

South China sea crisis: India and China anxious bilateral relations With ASEAN

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Abstract: The South China Sea (SCS) conflict has once again become the epicenter of the East Asian security dispute. Today the SCS is not only the most critical flashpoint in the East Asian region, it is also a litmus test of China's relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states, being a conflict embedded in, and a symptom of, the overarching relations. The research inquiries into New Delhi's current approaches to Maritime Asia regional security in general and the South China Sea from the perspective of an Indian Act East Policy operating in the East Asian security super complex.

key words: South China sea, India, China, Bilateral relationship, Priorities, steadiness

Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) conflict has once again become the epicenter of the East Asian security debate. Today the SCS is not only the most critical flashpoint in the East Asian region, it is also a litmus test of China's relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states, being a conflict embedded in, and a manifestation of, the overarching relations. Not only is it the situation most likely to escalate into major armed conflict between China and its

Southeast Asian neighbors, but also there is a risk that it will be the cause of a military confrontation between China and the United States. This is because during recent years a more aggressive Chinese posturing has coincided with a US.¹

Strategic “pivot to Asia.”² In China, the US pivot is widely seen as the linchpin of the disputes in the SCS, and as an attempt to collude with the other states making claims there against China; this forces China to react accordingly. Outside China the opposite view dominates, the perception being that China’s more assertive policy is the main source of the increased tensions in the SCS.³ Despite the recent increased attention, the current situation in the SCS is by no means a new one. After the end of the Cold War the SCS was characterized as Asia’s next flashpoint; a future of perpetual conflict dominated the predictions.⁴ The study relies partly on empirical findings and theoretical insights from security studies, in particular the concepts of security maximizer developed by defensive realists, as well as the South China Sea as a core security area in the Southeast Asian security sub complex (parcel in turn of the East Asian Regional Security Complex—RSC). The study relies partly on empirical findings and theoretical insights from security studies, in particular the concepts of security maximize developed by defensive realists, as well as the South China Sea as a core security area in the Southeast Asian security sub complex (parcel in turn of the East Asian Regional Security Complex—RSC). First, it identifies salient features in the evolution of the AEP since its inception through its successive phases of engagement. India’s LEP/AEP evolution highlights the increasing Indian interest with both the IOR countries and Southeast Asia from trade and investment into the political and security realm, revealing in turn a new stage of cooperation with Vietnam, the United States and Japan. Moreover, by placing the freedom of navigation as the most relevant security concern within its own narrative, the next section inquiries into the extent of India’s response to the most recent Chinese activities in the South China Sea, both in terms of diplomacy and naval strategy. The research argues that the relationship between India and China still embraces relevant security priorities for India beyond the South China Sea that lead both countries into the path of bilateral cooperation. This has reduced to some extent India’s incentives, as a security maximizer, to further contain China economically or militarily. As it will be developed, India’s main security concern in this maritime area is the guarantee of freedom of navigation, which might not necessarily involve a military containment in tandem with the United States and Japan. Moreover, current Indian maritime policies have yet to be adjusted to fully embrace a containment strategy against China through

deterrence naval power projection and a clear strategy beyond the trilateral Malabar Exercise or joint exercises with Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) navies.⁵

South China Sea Disputes: Recent Developments China's Growing Assertiveness

Xi Jinping were inclined to revert to the longstanding policy articulated by Deng Xiaoping of “setting aside dispute and pursuing joint development,” there was little hint of it as he began a 10-year stint as head of state, Communist Party leader and commander-in-chief. Addressing the People's National Assembly in mid-March, Xi rallied delegates around the goal of achieving “the great renaissance of the Chinese nation and the Chinese dream” . He also called for the People's Liberation Army to strengthen its ability to “win battles,” very likely an allusion to possible conflict in China's near seas. More to the point, Xi has continued to the pre-existing Chinese policy of using a three-tiered, comprehensive maritime force comprising of civilian fishing vessels, civilian law-enforcement ships, and warships to express China's growing claims to maritime rights and territory. Beneath Xi's calm demeanour is a tough man who should not be underestimated. His father fought with Mao against the Imperial Japanese Army. To be sure, China under Xi is elevating veteran diplomats and still focusing on economic development and trade, especially in East Asia. But some of China's neighbors are concerned about Xi's sharp-edged neighborhood policy. “The Chinese,” a Singaporean official told author Robert Kaplan, “charm you when they want to charm you, and squeeze you when they want to squeeze you, and they do its schematically. Maritime Disputes Are Spilling Over and Deepening Despite the different disputes in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, rising tensions in one have affected the other. What appeared to begin with growing Chinese-Vietnamese tensions over the Parcel Islands in the South China Sea in 2009 reverberated throughout all of East Asia by July 2010, when Hanoi hosted the 27-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum . It was there that the then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the United States now considered conflict resolution in the South China Sea a leading diplomatic priority. Similarly, when a Chinese fishing trawler rammed a Japanese Coast Guard ship in September 2010, East Asian countries took note, creating tensions leading up to the 2011 ASEAN Regional Forum. The standoff between Chinese and Filipino ships near Scarborough Reef in the South China Sea in 2012 led to Chinese de facto control of those land features and their surrounding waters, which was quickly followed by a heightened state of confrontation between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in

