc., was abysmally poor — even in the case of large, specialist logistic and shipping companies. Although a direct shipping route to India was introduced in July 2022, this was only between the Vietnamese port of Cua Lo (located 200 kilometers southwest of Haiphong) and the Indian riverine port of Kolkata. There were very significant opportunities for enhanced mercantile shipping that simply went abegging. These opportunities were underscored by the fact that Vietnam planned to double the cargo-handling capacity of its ports — from 200 million tonnes (MMT) to 400 MMT by 2030.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the total traffic handled at Indian ports had risen from 885 MMT in 2010-11 to 1,300 MMT in 2019–20, with 54 percent of all Indian cargo being handled by the country's twelve major ports.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, the ability to leverage these opportunities remained mired in large swaths of ignorance. For instance, commodity-wise specific data-records between Indian and Vietnamese ports were available with the customs authorities stationed at the various ports of both countries, but there was no system in place in either country to systemically obtain this data. Other challenges included operating patterns that were in place; for instance, breakbulk cargo vessels did not move the cargo from source to destination in a single voyage, which led to significant discrepancies in analysis. The substantial quantum of transshipment occurring at the transshipment hubs of Singapore and Port Klang added to the difficulties of accurately assessing, analysing, and recommending new, direct trade routes.

In a snapshot, the supply chain restructuring, current momentum of bilateral trade and policies of both governments are tailwinds supporting connectivity between the two countries. The US-China trade war and decoupling process make

Vietnam and India more significant in the global manufacturing. The MNCs' relocation of productive forces out of China would naturally bind India and Vietnam in the new supply chains. Bilateral trade ties are expanding, as both countries are seeking diversification and building up resilient supply chains. Strong civilizational and cultural links, as well as strategic trust provides an environment favourable for trade and investment expansions. Finally, the improvement of port systems in both Vietnam and India serves as a solid ground for connectivity. Current geopolitical vectors provide impetus for improved maritime linkages between Vietnam and India.

### **A Pathway Forward for India and Vietnam**

Since 2019, direct flights have started and increased quickly, which has prompted a surge in travelling between the two countries, and offers an enormous chance for business engagements. This has helped dispel the myth of low volume of traffic which made airlines of both countries delay the operationalisation of direct airlinks despite air service agreement between Vietnam and India having been inked almost fifteen years ago. The same should be applied to direct shipping routes, which would help shorten the transport time by a third — from 21-22 days to 14-15 days.<sup>25</sup> As trade potential is there and remains substantial, the establishment of the maritime highway would spur interests and open opportunities, and not vice versa.

Increased intensity of geopolitical rivalry among major powers, and also major economies, has driven both India and Vietnam to diversify their supplies and markets, making their economies far less vulnerable to any single supplier or a couple of major markets. A case in point would be Vietnam's textile and garment industry, and India's pharmaceutical industry, which are much dependent on a single source of supply. The ongoing restructuring of the supply chain also kindled business interest in expanding dyadic maritime connectivity between Vietnam and India. As the two countries are emerging as new centres of reliable supply chains, increased transportation and logistical links would broaden the range of choice for investors. Consequently, improving connectivity in the maritime domain is no doubt, a pathway towards comprehensive maritime security.

However, maritime connectivity ought not be left to market forces and the private sectors only. Given the fact that it needs big investments and has long-term impacts, governmental interventions are necessary. Also, as geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region gathers more steam, the risks to maritime shipping increase. Against that backdrop, maritime connectivity cannot be realised without a certain degree of security and safety, which can be provided by state actors. Improved maritime linkages not only deepen economic integration through greater trade and investment, but are also contingent on broader cooperation to build a more secure maritime domain between the two countries.

