



RCAS Commentary

India's Growing Involvement in the South China Sea Disputes

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About RCAS

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RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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India's Growing Involvement in the South China Sea Disputes

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India's increasing involvement in the South China Sea under Prime Minister Narendra Modi-including India's offer to provide helicopters to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) amidst the rising tensions between Manila and Beijing-has raised China's concerns. Beijing is wondering whether India can be a new "troublemaker"-a label generally applied to the United States-in the South China Sea.



▲ Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar (center) attends the 4th India-Philippines Joint Commission, Nov. 6, 2020. (The Diplomat)

India has indeed enhanced its military and diplomatic engagement with claimant states such as the Philippines and Vietnam, and it's likely that India will further expand its presence in the South China Sea and thus impose rising pressures on China. But it is difficult to image India becoming a major player in the South China Sea disputes in the short term.

India's Increasing Involvement

Through expanding defense cooperation with claimant states and changing its previous “neutral” stance on the 2016 arbitral tribunal award on the South China Sea, India has greatly deepened its involvement in the disputes under Modi.

In May 2019, the Indian Navy, for the first time, conducted joint exercises with the U.S., Japanese, and Philippine navies in the South China Sea. One year later, the Indian Navy held military exercises with the navies of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Australia, and Indonesia in August 2021. In May 2023, India for the first time sent warships to participate in a two-day joint exercise with the navies of seven ASEAN states in the South China Sea.

India has also significantly increased its military sales and assistance to the Philippines and Vietnam. In January 2022, India reached a deal with the Philippines for the export of 100 BrahMos supersonic anti-ship missiles. In June 2023, Vietnam became the first country to receive a fully operational light missile frigate from India.

This month, as tensions spiked between China and the Philippines over confrontations in the South China Sea, India announced that it would offer the Philippines at least seven helicopters that would be used for the rescue and humanitarian efforts of the PCG during natural disasters. While the primary focus is on boosting search and rescue capabilities, Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was quick to point out that the helicopters would be “a big contribution for the PCG’s maritime operations” in general.

In July 2016, after the arbitral tribunal announced its ruling in a case brought by the Philippines regarding China’s behavior and claims in the South China Sea, India said only that it took note of the award. This was likely meant to avoid taking sides, as China has consistently rejected the award as “illegal” and refused to recognize the tribunal’s standing.

However, at the India-Philippines Foreign Ministers' Meeting held at the end of June this year, India abandoned its previously cautious stance. Instead, India and the Philippines underlined the need for peaceful settlement of disputes and for adherence to international law, especially UNCLOS and the arbitral award, in the joint statement. This is the first time that India has proposed abiding by the award, indicating a significant shift in India's "neutral" stance on South China Sea disputes.

The Reasons for the Shift

Strategic interests, freedom of navigation, and oil and gas resources are the three factors determining India's expanded involvement in the South China sea. Geographically, Southeast Asia serves as a backyard for India and a gateway to the Indian Ocean. Given the rising tensions in the South China Sea, India is worried that the tensions might escalate into wars that would threaten its dominance in the Indian Ocean. As a result, India has attempted to increase its presence in the South China Sea to prevent tensions from spilling into the Indian Ocean, the traditional sphere of influence for India.

Additionally, India perceives the South China Sea as a foothold to push forward Modi's "Act East Policy" and leverage to balance China's expansions in the Indian Ocean and its offensives along the Sino-Indian border.

As half of its foreign trade passes through the Malacca Strait, free and secure navigation in the South China Sea is the key to India's trade security. Any conflicts in the South China Sea could threaten the free navigation in the world's busiest maritime transportation line and thus jeopardize India's trade ties with the Southeast Asian states as well as its economic security. This is another reason why India intervened in the South China Sea issue, although it has no maritime disputes with China or ASEAN countries.

India has conducted oil and gas exploration with Vietnam in the South China Sea since the early 2000s, although it has been criticized by China for doing so. India's motivations for oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea are twofold: First, to diversify its sources of oil imports, and second, to reinforce its military presence in the South China Sea in the name of energy cooperation.

Externally, the United States is a “pull factor” that encourages India to become involved in South China Sea disputes. New Delhi and Washington have many common interests. Both are pillars of the Quad, which aims to contain China's rise. Both are concerned about China's dominance in the South China Sea, and both have similar positions on the South China Sea disputes.

Moreover, the strategic confrontation between China and the United States and the border tensions between China and India provide a significant opportunity for a closer relationship between India and the U.S. Hence, the United States' efforts to promote cooperation with India in the South China Sea can be seen as mutually beneficial. Thus U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink said in June 2023 that the United States and India would establish a greater partnership on the South China Sea issue.

Future Trends

In the near future, India's presence in the South China Sea will be further expanded in three ways. First, due to fast-growing trade and investment connections and defense cooperation with the ASEAN states, India would have a stronger motivation to embolden its regional ambitions through the South China Sea issue. This would complicate and “internationalize” the South China Sea disputes.

Second, India would continue to offset China's advantages in the Sino-Indian border by manipulating the South China Sea issue. In fact, India has increased its involvement in the South China Sea sharply since the May 2020 clashes with China in Galwan Valley. Given the fragile peace in the border and the cool bilateral relationship, India is likely to utilize the South China Sea issue to restrain China's strengths in the border.

Third, India would receive help from the United States to intervene in South China Sea disputes. Actually, the U.S. has pressured India to become involved in the South China Sea issue through the Quad on one side and induced India's interference in South China Sea disputes by supporting India in border disputes with China on the other side. As there will be ongoing confrontation between China and the United States as well as cool relations between China and India in the next few years, India would not hesitate to seize the opportunity to gain benefits from Washington and simultaneously disrupt China's rise through cooperating with the U.S. on the South China Sea issue.

To conclude, India is likely to increase its involvement in the South China Sea by various means, which will cause some alarm in China. However, there are limits on India's influence in the disputes. Unlike the United States, India lacks strong alliances and a military presence in the South China Sea, which will necessarily limit its direct involvement. Moreover, the top priority of Indian leaders and generals is maintaining dominance over the Indian Ocean, rather than replacing China in the South China Sea.

Finally, even though India has increasingly stood with the Philippines and the United States in the South China Sea disputes, it has largely avoided provoking China. India's greater cooperation with the U.S. on the South China Sea issue would be restricted by New Delhi's traditional nonaligned posture and high strategic autonomy.

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Nian Peng is the Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong. He holds a Ph.D in Government and International Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. His main research interests are in the areas of China-Southeast/South Asia relations, Belt and Road Initiative(BRI) and maritime security of the Indo-Pacific. He authored/edited four books-*Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Springer Nature, 2022), *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Springer Nature, 2021), *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic* (Springer Nature, 2021), *International Pressures, Strategic Preference, and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988* (Springer Nature, 2020). His refereed articles have been notably published in *Ocean Development and International Law*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asian Affairs*, etc. He also contributes his perspectives to many think tanks and various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *East Asian Forum* in Australia, *The Diplomat* in the USA, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *Global Times*, *CGTN*, *World Affairs* in China.