the East China Sea.³ In May 2013, following rising tensions in the East China Sea, the Philippines and Taiwan became embroiled in tension over the tragic shooting of a Taiwanese fisherman by the Philippine Coast Guard; even as both sides were continuing to debate.⁶

India–China anxious bilateral relationship

Amid this new geopolitical environment in Southeast Asian sub complex, continues to reflect a pattern of both cooperation and competition. Among the most relevant centrifugal factors hindering cooperation between India and China are border issues—including the final delimitation of Aksai Chin, Jammu, Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh—, as well as Chinese repeated blocking of India’s move to sanction Jaish e-Muhammed chief, Masood Azhar, as a terrorist at the U.N. Security Council (Dasguptal 2017).⁷ Other areas of tension include cyber piracy (ZeeNews 2015),⁸ China’s close relationship with neighbouring Myanmar and with rival Pakistan (where the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, a rail and road connectivity project to Europe, will start in the near future), the uncertain nature of the brand new Chinese naval base in Djibouti and proposals to build another in Salalah, Oman, the Chinese refusal in 2016 to accept India into the Nuclear Supply Group, as well as recent Chinese approaches and economic deals with some IOR countries as part of its own Maritime Silk Route Initiative. In the Indian Ocean, the so-called ‘string of pearls’ theory is a major concern for India. The term was coined in 2005 by Booz Allen Hamilton, a consulting firm, which identified a pattern of Chinese naval presence throughout the IOR. According to Booz Allen Hamilton, China has been establishing a civilian maritime infrastructure along the South China Sea (Hainan, the Paracels and the Spratlys) and in littoral ports along friendly states including Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, Kenia and recently Djibouti. Even for the skeptics of the theory (Baker 2015)⁹ the building of a string of pearls is important because China is building its One Belt-One Road and Maritime Silk Route Initiative strategies, therefore remaining particularly powerful in Indian security mindset, mainly for the IOR (Dabas 2017).¹⁰ At the South Asian RSC, particularly relevant has become for India the Chinese presence into the IOR, where Beijing has been deepening economic presence, trade and investment, as well as naval activities. Chinese naval presence also goes back a decade with anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008. Now, Chinese naval patrols have already demonstrated blue water capabilities for extended periods, probably in anticipation for future deployments of surface vessels and new Shang and Jiang class

submarines in IOR waters (Ghosh 2015).¹¹ Here, India's response, as the dominant player in the South Asian RSC, has precisely been fostering good relations with SEA states—all surrounding China, that is, recasting the LEP as AEP (Dutta 2017).¹² New Delhi is, as Figure 4 shows, a sustained increase in total bilateral trade—USD\$ 70 billion for 2014 (Jha & Singh 2016: xvi),¹³ even though India still shoulders a sizable trade deficit (USD\$ 39 billion in 2014). Figure 5 highlights China's importance, as only ASEAN as a bloc surpasses Beijing in India's bilateral trade. The growth of bilateral trade is particularly important for India as China currently stands as its main trading partner; yet for China, this bilateral trade still represents a relatively small part of its overall trade, particularly in comparison with exchanges with Southeast Asian countries where total exchanges rose from \$7.9 billion in 1991 to a staggering \$472 billion in 2015, with the hope of reaching \$1 trillion by 2020 (PRC State Council 2016).¹⁴ Among other relevant incentives in the India–China relationship are common interests in developing regional economic integration—such as concluding the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and shared interests in strengthening the Asian community building process mainly through the EAS; common interest in global governance and multilateralism, including climate change (Mehrotra 2012),¹⁵ and finally, common desire to strengthen the international financial order through alternative, yet complementary new financial mechanisms such as the AIIB, BRICS's New Development Bank and the Contingence Reserve Arrangement. As Uma Purushothaman points out, India's interaction in these China-driven mechanisms helps reduce friction and mutual suspicion (Purushothaman 2015).¹⁶ Since the start of India's LEP, there has been interest from both sides to improve relations: from the official high-level visits to China in 1992 and 1993, to the upgrading of their partnership into a strategic one 10 years later, as well as by fostering cooperation within the EAS since 2005. Since 2014, India and China have tried to in put vigor into the bilateral relationship through the so-called Strategic and Cooperative Partnership under the Panchsheel Treaty's five principles of coexistence (Ramachandran & Krishnan 2014),¹⁷ starting with the signing of bilateral agreements in 2014 on several areas (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2014, 2014a).¹⁸ Interest between both countries to further develop links have been manifest also on the occasion of PM Modi's China visit in May 2015 and statements by Chinese President Xi Jinping over China's good will and cooperation with India (The New York Times 2015). It is interesting to note, however, that recent actions come at roughly the same time as China is pushing its maritime consolidation in the South China Sea, including the upgrade of islands in the Spritely, and the

