

JANUARY 2023

Emerging Geopolitical and Security Concerns of the Indo-Pacific

CSS DIALOGUE REPORT

THE CENTRE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

Emerging Geopolitical and Security Concerns of the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a critical geopolitical and security focal point in the 21st century, captivating the attention of policymakers, analysts, academicians, leaders, and strategists all over the world. From the eastern shores of Africa to the western coasts of the Americas, the Indo-Pacific comprises some of the world's most dynamic societies, influential economies, vibrant cultures, and strategic maritime routes. Over the past few decades, the region has experienced rapid and substantial transformation, characterised by a shift in power dynamics, heightened security challenges, and the convergence of geopolitical interests, making it a pivotal area of study.

This report, divided in 3 parts, is the work of 15 Research Interns at CSS, who examined critical issues pertinent to the countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The report aims to offer valuable insights and perspectives that contribute to a deeper understanding of the region's evolving geopolitical and security landscape. By doing so, the report aims to aid in navigating the path towards a secure and prosperous future for the Indo-Pacific.

This report is a product of the Centre for Security Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs.

Centre for Security Studies

Jindal School of International Affairs

O.P. Jindal Global University



All rights reserved @CSS, JSIA

For queries kindly contact css@jgu.edu.in

Table of Contents

Sino-Indian Relations <i>Focus on Land Relations and Army</i> Vaibhavi Katal	04
The Solomon Dilemma Vandit Singh	09
US Strategy and Policy towards the Indo-Pacific Vanshika Sirohi	13
India's Maritime Security <i>Evaluating the South-China Sea Conflict</i> Vedica Karnik	20

Prologue

“*Sino- Indo Relations: Focus on Land Relations and Army*” highlights the relationship between India and China since independence. It talks about the history of conflict and the changes that occurred as the result of the same. The author sheds light on the Galvan Issue and the Post 2020 face-off, highlighting how airstrips and helipads to support forward-deployed forces are coming up, and tunnels are being bored into the mighty Himalayas to give all-year connectivity to the remotest locations.

“*The Solomon Dilemma*” underlines the relations between Australia and the Solomon Islands, an island nation located in Melanesia in the Southern Pacific Ocean and lies on the north-eastern side of Australia. It sheds light on the diplomatic relations that Solomon Islands had with the Republic of China (Taiwan), making it one of the last few countries to switch recognition from Taiwan to China. The author highlights how Solomon Islands occupies an extremely strategic position in the Melanesian Region of the South-Western Pacific Ocean, with Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and the Islands of Guam (US Territory), Palau, Fiji, etc. in close periphery, making it one of the most prime geopolitical real estates in the world.

“*U.S. Strategy and Policy Towards the Indo-Pacific*” discusses about U.S. National Security Strategy and how the relevance of India is increasing day by day, in the Indo-Pacific Region. The author highlights how the emergence of China as a peer competitor to the United States is the most important trend in the Indo-Pacific region and how the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) is promoted as a move to strengthen American economic dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.

“*India's Maritime Security: Evaluating the South China Sea Conflict*” highlights how the South China Sea is one of the most contentious issues in the world today, with constant and escalating tensions amongst several countries in the region. The author sheds light on the importance of the South China Sea and the history of its dispute. She also highlights how the situation has evolved over time and what are India’s interest in the region.

Sino-Indian Relations

Focus on Land Relations and Army

Vaibhavi Katal

Introduction

Independent India under Jawahar Lal Nehru endeavoured to remain non-aligned with the two existing superpowers, the Soviet Union, and the United States of America.¹ Nehru assiduously worked to enhance cooperation with other newly independent nations. This was the guiding principle on which was founded the “Panchsheel Agreement”² with China and the initial bonhomie between the two nations. In this line of thoughts, the army was relegated to a non-essential entity that had little use for a peace-loving nation. The decades of neglect of the operational readiness of the army were to have a telling effect later.

History of Conflict

The annexation of Tibet removed the buffer between China and India. The un-demarcated border more than 3000kms³ brought with it, many confrontations based on difference in perception of the two sides. China’s ambitious plan of gaining control of what it perceived as erstwhile Tibetan extension brought Ladakh region and present-day Arunachal Pradesh also into conflict. India chose to remain oblivious to the Chinese ambitious until early 60s by when, China had already constructed a road to connect Tibet with the restive Xinjiang province in a region that is today known as Aksai Chin.⁴ Owing to the distance, sparse population, and isolation, the entire border with erstwhile Tibet and later with China had been a long-ignored region of the subcontinent. While India continued to bank on the

¹ Lidarev, I. (2022, October 20). *The 1962 Sino-Indian War still Shapes Delhi's foreign policy*. – The Diplomat. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-1962-sino-indian-war-still-shapes-delhis-foreign-policy/>

² *External Publicity Division Ministry of External Affairs Government of ...* (n.d.). Retrieved January 20, 2023, from https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/191_panchsheel.pdf

³ Alex Tickell Senior Lecturer in English and Literary Historian. (2022, November 8). *1962's Sino-Indian border war lasted four weeks – internment of India's Chinese community lasted years*. The Conversation. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://theconversation.com/1962s-sino-indian-border-war-lasting-four-weeks-internment-of-indias-chinese-community-lasting-years-192366>

⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.). *Sino-Indian war*. Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sino-Indian-War>

Panchsheel Agreement and promoted slogans like “Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai”⁵, China kept working to implement its One-China policy. The escape of the Dalai Lama from Tibet in 1959 and China’s assessment of India as a threat to its sovereignty over Tibet became two of the most notable causes of the Sino-Indian War.