To this end, the governments of India and Vietnam should continue to upgrade their respective port infrastructure and facilitate reliable investments into the industries. According to a Reserve Bank of India report in 2022, India's poor shipping connectivity has hindered its integration into the global value chain. The report reveals that India scored 34 percent in the global value chains (GVC) participation index, whereas the 10-member ASEAN group scored 45.9 percent. On the other hand, Vietnam scored above 50 percent by the same yardstick, as reported in a separate study.<sup>26</sup> In this context, Adani's investment into Lien Chieu ports in Da Nang, if materialised, would create a gateway for the flow of India's goods into Vietnam. Vietnamese enterprises should be encouraged to invest into port infrastructure and trading houses in India. Besides that, developing smart ports, which are not only climate sustainable but also digitally intelligent, could also be a potential field for cooperation between the two countries.

The two countries also need to give incentive to shipbuilding industries and encourage direct shipping routes to reduce reliance on global shipping cartels. To this end, New Delhi and Hanoi should consider reducing cabotage restrictions and give favourable conditions for Indian and Vietnamese companies to connect a range of ports in both countries. They should also endeavour to jointly develop special and preferential taxation mechanisms and procedures to avoid any unnecessary prolongation of lay times, simplify and expedite wherever possible customs and other formalities to facilitate the flow of goods from one country's port to the other's port. To reduce dependence on global shipping giants such as Maersk, MSC or COSCO, the two countries should consider giving special support to their national shipping

corporations to form maritime shipping joint ventures for better development of direct routes. To this end, Vietnam and India might need to revisit the agreement on maritime shipping agreement signed on 24 May 2013.<sup>27</sup>

Notably, insufficient data has limited the ability to leverage these opportunities. No system has been put in place in either country to systemically obtain and make public commodity-wise specific data-records between Indian and Vietnamese ports — which might be scattered with the customs authorities stationed at the various ports of both countries. The data on how the cargo moves from source to destination is also more difficult to obtain. It is recognised that a big quantity of transshipment occurring at the shipping hubs of Singapore and Port Klang add another layer of difficulty to accurately assess, analyse, and recommend new, direct trade routes. In this regard, a system needs to be put in place to collect relevant data for mapping the pathway goods being moved between Vietnam and India, and beyond for more informed policy-making decisions.

To leverage all strategic and geo-economic favours, India and Vietnam ought to consider negotiating a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement (CEPA), which would clear all hurdles for greater trade and investment. A CEPA would give a broader space for the two countries to negotiate important issues such as trade in goods, trade in services, technical barriers to trade, investment, payment, relevant skill development schemes, logistics and connectivity issues. After all, the connectivity between the two broad economies is an important factor which will create greater maritime connectedness.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, despite much hope and talks, connectivity remains a weak spot in Indo-Vietnam maritime cooperation. Though connectivity has a long history dating back to the ancient dynasties, and the two countries have been blessed with favourable geographic conditions for seaward expansion, there was little interest in both New Delhi and Hanoi to develop dyadic maritime transport linkages before 2013. The rise of China and increased geopolitical rivalry kindled some attention to the east-west corridors, both through land and sea, between India and Southeast Asia. However,

merely the convergence of geopolitical interests was not sufficient for any real push. Only once supply chain disruptions and restructurings occurred and intensified under the Covid-19 pandemic, did real interest in strengthening maritime connectivity between India and Vietnam take shape. The swift growth of trade between the two countries and the need to strengthen their supply chain resilience also added to the shift. Yet, given its strategic importance and risky nature, maritime connectivity requires the governments' supporting policies to fully materialise. It is recommended that Vietnam and India continue their port-led development by putting greater emphasis on modernising port facilities and shipping industries, while at the same time enhancing soft links through simplified procedures, digital documentation, cabotage facilitation, systemized data collection and analysis, and a comprehensive trade agreement.

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## Book Review

# Thirty Years of ASEAN-India Relations: Towards Indo-Pacific

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640 Pages ISBN 978-93-94915-25-1

*Ms Sushmita Sihwag*

In his seminal address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an emphatic appeal for Asian solidarity: *“Asia of rivalry will hold us all back. Asia of cooperation will shape this century.”* He cited ASEAN as *“an example and inspiration”* for successful regional integration. Five years later, in 2022, ASEAN and India marked 30 years of dialogue relations, and the year was celebrated as the ASEAN-India Friendship Year. Aptly titled *‘Thirty Years of ASEAN-India Relations: Towards Indo-Pacific,’* the compilation edited by distinguished economist Professor Prabir De of the New Delhi-based ASEAN-India Centre (AIC)/Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), is a timely and authoritative work of scholarship, commemorating the occasion. A voluminous collection of thirty research papers, the edited volume reviews the accomplishments of ASEAN-India relations in the last three decades, and endeavours to present a roadmap for the forthcoming one.

