



India's Engagement in the South China Sea

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea is of immense strategic significance to India from politico-diplomatic, economic and security perspectives. As a rising power, India has expanded its strategic geography and, in this context, it formulated its Look East Policy, which was rechristened as the Act East Policy in 2014. Its current interests go beyond Southeast Asia into the wider Asia-Pacific region, including the South China Sea. From an economic perspective, more than 50% of India's trade is transported through the sea lanes of the South China Sea. India is also concerned about China's assertiveness here, in particular its aggressive posturing and militarisation of the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands and non-adherence to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). India has actively promoted the principles of international law and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. Further, the Indian Navy has maintained a regular presence in the South China Sea to protect India's economic and security interests, which includes the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation's (ONGC) offshore oil and gas exploration project in partnership with Vietnam.

KEYWORDS

India; South China Sea; strategic engagement; naval exercises; ONGC; ASEAN; Quad

Introduction

In the large maritime space encompassing the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea has emerged as an arena of competition among major powers, that is, the United States (US), China, India and Japan, who have enormous strategic interests in the region. Besides the strategic competition between the US and China, which has been extensively studied for over the decade, the South China Sea has also witnessed other rivalries between China and Japan and China and India. For China, the South China Sea is strategically significant and it needs to control it to become a global power. In March 2010, China identified the South China Sea as its core interest, on “par with Taiwan and Tibet”.¹ India's engagement in the South China Sea aims to balance China, especially as the border conflict between India and China has become more complicated in recent times.² India also considers the Indian Ocean and the South Asian region as its traditional sphere of influence and therefore, countering China's presence in this area becomes essential. Indeed, to fulfil its global role, India needs to promote a regional

role for itself, in which the Pacific in the east becomes a high priority. Further, there is a requirement to address the tensions with Pakistan, uncertainty in the Middle East, and the unstable security environment in post-Soviet space after the Gulf War in 1991 and Central Asian republics' catapult to independence.³

This article examines India's strategic interests in the South China Sea and its involvement through politico-diplomatic engagements and naval exercises with regional countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, and with the US and Japan. It also has to protect its energy interests as well as maintain the ONGC's offshore oil and gas exploration project with Vietnam. In addition, the article showcases the prospects and challenges for India's engagement in the South China Sea.

India's strategic interests in the South China Sea

India has clearly stated that it has "important political, economic, commercial and social interests in the Asia Pacific and has a stake in continued peace and stability in the region".⁴ Its strategic interests in the South China Sea can be gauged from the answer of V.K. Singh, Minister of State in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), to a question in the Rajya Sabha in 2017: "South China Sea is a major waterway and over US\$ 5 trillion trade passes through the sea lanes in this region. As per information available, over 55% of India's trade passes through South China Sea and Malacca Straits".⁵

In terms of security, the annual report of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) for 2003–2004 described India's security environment as being directly linked with Southeast Asia;⁶ and the subsequent annual reports have noted that: "... India's geographical area, strategic location, trade links and its EEZ connect its security environment directly with its extensive neighbourhood, particularly neighbouring countries and the regions of Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean".⁷

There is a possibility that, strategically, India wants to get involved in the South China Sea as China has been doing in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. "Any cooperation between India and America in the South China Sea is bound to benefit larger interests of India and help it counter China's 'string of pearls' strategy in the Indian Ocean",⁸ including the latter's increasing influence in South Asia, where India has a perceived sphere of influence in which it plays a pre-eminent economic, political and security role.⁹ Tridib Chakraborti and Mohor Chakraborty further emphasise:

... as China expands its political and economic influence in India's immediate neighbourhood over a string of sub-continental states including Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the LEP/AEP facilitates India's policy of containing China's footprints in its "extended" neighbourhood by rallying weight behind countries caught in the dispute over overlapping claims to sovereignty with Beijing.¹⁰

Robert Kaplan argues: "... China approaches the Indian Ocean as a land-locked power, seeking port access agreements with littoral countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Burma – thus bringing it into potential conflict with India".¹¹ Harsh Pant adds:

China deployed its Jin class submarines in 2008 at a submarine base near Sanya in the southern tip of Hainan Island in South China Sea, raising alarm in India as the base is

merely 1,200 nautical miles from the Malacca Strait. The base will be its closest access point to the Indian Ocean.¹²

China's actions, such as reclamation activities in some features, construction of military-related infrastructure, and positioning/installation of weapons in the Spratly since the end of 2013, have brought the threat closer to India.

