



# VIETNAM'S INCREASING RELEVANCE TO INDIA'S SOUTH CHINA SEA POLICY

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## ABSTRACT

*Despite China's assertiveness, India has actively participated in the South China Sea (SCS), particularly by expanding its naval presence and building relationships with Vietnam. This essay analyses the pertinent incentives for India's participation in the SCS before looking at the development of three areas of bilateral cooperation between India and Vietnam: defence, economy, and diplomacy. Given their shared concerns over China's escalating maritime coercion, the cooperative initiatives become strategically important in that they help deepen India-Vietnam relations.*

Vietnam is at the top of India's strategic calculations as it attempts to ensconce its geopolitical interests in the South China Sea (SCS). First, their trusting relationship has depended on their long-standing and trouble-free connection, with India's support for Vietnam's anticolonial resistance during its tenacious fight for independence and unification. Second, New Delhi's goal of a secure Southeast Asia has benefited from Vietnam's stance on regional security and its strategy for resolving the SCS issue.

Despite Beijing's threats, New Delhi has stepped up security ties with Hanoi while regional middle powers like South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand have refrained from criticising the SCS and avoided seeking close maritime cooperation with Vietnam out of concern for Chinese retaliation. India has grown more motivated to promote better ties with Vietnam under the Act-East Policy because New Delhi regards Hanoi as a critical fulcrum for its Southeast Asia policy. The cornerstone of Vietnam's efforts to pursue multilateral involvement has become building relationships with conventional and friendly nations. Vietnam, which has acted as a bridge-builder between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, has so fostered India's tighter integration with Southeast Asia (ASEAN). Vietnam would aid India in "expanding its reach beyond the Indian Ocean," according to Pham Sanh Chau, ambassador of Vietnam to India. Both nations hold that ASEAN "[occupies] the central role in any evolving security structure in the region."

This article's major point is that India views Vietnam as the key to extending its influence in the SCS, as seen by its diplomatic, economic, and military efforts. Therefore, encouraging India-Vietnam collaboration on marine security might potentially strengthen the developing middle-power

partnership between the two like-minded nations, attributing a firm stance to China's aggressive posturing in the SCS.

## MOTIVATORS FOR INDIA'S SOUTH CHINA SEA ENGAGEMENT

The expansion of China in the disputed sea, India's utilitarian interests there, and the expanding geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific region are the main causes strengthening India's involvement in the SCS. India has adopted a cautious stance in response to China's growing power, which has prompted India to intervene in order to protect its interests and thwart Beijing's aspirations for hegemony in coastal Southeast Asia. India's interests in the SCS, such as trade connections, freedom of navigation, and a regional order based on rules, have strengthened Indian authorities' commitment to the area. India is also aware of how crucial it is to strengthen its position as a true middle power in the Indo-Pacific region.

## CHINA'S RISE IN A CONFLICTED SEA

The gradual increase of Chinese influence in the SCS since World War II could be summed up as follows: (1) Invasion of the Paracel and Spratly Islands in 1946-1947; (2) Gradual occupation of the Paracel Islands from 1956 to 1974; (3) Occupation of land features (such as islands and rocks) in the Spratly Islands from 1988 to 1995; (4) Pursuit of the policy of "detaining land disputes, exacerbating maritime tensions" from 1996 to 2008; and (5) Multifaceted expansion with a high level of military presence since 2009. The logic behind China's ascent in the SCS is that whenever a power vacuum was apparent, China would seize the opportunity to fill the void and assert its dominance.

"A new phase in the legal struggle over territory and maritime rights in the SCS" began in 2009 when China



unilaterally submitted the Nine-Dash Line map to the UN. China has increased coercive measures against claimant governments starting in 2009, which has increased the possibility of confrontation in the disputed waters. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread, tensions in the SCS increased further as China violated the maritime waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of its neighbours. In short, the reason for the escalating tensions in the SCS is China's irredentist claims to disputed islands and its aggressive behaviour.