The book is divided into four major sections and addresses the whole gamut of ASEAN-India relations, from trade and investment to Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). It begins with a panoramic introduction by the editor, tracing the evolution of ASEAN-India relations, reflecting on contemporary challenges, and identifying opportunities for deepening the partnership in the post-COVID-19 era.

Continuing along similar lines, the first part of the book provides a broad overview of diplomatic relations and multidimensional cooperation spanning defence and security, agriculture, energy, technology, trade and investment, tourism, connectivity, and environment. The subsequent parts delve deeper into each of these aspects. The second part focuses upon traditional areas of cooperation and is subdivided into four sections, namely, trade and investment, production networks, connectivity, and culture. In the third part, the focus shifts to relatively newer areas of cooperation, which include the digital economy, sustainable development, tele-medicine, tele-education and security issues. The fourth and final part, entitled '*Way Forward*', sheds light on aspects of the partnership that demand greater attention in the next decade, such as maritime domain awareness (MDA), maritime transport, and convergence between the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative (IPOI).

In the chapter analysing ASEAN-India trade composition pre- and post-FTA, authors Nida Rahman and Prabir De note the shifting of the bulk of India's trade with ASEAN between 2010 and 2021, from agricultural raw materials and food to manufactured goods. With regard to the export composition in particular, this shift has been spearheaded by transport equipment, chemicals, and textiles. However, imports of transport equipment from ASEAN have simultaneously increased sharply. Further, imports of high technology products have risen but the country's exports in this sector continue to consist of low and medium technology products, signalling the need for improving competitiveness in this category. Interestingly, India's exports-to and imports-from from ASEAN in respect of fuels have witnessed a significant drop. The authors stress that India's perpetual trade deficit with ASEAN continues to be a cause of concern. In particular, its trade deficit with Indonesia has worsened after the AIFTA implementation, from US\$ 5,146.6 million in 2010 to US\$ 7,639.5 million in 2020. The same is the case with Thailand and Malaysia. This demands attention from policymakers in New Delhi. Strikingly, India's trade balance with Singapore, too, has shifted towards a deficit in 2020, from the surplus enjoyed in 2010. The primary cause of these trends continues to be India's extensive imports of animal or vegetable fats and oils, along with electrical machinery and equipment. On the bright side, meat and edible meat exports to ASEAN formed the largest surplus-generating

item, garnering US\$ 1.35 billion in 2020. The fact, however, is that while India's imports from ASEAN are crucial to meet its domestic demand, its exports form only a marginal component of the ASEAN demand. The authors call for urgent remedial action from policymakers within the Government of India if India is serious about achieving a value of US\$300 billion in its trade with ASEAN by 2025, without the trade deficit becoming excessively skewed in favour of the latter.

The analysis of agricultural trade data in the subsequent chapter paints a similar picture. India's agricultural exports and imports to ASEAN have grown in the post-FTA period but its share in ASEAN's overall agricultural trade remains at a dismal 4 percent. The authors highlight the need and scope for diversification, given that India and ASEAN have been trading in similar agricultural commodities, such as fish products, cocoa, natural rubber, and cotton. Another reason for the trade imbalance is the frequent imposition of tariff and non-tariff measures (NTMs), which are well known to hinder trade. Likewise, India has not been able to reap the benefits of the "ASEAN-India Trade in Services Agreement" (AITISA), despite it having been ratified by all parties in 2018, due to legal loopholes in the agreement, as well as the lack of implementation of mutual recognition of qualifications, which is further restricted to professional qualifications. When it comes to investment relations, the author spotlights the critical position of Singapore in India's share of FDI inflows and outflows with ASEAN countries, amounting to 98 percent and 87 percent, respectively. He identifies the digital economy, education, healthcare, food processing industry, and start-ups, as potential areas for intensifying investment relations and strengthening regional and global value chains. For this, it is imperative for the trade partners to initiate business facilitation measures, create opportunities for regional investment promotion, skill development, and promote MSMEs. The following chapter calls attention to the importance of enhancing economic freedom, which allowed ASEAN countries to reap the benefits of FDI inflows.