Following a series of border skirmishes between 1959 and 1962, which began as a by-product of the Tibetan rebellion, China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) launched a military invasion across the disputed border on October 20th, 1962.⁶ Indian knee-jerk reaction coupled with near non-existent logistical capabilities and an unprepared army resulted in a comprehensive defeat. Due to the lack of preparedness and adequate troops on the ground, Aksai Chin was transgressed and occupied by China, whereas it continues to claim Arunachal Pradesh to date.⁷

The Changes after conflict

The immediate consequence of the war on India was the end of the Nehruvian era in Indian foreign policy, which was driven by former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s ideas.⁸ It resulted in the emergence of a far more muscular and realistic India on the world stage. Most importantly, it changed India’s approach towards its foreign policy and international relations and continues to shape Indian foreign policy to this day.⁹

This led to the border being manned by more troops on the ground. Defences were built up at critical locations to safeguard the sanctity of the LAC (Line of actual control). Over time, numerous SOPs (standard operating procedures) have been built up to avoid a faceoff between the patrolling parties of both nations and avoid further escalation. The patrolling

⁵ Lidarev, I. (2022, October 20). *The 1962 Sino-Indian War still Shapes Delhi's foreign policy*. – The Diplomat. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-1962-sino-indian-war-still-shapes-delhis-foreign-policy/>

⁶ Krishnan, A. (2022, October 20). *In China, 1962 anniversary brings new attention to 'forgotten' war*. The Hindu. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/in-china-1962-anniversary-brings-new-attention-to-forgotten-war/article66035296.ece>

⁷ *Understanding the disputed Lac and China's claims over Arunachal*. The Indian Express. (2022, December 15). Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/the-disputed-lac-and-chinas-claims-over-arunachal-pradesh-8324703/#:~:text=China%20claims%20some%2090%2C000%20sq,so%2Dcalled%20Arunachal%20Pradesh%20%9D>.

⁸ Lidarev, I. (2022, October 20). *The 1962 Sino-Indian War still Shapes Delhi's foreign policy*. – The Diplomat. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-1962-sino-indian-war-still-shapes-delhis-foreign-policy/>

⁹ Lidarev, I. (2022, October 20). *The 1962 Sino-Indian War still Shapes Delhi's foreign policy*. – The Diplomat. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-1962-sino-indian-war-still-shapes-delhis-foreign-policy/>

parties are under clear-cut instructions not to resort to firing and to gradually withdraw and avoid confrontation.¹⁰ This has resulted in a near-zero loss of life for many decades now.

However, India, in all its wisdom, kept connectivity to the LAC at a minimum. This was a deliberate thought process that included defensive posturing, as well as not providing the enemy the advantage of better road connectivity should they go on the offensive. The hardships of troops stationed in the forward locations was high as they had to traverse vast distances to reach their location. The logistical arrangement in terms of ammunition and food also came at a high price. Meanwhile, China continued to improve its infrastructure along the LAC. This gathered pace in the last two decades, with India clearly realising the inadequacy of its own infrastructure vis-a-vis that of the enemy.¹¹

Change in Outlook

The polity and the army leadership has had a change in mindset in the last decade or so. From a defensive posturing that was being followed for many decades, a more assertive deployment has been formulated to counter the rapid build-up of the Chinese capability. This resulted in many road and rail networks being planned right up to the LAC. India has shifted gears in the last few years, and projects that have been long delayed are finally reaching fruition. This has not gone down well with the Chinese, who view all such developments as a threat to their control of the disputed area. One such road linking Daulat Beg Oldi in the Northern sector of Ladakh seemed to be the trigger point for a faceoff in June of 2020 and the now famous battle of Galwan.¹²

The Galwan Saga

In June of 2020, news of multiple clashes that had erupted in Pangong Tso and adjoining areas reminded India of the short but intense war of 1962.¹³ Those at the helm of Indian Politics felt that the nation did not need an army. After years of neglect and with no insight into the military matters, the army was thrust ahead with no backup, no foresight,

¹⁰ Baruah, A. (2020, June 16). *Analysis: "there will be no conflict if Indian Army does not enter our actual line of Control"*. The Hindu. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/there-will-be-no-conflict-if-indian-army-does-not-enter-our-actual-line-of-control/article31836317.ece>

¹¹ *Urgent need to improve India's border infrastructure*. ORF. (2015, December 8). Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/urgent-need-to-improve-indias-border-infrastructure/>

¹² *Daulat Beg Oldi: Indian road to strategic dominance along Lac in war against China nears completion*. DNA India. (n.d.). Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-daulat-beg-oldi-indian-road-to-strategic-dominance-along-lac-in-the-war-against-china-is-near-completion-2847596>

¹³ Philip, S. A. (2021, May 18). *Year after First Big India-China clash in Ladakh, tensions linger. this is how it all began*. ThePrint. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://theprint.in/defence/year-after-first-big-india-china-clash-in-ladakh-tensions-linger-this-is-how-it-all-began/660143/>

and little preparation.

The Indian army is thoroughly professional and has never had to resort to first use of force by deception. They are recognised as a gentleman's army. However, the same army has a remarkable legacy of being the bravest of the brave when the call of duty comes calling. They then go about their job with the utmost bravery and ruthless courage. The Indian jawans is known to fight to the last man, last bullet and is the holy grail of the Indian army.¹⁴ The men have not flinched in the face of hopeless odds, and the pride of the unit is upheld at all costs.

After 58 years, China again clashed with India in the Galwan Valley on the fateful night of 15th June 2020.¹⁵ The enemy provoked the gentle army that stands by the borders, and then they brought upon themselves what no army would want to experience. Enraged and seething with uncontrollable anger, the men unleashed the most vicious attack the enemy had witnessed. The unfortunate souls who fell into the hands of the crazed Indian men met a horrific and brutal death, and for a few hours on the icy barren landscape of the Galwan Valley, death reigned supreme. The enemy was left stunned. Thus, it was not expected and certainly not possible. By the time the cold morning dawned, the morale of the enemy lay shattered.

The Indian army changed the situation with one brutal offense, the enemy almost immediately was more conciliatory in his messages.¹⁶ While the nation enjoys its freedom, the army goes about its jobs, losing brothers in arms but never letting the country down, nor the honour and legacy of the Paltan! They will never complain, they will willingly die but will never fail; and they will be the insurmountable wall that no adversary can scale!

Post-2020 Face-Off

Things have changed on the LAC since infrastructure for the troops is being built up at a brisk pace. The government has shown remarkable courage in not getting cowed down by the veiled threats from China. In a further affirmation of the new vision of an assertive and confident nation, army deployment has been changed to an aggressive defensive posture

¹⁴ "they fought to the last bullet and the last man". The Hindu. (2021, November 16). Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/they-fought-to-the-last-bullet-and-the-last-man/article4017294.ece>

¹⁵ *Galwan Valley: A year after the violent clash*. The Indian Express. (2021, June 14). Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/galwan-valley-clash-timeline-india-china-disengagement-7358554/>

¹⁶ Tiwary, D. (2020, July 7). *In Galwan, both sides agree: Troops step back 1.8 km, 30 soldiers each in tents*. The Indian Express. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-china-galwan-troops-withdraw-6492347/>

with adequate forces for offensive action, should it be required. Airstrips and helipads to support forward-deployed forces are coming up, and tunnels are being bored into the mighty Himalayas to give all-year connectivity to the remotest locations.¹⁷

Conclusion

The situation on the LAC remains tense, although stable. It may yet turn out to be a calm before the storm. The army and the nation need to recognise that there is an imminent threat that must be met head-on, and preparation for any eventuality needs to be factored in. The situation is likely to continue for many years, if not decades, as China becomes more and more belligerent as it seeks to reposition itself in the world order.