India considers China's SCS aggression to be a danger to the balance of power in the region. India has continued to be wary of Chinese intrusion into the SCS since China has long tried to limit India's military presence and cooperation with nearby littoral nations. India would find it difficult to access maritime trade routes and carry out oil and gas development in the sea if China came to dominate the SCS. In addition, given Beijing's naval capabilities, India's long-term economic foothold in Southeast Asia would probably be put to the test.

Border issues between China and India have exacerbated Indians' hostility toward China. 73 percent of Indian respondents to a 2019 Pew survey deemed China's escalating military strength in the SCS to be "a bad thing." Both historical and contemporary factors, particularly "the unique histories governing their formation as modern states, the stark contrasts in their respective political regimes, and their ongoing territorial disputes and geopolitical rivalries," are major determinants of tensions between India and China, whether overt or covert.

### **INDIAN INTERESTS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

In India's SCS interests, freedom of navigation, marine resources, and strategic interests all play a triple role. Since "the SCS is our business," India has taken the stability and security of the SCS seriously. Our historical entitlement to pass through the SCS unhindered has been established by custom and practise. For two thousand years, we have mutually aided in each other's prosperity, according to Vijay Gokhale, a former ambassador of India to China and current minister of foreign affairs. India's access to Southeast Asia, where it has historically maintained maritime relations and deep cultural ties with neighbouring nations, might be severely harmed if freedom of navigation in the SCS is seriously threatened.

The SCS, one of the most significant international shipping routes, supports India's diplomatic and economic ties with Southeast Asian nations. The Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry estimates that India's bilateral commerce with ASEAN economies was \$78.9 billion in 2020–21 and may increase to \$300 billion by 2025. There is still a tonne of room to grow trade and investment between India and ASEAN, particularly in fields like infrastructure, tourism, e-commerce, education and skill development, and pharmaceuticals and healthcare. As a result, the stability and security of the economies of Southeast Asia coincide with the security of the maritime route from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, with the SCS continuing to serve as the focal point.

Since the late 1980s, when ONGC Videsh Limited (ONGC-VL) collaborated with PetroVietnam, India has been working on offshore energy projects in the energy-rich SCS alongside Vietnam (PVN). In the SCS, both sides made the discovery of the two sizable gas fields known as Lan Do and Lan Tay, each with up to 58 billion cubic metres of estimated natural gas reserves and an annual output of two billion cubic metres on average. India's dependence on oil imports increased from 83.8 percent in 2018-19 to 85 percent in 2019-20 as a result of the country's quickly rising consumption and stagnant domestic output. A sizable portion of the country's oil imports came from the United States and Russia. India's energy requirements might be met by the plentiful oil and gas in the SCS, reducing its reliance on imports from the American and Russian markets.

In terms of strategic interests, the SCS is a strategic centre connecting East Asia, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, South Asia, and the Middle East. It is located at the edge of India, where the Pacific and Indian Oceans converge. The SCS serves as a buffer zone that helps stop major powers from attacking India viciously. A strong presence in the SCS could aid India in reducing its reliance on major nations for its stated marine needs. India might maintain its strategic security in the SCS as a "pedal" to increase its strategic influence in the western Pacific in the face of China's increasing coercion. In other words, the SCS uses India's counterbalanced influence against China to fulfil the role of the "Eastern shield."

It is also crucial to recognise that the SCS acts as a strategic entry point to India's Act-East Policy, which demonstrates New Delhi's readiness to pursue tighter political and security alignments as well as economic cooperation with Southeast Asia. In terms of strategy, the SCS aids India in extending its influence and examines its capacity to have a significant impact on Southeast Asia. India views China's expansionist activities in the SCS as endangering its national and regional interests, hence Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes stressed in April 2000 that India's maritime rights extend "from the North of the Arabian Sea to the SCS."