Apart from trade and investment, the compilation also looks into the importance of connectivity for enhancing economic ties. It notes that, in comparison to 2010, the connectivity agenda has now evolved to focus on both, 'hard' and multimodal connectivity as well as 'soft' connectivity which includes trade facilitation. Further, it emphasises that maritime connectivity is becoming increasingly important against

the backdrop of the Indo-Pacific and its rising significance. The focus then shifts to other areas of the relationship, such as culture, and recommends the bolstering of the India-ASEAN ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) Network Consortium to deepen the historical cultural links between the two in contemporary times. In the section on new areas of cooperation, the authors call for cooperation in initiating reforms of the global economic order and its various institutions, such as the WTO, IMF and G20. The chapters on sustainable development highlight the scope for collaboration on low-carbon green growth and achievement of the SDG goals. Further, the book focuses on the need to move beyond the dichotomy of traditional and non-traditional security issues to tackle challenges such as the smuggling of illicit drugs through the “Golden Triangle”, as also piracy and other issues related to maritime security.

In the final section focusing upon a new agenda for the coming decade, the chapter on MDA underscores three major reasons for India and ASEAN to collaborate and assume joint leadership on MDA, namely, the significance of global maritime trade passing through the region, the problem of piracy in the critical routes within the South China Sea, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, and finally, inter-State maritime disputes over contested geographical features that plague the region. It recommends the cross-deployment of liaison officers between Information Fusion Centres (IFCs)/Information Sharing Centres (ISCs) to build trust, having a single point of contact (SPOC) under a National Maritime Security Coordinator (NMSC) for each member nation, and the conduct of operational exercises between maritime security enforcement agencies.

Overall, the edited volume, *Thirty Years of ASEAN-India Relations* presents an exhaustive coverage of the multi-dimensional facets of diplomatic relations between ASEAN and India. What makes the edited volume a must-read for any serious scholar of ASEAN-India relations is, the deep and incisive first-hand analysis of trade, services, and investment data, particularly over the last decade. The data is presented using a variety of graphs and is classified country-wise, commodity-wise, and industry-wise. The analysis also considers the imposition of tariff lines, import penetration of India into ASEAN, as also potential exports to ASEAN in various product categories. The book provides both, a historical overview of the ASEAN-India partnership and a detailed analysis of granular data; which makes it a useful resource for a variety of types of audience, including policymakers, industry analysts,

media, and academia.

On the flip side, the attempt to cater to a diverse audience with varying levels of expertise, and the resultant shifting depth of focus across chapters can leave readers confused and make the book hard to follow. Additionally, there is excessive focus on the economic aspect of the partnership, which is something that the Indian policymakers themselves are trying to expand beyond by engaging with the “ASEAN Politico-Security Community” (APSC) and the “ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community” (ASCC). Notably, a serious discussion on the deteriorating security situation in Myanmar is starkly absent in the chapters discussing connectivity or security. These infirmities notwithstanding, the compilation presents a comprehensive study of ASEAN-India relations and is a well-referenced book that makes it a valuable scholarly resource.

