

INDIA'S STRATEGIC DRIVE INTO THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Dost Barrech*
Iram Nazisht†
Syed Asghar Shah‡

Abstract

The South China Sea (SCS) is known for its strategic location and abundant of natural resources. It has become a source of conflict among countries in the region due to its importance as a major trade route for China, the US, India, and Japan. Its significance has led to tensions and disputes over control and access to its resources. Its geopolitics is greatly affecting the region owing to the growing conflict between the two emerging powers in the region, such as China and India. The comprehension of geopolitics necessitates an understanding of the divergent geopolitical interests of both states involved in the area. This paper focus on understanding the India's increasing naval posturing in SCS. New Delhi is swiftly enhancing its naval capabilities and stretching its maritime interests in the SCS. India has been increasing its presence in the SCS, which is of utmost importance to its trade relations with Japan. While, China is a strong contender in the SCS by retaining its top position among other nations. India is becoming a pre-eminent maritime power in the SCS. Moreover, China is not ready to recognize India's naval advancement. The study, thus spotlights India's maritime interests and campaigns in the SCS along with other major powers.

Keywords: Littoral states, Exclusive Economic Zones EEZ, Naval Exercises, QUAD, SIMBEX

*Lecturer in the International Relations (IR) at the University of Balochistan (UOB) in Quetta. Email: bareach87@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

†M.Phil. Scholar at National Institute of Pakistan Studies at Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad. Email: irrammalik888@gmail.com

‡Chief Statistical Officer, Government of Balochistan. Email: asgharshah10@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The seas of Asia have been witnessing historical anomaly among states in recent times. The driving forces behind the shifting power of balance in the transforming Asian region are strategic rivalry between China and India. In their pursuit of energy security and global influence, both Beijing and New Delhi have shifted their focus from land routes to sea routes, with a particular emphasis on the SCS. As a result, their activities have become more maritime-centric, reflecting their ambitions to establish dominance in the region. In South Asia the major power rivalries is likely to affect the whole region (Homes, 2008). South Asia in contemporary times has been witnessing major power competition between India and China. This extreme contention has provoked China to have close partnership with other South Asian countries particularly Pakistan. On the other hand, India has signed many alliances with the US in order to overshadow Chinese influence. China's partnership with Pakistan and India's growing alignment with other major powers- have further fostered enmity between the two countries (Madan, 2021).

There are various visions of China and India for the region. India's maritime strategy and doctrine reoriented its approach towards 'Sea Control'. New Delhi's maritime economic pursuit include 'sea borne trade, energy security, shipping and fishing with major Indian investment and diaspora'. New Delhi is aiming to generate US\$ 250 billion from the robust maritime sphere by 2024. India's Maritime Military Strategy identifies the SCS as a crucial area of interest and considers it a 'blue water' domain. Annually, 55% of India's trade passes through the strategically important Strait of Malacca to the SCS. India upholds the principle of open navigation and regards the sea as a 'Global Commons', supporting the United Nations' rulings on the SCS (Sana, 2020).

In the wake of dramatic nuclear tests, expeditious economic growth, and a great military posture, India seems ready to take great place among the world's dominant nations. Moreover, India today is more

engaged in the realpolitik of the world, and actively participating as a more proactive player in Asian security disputes. Its security agenda determines the unrestrained ventures of China in the SCS. New Delhi is seeking for the guarantee of increasing freedom of navigation which has been expressed by Indian diplomats and officials to China in the several international fora. The overall, India-China bilateral relationship highlight competition and cooperation (Granados, 2018).

There have been growing tensions in the South China Sea. The past several years indicate that China has assumed more assertive posture in the region to strengthen its jurisdictional claims, stretching out its military reach and undermining the claims of other states in the region through repressive measures. Mushrooming enmity in the South China Sea unfolds two concerns for policy makers. The South China Sea is a crucial area for both regional and international navies due to its significance as a theater of operations for global commerce. The US Navy, in particular, heavily relies on the SCS to deploy between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. The disputed waters of the South China Sea contain significant energy resources that are essential to the economic development of East Asian countries. The sea is also a crucial source of marine life, which has a direct impact on human and food security in the region (Scholfield, 2009).