### **INDIA'S VISION FOR THE "INDO-PACIFIC"**

In his keynote speech at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the first time outlined India's vision for the "Indo-Pacific area." Modi advocated for a "free, open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region" in his speech on foreign policy, using the term "Indo-Pacific" 11 times. Additionally, Modi emphasised that ASEAN would continue to be the defining feature of the Indo-Pacific and stated that India's relations with this area would be based on the Hindi letters Sammaan (respect), Samvad (conversation), Sahyog (cooperation), Shanti (peace), and Samridhi (prosperity).

Vietnam showed support for India's pledge to play a stronger part in the Indo-Pacific architecture. Former Vietnamese president Tran Dai Quang praised India's crucial



role and urged India to have a stronger presence in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region in his 2018 defining speech on India-Vietnam relations: “In recent years India’s rise has been closely linked with the prosperity and affluence of Asia as a whole. The peaceful development of India has always contributed significantly and positively to the peace and stability of the region. India certainly deserves to play a bigger part in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region and the rest of the globe given its enormous potential and significant contributions.

India has practical reasons to want to get access to Southeast Asian waterways and help ASEAN members develop their capacities. The core of New Delhi’s Indo-Pacific strategy is centred around these strategic issues. When seen from the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia is India’s “backyard,” while when seen from India, it is the Indian Ocean’s “foyer.” With its expanding maritime role, India has long served as a security provider at the centre of the integrated Indo-Pacific maritime theatre. Under the Modi administration, India’s Act-East Policy—an upgrade from its earlier Look East Policy—has progressively evolved into an Act Indo-Pacific Policy, with the Indo-Pacific region serving as the main point of its engagement with nations in South, Southeast, and East Asia.

Due to China’s naval bases around it in the “string of pearls” that stretches from the Chinese mainland in the Asia-Pacific to the Indian Ocean and even the Middle East, India’s sphere of influence is expected to become increasingly constrained. While China has become engaged in SCS territorial conflicts, India may soon experience the spillover effects of geopolitical unrest. India has maintained cordial ties with neighbouring nations in the Indian Ocean region, which may portend a new arena for rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi. India’s geopolitical and strategic interests in the larger Indo-Pacific, where China has long been caught in an ambiguous position given the expansion of its maritime aspirations, would be seriously threatened by China exercising greater influence outside.

#### **INDIA-VIETNAM MARITIME SECURITY TIES**

Vietnam has consistently supported India’s active participation in the SCS. Vietnam has consistently viewed India as a trustworthy strategic partner and has long regarded the two countries’ relationship as “trusted and cordial.” Vietnam stands out as a focus point in India’s perception because Hanoi is at the geopolitical centre of the Indo-Pacific, whereas India’s physical location in South Asia has always backed itself as a critical component “in the strategic equation around the Indian Ocean.”

#### **FINANCIAL COLLABORATION**

India has a significant economic interest in promoting oil-exploration activities off the coast of Vietnam, with ONGC Videsh Limited involved in oil and gas production alongside PetroVietnam, despite keeping quiet about China’s dominance in the SCS. China, on the other hand, expressed serious concerns over India’s efforts to establish commercial links with Vietnam,

alleging that the two countries’ joint oil and gas development breached China’s legal rights in the SCS. The China Communist Party’s official tabloid, *Global Times*, referred to the India-Vietnam agreement as a significant political provocation in 2011 and asked the Indian government to “use every means necessary to prevent this cooperation from happening.”

India strongly disagreed with China’s position about Vietnam’s offer to conduct oil exploration in maritime areas. Vishnu Prakash, the official spokesperson for the External Affairs Ministry, responded to Beijing’s threat in September 2011 by saying, “Our cooperation with Vietnam, or with any other country for that matter in the globe, is always in accordance with international laws, norms, and agreements.” A harder stance took shape with the signing of the agreement on new investments in oil and gas exploration between ONGC-VL and PVN during the visit of Vietnamese president Truong Tan Sang to India in October of the same year.