The army now has the full support of more than a billion people, and no effort is being spared to equip the troops with the best weapons, clothing, and shelters. An army that is already battle-hardened and professional, argues well for any conflict that may arise. The country can rest assured that its finest men and women are well provisioned and will defend the sanctity of the border like no one else can.

¹⁷ Dubey, A. K. (2021, June 23). *Chinese army realised it needs better training, preparation after Galwan Clash: Cds Rawat*. ThePrint. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://theprint.in/defence/chinese-army-realised-it-needs-better-training-preparation-after-galwan-clash-cds-rawat/682877/>

The Solomon Dilemma

Vandit Singh

Solomon Islands is an island nation located in Melanesia in the Southern Pacific Ocean and lies on the north-eastern side of Australia. Its capital is Honiara, and it comprises six major islands and over 900 smaller islands, located to the east of Papua New Guinea and North-West of Vanuatu. Although initially settled around 2000 BCE, probably by the people of the Austronesian language group, it was only in 1568 that the Spanish navigator Álvaro de Mendaña became the first European to visit the island. Just like every other part of the world, even the Solomon Islands were engulfed by the wave of colonialism, and in 1893, the Southern Solomon Islands were declared a British Protectorate. During the Second World War, the Solomon Islands Campaign (1942–1945) saw fierce fighting between the United States, the British Commonwealth forces, and the Empire of Japan, especially the Guadalcanal Campaign. The nation attained its independence on July 7, 1978. It has maintained cordial ties with the United States, Australia, and increasingly with the People’s Republic of China. In November 2021, the island nation’s government was confronted by a series of protests and violent riots that shook the country, which led to a series of geopolitical events and crises and became one of the many focal points of the much larger US-China Cold War.

The Australian - Solomon Relations

Relations between Australia and the Solomon Islands date back to the 1950s, when British and Australian government officials discussed transferring the sovereignty of the British Solomon Islands to Australia. The Australian External Affairs Minister Paul Hasluck brought a proposal for a transfer to the cabinet in 1956, which was eventually rejected primarily for reasons of cost. Both Australia and the Solomon Islands have signed a bilateral security treaty in 2017 that allows Australian police, defense, and other civilian personnel to be deployed in the Solomon Islands in case of an emergency.

Australia serves as the biggest import partner for the Solomon Islands and one of its biggest export destinations as well. It is also a significant foreign aid donor to the Solomon Islands and the country's main development partner. In 2018-19, Australia donated \$187 million to the Solomon Islands, making it the second-biggest recipient of Australian aid, only next to Papua New Guinea.

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was an Australian-led intervention that was deployed to the Solomon Islands in July 2003 to establish peace and security in lieu of the instability brought about by militias like the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force. It lasted until 2017, and the Lowy Institute estimated that

Australian government spending on RAMSI was \$2.6 billion in real terms.

The Middle Kingdom in the Pacific

The Solomon Islands and Mainland China (PRC) established official diplomatic relations in 2019. Prior to this, the Solomon Islands had diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan), making it one of the last few countries to switch recognition from Taiwan to China.

British portal The Guardian and Solomon's National newspaper, 'Solomon Star' reported that Solomon Islands MPs had claimed both China (PRC) and Taiwan (ROC) had offered them hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes to influence politics in their favour. A series of demonstrations and violent riots followed the government's decision, leading to a 36-hour lockdown in the capital, several buildings burning down, and the deployment of police. Experts have deemed the switch an important step towards China's One Belt, One Road goals. Beijing promised about \$730 million in aid after the recognition switch.

The much-controversial bilateral security agreement signed between the two nations in April 2022 made a lot of noise within the political lobbies of the US and in particular, Australia and rang off emergency bells in Canberra and Washington, DC. The draft agreement between China and the Solomon Islands focuses on boosting the latter's national security capacity. It also includes cooperation on humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and efforts to maintain social order, among other areas. Although the text of the final China-Solomon Islands agreement remains secret, a draft leaked in March accorded broad freedom of operations to the Chinese security personnel and naval units in the Pacific Country and included provisions that would allow China's security agencies to 'assist in maintaining social order' on the island's soil and provide the Chinese security personnel with 'legal status and judicial immunity' from the domestic laws of Solomon Islands. A clause in the agreement says that China can "make ship visits to, carry out logistical replacement in, and have stopover and transition in the Solomon Islands," as well as send Chinese forces to the country to 'protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects.' This has stoked major security concerns in the United States and its allies in the region that China could send troops to the Solomon Islands and establish a permanent military base there, less than two thousand kilometres off the Australian coast. The government of the Solomon Islands announced the agreement was part of an effort to 'respond to the Solomon Islands' soft and hard domestic threats' as part of the nation's national security strategy, referring to the violent 2021 Solomon Islands unrest over the Prime Minister's decision to switch recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China.

The Geostrategic Implications and the US

The South Pacific has been perceived as part of an “American lake,” as declared by Former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954. The United States also expressed commercial and security interests in the region as early as 1825. Today, the United States has a strong military presence in the region through the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, with about 375,000 military and civilian personnel, 2,460 aircraft, and 200 naval vessels, including five aircraft carrier strike groups. It has a military presence in Palau, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the US Overseas Territories of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. Under the Joe Biden administration, the Pentagon has prioritised building up U.S. military bases in Guam and Australia to offset China’s influence.

The United States closed its embassy in the Solomon Islands in 1993 as part of a post-Cold War global reduction in diplomatic posts and priorities, an example of its neglect of the region in the recent decade. This became much more problematic under the Trump Administration when his ‘America First’ and ‘Make America Great Again’ campaigns focused primarily on the domestic social, political, and economic issues of America while neglecting its alliance systems and partners across the world. However, the incumbent US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, has stated that the US will soon reopen its embassy in Honiara in order to step up its engagement with the Pacific Island State.