From an economic point of view too, India acknowledges that Southeast Asia along with Central Asia, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean are strategic factors that impose increasingly larger responsibility on it.¹³ Therefore, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has integrated India's vision of the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean policy of "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) into an inclusive Indo-Pacific framework.¹⁴

The data released by the Indian government show that, in the fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, economies in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Northeast Asia and Americas accounted for 33.50% (excluding China) or 43.39% (including China) of India's total trade in value.¹⁵ As trade contributed to 40% of India's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019,¹⁶ securing seaborne trade through the South China Sea has assumed greater strategic significance for India.

In addition to threats of piracy, armed robbery and terrorism in the Indo-Pacific waters,¹⁷ there is the Chinese challenge which impacts on India's economic interests in the South China Sea. Further, India has a stake in the oil and gas exploration in the region and has been engaged in commercial energy transactions with Vietnam since the late 1980s. Its concerns also arise from the Chinese articulation of its "core interests", which includes South China Sea, as Beijing may expand to include the disputed areas in India's northern borders.¹⁸

Thus, the above-mentioned factors increasingly challenge the peace and stability in the region (South China Sea), which is of great significance to India.¹⁹

India's diplomatic engagement

India began to publicly challenge China after its warship, *INS Airavat*, received a warning message from the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) while sailing at a distance of 45 nautical miles from the Vietnamese coast in the South China Sea in July 2011. India officially articulated the view that it "supports freedom of navigation in international waters, including in the South China Sea, and the right of passage in accordance with accepted principles of international law"; further, it called all to respect these principles.²⁰

In his keynote address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue (2018), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that the South China Sea is a global common that required "freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law".²¹ Earlier, too, after the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) judgement on the Philippines–China case in 2016 – which rejected China's historically based sovereign claim in the South China Sea – India "noted the Award of Arbitral Tribunal" and supported "freedom of navigation and over flight, and unimpeded commerce, based on the principles of international law, as reflected notably in the UNCLOS".²²

India's involvement in the South China Sea has also been demonstrated through a number of India–ASEAN summit meetings. In the context of China becoming more

and more aggressive in the South China Sea, especially since the end of 2013 when it began reclamation, construction and militarisation of the islands and features in the sea, India and the ASEAN's views on the situation have aligned. Indeed, since 2016, India and ASEAN have openly shared common concerns about the South China Sea issue. For instance, the Chairman's Statement of the 14th ASEAN-India Summit, held in September 2016 in Laos PDR, "emphasized the importance of maintaining peace, security and stability, unimpeded commerce, freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea"; "underscored the importance for the states concerned to resolve disputes through peaceful means in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)"; and considered the 1982 UNCLOS as establishment of "the international legal order of seas and oceans".²³

In the next ASEAN-India Summit held in the Philippines in 2017, India and ASEAN shared the same view on the framework of a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea. The two sides "... urged the Parties to conclude a substantive and effective COC consistent with universally recognised principles of international law and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) at the earliest opportunity".²⁴ Rules-based order in the South China Sea continued to be underlined in the Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN-India Summit held in Singapore in November 2018. In the statement, India and ASEAN "... discussed the importance of promoting a rules-based order in the region, including through upholding international law such as the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea" and "reaffirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea".²⁵ The same viewpoint of India and ASEAN was reiterated in the 16th ASEAN-India Summit held in Thailand in 2019.²⁶