Between 2013 and 2016, significant changes occurred in the SCS, including the construction of artificial islands, fortification of natural maritime features, and the establishment of military installations, leading to increased tensions for the coastal states. These measures, along with China's long-running campaign of dispute, which includes deploying large fishing vessels and maritime militia vessels in Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and exploiting Southeast Asian energy vessels, have caused growing concerns. Tensions surrounding the energy resources in the sea have been documented for several years, with reports of severe exploitation in the waters and air,

causing particular unease. The 2014 dispute between China and Vietnam over an oil rig in the Paracel Islands heightened the confrontation, and reports of China's mobilization of dozens of aircraft further escalated tensions. China's extensive military fortification across the Paracels and Spratlys raises concerns about future hazards, including swift aerial surveillance over the SCS (Salleh, 2021).

SCS from Theoretical Framework Perspective

Alfred Mahan's sea power theory argues that in order to become a great power, a nation must meet three key requirements: production, shipping, and colonies. Mahan argues that maritime commerce is crucial for a nation's economic prosperity and overall wealth, and the Sea power is the key to global dominance. He uses the example of the British Empire to support his theory, citing its reliance on Sea power to become a great empire. Mahan believes that a nation with access to the Sea has a significant advantage in terms of dominating the world, as the Sea itself has immense potential to bring prosperity and strength to the nation. The Sea can perform many functions that are advantageous to the nation, such as providing a means for transportation, facilitating trade and commerce, and offering strategic advantages in times of war and conflict. According to him, a nation with a Sea is in a favorable position to become a great power (Sherazi, 2020).

Having been analyzed Alfred Mahan's Sea Power theory and China's recent actions in the SCS, it can be inferred that the region is applying Mahan's principles to achieve its diplomatic, economic, and military objectives. China has incorporated the Sea Power theory into its foreign policy and has taken concrete measures, including the Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013, to achieve its goals. Although theories and associated concepts are developed to address specific situations during a particular time period, they can still provide useful guidelines for the relationships between states. Thus, it is important to comprehend China's actual maritime strategy in light of

these assumptions. China's recent 'Pivot to Sea' policy is not a novel concept but has roots dating back to the ancient dynasties in China. During this period, two noteworthy maritime ventures took place that exemplify China's focus on the sea. The first was led by Zheng He during the Ming period, in which he undertook eight voyages from 1405 AD to 1433 AD (Watkins, 2015).

These voyages were significant diplomatic, political, and economic interests. Unlike the Europeans, whose seafaring purposes were aimed at conquering foreign lands and prompting trade, the Chinese ships were skillfully designed specifically for seafaring purposes and not for confrontations. These voyages were not intended for the current notion of maritime trade nor for achieving 'command of the sea' as per Mahan's view. Rather, they were intended to promote the connectivity of people and goods through the use of seafaring channels (Watkins, 2015).

In the contemporary times, China is one of the best examples of countries that have not only been inspired by Mahan maritime ideas but also incorporated those ideas to enhance its economic and military capabilities. Mahan's great influence over the Chinese navy was specially significance at the 2004 Sea Lanes Security symposium in Beijing. Wang Zaibang articulated; "Mahan's appeal is easily understandable. Though he was writing for an emerging power, the USA, something which currently states the People's Republic of China". China's massive investment in its navy characterizes that in order to gain dominance of nearest maritime spaces, it cannot cope with the US until it has become the first is issue of vessels by enhancing its foothold in the SCS (Orbaiceta, 2022).