The Chinese equation took an interesting turn when, in August 2022, the Solomon Islands turned away a U.S. Coast Guard ship and a British Royal Navy ship, claiming to have placed a moratorium on all foreign military ships pending further review, raising fears the Solomon Islands was turning away from western nations in favour of China. Former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison added that a Chinese Military Base in the Solomon Islands would be the ‘Red Line’ for the governments of Australia and the United States. There is an underlying concern about a possible Chinese Military Installation in the Island Nation, which is worrying the policy planners in Washington and Canberra.

Solomon Islands occupies an extremely strategic position in the Melanesian Region of the South-Western Pacific Ocean, with Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and the Islands of Guam (US Territory), Palau, Fiji, etc. in close periphery, making it one of the most prime geopolitical real estates in the world.

If China succeeds in building a military base in the Solomon Islands, then it can better observe the maritime exercises and drills of its Western rivals and exude power across the Pacific Ocean. In return, Beijing is expected to reward the Solomon Islands with big investments, tourists, and development plans that may bring prosperity to the Island Nation, since the majority of these smaller nations in the Pacific are plagued by poverty, underdevelopment, and weak governance. From an American Perspective, the United States should coordinate with its regional allies, partners, and the private sector to reestablish a credible presence in the region and provide alternatives to China’s financial resources. The potential stationing of the Chinese

Military on an ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’ off the coast of Australia would be equivalent to the presence of the Russians on Cuba off the coast of Florida.

Conclusion

From a Chinese Perspective, the Southern Pacific has never looked this promising to Beijing, and it will look to foster its relations and convince more Pacific States to switch recognition from Taiwan to the PRC, lending it more legitimacy on a global scale and reducing whatever is left of Taiwan’s political and economic clout. Other maritime powers like India and Australia must look to financially assist the poorer states in the Indo-Pacific and attempt to pull them out of the ever-growing Chinese Orbit. For New Delhi to gain something in this scenario, it must first focus on its economy and look to exponentially increase its Gross Domestic Product. This would enable it to facilitate much bigger and more strategic investments in smaller states around the world and counter the Chinese chequebook that reigns supreme across the developing and underdeveloped world. The QUAD grouping can be a great platform to initiate the counter-response by going beyond the naval exercises and drills. The Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF) and Build Back Better World (B3W) were two major initiatives taken up by the Joe Biden administration to counter the growing Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, but their effective on-ground impact is yet to be seen and analysed. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War since February 2022 has become a matter of top concern and priority for the Western Nations, and the Russians have again overtaken the Chinese as the biggest enemy or rival for the West. This comes after the Trump Administration launched an all-out economic war against Beijing.

Lastly, it all indicates towards a decreasing say of Washington in global matters and the real rise of a Multipolar World – The Americans who are no longer considered the biggest seat at the table and are accompanied by a China which looks to overtake them economically and wishes to become the new hegemon; a Russia which still holds a great deal of strategic leverage over the world through their natural resources and defence industry; an India which looks to become an economic powerhouse and the counter to China; a France which even while remaining an American Ally and a member of NATO, wishes to exercise significant strategic autonomy in terms of the European affairs and looks to retain its colonial era influence over the much poorer Western and Central African states; the Saudis who wish to see itself retain its title as the most powerful and influential Muslim Nation while not being a consistent applicant of the demands raised by the Americans, their biggest defence and security partner and many other regional powers like Japan, Brazil, Germany, etc. Although named after the Penultimate King of the Ancient Kingdom of Israel (United Monarchy of Israel and Judah), i.e., King Solomon, a highly quintessential and symbolic figure for the larger Judeo-Christian Civilisation of the Occident, of which the United States is the biggest and most powerful representative, it is quite ironic that the same state is now on the verge of becoming a de-facto Chinese Vassal State.

US Strategy and Policy Towards the Indo-Pacific

Vanshika Sirohi

Introduction

A geopolitical region known as the Indo-Pacific includes both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The Indo-Pacific is a 40-nation regional framework encompassing the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean, the western and central Pacific Ocean, and the seas tying the two together in the general vicinity of Indonesia.¹⁸

Since 2011, the phrase "Indo-Pacific" has become more frequently employed in international geopolitical and strategic debate. The Indo-Pacific is a framework that aims to establish a connected multipolar region that must be managed by generally accepted international standards, laws, and customs. The maritime region from the Indian Ocean through the East Asian littorals and into the western Pacific Ocean is referred to as the "Indo-Pacific." In order to guarantee a common, rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and unhindered trade in conformity with international law, security in the region must be achieved through discussion. The security and economic cooperation networks in the Indo-Pacific are being rewired as unilateral networks expand and mega-trade agreements take hold in this dynamic region.¹⁹

U.S. National Security Strategy

The phrase "Indo-Pacific" was adopted by the Donald J. Trump administration to refer to its broader strategic interest in the pan-Asian region. Resolving disagreements about the boundaries of the Indo-Pacific and what can and should be done throughout this vast area is necessary to fully realise the promise of this approach.²⁰ The inclusion of the Indo-Pacific in the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) suggests that the Trump administration has elevated the area to a top regional priority. In the Indo-Pacific, according to the strategy, a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place, and China is using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats

¹⁸ Diplomat, Udayan Das. "What Is the Indo-Pacific?" The Diplomat. July 13, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/what-is-the-indo-pacific/>

¹⁹ Bush, Richard C., Tanvi Madan, Mireya Solís, Jonathan Stromseth, and Andrew Yeo. "An American Strategy for the Indo-Pacific in an Age of US-China Competition." Brookings. Brookings, November 21, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/an-american-strategy-for-the-indo-pacific-in-an-age-of-us-china-competition/>.