dismissal of the 2016 PCA ruling. It is most likely due to this apparent contradiction and resulting suspicion from India over Chinese intentions that the securitization speech of the freedom of navigation has entered the top of the Indian foreign policy and maritime security agenda.¹⁹

India as a Major Power: In quest of Priorities and steadiness with South China sea

The current AEP has allowed India to successfully penetrate the East Asian RSC, and particularly the Southeast Asian sub complex, through closer partnerships, and has enabled India to better participate as a rule shaper in the Asia Pacific. Yet New Delhi's responses to the recent events in the South China Sea are constrained first by the fundamental objectives of a security maximizer among them avoiding escalations that might have impact to its security, by the cost-benefit rationale in the economic realm with its partners mainly China, and second, by a current naval policy whose strategy is yet to be fully Indo-Pacific in nature. India's aspiration to become a major power in the East Asian RSC, as embedded in its AEP, no doubt needs a correlation with an upgrading in its naval strategy to fully address the importance of the South China Sea for its economic, mainly energy security. India has reacted to the upgrading of Chinese military installations both in the Paracels and the Spratlys, as well as the Philippines-led 2016 PCA award against China, largely through closer political consultations and convergence of interest with several states, mainly Vietnam in Southeast Asia and with the United States and Japan. This convergence is evident in terms of louder calls over guarantees of freedom of navigation and overflight in the area, as well as respect for the rule of law, mainly stipulations enshrined in the Law of the Sea and decisions emanated from the PCA ruling. And yet, compared with the South China Sea integral part of the Asian Super complex and yet belonging to a distinctive East Asian RSC under a strong Chinese power projection, India's attention rather continues to be paid more on the IOR and its maritime security (Berlin 2010)²⁰ as part of its own South Asian RSC. Security threats there, spanning from terrorism to border instability, and in the IOR, including the recent Chinese economic and naval advances continues to dominate India's policy circles' mindset, as Singh (2016)²¹ recognizes. The IOR will continue to be of paramount importance in comparison with an upgraded Indian presence, either civil or naval, into the South China Sea. Within India's approach to its maritime security, the IOR will remain a priority under Modi's current strategy, such as the recently announced Vision SAGAR, Security and Growth for All in the Region (Gadkari 2016)²² reveals. In terms of naval strategy, India should soon decide whether to project