India's impressive and rapid ascent in the global power hierarchy, attributed to its strong economy - ranked 7th in the world with a GDP of around \$2 trillion as per the World Bank - is an unprecedented achievement in history. New Delhi plays an active role in several multilateral organizations, including BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and G-20. The post-Cold War era illustrates

India's increasing involvement in security crises in Asia, with New Delhi playing an active role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), East Asia, South East Asia, and the Asia Pacific countries. The country's impact on global governance and its role as a significant player in international security have been topics of heated discussion in recent years. India is often regarded as a state that prioritizes expanding its security domain over gaining power. As an international player, India is viewed as a pragmatic actor that seeks to safeguard its political and economic interests while also enhancing its military security (Granados, 2018).

The territorial and maritime conflicts in the SCS have had significant and long-lasting impacts on the region. These ongoing disputes continue to impede the establishment of sustainable peace and security in the area. These conflicts first emerged in the 1970s and have involved several countries including China, South Asian states, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. China has been particularly aggressive in its activities, encroaching on the sovereign territories and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of neighboring countries, and constructing artificial islands.

Beijing has also been deploying military assets in these areas and developing logistics and communication infrastructure. China maintains that these territories are an integral part of its "core interests" and has adopted an uncompromising stance on the issue. David Scott, who is a lecturer at Brunel University, stated that India is giving more importance to the SCS in its strategic discussions and calculations, which is also becoming an important consideration for the SCS states. India has demonstrated its interest in the Indo-Pacific region, and sees it as a unified and interconnected maritime domain that revolves around ASEAN (Shah, 2021). New Delhi, resultantly, is well aware of the significance of Alfred Mahan's Sea Power theory and has been taking measures to boost its production, shipping capabilities, and monitor the natural resources in the Sea. India is determine to not to concede any territory to China in the region.

India's Approach to SCS Disputes: Historical Diplomacy and Naval Posturing

The increasing rivalry between China and India has prompted India to pursue a balancing strategy with regard to its strategic interests in the SCS. As China has stepped up its naval operations in the region, India has become more actively involved in SCS affairs. India's position on the territorial disputes in the area has been reflected in its desire to build a strong ASEAN-India relationship. It declared we recognize the crucial role played by India in promoting regional peace and stability, and therefore, we are committed to enhancing maritime cooperation to tackle common challenges. Philippines former deputy minister for international economic relations, Laura Q. Del Rosario had once expressed: "India should go East, and not just Look East" (Shah, 2021).

India's naval actions in the SCS demonstrate its diplomatic ties with other regional nations. The Indian Navy has dispatched various warships to counter Chinese naval activities in the disputed waters. These deployments involve independent initiatives, bilateral efforts, port development, and trade exchanges. The Indian Navy has also conducted joint exercises such as the Singapore-India Bilateral Maritime Exercises (SIMBEX) and sailed with the navies of the US, Japan, and the Philippines to showcase their multi-mission presence in the SCS (Shah, 2021).

India's strategy towards the SCS is clear from its diplomatic and economic engagements with other nations, which are in line with its 'Look East Policy'. India has strong bilateral ties with neighboring countries, particularly in terms of energy resources and trade, reflecting its economic approach in the region. Energy resources are a vital factor, considering the estimated energy potential of the area. From a diplomatic standpoint, India aims to act responsibly and establish itself as a regional leader that can resolve disputes between nations peacefully (Manisha).

The Significance of the SCS: Understanding its Importance in Regional Geopolitics

The South China Sea is located in a region of great geostrategic significance, stretching from the southwest Strait of Malacca to the northeast Strait of Taiwan. This area is strategically one of the world's active region. In order to cope the growing militarized threats China has built artificial Island in the SCS and Chinese soldiers are positioned in different places on Islands (Parveen, 2022). The importance of the SCS cannot be underestimated. This significant body of water is all-encompassing in terms of geographical, social, economic, political contours. The SCS is considered of great strategic significance due to its location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, connecting them and stretching from the eastern end of the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Taiwan. It is estimated that around one-third of global trade passes through this waterway annually. The presence of oil and gas reserves beneath its surface has further increased its importance. This region has the most disputed maritime boundary in the world, with China, Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei all having important territorial and maritime claims. Non-claimant states have also acknowledged the significance of the South China Sea to their interests, with the US being a prominent advocate (Raymond, 2022).