²⁰ Council on Foreign Relations. "The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Needs More Indian Ocean." Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/us-indo-pacific-strategy-needs-more-indian-ocean>.

to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda.²¹

Increasing India's Relevance

India is naturally at the centre of the Indo-Pacific framework rather than being an add-on to an East Asian-centric view of Asia. In fact, the idea of Indian centrality revives a colonial-era framework that put India in the middle of a broader maritime strategic domain, as C. Raja Mohan of Carnegie India has noted. India has been a vocal proponent of an Indo-Pacific region that is free and open. India should have a bigger influence in the region, according to the US, Australia, and the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) nations. India sees the Indo-Pacific region as a strategic and geographical stretch that connects the two large seas through the ten ASEAN nations.²² India's view on the Indo-Pacific is centred on "inclusivity, openness, and ASEAN centrality and unity." With foreign investments moving eastward, such as through the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, as well as the Free Trade Agreements with ASEAN and Thailand, India's trade in this region is expanding quickly.²³

New Delhi grew to play a crucial part in each nation's policy as nations like Australia, Japan, and the United States started to identify the Indo-Pacific as the new arena for strategic conflict. The Japanese Prime Minister Abe referred to this broader marine region as the "confluence of the two seas" in an address to the Indian parliament in 2007. India is on the verge of overtaking China as the world's most populous nation, a stable democracy with the sixth-largest economy, the third-largest military by strength, and the fifth-largest defence budget, as well as a dedication to the rule of law and the liberal international order. It is difficult to ignore India's inherent relevance in this larger region. India's responsible development sets a good example for underdeveloped countries and presents a chance for greater cooperation in the fields of science, the environment, and security.²⁴

Strengthening Indo-US Ties

The US Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen, urged for stronger relations between the US and India in a speech she gave at Microsoft in New Delhi in November. She also stressed the value of "friendshoring" between the two biggest democracies in the world. She mentioned three sectors that are ideal for collaboration: development, digital trade, and climate.²⁵ Similar to how Europe served as the main stage for world politics in the 20th century, Asia will serve as the venue for much of the history that will shape this one. We may anticipate a century that is

²¹ Id.

²² Id.

²³ Saha, Premesha. "India's Role in the Emerging Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific." ORF. Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-role-in-the-emerging-dynamics-of-the-Indo-Pacific/>

²⁴ The Hindu, December 4, 2021. "Indo-US Joint Statement after Obama-Modi Talks." <https://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/Indo-US-joint-statement-after-US-President-Barack-Obama-and-Prime-Minister-Narendra-Modi-talks/article60330910.ece>.

²⁵ Council on Foreign Relations. "Boosting Trade, the Key to Stronger Indo-U.S. Ties." Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/article/boosting-trade-key-stronger-Indo-us-ties>.

primarily wealthy and peaceful if the region maintains its current level of peace and keeps driving global economic growth in an environment where conflict is reduced, and cooperation is encouraged. However, if great power confrontation occurs in the Indo-Pacific, this century will have a very different and far harsher future.

The George W. Bush administration gave improving ties with India a high priority, and it was really the Bush administration that was instrumental in negotiating the civil nuclear accord that was so essential to putting an end to decades of hostility between New Delhi and Washington.²⁶

The rebalancing to Asia and realising "the potential of our partnership with India" were cited as two of the "historic opportunities" before the United States in the Barack Obama NSS of 2015. This approach focused on U.S. interests in advancing "our strategic and economic alliance" and swiftly zeroed in on shared ideals between "the world's largest democracies," the United States and India. As the two largest democracies in the world, the United States and India are developing a strategic alliance that is supported by our common goals, shared moral principles, and strong ties between our people.²⁷ India's position in terms of strategy is improved by the Trump administration's embrace of the wider Indo-Pacific framework and its elevation to the top of the list of regional strategic priorities. The new NSS gives India a new level of significance as part of the American strategy for a more visible Indo-Pacific region.²⁸

The Role of a Rising China

The emergence of China as a peer competitor to the United States is the most important trend in the Indo-Pacific region. When the world's superpowers turned their attention to the Pacific after World War II, there were two dominant nations there: the United States and the former Soviet Union, led by Russia. Then, because of the fall of the Soviet Union, China became a new force in the Pacific. The fact that China has started to patrol the Pacific Ocean in significant numbers has increased concerns from the US-led Western Alliance, and the first Sino-Russian security patrol in the Western Pacific in October 2021 caused the US-led Western Alliance serious alarm.²⁹

Chinese actions that jeopardise crucial U.S. interests include the use of coercion — whether in the form of grey-zone tactics, political meddling, economic pressure, or military force — to erode the U.S. alliance system in Asia, press unilateral territorial claims, and settle international

²⁶ Council on Foreign Relations. "More Prominence for India and the Indo-Pacific in the U.S. National Security Strategy." Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/more-prominence-india-and-indo-Pacific-us-national-security-strategy>.

²⁷ The Hindu, December 4, 2021. "Indo-US Joint Statement after Obama-Modi Talks." <https://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/Indo-US-joint-statement-after-US-President-Barack-Obama-and-Prime-Minister-Narendra-Modi-talks/article60330910.ece>.

²⁸ Council on Foreign Relations. "More Prominence for India and the Indo-Pacific in the U.S. National Security Strategy." Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/more-prominence-india-and-indo-Pacific-us-national-security-strategy>.

²⁹ Sohail, Ajmal. "Challenges to Peace and Security in Asia/Indo-Pacific Region." *Modern Diplomacy*, November 11, 2022. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/11/12/challenges-to-peace-and-security-in-asia-indo-Pacific-region/>.

disputes without regard for international law. Even though Taiwan's residents reject the terms, China also aims to weaken regional democratic resistance and annex Taiwan to the People's Republic of China. A new reality in this maritime region is demonstrated by China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean (a military base in Djibouti and closer ties with nations like Sri Lanka and the Maldives).³⁰

As an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the United States is working with its allies to provide high-quality, sustainable infrastructure through a regional fund that includes Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and European nations. A new regional trade and investment treaty modelled after regional cooperation has been under negotiation by China's think tanks and other policy powerhouses since 2013.³¹ The growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian countries has frightened international policymakers. Security issues in the area are a result of China's growing military presence in the Indo-Pacific region and its expanding footprints in the Indian Ocean. The security of the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCS) is the main issue facing the Indo-Pacific region. Other big regional players like India, Japan, and the United States have expressed serious worries about this.³²

Strategic Partnerships

For a variety of reasons, the new US Indo-Pacific Strategy, which was unveiled on February 22, 2022, has received little attention. The Russia-Ukraine crisis, which culminated in an invasion and war on February 24, 2022; the strategy document's contents, which are largely in accordance with what is already in the public domain; and the restricted articulation of the action agenda are three of the most significant among them (the how element).³³ The US has nonetheless persisted in indicating that its engagement with and policy for this region would be long-lasting and that conflicts or crises in other regions of the world will not materially affect it.