On the diplomatic front, India's strategic assessment of the South China Sea was strongly reflected at the 17th ASEAN-India Summit (virtual) in 2020. Besides continuing to affirm the importance of a rules-based order in the region and encouraging effective negotiations towards the early conclusion of an effective and substantive COC consistent with international law, India and ASEAN, for the first time, expressed their concerns over "recent developments, including land reclamations, activities and serious incidents, in the South China Sea, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions, and may undermine peace, security, and stability in the region".²⁷ Emphasising the importance of non-militarisation, India and ASEAN also reaffirmed the importance of upholding international law, particularly the 1982 UNCLOS, "which sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out".²⁸

In addition, within the Quad framework too, involving Australia-India-Japan-US, India aims to "check China's increasing efforts to expand military influence in the region".²⁹ During the first consultations of the Quad, India and its like-minded partners "discussed measures to ensure a free and open international order based on the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific", including "ensuring freedom of navigation and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific".³⁰ More recently, during consultations held in Tokyo in December 2020, the Quad countries exchanged views on issues related to China's strategic interests, such as the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Mekong sub-region.³¹

Joint naval exercises

In 2000, India made its presence felt in the South China Sea when Indian naval ships transited through it and announced exercises in the area. China perceived the Indian Navy's activities as a direct challenge³² since it considered the South China Sea along with Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang as core interests.³³ The Indian Navy's regular presence in the South China Sea, through visits to key ports of littoral countries, is meant as an affirmation of the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. These visits have been of concern to China:

... in every year since 2000, India's naval ships have paid friendship visits to some of the main ports of Vietnam, such as Dinh Vu (Northern province of Hai Phong), Tien Sa (Central province of Da Nang), Saigon (in Ho Chi Minh city), and Nha Trang (province of Khanh Hoa). The Indian navy was even reported to have been "perhaps the only foreign navy in recent times to have been given this privilege by the Vietnamese at a port other than Halong Bay, near Hanoi". The Indian naval ships' frequent visits to Hai Phong port, near Hanoi (Vietnam) signifies mutual understanding. An Indian government official opined, "the move will give India the key to a sustainable presence in the South China Sea".³⁴

Indian Navy ships have recently made friendship visits to ports surrounding the South China Sea in Cambodia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and the Philippines. Along with the visits, the Indian Navy has conducted bilateral exercises with regional navies "as a clear commitment to the security of the Southeast Asian littorals".³⁵ In May 2018, three Indian warships – Shivalik-class stealth multi-role frigate, *INS Sahyadri*, Deepak-class fleet oil tanker, *INS Shakti*, and anti-submarine Kamorta-class stealth corvette, *INS Kamorta* – and Vietnamese Navy held the first joint naval exercise in Tien Sa Port in the central province of Da Nang (Vietnam).³⁶ In April 2019, the India Navy (with warships *Kolkata* and *Shakti*) and Vietnamese Navy held a four-day maritime exercise off the strategic Cam Ranh Bay in the South China Sea to boost operational cooperation, including a harbour and a sea phase.³⁷ In December 2020, Indian warship, *INS Kiltan*, undertook a two-day "passage exercise" with the Vietnamese Navy in the South China Sea to boost maritime cooperation between the two countries; also, the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea was reaffirmed by the leaders of the two countries.³⁸

The navies of India and Singapore have been conducting joint drills, under the Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX), for a number of years. In order to counter common challenges in the South China Sea, these exercises have evolved from simple anti-submarine exercises to important annual exercises to enhance the interoperability of the two naval forces, including targeting and tactical exercises on surface as well as air scenarios.³⁹ With regard to Malaysia, after joint military exercise with Malaysian Armed Forces focused on counter-insurgency and counterterrorism in jungle terrain in May 2018, the navies of India and Malaysia undertook a three-day joint naval military exercise, named *Samudra Laksamana*, off the Malaysian port of Kota Kinabalu in the South China Sea⁴⁰ in September 2019. Before the joint naval drill with the Malaysian Navy, two Indian naval ships, *Sahyadri* and *Kiltan*, visited Sihanoukville Port of Cambodia on a five-day goodwill visit and conducted joint maritime exercises and sports-related activities with the Royal Cambodian Navy.⁴¹