The SCS is rich in maritime resources which is significant for China and other countries around South East Asia regarding their national capacity building and economic development. These robust maritime resources include water and sovereign soil, soft resources for states China claims that the resources in the SCS hold legal and historical significance for them, as they were the first country to explore and govern the area. China asserts its sovereignty over the region through its ownership of the 'U-shaped 9 dashes', which signifies that China holds the largest portion of exclusive resources in the SCS (Togo, 2013). China's actions in the SCS have expanded its power and influence over the global economy. This has raised concerns among

the US and its allies as China's growing capability threatens the strategic importance of the SCS's shipping lanes, which carry around \$5.3 trillion worth of goods annually. The SCS is responsible for transporting approximately one-third of the world's seaborne oil and more than half of the global trade in liquefied natural gas. In 2012, the International Energy Agency predicted in its World Energy Outlook report that 90 percent of Middle Eastern fuel exports would travel through the SCS by 2035 (Moulton, 2022).

The SCS is located to the south of mainland China and Taiwan, and it shares a strategic border with the Far East states. The area covers three million square kilometers of water bodies, which includes a Sea basin of approximately one million square kilometers of continental shelf. There are over 200 islets, reefs, and rocks in the Sea, which are unsuitable for human habitation in the near future. Due to its rich and strategic location, the Sea is believed to be a breeding ground of economic and security complexities. It is suspected to have one of the world's largest deposits of hydrocarbons and fossil oil, although their estimated strength has yet to be proven. A report from the International Hydrographic Organization confirms these facts.

The Paracel and Spratly Islands, which comprise over 100 small islands, are surrounded by fishing grounds and abundant oil and gas reserves, making them attractive to outside powers. China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam have all recently established a military presence on some of these islands, which are at the center of the emerging dispute in one of the most strategic waterways in the world. David Rosenburg describes China's policy of 'creeping assertiveness' or "creeping irredentism" in the region (Amry 2014).

Buzan Barry observed that the oceans' potential economic value and the growing territorial claims of nations have led to the current scenario where oceans are fiercely contested for limited resources. The SCS was previously under France's control in the 1930s, but during World War II, Japan took over the territory. Following the war, Japan abandoned the resource-rich region, and since then, the

Sea has become the "crux of all territorial conflicts. "Mother of all territorial disputes" (Victor, 2016).

Why is SCS so crucial for India?

Analysts have acknowledged that India has geopolitical aspirations in the SCS and is determined to uphold its legitimate agreements and economic interests with other ASEAN countries to develop maritime initiatives. Meanwhile, China maintains its undisputed dominance in the South China Sea as it demonstrates its influence in the Asia-Pacific region (Deshmukh, 2020).

China's basis for having the possession of South China Sea waters in the regions has historical narratives. It claims that based on historical evidences of ownership which has been depicted through the map of the South China Sea dating back to 1947, nobody can deny its unlimited access to waters. Moreover, China's claims have grown assertive gradually in a statement by its Defense Minister, Wei Fenghe, 'We will not relinquish a single inch of territory passed down from our forefathers'. As a result, India's advocacy for strategic security, freedom of navigation in the seas is greatly feasible for ASEAN countries who are being dominated by China's supremacy in these waters. Respectively, India has raised its serious apprehensions on the growing hegemonic power of China in the sea, which is impediment in the ways of its lasting interests. China's expansion of its Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in to the SCS has become the source of anti-access zone for international navigators. Hence, China is barring foreign vessels from entering. India's prosperity depends heavily on sea trades across the Indo-Pacific Ocean. Due to the probability of the sea converting in to a 'Chinese lake', India has become apprehensive of China. To avoid this imminent threat from China, the Indian navy authorities would surely advance their maritime presence in the Southeast Asia (Elapata, 2020).