The new plan keeps moving in the general direction set forth in the most recent US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, which was published on June 1, 2019. Although some changes are slight, they could be considered adaptations to the changing geostrategic environment. The 2019 strategy had highlighted the importance of 'strategic partnerships.' However, the new policy places a stronger focus on "relationships and partnerships," specifically mentioning the current regional treaty alliances. It aims to strengthen new alliances while modernising and adapting existing ones (Australia, Japan, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand). The Quad receives particular significance and frequent discussion in the strategy among

³⁰ Council on Foreign Relations. "The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Needs More Indian Ocean." Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/us-indo-pacific-strategy-needs-more-indian-ocean>.

³¹ Council on Foreign Relations. "U.S. Policy toward the Indo-Pacific: The Case for a Comprehensive Approach." Accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/report/us-policy-toward-indo-pacific-case-comprehensive-approach>.

³² Baruah, Darshana M. "India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theater of Opportunity." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/30/india-in-indo-pacific-new-delhi-s-theater-of-opportunity-pub-82205>.

³³ Luthra, Girish. "The New US Indo-Pacific Strategy: Balancing Continuity with New and Evolving Environment." ORF. Accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-new-us-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

partnerships. The policy was announced by President Biden on September 24, 2021, during the Quad Leaders' Summit.³⁴

It aims to strengthen the Quad and investigate how the Quad may collaborate with ASEAN. In contrast to 2019, the new strategy aims to coordinate methods with the EU (European Union) and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation).³⁵ This is in part because it is acknowledged that the US and EU have different regional policies in several ways. It is also significant that the penultimate section, which explains the action plan, only briefly mentions the new security cooperation between Australia, the UK, and the US (AUKUS) for the region, which was launched on September 15, 2021. This reference is merely a reiteration of the Joint Statement's text, which was released in conjunction with the launch of AUKUS. It may be being downplayed in order to allay worries about its likely course that have been voiced by some partners and to prevent AUKUS from impeding US efforts to forge alliances and relationships both within and outside of the area. A new economic and trade relationship agenda is introduced in the new strategy, and an "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" is planned to debut in early 2022. Additionally, it makes mention of things like democratic principles, digital technology, climate, environment, and health. This gives the plan a well-rounded approach, even though the major emphasis is still on "security," with a concentration on the maritime area.³⁶

Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), the Joe Biden administration's first significant trade policy, was introduced in late May. The IPEF is promoted as a move to strengthen American economic dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement negotiated under the Barack Obama administration, had this as its goal as well. The TPP was abandoned by President Donald Trump in 2017, and the Biden administration has made it clear that it has no plans to rejoin the CPTPP, officially known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Australia, Brunei, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam are among the 13 nations that have joined the IPEF negotiations with the United States. Taiwan had hoped to participate but was not included. The participants in the IPEF represent around 40% of the world economy as a whole. There are four main pillars that support the IPEF negotiations.³⁷

³⁴ Id.

³⁵ Stromseth, Jonathan. "ASEAN and the Quad: Strategic Impasse or Avenue for Cooperation?" Brookings. Brookings, March 9, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/23/asean-and-the-quad-strategic-impasse-or-avenue-for-cooperation/>.

³⁶ Luthra, Girish. "The New US Indo-Pacific Strategy: Balancing Continuity with New and Evolving Environment." ORF. Accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-new-us-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

³⁷ United States Trade Representative. "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)." Accessed January 20, 2023. <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/agreements-under-negotiation/indo-pacific-economic-framework-prosperity-ipef>.

Linked Economy

The three broad topics of digital trade, labour, and the environment will be covered by the trade pillar. The United States' plans are expected to be modelled after the USMCA, which Tai has referred to as "a new model for trade deals." The USMCA's chapter on digital trade codifies a number of U.S. policy goals, including a ban on customs fees on digital goods, limitations on data localization (or compelling corporations to store user data within a country), and a disallowance of regulations that impede cross-border data transfers.³⁸

A Strong Economy

This pillar will address supply-chain challenges in part by developing rules that will allow businesses to respond to disruptions more quickly. While an early warning system for supply-chain shortages and efforts to map supply chains for critical minerals could be beneficial, decisions to diversify supply chains may be best left to the companies involved in product sourcing and production. The COVID-19 pandemic is largely to blame for the current supply-chain crisis. However, the US can do a lot on its own, such as improving port efficiency to reduce shipping bottlenecks and lowering tariffs on chassis that transport cargo containers.³⁹

Greener Economy

This pillar addresses a wide range of climate-related issues, including renewable energy, decarbonization, energy efficiency standards, carbon removal, and methane emissions reduction. There is the possibility of overlap between these discussions and the trade pillar's environmental discussions. Fiji and New Zealand, two IPEF partners, are already involved in discussions on the Agreement on Climate Change, Trade, and Sustainability (ACCTS), which is far more ambitious than what has been proposed so far for the IPEF. The ACCTS connects trade and sustainability by lowering trade barriers for environmental goods and services, reducing harmful fossil fuel subsidies, and providing voluntary eco-labelling guidelines.⁴⁰

Economic Equity

This pillar will concentrate on tax and anti-corruption policies, and it is likely to codify existing multilateral commitments on these issues, to which not all IPEF members subscribe. Fighting corruption at home and abroad is a core national security interest for Biden, and this pillar will support those broader efforts. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation initiative to improve business ethics in two important export sectors, medical devices and biopharmaceuticals, is

³⁸ Council on Foreign Relations. "Unpacking the IPEF: Biden's First Big Trade Play." Accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/article/unpacking-ipef-bidens-first-big-trade-play>.

³⁹ Id.

⁴⁰ New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. "IPEF Overview." New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/free-trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements-under-negotiation/indo-Pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity/ipef-overview/>.

one example.⁴¹

Conclusion

To realise and establish a fully Indo-Pacific strategy, as a sign of good faith towards Indian priorities, Washington must support India's membership in APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation). India has been excluded from the club for more than twenty years despite having an economy worth over \$2 trillion, and this absence is not particularly strategic. The strategic objective of extending the Asia-Pacific framework to a larger Indo-Pacific region is undermined by India's continued exclusion from a multilateral organisation that is essential to economic activity throughout Asia.