India conducted its first naval exercise with Japan in 2012. Japan, on its part, has issues with China over both historical and island disputes in the East China Sea. It also has strategic interests in the South China Sea and faces the same challenges posed by China. The first Japan–India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX 12) was conducted in June 2012 in the Uraga Strait of Yokosuka.⁴²

In addition to bilateral exercises with Southeast Asian littoral countries, India's engagement in the South China Sea has become stronger by shifting the Malabar drills from the west to the east coast of India. It has also invited more like-minded partners to join, notably, Japan and Australia. The Malabar naval exercise, which began as a bilateral training event between India–US in 1992, has increased steadily in scope, complexity of operations and level of participation in successive editions.⁴³

From 2009 onwards, all Malabar exercises have increased in complexity to include surface and anti-submarine warfare, coordinated gunnery exercises, air defence, employment of aircraft and submarines, VBSS [visit, board, search and seizure] drills and other high-end manoeuvres for exigencies likely to be encountered at sea.⁴⁴

The increasing importance of the strategic position of the South China Sea is evident because since 2007, Malabar has been held alternately in the Bay of Bengal and the Western Pacific Ocean (including Japanese Sea, the Philippines Sea and in Guam), “in close proximity to a site fast evolving as a critical flash point in global affairs – South China Sea”.⁴⁵

India has also expanded its Malabar partnerships to include countries with interests in the South China Sea, along with those who are facing the same challenges posed by China's assertiveness in the region. After undertaking joint exercises with Japan and Australia in 2007, India invited Japan as a permanent member in 2015, whereas Australia was invited to become a permanent member of the exercises in April 2020.

An important step forward for India regarding its involvement in the South China Sea was that for the first time in history, the Indian Navy participated in multilateral exercises with the US, Australia, Japan (Quad countries) and the Philippines in May 2019. India deployed its destroyer, *INS Kolkata*, and tanker, *INS Shakti*, for exercises with the US guided missile destroyer, *USS William P. Lawrence*, Japan's helicopter carrier amphibious ships and a Philippine patrol vessel in the waterway claimed by China in the South China Sea.⁴⁶

ONGC as a strategic tool

From the energy perspective, India acknowledges the strategic importance of South China Sea:

On May 19, 1988, ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) signed a petroleum sharing contract with PetroVietnam for three blocks 06, 12E and 19 in Nam Con Son basin, about 370 km offshore of Vietnam ... The exploration efforts of OVL, along with British Petroleum and PetroVietnam, in South China Sea in 1992 and 1993, led to the discovery of the Lan Do and Lan Tay gas fields. The project, which has reserves of around 58 billion cubic meters, will yield about three billion cubic meters of gas a year.⁴⁷

In June 2006, the OVL began operation with 100% stake in two offshore exploration blocks, 127 and 128, in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China

Sea. The OVL left Block 127 after it failed to find any hydrocarbons there and continued exploration in Block 128.⁴⁸ In November 2018, India and Vietnam agreed to continue promoting bilateral investment in joint projects between PetroVietnam and OVL on the continental shelf and EEZ of Vietnam.⁴⁹ Obviously, OVL's continued exploration in the South China Sea is a clear and solid affirmation that Chinese claims in the South China Sea are unlawful. In fact, in 2012, Admiral D.K. Joshi, then Chief of the Indian Navy, while describing the South China Sea situation as "complex" due to China's increasing naval modernisation, affirmed that India would send forces to protect its economic interests there.⁵⁰

In other words, the OVL is India's strategic tool in the South China Sea. It is an important basis for India to ensure the presence of strategic forces, including the navy, to protect its legitimate interests as the OVL exploitation project is entirely within Vietnam's EEZ. The OVL's presence, in spite of Chinese objections, is an affirmation of India being seen as a responsible protector of international law. This is clearly demonstrated by India's indirect support for the PCA ruling (established under the Annex VII of UNCLOS) on the Philippines–China case in 2016, which judged that no features in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea could attain island entity as China had claimed. In addition to upholding international law, India and Vietnam, in their Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People (2020), have