full naval power in the South China Sea; so far, it has been hesitant to participate in FONOPs operations like the United States has done seven times since 2015 (three under President Trump administration). Is it in India's interests to play the role of a 'net security provider' (Khura 2015)²³ to the United States in the region? The answer might not be as pessimistic as it seems, as in the years to come, India is likely to continue searching for deeper security cooperation schemes with Southeast Asian countries, but largely in areas of nontraditional security, such as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief HADR, far from engaging in FONOPs. This engagement is clearly evident with Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia where examples range from the Indo-Singapore Bilateral Exercise SIMBEX (Press Information Bureau, Government of India 2015)²⁴ to India's navy INR Saryu participation in ARF disaster relief exercises HADR in Penang, Malaysia, with cooperation with navies from Malaysia, Thailand and even China (Lakshmi 2015),²⁵ and the revision of the India-Singapore Defense Cooperation Agreement (Ministry of Defence Singapore 2015).²⁶ And yet, projection of influence and securing economic interest in the South China Sea does demand a clear strategic vision. It is a question of strategic thinking in the long run. In terms of a more comprehensive maritime development strategy, the future of India's AEP in the Southeast Asian sub complex—including the South China Sea littoral states—needs to be anchored both in more investment in Southeast Asian maritime infrastructure (as China is already promoting), and through a long-term policy of creating and improving port capacity and a robust commercial fleet at home (Singh, A. 2016),²⁷ which in turn should be stated in a government white paper in the years to come. A pressing question, however, is how to engage China in the short and medium term. As for involving Beijing in the creation of a stable security architecture in the Southeast Asian sub complex and the East Asian RSC at large, India seems already reflecting in the urgent need for mechanisms that should ultimately guarantee freedom of navigation, the strengthening of international regimes such as UNCLOS, as well as resource exploration. After several years, in February 2016, China and India finally held for the first time its 'Maritime Affairs Dialogue' (Khurana 2016b)²⁸ that can be viewed in India as an important opportunity for fostering maritime cooperation, promoting freedom of navigation and rule of law at sea and a forum to debate to contain Chinese strategy in the IOR, in particular the prevailing perception of a 'string of pearls' theory evolving. At the economic and political level, the India-China relationship still contains, as pointed out in the above lines, relevant incentives leading to cooperation, notably the increase in bilateral trade and the common interest to provide common public goods such as

strong, innovative international financial institutions (New Development Bank, Contingence Reserve Arrangement and AIIB). But above all, bilateral cooperation will serve to New Delhi's interests over its overall security imperatives in the South Asian RSC. In terms of maximizing India's security, both border security and combating terrorism, issues that does demand cooperation from Beijing, are likely to dominate the security priorities of India in the foreseeable future. Most likely, these two security priorities, together with urgent calls to guarantee freedom of navigation in the maritime realm, will shape India's AEP via-a-vis China in the South China Sea and its bilateral relations with Southeast Asia in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion:

The increasing escalation of the dispute in the South China Sea may indicate a change of policy and strategic intent from disputant countries, especially by China which has the biggest claim to the area. Taking into account these recent developments, the territorial claims in the South China Sea have further increased the challenge of arriving at a long-term peace settlement of this dispute. Diplomatic efforts made by ASEAN over several decades to formulate a peace settlement 15 have not resulted in any significant developments, and it is a fact that even now ASEAN memberstates have differing views on the issues associated with the South China Sea. This was particularly illustrated in 2012 when, for the first time in 45 years, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting failed to produce a joint communiqué summarising its proceedings, because of concerns that the proceedings were implicitly critical of China. The extension of Indian strategic space into the Indo-Pacific Ocean will naturally have strategic consequences. China has reacted by asking India to stay away from the South China Sea while the South-East Asian countries and Japan have welcomed the Indian presence. China, which looks upon the South China Sea as a springboard for its power projection in Asia-Pacific, looks upon the Indian presence with the blinkered vision of China containment in concert with the democracies along the Asian Rim Land. It is indeed unfortunate that India's growing bilateral relations with Vietnam and with other South-East Asian countries, in particular Indonesia, and growing strategic cooperation with Japan, are seen by the Chinese as an Indian attempt 446 Raman Puri and Arun Sahgal at strategic assertion in the Chinese backyard. The paranoia gets enhanced in the backdrop of US-India strategic partnership and American attempts at ensuring freedom of seas and asking China to resolve the issue bilaterally. India has genuine economic interests in the region. During the recent visit of the Vietnamese Prime

Minister to India, the two countries signed an oil and gas exploration agreement, in addition to significantly upgrading their military and trade relationship. In a rather trenchant editorial, China accused India of getting involved in the South China Sea dispute despite China urging India to stay out. It concluded that India has a vested interest in becoming involved as part of the larger strategy to contain China in the region. An influential Chinese Communist Party-run newspaper warned that "every means possible" should be used to stop India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC-Videsh) engaging in exploration projects in the South China Sea. It further warned India that its actions would push China to the limits, implying that India would bear the consequences of its action. There are mixed views on India's continued oil exploratory activity in the South China Sea. Some diplomats and analysts, generally concerned about China's rise, take a view that there is a need to pay close attention to the Chinese protest. They remind us of a range of possibilities that exist and a range of options that are available to the Chinese. The concern is what happens if China decides to take the conflict to the next level by triggering a confrontation in its own backyard, in terms of physical harassment.

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