A strong Indo-Pacific strategy must include a regional economic axis that provides competition for China's wide regional economic framework. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was no longer in effect as a result of the United States' exit. China and India support the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a different trade organisation with less ambitious goals but whose presence, in the absence of American leadership, highlights how the United States has lost its capacity to influence regional trade rules of the road. Given the leadership advantages that would come from re-engaging with partner nations, the Trump administration should give the TPP another look. India may eventually be persuaded to join the trade treaty by an economic plan for the rest of the region that is based on the TPP. The larger region as well as the Quad countries should enhance their diplomatic collaboration. It might cover regional anti-drug and anti-terrorist operations or focus on particular political or humanitarian situations, such as those in the Maldives and along the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar. In order to implement such a framework, it will be necessary to cross bureaucratic barriers.

The United States has improved relations with India and created strategic plans for a significant bilateral engagement. The Trump administration's focus on the Indo-Pacific region, which builds on the work of the Obama administration's U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, maybe its most important strategic project. Instead of the Asia of antagonism that should continue to shape this century, an Asia of cooperation is required. To increase the effectiveness of peace initiatives in the area, one must eventually integrate all the assistance they are able to get.

⁴¹ Council on Foreign Relations. "Unpacking the IPEF: Biden's First Big Trade Play." Accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/article/unpacking-ipef-bidens-first-big-trade-play>.

India's Maritime Security

Evaluating the South China Sea Conflict

Vedica Karnik

The South China Sea is one of the most contentious issues in the world today, with constant and escalating tensions amongst several countries in the region. This dispute has far-reaching implications, for India's interests in the region. The countries party to these disputes are all located in the Indo-Pacific region, which are China, Brunei, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. This report will provide a detailed analysis on the South China Sea dispute and its impact on India.



Importance of the South China Sea

The South China Sea, located between the coast of the Asian continent and the Philippines, Borneo, and the Indonesian archipelago, is a large tropical sea basin with an area of more than 3 million square kilometers.

Many states in the region are deficient in natural resources but have a vibrant industrialized economy that depends on the import of raw material, and the export of finished products by

sea. The gateway to the Strait of Malacca and the port of Singapore, is one of the world's most important and busiest merchant shipping routes, with an estimated \$5 trillion worth goods being carried through it each year. This includes around 25% of seaborne oil (more than 15 million barrels per day) and more than 50% of the world's trade in liquefied natural gas (LNG) (Schofield 2017).

Tensions in the Indo-Pacific region have increased due to estimates that the sea has 11 billion barrels of undiscovered oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of undiscovered natural gas (Administration, 2021) Source: (SCHOFIELD 2016)

Fish are abundant in the waters. It has been estimated that the sea holds over 12% of the global fishing catch, which is worth over US\$21 billion. These resources not only provide employment to over 3.7 million people, but also play a crucial role in maintaining food security for millions (Ning 2021).

History of the Dispute

At the peak of the World War, the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy used islands in the South China Sea region, as strategic bases that aided Japan's military. At that time, Japan believed that these islands stood unclaimed, however, history says otherwise. Historical records show that France had controlled some of those islands before it fell into the hands of Japan.

As the second World War faded into oblivion, the **1951 Treaty of San Francisco** mandated that Japan must surrender the territory that they had conquered during the war (Lee 2002). As the 1951 treaty negotiations went on, the People's Republic of China made numerous claims on these islands. The Chinese majorly based their claims on the nine-dash line. Originally known as the "eleven-dashed-line," this line was first acknowledged by the Kuomintang government of the Republic of China for when it staked its claim on the islands for the first time in 1947. After Zhou Enlai came into power, he finalized the nine-dash line. In China's 1958 Declaration, its claims on the islands in the South China Sea region were staked on the bases of the nine-dash line.

Under the Geneva Accords of 1954, which not only ended the First Indo-China war but also divided Vietnam into 2 parts by the 17th parallel, giving Vietnam control over the 'Vietnamese territories' that were located in the South of the 17th parallel (Landon 1996). Thus, Vietnam had control over islands in the Paracels and Spratly.

Claims of the Countries Party to the Dispute

- China has claims to more than 80% of the waters that they have included under the 'nine dash line'. The claimed waterbody stretches up to 2000 kilometers from land - reaching as far as Indonesia and Malaysia.

- Vietnam claims the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands as its own.
- Philippines asserted control over the Spratly archipelago and the Scarborough Shoal, that falls under the EEZ of Philippines.
- Brunei's claims are based on the Exclusive Economic Zone as per the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. This includes the southern region of the South China Sea and parts of Spratly Islands.
- Indonesia only claims a part of the sea that geographically comes under its exclusive special zone, near the Nantua Islands.
- Malaysia's declarations are based on legal grounds, as a part of the southern Spratley Island falls inside its border.

Recent Developments

Today the issue raises global concerns over China's increasing control over waters that were previously considered 'international' or parts of different countries. It has been proven that China has gone to lengths of seizing and reforming small lands, dredging enormous amounts of sand from and around the reefs and has used it to build land that's large enough to support their military bases. The dispute is not purely based on geopolitical rectifications but also international power. Today, the world stands to see whether or not China would comply with international laws and norms.

2014 saw a confrontation between Vietnamese and Chinese ships after China deployed a drilling rig near the Paracel Island region. Shortly after this incident took place, Beijing started its projects in the Spratly archipelago, that included increasing surface areas of islands using man-made structures and building and placing military equipment on them.

China has also created a new city on Wooden Island. The city, Sansha, has not only attracted tourists, but has been able to increase China's power over these islands without actually triggering any major confrontations with either the claimant parties or an international body.

In 2016, the international tribunal at The Hague stated that China had no such 'historic rights' over the South China Sea as its claims (Graham 2016). However, China on its own accord, rejected the ruling on the basis that it had no 'binding force'.

In April 2019, tensions between China and Vietnam escalated when a Chinese coastguard collided and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat. This led to a full-blown protest on the streets of Hanoi.

Towards the end of April 2019, China, using its international power, claimed over 80 disputed geographical features in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, that were also claimed by Vietnam. To the disappointment of many, Vietnam only retaliated by accusing China of "seriously violating" the country's sovereignty. China went on to, not only claim, but set up two separate

administrative districts on these islands that were directly governed by the city it built on Wooden Island, Sansha.

The latest development regarding the disputed waterway happened on 16th January 2023 when the Chinese State media reported that a United States aircraft carrier group was operating in the sea. (Xuanzun 2023) However, the media did not include in its report the ‘confrontational drills’ that the Chinese navy conducted in the same waterways.