05 May 2024

### **About the Reviewer**

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# *Micronesia – Hedging Its Bets*



# The Trouble with Micronesia’s New China Policy: Implications of FSM Informing China that it Opposes AUKUS and Supports the Global Security Initiative

*Mr Richard Clark*

In far too many cases, Indian strategists do not seriously consider Oceania at all, dismissing it as a distant place of minimal importance to New Delhi. Such dismissiveness is likely to prove to be a very costly error. Oceania has considerable relevance not only to countries such as the US, Australia, New Zealand, but to China, Japan, and India as well. If India is to be a power of any consequence in the Indo-Pacific and not merely its western segment (the Indian Ocean) alone, Oceania needs to be taken seriously. This is especially important in the light of India’s decade-long (since 2014) geopolitical investment in the “Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation” (FIPIC), juxtaposed against that of China, as evidenced by the visit of Mr Wang Yi, the then-Foreign Minister of China to eight FIPIC countries — namely, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Timor-Leste — from 26 May to 04 June 2023. The geopolitical game of Wei Qi that is afoot in Oceania has India and China on the one hand, and the US, Australia, and China, on the other, all jockeying for favourable positions upon this gameboard. The views expressed in this article are those of Mr Clark as an individual, and are not to be construed as reflecting official views of either the Indian establishment or the National Maritime Foundation.

Wesley Simina, the President of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), travelled to China between 05 and 12 April 2024 for a State visit, on the heels of his visit to the United States, where he had exchanged notes on a 20-year renewal of key

elements of the Compact of Free Association, an agreement that is the foundation of FSM-US relations. While many in Washington might think that the renewal sorts out FSM-US relations for the next two decades, a closer look at Simina's China visit should give them pause. Immediately prior to his China Visit, Simina gave an interview to Mar-Vic Cagurangan at the Pacific Island Times,<sup>1</sup> where he described his appreciation at the chance to play 'peacemaker' between Washington and Beijing.

Simina's trip to China overlapped with visits by Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,<sup>2</sup> Thailand's Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, Suriname's President Chandrikapersad Santokhi, and Taiwan's former President Ma Ying-jeou,<sup>3</sup> representing the opposition Kuomintang party. Despite the busy diplomatic schedule in Beijing, Simina was given the red-carpet treatment. Simina did not bring along his Chief of Staff, Jane Chigiyal, nor his acting attorney general, Leonito Bacalando Jr. Yet Simina was accompanied by Chris Christian, the son of former President Peter Christian and husband of the executive director of the Western & Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, Rhea Moss-Christian, as well as Eugene Pangelinan, previously the executive director of the FSM's National Oceanic Resource Management Authority. Pangelinan was alleged by former President David Panuelo to have unilaterally provided permits to dual-purpose research vessels from China.

In the meeting between China's Xi Jinping and Simina, Xi inaccurately suggested that Austronesian languages originated in Fujian Province. Simina apparently did not push back on this. Nor did Simina raise the issue of China's diplomats following former President Panuelo and his family in September 2023. Notably, Simina said that the FSM is "firmly committed to the One China principle." Historically the FSM has used the term "One China policy" instead, the idea being that the word "principle" means something specific to Beijing that it doesn't mean to the FSM.

However, we have seen Simina misuse crucial words in the past. During the FSM president's meeting with the US Secretary of Defence in March 2024, Simina said that the FSM and the United States shared the values of "peace, unity, and freedom." FSM presidents, including Panuelo (2019-2023), Christian (2015-2019), and Emanuel Mori (2007-2015) tended to always use the words "peace, unity, and liberty" because those are the words on the FSM's seal. The fact that Simina knew

to repeat the themes of the words he has heard before, but failed on the execution, is consistent with his personality and previous public addresses.

In isolation, a reference to the ‘One China principle’ does not represent a policy shift from the FSM; it is most likely that Simina simply does not see the difference between the ‘One China policy’ and the ‘One China principle’. What does represent a policy shift, however, is the FSM’s uncritical support for China’s favoured language. Simina describes wanting to deepen the ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ with China. Former President Panuelo, by contrast, spoke of the FSM-China ‘Great Friendship’, named after the Great Wall of China. The implication was that, yes, the FSM and PRC were friends, but there was also a definable border—i.e. economic and technical cooperation were on one side of the wall, and agreements in opposition to the rules-based order were on the other side, to remain unknowable.

While in office, President Peter Christian may have allowed Xi Jinping to call the FSM-China relationship a comprehensive strategic partnership; but he took the effort to ensure the FSM didn’t join the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, an operating arm of the Belt and Road Initiative.