The maritime security perils, likewise unlawful smuggling and fishing, a territorial clash over the sea posits a great threat to security

issues. It determines a potential threat of armed eruption in the area, which would cause disruption to the freedom of navigation. This would be turbulent for Indian and other claimant states in the region. India's intensified role in the region is not only beneficial to the maritime states, but also serve India's own strategic interests. More significantly, freedom of navigation in the SCS is critical to India. India's trade relies on the safety of passageway in the Sea. Consequently, immense peace and security in the SCS waters is necessary for the advancement of India's vision successfully. This grand vision mainly concern with trade and economics to increase the GDP. However, India manifests the critical aspects of the vision by exemplifying maritime structure and domain awareness, and joint naval exercises with other countries for the better navigation in the Asia-Pacific region. With reference to economic security, the growing obstructions to the freedom of navigation will impact the rest of the activities (Elapata, 2020).

India's Naval Exercises with Regional Countries in the South China Sea

Due to past clashes between troops on the disputed land border, the Indian military has traditionally been distrustful of China. As a result, the Indian government has been seeking closer ties with the US in recent times to counter Chinese influence. The Indian Navy announced that it will be deploying four ships, including a guided missile destroyer and a missile frigate, for a period of two months in Southeast Asia, the Western Pacific, and the SCS (Miglani, 2021).

The deployment of Indian Navy's ships is intended to showcase their operational capabilities, peaceful presence, and support for allied nations in promoting maritime order. This move comes as the SCS has become a contentious issue in the complicated relationship between China and the US. The US strongly opposes Beijing's illegal claims in the waters, which are rich in resources. In addition to joint war drills with the US, Australia, and Japan on the coast of Guam, the Quad countries, an informal group, are advocating for a way to counter

China's assertiveness. The Biden administration has stated that these maritime initiatives aim to enhance coordination and cooperation between the Indian Navy and allied nations, based on shared maritime interests and a strong commitment to uphold freedom of navigation on the high seas (Miglani, 2021).

Similarly, India, is searching for its strategic ambitions in the SCS, has taken Vietnam a potential partner to contain China's aggression. The forging of India-Vietnam bilateral cooperation in multiple fronts such as diplomacy, defense, and economy has opened a new chapter of strong trusted relationship. Vietnam's persistent stand point on regional security and resolving the SCS crisis has benefitted New Delhi's significant vision for a serene Southeast Asia.

While other powers, such as New Zealand, Australia, and South Korea are reluctant to speak out against the China's maneuvering in the SCS, New Delhi has closely grown ties with Hanoi despite clear warnings from Beijing. In line with its Act-East Policy, India is aiming to strengthen ties with Vietnam, which is viewed as a key strategic player in Southeast Asia. Vietnam has also acted as a mediator to facilitate India's relations with other ASEAN countries. According to Pham Sanh, Vietnam's ambassador to India, "ASEAN plays a crucial role in shaping the security structure of the region." India has multiple ambitions in the SCS, including securing access to maritime resources, safeguarding freedom of navigation, and pursuing deep strategic interests (Sang, 2022).

India is focused to bring peace and prosperity in SCS, the sea is a matter of significant important to us. We have historical rights which have been founded by tradition and practice to preserve the SCS without any impediment. We have mutually contributed to each other's prosperity for two thousand years", India's former ambassador to China said. India's access to Southeast Asia is need of the time to maintain maritime relationship and resilient cultural bonds with regional countries. The SCS is a crucial global shipping lane that allows India to establish diplomatic and economic ties with

Southeast Asian nations. India's strong trade relations with the economies of ASEAN reached \$78.9 billion in 2020-21 and are expected to reach \$300 billion by 2025. India and ASEAN have collaborations in various sectors, including infrastructure, e-commerce, tourism, education and skill development, healthcare, and pharmaceutical manufacturing. During the 2018 Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented his vision for an 'open, prosperous, free, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region' (Sang, 2022).