UNCLOS and the ASEAN Way

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, commonly also known as the Law of the Sea Convention or the Law of the Sea Treaty, is an international legal framework that presides over maritime activities. It was signed on 10 December 1982, in Jamaica, and as of 2016, over 167 countries are part of it.

Soon after UNCLOS was established, many agreements were made on matters regarding a nation’s responsibility and privileges towards international waterbodies. As the SCS dispute increased in its importance, UNCLOS established certain parameters related to the how much countries could exploit water resources. UNCLOS in its resolutions also stated the parameters that countries have to follow when it comes to navigation, territorial rights, and maritime dispute settlement strategies. The 1994 treaty initiated by UNCLOS, identified the sovereignty rights of coastal states/countries, and provided conflict resolutions specific to the South China Sea Dispute. This Treaty was ratified by most ASEAN countries including Indonesia (1986), Singapore (1994), Myanmar (1996), Laos (1998) and Thailand (2011). China, despite having ongoing maritime conflicts with most countries in the region, ratified the treaty in 1996 (Jawli 2016).

ASEAN or Association of Southeast Asian Nations that comprises of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam was established in the year 1967, with the sole purpose of containing the spread of communism, promoting equality, maintaining corporation and stability amongst the countries in the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN started its formal engagements with China over the South China Sea Dispute in the 1990s. After multiple unsuccessful dialogues, China and ASEAN mutually agreed on the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002. By signing this treaty, both sides were compelled to abide by the international laws and to not militarise any disputed land in the region (Beng 2020).

Twenty years have passed since the declaration was signed, and yet no significant solution has been found. The progress ‘can be measured in millimeters’ (Collinson 2019). Despite agreeing to the conditions of the Declaration, China has the overtime militarized the region, and altered the geographical land to favour its political and military conditions.

India’s Interest in the South China Sea Region

Even though India has no territorial claims, it has strong economic interests in the disputed waterbody. Under the 'Look East Policy'; India has held a higher position internationally and this is visible in the joint statement that United States and India made in September 2014. The joint statement urged the claimants to "avoid the use, or threat of use, of force in advancing their claims" (PARASHAR 2014).

India has a massive stake in the region in terms of geopolitics and geo-economics. While India is not part of the South China region geographically, it is involved with some countries through naval exercises, diplomatic partnerships, oil exploration etc. India over the years has extended diplomatic outreach to its 'extended neighbourhood'.

India's objective to secure a significant position in East Asia has led to the adoption of the Act East Policy. Under the Act East Policy, India proposes to attain certain degree of prominence in the Indian Ocean region. At the same time, containing China's ever-growing hegemony in the South China Sea region. India's geopolitical interest rests on the growing cooperation between America, Australia, Japan, and India; thus, these waters are referred to as the "Indo-Pacific". Given its strategic geographical location, India may have unconstrained access through Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific. A lot more is at stake for India. The South China region holds importance in terms of trade within the Asia-Pacific region. Nearly 55% (PANT 2021) of India's trade passes through these waters, hence stability and peace in the region is of grave importance for India.

On 4th August 2016, India made its first official statement on the dispute. Former External Minister of State, General V.K. Singh, stated that India "supports freedom of navigation and over flight, and unimpeded commerce, based on the principles of international law, as reflected notably in the UNCLOS. India believes that States should resolve disputes through peaceful means without threat or use of force and exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that could complicate or escalate disputes affecting peace and stability. As a State Party to the UNCLOS, India urges all parties to show utmost respect for the UNCLOS, which establishes the international legal order of the seas and oceans" (IndianExpress 2016).

India has always emphasized the importance for a peaceful settlement, thus taking a moral vocal stand. India has declared that South China Sea is a 'global commons', where disputes must be settled with accordance to the per existing international laws. In 2020, the Indian Navy deployed a frontline warship in the South China Sea, after the Galwan incident (Negi 2020). While there have been speculations behind the motives for the deployment of a warship, the message is loud and clear and cannot be missed.

While India can only play a limited role in resolving the dispute, its support and sensitivity towards the issue, demonstrates to the Southeast Asian nations that India is willing to engage in a serious course of action. To ensure greater trust and prevalence in the Southeast Asian region, India must be more involved with the QUAD members and increase engagement with its Act East policy (Saha 2021).

Conclusion

It is important to note the significance of the South China Sea when it comes to global maritime trade, peace in the Southeast Asian region and allowing all countries to flourish economically, socially, and politically.

The South China Sea dispute is a complex and multifaceted issue that involves a number of different countries and a range of economic, strategic, and territorial concerns. The dispute has evolved over time and has been marked by a variety of claims and counter claims over territory, resources, and sovereignty. While there have been some attempts to resolve the dispute through diplomatic means, the situation remains unresolved and the potential for conflict remains high. The internet has played a significant role in spreading information and shaping public opinion on this issue. Easy access to a wide variety of information from a wide range of sources has allowed people to stay informed and participate in discussions about the dispute. Despite this, the South China Sea continues to be volatile and has the potential to be a flashpoint for conflict.

Ever since the issue arose, there has been significant pressure that the freedom of navigation in the sea included a country's rights to conduct military activities in the exclusive economic zone. (Storey 2017). Apart from that, the tensions in the sea have only seen an upsurge since the mid-to-late. Experts in the field owe this to the increase in the feeling of nationalism, especially over territory. Social media and the internet have led to an increase in knowledge about the South China Sea dispute.

The South China Sea dispute has significant implications for India, both in terms of its economic interests and its strategic position in the region. India has a strong economic interest in the South China Sea, with a significant portion of its trade passing through the area. It also has strategic partnerships with countries that have claims in the region such as Vietnam and Philippines. The dispute has the potential to disrupt this trade and threatens the stability of the region. India has also been increasing its presence in the region, through joint naval exercises and the establishment of a military base in the Seychelles, as a way to safeguard its economic and strategic interests in the region.

Furthermore, the South China Sea dispute has broader implications for the balance of power in the region and the rules-based international order. India has been vocal in advocating for the peaceful resolution of disputes with respect to the international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). India has also called for the resolution of disputes through peaceful means, in accordance with the principles of international law, including UNCLOS.

Overall, the South China Sea dispute is a complex and multifaceted issue that has significant implications for the region and the international community. It is important for all countries involved to continue actively engaging with the issue, and work towards a peaceful resolution

of the dispute through diplomatic means, in accordance with international law.



Centre for Security Studies

Jindal School of International Affairs

O.P. Jindal Global University

All rights reserved @CSS, JSIA