But what ought to attract the most attention is, the China-FSM Joint Statement.<sup>4</sup> In the seventh item of the statement, the FSM says it will explore cooperation with China under the Global Security Initiative (GSI) to “address the impacts of traditional and non-traditional security challenges.” The GSI has similarities to the Common Development Vision, which was the proposed security agreement for the Pacific Islands that former FSM President Panuelo rejected in May 2022 after discussing what it would actually do. More concerning is item number ten in the joint statement, where the FSM endorses this text:

“The two sides reiterated their commitment to firmly upholding the international nuclear non-proliferation regime with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as the cornerstone, and call on relevant countries to fulfill international obligations and prudently handle issues such as the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water and cooperation on nuclear-powered submarines.”

Under this text, the FSM fails to call out China for having nuclear-powered and nuclear-weapons-equipped submarines patrolling the Pacific, but does unsubtly (albeit not by name) criticise the United States and Australia for AUKUS — a security

alliance that aims to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, and for the express purpose of deterring the nuclear-powered submarines China is already using. The FSM also signed on to criticisms of Japan for its discharge of ALPS-treated wastewater. China has long been focusing on this issue to smear Japan through fora such as the Pacific Islands Forum, preying on Pacific Islanders' sensitivity to nuclear issues with the aim of making the West appear as the transgressor of international norms.

Perhaps Simina doesn't know that China outputs orders of magnitudes more radioactive tritium than Japan, and that Japan's discharge of ALPS-treated wastewater isn't the same as nuclear-contaminated water. Perhaps Simina is similarly unaware that China patrols the Pacific with nuclear-weapons-equipped and nuclear-powered submarines. After all, in his first week as president, he shut down the FSM Information and Intelligence Service, which was mandated to provide him that sort of information. And perhaps Simina supports China's claims over Taiwan because he is unaware that the Chinese Communist Party, in fact, has never once controlled the island.

What's most plausible, however, is that such nuance and context do not matter when donor money is on the table. Now that the Compact of Free Association has been funded by the US Congress, the FSM might as well seek the benefits of China and other partners, and test the limits of its rhetoric.

There is nothing wrong with such an approach, if undertaken openly; even Henry Puna, the secretary-general of the Pacific Islands Forum, recently recommended that Pacific Islands ought to play large powers against each other for maximum benefits. The trouble lies in the FSM's apparent unwillingness to own up to what Simina apparently promised Xi. As of this writing on the evening of 18 April 2024, the FSM had yet to publicise this state visit to China in any format, leaving Chinese media and official readouts as the only public sources of information.

In short: it is profoundly difficult for the FSM to maintain its own security if, with one side of its mouth, it supports the international rules-based order it benefits

form and, with the other side of its mouth, it supports China's efforts to violently overtake it and reshape it in its image.

*Update: on the morning of 19 April 2024, approximately three hours after the publication of this article and the author's direct dissemination to FSM officials in the Office of the President, the FSM government published a press release on its Facebook Page, found here.<sup>5</sup> The release avoids discussing the China-FSM joint statement, makes no mention of nuclear issues, and reintroduces the One China policy language. The release also lists 10 memoranda of understanding reached during Simina's visit to China, including a relationship between China Media Group and the Office of the President's Division of Public Information. This marks the first time that the press secretary of the FSM would engage in a relationship with China's state media, or any foreign government's public information apparatus, for that matter. This is further noteworthy as it was Simina and former President Christian who, in September 2021, shut down the then-President Panuelo's proposed 'Freedom of Information Act', which would have provided FSM citizens the explicit legal right to information about and from their government. It was the legal opinion of the FSM Department of Justice at that time that FSM citizens categorically do not possess a right to information from their government.*

11 May 2024

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Mr Richard Clark is a former special Assistant and Press Secretary to the President of the Government of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and founder of both the Cybersecurity & Intelligence Bureau (CSIB), and the FSM Information & Intelligence Service (IIS).

## **Acknowledgement**

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## ENDNOTES

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