... emphasized the legal framework set out by the UNCLOS within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out, and that UNCLOS is the basis for determining maritime entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and legitimate interests over maritime zones.⁵¹

Prospects and challenges

There are reasons to expect India's increasing engagement in the South China Sea, including India's growing involvement in the sea in the last decade, the pressure to counterbalance China's increasing influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, the Quad's commitment to protecting rules-based order in the region and ASEAN's efforts to encourage India to increase its engagement in the region.

After India publicised its support for international law in the South China Sea following the *INS Airavat* incident, especially after Prime Minister Modi's government upgraded the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy, India has been increasingly engaged in security issues in the Asia-Pacific, including the South China Sea. Indian warships have appeared more often in the east seas, and bilateral naval exercises with several Southeast Asian littoral countries have been accelerated since 2018. For the first time in 2019, India participated in multilateral naval exercises in the South China Sea with the Quad members and the Philippines, and this pattern is likely to continue in the future. By all counts, the shifting of Malabar naval exercises to the east also seems irreversible. It India is no longer hesitant to challenge China in the South China Sea by conducting joint naval exercises with the latter's competitors in the sea. The Indian Navy, for the first time, conducted a bilateral joint naval exercise with an ally of the US, the Philippines, in the South China Sea, in August 2021.⁵² The Indian Navy, along with the navies of the US, Japan and the Philippines, had conducted joint naval exercises in the South China Sea in May 2019.⁵³ The Indian Navy

has also conducted several bilateral joint exercises with its Vietnamese counterpart⁵⁴ in the region.

China, under Xi Jinping, has increased its influence in most South Asian countries. Sri Lanka and Maldives are increasingly economically dependent on China. Nepal, under Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, has turned hostile towards India, primarily due to support from China. Pakistan, meanwhile, remains an all-weather ally of China. With Chinese naval bases in Gwadar in Pakistan and in Djibouti, and militarisation of the artificial features in the Spratlys in the South China Sea, Chinese warships and seismic survey ships have started making regular visits in the Indian Ocean. As a result, India is facing numerous strategic challenges in the Indian Ocean (primary in the area of security interest) and in its immediate neighbourhood. In this context, increasing its strategic presence in the South China Sea is a suitable and relevant option for India.

After the revival of Quad in 2017 under US President Donald Trump, the first consultations were held in the Philippines. The rules-based order, including freedom of navigation and overflight, and unimpeded commerce in accordance with international laws were deliberated during the meeting. As mentioned earlier, the South China Sea was also discussed during Quad consultations held in Tokyo in December 2020. All Quad members now participate in India's Malabar exercises; and the Quad countries conducted their first drills in the South China Sea in May 2019. Going forward, the possibility of institutionalisation of the Quad, from consultations to the summit level, gives hope to its future, especially since its consultation meetings (held the first time in 2017) were upgraded to a virtual summit held March 2021 and the first-ever in-person leaders' summit held in September 2021 at the White House. The collective activities of Quad will secure India's increasing engagement in the South China Sea in the years to come.

India's presence in the South China Sea could be further strengthened through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which "envisages ASEAN Centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region".⁵⁵ In their statement at the summit in 2020, India and ASEAN announced "shared commitment to maintaining the ASEAN Centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms in the evolving regional architecture".⁵⁶ The Quad has also "reaffirmed the strong support for ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-led regional architecture".⁵⁷ The ASEAN's centrality is now acknowledged by the major powers, including India. For its parts, India also puts ASEAN at the centre of its Look East/Act East Policy.