India has been actively involved in deploying its naval forces in the SCS since 1995, with the aim of increasing its presence in the region. This strategic positioning has involved various initiatives taken by India over the years. The Singapore-India Bilateral Maritime Exercises (SIMBEX) have been conducted since 1994 and hold great importance. The Indian Navy intends to strengthen its ties with coastal states such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei by conducting amicable port calls in the SCS. New Delhi has launched deep-sea maritime activities in Campbell Bay, located at the southern end of the Andaman Islands, to enhance its monitoring efforts in the region (Barrech, 2021). To strengthen its position in the region and counter China's growing influence, New Delhi has conducted significant naval exercises with the Philippines in the disputed SCS (Wing, 2021).

The navies of India and Singapore have successfully conducted joint naval drills in the SCS, featuring prominent navy ships such as Shakti and Kolkata, as well as the long-range maritime patrol aircraft, Poseidon-81. The armed forces of India and Singapore have developed a strong relationship, and their yearly joint exercises have evolved from traditional anti-submarine drills to more elaborate maritime operations, such as advanced air defense maneuvers, tactical exercises, and surface practice firing. India is committed to protecting its strategic national interests in the SCS and is making significant efforts to counter China's increasing assertiveness in the

region (India, Singapore conduct naval drill in South China Sea, 2019).

India's Rising Influence in the Indian Ocean Region

The fundamental factors triggering India's dominance in the SCS are the assertiveness of China in the contested sea along with fostering strategic weight of the Indo-Pacific region. Beijing's hegemonic ambition provoked India to safeguard its interests at any cost. India's major aspirations in the SCS are advance commercial linkages with other Southeast Asian states, freedom of navigation, and consolidation of order which will be rule-based in the region. Besides, India explores the prominence of growing its status as a regional power in the Indo-Pacific region (India, Singapore conduct naval drill in South China Sea, 2019). India has identified the growing Chinese military and commercial activities in the Indian Ocean Region. It has taken steps to confine the China's strategic positioning. Without mentioning China, the spokesperson on Indian navy expressed before the Straits Times, initially, the Indian navy would make an unusual overseas deployments to these region.

However, the dynamics have now shifted due to the increasing presence of external powers, which has prompted us to increase our presence in the region. New Delhi has forged alliances with external powers in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through strategic coordination and logistics agreements with the US and France. US has strengthened its relationship with India through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes Australia and Japan. India's increasing presence and influence in the IOR is evident in its participation in joint exercises with other states. For instance, in 2018, India engaged in the "Milan" multilateral naval exercises with 16 other countries in the Nicobar and Andaman Islands to enhance its naval capabilities. The Indian Ocean Region has become an area of intense geopolitical competition, with China already establishing strategic military bases in the region. India has recognized the importance of engaging with countries in the region and has made some progress in this regard. However, without investing in its

military capabilities, particularly its navy, India's vision of a "safe, free, and open Indo-Pacific" will not be realized. Therefore, New Delhi must take significant steps to boost its naval power to effectively counter the increasing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region (Thakker, 2018).

China's commendable economic growth has enabled her to capitalize more on its military, and enhance its diplomatic and political clout in the Indo-Pacific region, resulting in the establishment of Quad. US under the umbrella of the Quad is embarking on a journey to thwart Chinese greater presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, the US officials under Trump's administration declared that U.S. and India were not only the two largest democracies of the world but also their democratic values have had implications for other states. By and large, Quad was an inclusive group which was keen on openly welcoming the other democratic countries in the region. In order to contain China, Japan has been sharing intelligence with India and Australia. New Delhi is ambitious to reduce China's ascendancy in the Indo-Pacific region through Quad.

