

---

## India's Strategic Interests and Influence in the South China Sea: Navigating Regional Power Dynamics

**Debajit Boruah**

Research Scholar

Dept. of International Relations, Sikkim University, Sikkim

boruahdebajit2015@gmail.com

---

### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

---

#### Keywords:

*South China Sea, Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics, Diplomacy and Strategic Influence*

---

### ABSTRACT

The South China Sea (SCS) is a vital area in global geopolitical landscape due to its strategic position, immense natural resources and participation of key players through multiple strategic power-projections. Despite its distance from India, the South China Sea plays a key part in India's geopolitical blueprint, specifically under the framework of India's "Act East" policy and its vast Indo-Pacific strategy. This study analyses India's strategic goals in the South China Sea, emphasizing the political, economic and security dimensions. It also examines the intricate power relationships between China, the US and India, and how India approaches these issues to safeguard its interests and advance regional security. India's efforts to balance strength and influence in the Indo-Pacific region are highlighted by its involvement in the South China Sea. The study's overall analysis of India's strategic position in the South China Sea emphasizes the importance of this role for India's Indo-Pacific strategy and "Act East" policy.

---

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14852707>

---

**Introduction**

The South China Sea is a vast marginal sea located in the western Pacific Ocean and become a hotspot for geopolitical tension in the twenty first century. It is bordered by several Southeast Asian nations including China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei and Indonesia. Geographically, it stretches from the Strait of Malacca in the southwest to the Taiwan Strait in the northeast. It covers an area of approximately 3.5 million square kilometers (Beckman, 2019). The sea is characterized by numerous islands, atolls, reefs and shoals. The most notable of which are the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands and the Scarborough Shoal.

The following map shows the South China Sea and its territorial claims-

**Map no. 1.1: The South China Sea and its territorial claims**



*Source: Global Research House*

Along with its vast oil, gas and fishery deposits, it is an important marine route for international trade (ibid). With its rapidly expanding economy and rising global footprint, India has both possibilities and problems in the South China Sea (SCS). India's larger Indo-Pacific policy, which seeks to offset China's increasing aggressiveness and expand its influence, depends heavily on this area..

Indian engagement in the South China Sea is impacted by a variety of political, security and economic considerations. India's energy security and marine trade routes depend on the South China Sea economically. India's maritime interests and the stability of the area as a whole are at stake due to the



region's volatility. India, which has a complicated relationship with China, seeks to balance its diplomatic efforts between establishing its presence and avoiding open conflict.

### **The Geopolitical Significance of the South China Sea**

The South China Sea possesses considerable geopolitical importance, primarily because of its role as a crucial maritime route connecting the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. It serves as a critical channel for international trade. Roughly one-third of global shipping transits through the South China Sea, which makes it an essential route for the transportation of energy supplies and goods. Therefore, for India, which is deeply reliant on maritime trade, the security and stability of the South China Sea is of utmost importance. The South China Sea is a vital maritime passage that connects the Indian and Pacific oceans, which gives it significant geopolitical significance. It is an essential route for global commerce. The South China Sea is a vital route for the transfer of commodities and energy supplies, since it is carried by around one-third of all shipping worldwide. Therefore, the security and stability of the South China Sea are crucial for India, a country that depends heavily on marine trade.

Beyond its strategic location, the South China Sea is also rich in natural resources. The region is believed to contain substantial reserves of oil and natural gas, which are key to the energy security of many nations, including India (Kapoor, 2021). Additionally, the South China Sea's plentiful fishery resources contribute significantly to the economies of the surrounding countries. Disputes over control of these resources have led to tensions among several countries, including China and its littoral states (Smith, 2020).

Various significant players from across the world are involved in the complex power dynamics in the South China Sea. Regional actors and the international community are concerned by China's forceful measures, which include the construction of artificial islands and the militarization of specific regions (ibid). One major player in the Indo-Pacific, the United States, has been heavily involved in the area. It has been contesting China's maritime claims using freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). The South China Sea is becoming a possible war hotspot with major ramifications for regional and international security as a result of these activities.

### **India's South China Sea Strategic Interests**



India's interest in the South China Sea is diverse. It encompasses economic, security and diplomatic considerations. Economically, the South China Sea is essential for India's trade, with a substantial portion of its exports and energy imports passing through this region. Any disruption in the South China Sea could have serious repercussions for India's economy, particularly in terms of energy security (Chaudhuri, 2020). India has also made investments in oil and gas exploration within the region. With ONGC Videsh, the overseas arm of India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), India is participating in joint ventures with Vietnamese firms to explore hydrocarbon resources in the SCS (Gupta, 2021).