Besides ASEAN as a bloc, some maritime partners have encouraged India to increase its naval presence in the South China Sea. India's Malabar exercises were undertaken in the Philippine Sea in 2007, 2016 and 2018. Since 2018, India and Vietnam have conducted annual joint naval exercises. Malaysia, for the first time, had a joint drill with India in the South China Sea in 2019. Cambodia, one of the closest friends of China in Southeast Asia, also undertook a joint naval exercise with India in 2019.

While there are bright prospects for India, there are also challenges awaiting India's strategic involvement in the South China Sea. The first concern is to determine what are India's interests in the South China Sea. Although the South China Sea has immense economic and security significance for India, the sea has been categorised as a secondary area of security interest.⁵⁸ In other word, the South China Sea region is not among the highest security priorities for India. Therefore, this can potentially lead to the deduction that there is uncertainty about India's security commitment to the region.

Second, it cannot be denied that China has an important role in India's foreign trade. For instance, in the fiscal year 2017–2018, it accounted for 11.66% of India's total trade in value.⁵⁹ In terms of power correlation, India still lags behind China in terms of economic and military capability. India's role in Quad is still a question when "the Quad is poised to become openly anti-China"⁶⁰ while India remains committed to the principles and values of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).⁶¹ As a result, suspicions about India's limited involvement in the South China Sea persist.

The third hurdle could come from Quad's inconsistency in publicising a common viewpoint during the consultations. It cannot be denied that the Quad is becoming a formidable force that can challenge China's ambitions in the South China Sea. However, the inconsistency between members when disclosing information about the consultations creates doubts regarding the Quad's common goals. For example, during the consultations in December 2020, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the US Department of State publicised the Quad discussion on hotspots such as North Korea and the South China Sea, diplomatic agencies of India and Australia did not name those particular issues. India has stepped up its engagements in the South China Sea, which has also seen increased commitments side-by-side by the US⁶² However, since the defence arrangement between the US, Australia and the United Kingdom (UK), known as AUKUS, was announced in September 2021, there could be some disappointment, especially if the US prioritises the AUKUS over the Quad.

Last but not the least, ASEAN has recently shared common views with India on the South China Sea and some countries, such as Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam, have joined Indian naval exercises in the South China Sea. However, ASEAN itself has not been able to agree on how to deal with China on sensitive issues, including the South China Sea. Thus, ASEAN's ability to openly welcome the involvement of other major powers in the South China Sea issue, including India, is really limited.

Conclusion

Though the South China Sea is only categorised as a secondary area of security interest, it has strategic significance for India. The South China Sea is the region where a large amount of Indian trade passes through every year. It is also an area where India can increase its influence in order to balance China's involvement in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, which India considers a primary area of security interest and its traditional sphere of influence.

From the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially since the second decade, India has been strategically engaged in the South China Sea through diplomatic channels and naval exercises; also, it has maintained OVL operations. India has actively voiced support for international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS, in the South China Sea. India has also chosen ASEAN as an important channel to share its views, on the one hand, and create a collective unity to support international law in the South China Sea disputes, on the other. It has done so by adding the South China Sea issue and sharing common views on peacefully settling the dispute in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS, in their chairman's statements of ASEAN-India summits, since the 14th ASEAN-India Summit held in Laos PDR in September 2016.

It has indirectly supported PCA rulings when considering UNCLOS as the basis for determining maritime entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and legitimate interests over maritime zones through the 2020 ASEAN–India Summit. Through bilateral naval exercises with several South China Sea countries, multilateral framework of Quad and, especially, the strategic shift of Malabar exercises from the west to the east, India has actually enhanced its engagement in the South China Sea. Maintaining the ONGC’s presence in the South China Sea is a strategic tool for the Indian Navy to have a regular and legal presence in the sea.

Despite the advantages of India’s increasing involvement in the region, including some ASEAN countries’ interest in India’s role in maintaining ASEAN centrality and Quad’s regular operations, there are challenges too. The limitation of India’s engagement in the South China Sea, the inadequacy of India’s power over China, and ASEAN’s cleavage in the disputes are issues that, in coming years, will impact India’s involvement in the South China Sea.

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