The Quad appears to be a strong platform for New Delhi to oppose China's robust Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Shehryar Khan, 2022). The Indian government's concern over the rising influence of China in the SCS led them to take proactive measures to enhance their capabilities in the Indian Ocean, including the procurement of Guardian drones. According to Harsh Pant, head of the strategic studies program at the Observer Research Foundation, India has previously acquired the most sophisticated maritime reconnaissance drones globally to track the activities of Chinese warships in the SCS (Chandran, 2017).

US Support to India in Enhancement of its Influence in SCS

With China's rapid economic and military rise, the US considers India as a crucial ally not only in SCS but also in their bilateral relations, which have recently take a new direction. India and the US share

mutual interests in the IOR. Both states recognize the importance of these strategic relations. The containment of China is the major interest of US in the region by using military, economic, and technological support of India in the region. Considering India as a rightful competitor of China in the Indian Ocean, the US unquestionably have strong support for India's military rise. Indian experts argue that the establishment of India-US strategic partnership was initiated during Bush's era and this dates back to Clinton administration when the nuclear technology was transferred to India. In 2012, both countries launched the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative during the Obama administration. In June 2016, the US entitled India as a 'Major Defense Partner'. In 2016, India and the U.S. inked the Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), and during President Trump's tenure, the defense relationship between the two nations experienced significant growth (Saeed, 2020).

The participation of India in Malabar exercises supported by U.S. in disputed waters of SCS and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island increases the security apprehensions of China. In May 2019, the six-day naval drill with the US, Japan and Philippines to envisage its power and to demonstrate its pivotal role of a 'net security provide' showed India's competition with China in the region. The Chinese ambassador to India, Le Yucheng, expressed grave concerns of his country and urged India to ensure that its trilateral maritime engagements of defense ties with other countries would remain peaceful and stable in the Asia-Pacific region. Despite China's concerns, India continues to demonstrate its presence in the SCS with the full support of the US (Sana, 2020).

The ongoing competition in the SCS underscores the interplay between power politics and geography, which will be having diverse implications. The evident transforming balance in the region, growing contestation for the occupation of maritime resources among regional states, and the dearth of a rule-based order for tackling

security competition is inevitable. The region, thus, represents a unique structure where economic interest, territorial sovereignty, and freedom of navigation as well as plenty of diverse overlapping claims are stimulating some of the profound geostrategic transformations in the global politics. The escalating military capabilities of China have contributed to the geostrategic rivalry in the region. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, consisting of the US, Australia, Japan, and India, was established to promote an open Indo-Pacific region that is essential to the national and strategic interests of these countries. The Quad members are highly concerned about China's activities in the Indo-Pacific and SCS, which pose a significant threat to their democratic values and disrupt sea lanes of communication. The containment of China is the primary topic of discussion among the Quad members (Hindustan Times, 2022)

CONCLUSION

The SCS holds immense importance for India due to a variety of factors. Its significance lies in being a major trade route and rich in natural resources, particularly oil and gas, making it a crucial economic hub for India. The region's strategic value as a communication channel and its impact on regional geopolitical dynamics further underscores India's interest in it. India prioritizes maintaining peace and stability in the region, emphasizing the need for upholding international law and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight. India's collaborations with strategic partners such as Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines who share similar concerns and interests in the SCS, serve to enhance its involvement in the region.

India perceives itself as a key stakeholder in the SCS due to the importance of the region in maintaining its own security. India recognizes the necessity of cooperating with ASEAN countries to resolve SCS disputes and contain China's growing influence. The India-China power struggle will have significant consequences, especially as India seeks to establish its dominance in the SCS. China's

increasing involvement in the Indian Ocean is not exclusive to India, and both countries have security priorities in the region. India seeks to maintain friendly relationships with other countries in the region while pursuing its flourishing trade and maritime activities, which is concerning for China. The ASEAN members welcome India's increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific region, and they see it as a counterweight to China. In short, the SCS is a battleground for the ongoing competition between major global powers, specifically the US and the China. As part of its broader strategy of containing China, the US is likely to support India in the SCS, adding to Beijing's already mounting concerns in the region.