Another important component of India's interests in the South China Sea is security. India's marine security is seriously threatened by the region's instability and the potential of war. As a result, through cooperative drills, maritime patrols and strategic alliances with neighboring nations, India's naval policy has become more and more concentrated on enhancing its presence in the Indo-Pacific, notably the South China Sea (Pant, 2020). India's commitment to defending its maritime interests and promoting regional security is demonstrated by the Indian Navy's participation in exercises like the Malabar naval exercise alongside the US and Japan.

Diplomatically, India faces the challenge of balancing its relationship with China while supporting the sovereignty claims of Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea. India has consistently supported the principles of freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and the peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea in accordance with international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Mohan, 2018). India's participation in multilateral forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) reflects its strategy of maintaining a stable and balanced regional order in the Indo-Pacific (Singh, 2022).

### **Power Dynamics and India's Role**

The power dynamic in the South China Sea is heavily influenced by the strategic rivalry between China and the United States, with India playing an increasingly significant role in the region. India's relationship with China is marked by both cooperation and competition, with historical and current tensions shaping their interactions (Joshi, 2019). The ongoing border disputes between India and China,



particularly the recent standoffs in the Ladakh region, have further complicated bilateral relationship between both the countries influencing India's stance on issues such as the South China Sea.

As a key component of the Indo-Pacific, the South China Sea has been a focal point of this cooperation, with both countries highlighting the importance of upholding international law and resisting actions that threaten regional stability. India and the United States have strengthened their strategic partnership in recent years, especially in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The alignment of interests between the two countries in promoting a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific has led to closer cooperation in areas like defence, trade and maritime security (Rehman, 2020).

Beyond its bilateral and global engagements, India has also worked to strengthen regional security and stability through naval diplomacy and capacity-building projects. Improving marine domain awareness and securing sea lines of communication are the goals of the Indian Navy's expanding involvement in the Indo-Pacific, which includes the South China Sea (Mukherjee, 2021). Additionally, India is working to strengthen regional capabilities by giving Southeast Asian countries equipment and training. It also shows that it is dedicated to keeping the marine environment in the area safe and stable (Hussain, 2018).

## Conclusion

A number of factors, including the region's importance as a major maritime trade route, its wealth of natural resources, and the intricate power dynamics between major players like China, India, and the United States, are driving India's strategic interests in the South China Sea. As India continues to grow as a regional power, its involvement in the South China Sea is expected to increase, reflecting its broader Indo-Pacific strategy and its efforts to balance power and influence in the region.

In the years ahead, China's aggressiveness, the changing U.S.-China competition, and the interests of Southeast Asian countries will provide challenges for India's strategy in the South China Sea. India can make a significant contribution to maintaining a stable and rules-based order in the South China Sea by using its strategic alliances, improving its naval capabilities, and participating in global diplomacy. India's interest in the South China Sea will continue to be a key component of its foreign policy and regional strategy as the Indo-Pacific geopolitical environment changes.

## References



- Beckman, R. (2019). The South China Sea: Maritime trade routes and strategic significance. *Journal of Maritime Affairs*, 12(2), 145-160.
- Chaudhuri, S. (2020). India's maritime strategy and the South China Sea. *Indian Ocean Studies*, 15(1), 78-92.
- Gupta, A. (2021). India's energy security and the South China Sea. *Energy Policy and Security*, 18(3), 199-213.
- Hussain, A. (2018). Multilateralism and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. *Global Security Review*, 9(4), 225-240.
- Joshi, M. (2019). India-China relations and the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific. *Asian Strategic Review*, 17(2), 113-129.
- Kapoor, R. (2021). Natural resources and the South China Sea: India's economic interests. *Journal of Resource Management*, 22(4), 301-316.
- Mohan, C. R. (2018). Diplomacy and strategy in the South China Sea: India's balancing act. *International Relations Quarterly*, 10(3), 164-180.
- Mukherjee, R. (2021). Naval diplomacy and India's role in the Indo-Pacific. *Maritime Affairs*, 16(1), 47-62.
- Pant, H. V. (2020). India's naval strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Balancing power and interests. *Strategic Studies Journal*, 28(1), 87-102.
- Rajagopalan, R. (2019). Security dynamics in the South China Sea: Implications for India. *Journal of Asian Security*, 13(2), 142-158.
- Rehman, I. (2020). *The Indo-Pacific and India-U.S. strategic cooperation*. *Global Strategic Review*, 12(1), 101-116.
- Roy-Chaudhury, R. (2020). India and China: Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. *Indian Defence Journal*, 14(3), 45-63.
- Singh, A. (2022). India's diplomatic strategy in the South China Sea. *Journal of International Relations*, 31(1), 201-218.
- Smith, J. (2020). China's assertiveness in the South China Sea: A geopolitical analysis. *Journal of Asian Geopolitics*, 11(2), 89-104.