REFERENCES

- Amry, S. (2015). An Analysis of the South China Sea Dispute: Focusing on the Assessment of the Impact of Possible Solutions on the Economies of the Region.
- Barrech, M. (2021). Indian Activism in South China Sea- Implications for peace in East Asia. *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*. Issue Brief.
- Chandran, N. (2017). New Delhi wants to buy US drones to monitor China in the Indian Ocean. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/27/india-news-modi-wants-naval-drones-to-watch-china-in-indian-ocean.html>
- Derek, W. (2015). What China Has Been Building in the South China Sea? *New York Times*, July, 30.
- Deshmukh, C. S. (2020). South China Sea: Perspectives, Challenges and India's Options. *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, 1, 238-263.
- Elapata, D. (2020). India: A Growing Presence in the South China Sea.

- Granados, U. (2018). India's approaches to the South China Sea: Priorities and balances. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 5(1), 122-137.
- Hindustan Times (2022, Jan. 22) The long shadow of sea power and the South China Sea dispute *Hindustan Times*.
- Holmes, J. R., & Yoshihara, T. (2008). China and the United States in the Indian Ocean: an emerging strategic triangle? *Naval War College Review*, 61(3), 40-60.
- Khan, S., & Mohammad, D. (2022). QUAD. A recipe for confrontation or stability? *Journal of Contemporary Studies*, 11,(1).
- Madan, T. (2021). Major power rivalry in south Asia. *JSTOR Security Studies Collection*.
- Miglani, S. (2021). India deploys warships in South China Sea as part of 'Act East' policy. *Reuters*.
- Moulton, T. (2022) Preventing War in the South China Sea. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=10&ModuleId=20562&Article=3111133>
- Orbaiceta, G. (2022). Influence of Alfred Mahan's Doctrine on China's Navy. *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies*
- Parveen, M. (2022). US-China Strategic Competition. *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad. Issue Brief*.
- Raymond, M., & Welch, D. A. (2022). What's Really Going On in the South China Sea? *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 41(2), 214-239.
- Sana, A., & Akhtar, S. (2020). India's 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy: Emerging Sino-Indian Maritime Competition. *Strategic Studies*, 40(3), 1-21.

- Schofield, C. H., & Storey, I. (2009). *The South China Sea dispute: Increasing stakes and rising tensions* (Vol. 24, p. 1). Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation.
- Salleh, A., Permal, S., Vergara, P. L., Son, N. H., & LAKSMANA, E. A. (2021). *The South China Sea: Realities and Responses in Southeast Asia*. New York: Asia Society Policy Institute.
- Sherazi, T. Z., Khan, A., & Khan, H. U. (2020). Great water wall in South China Sea: maritime designs of China under Mahan's theory of sea power. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 4(2), 278-293.
- Saha, P. (2021). India Calibrates Its South China Sea Approach. *Observer Research Foundation, Issue Brief*, (477).
- Sang, H. T. (2022). The Growing Importance of Vietnam to India's South China Sea Policy. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*.
- Saeed, M.A., & Javid, U. (2020). India's naval expansion and strategic partnership with the us in the Indian ocean region: implications for Pakistan. *Margalla Papere* 24 (1), 67-80.
- The Economist (2019, May 19.) India, Singapore conduct naval drill in South China Sea. *The Economic Times*.
- Togo, K. (2013). Territorial Issues in Asia Drivers, Instruments, Ways Forward. 7th Berlin Conference on Asian Security (BCAS) (July 1-2, 2013) by Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), Berlin
- Thakker, A. (2018). A rising India in the Indian Ocean needs a strong Navy. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. Retrieved from https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181017_NewPerspectives_FINAL.pdf.

Victor, E. (2017). *China and the South China Sea. A quest for dominance in global politics*. GRIN Verlag.

Wing, A. (2021, August 25). India conducts joint naval exercise with the Philippines as it seeks to expand South China Sea role, *South China Morning Post*