Admiral Devendra Kumar Joshi, the head of India’s navy, described the SCS situation as “complicated” and emphasised India’s steadfast commitment to economic resources and freedom of navigation in the disputed waters. Admiral Joshi asserted that anytime India’s interests are at stake—for instance, because ONGC-VL holds three oil exploration blocks there—“we will be compelled to go there and we are prepared for it” against the backdrop of Beijing’s military modernisation in the SCS. State-owned ONGC-VL from India and state-run PVN from Vietnam signed a mutual cooperation agreement “for mutual cooperation for exploration in Blocks 102/10 & 106/10 of PVEP and Block 128 of OVL [ONGC-VL] in offshore Vietnam” despite China’s protests that the exploration of Blocks 127 and 128 violated its territorial rights. A decided decision, the 2014 agreement “made a volte face at the urging of Ministry of External Affairs, which wanted India to extend its presence in [the] SCS,” according to the statement. India demonstrated its will to stand in good favour with Vietnam by remaining committed to increased oil exploration with Vietnam and promoting its readiness for naval combat.

A two-year extension to explore Oil Block 128—part of which is inside China’s so-called Nine-Dash Line—was given to ONGC-VL by Vietnam in July 2017. India’s strategic interest in maintaining its economic presence in the SCS while Vietnam might continue to entangle Indian economic interests with its economic activity in the contentious waters was implied by the fifth extension of the exploration licence. The extension was a calculated strategic choice because the two parties’ interests go much beyond simple business. Increasing oil cooperation could be interpreted as Vietnam’s concrete action to welcome India’s expanding role in the SCS. Vietnam is fostering commercial ties with India “as part of its strategy of seeking many partnerships with big powers while avoiding formal military alliances.”

The core of bilateral economic relations remained oil and gas exploration. In his official meeting with Prime Minister Modi on 2018, Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang urged Indian companies to keep up their oil and gas exploration and



exploitation activities in Vietnam's continental shelf and EEZ. The two nations defined "models for cooperation, including those involving third country" in their joint oil and gas projects that same year for the first time. Vietnam's open attitude toward China may be seen as a direct reaction to Beijing's unreasonable opposition and, to some extent, a subtly counterbalanced action against the latter's maritime aspirations. Despite Beijing's condescending and confrontational acts in Vietnamese waters, India has again demonstrated its commitment to promoting oil and gas exploration with Vietnam.

## DEFENSE AND SECURITY

While understanding the strategic significance of the SCS and their precarious situation in relation to China's ascent to power, India and Vietnam are moving closer together. The two partners have increased their investment in security and defence cooperation along with diplomatic support and energy cooperation. The Defense Protocol signed by India and Vietnam in March 2000, which established a thorough framework for ongoing discussions between the two defence ministers and potential combined naval exercises, marked a turning point in their bilateral defence cooperation. India and Vietnam signed a memorandum of agreement on defence cooperation in November 2009, which aided both nations in strengthening their defence cooperation and fostering delegation interactions.

A mysterious Chinese warship engaged the Indian Naval Ship Airavat in September 2012 while it was leaving Vietnam. The naval threat that China purposefully sparked was the first known run-in between the two navies in the SCS. India's position in the disputed sea was irritated by China's naval assertiveness, which made India more determined to improve maritime ties and interoperability with Vietnam.

The "rise" of China and Its escalating maritime aggressiveness are primarily to blame for the change in India's SCS engagement, as well as "its own evolution via the Indian strategic prism" and "security dynamics" in Southeast Asia. Referring to David Scott's SCS rhetoric, the logic of India-Vietnam relations under the "China threat" was greatly illuminated: "Kautilya's logic also applies for India, his so-called "mandala diplomacy" in which a neighbour (China) is likely to be antagonistic but a neighbour of that neighbour (Vietnam) is likely to be supportive."

Vietnam has been in the vanguard of India's participation in the area, and India remains dedicated to the modernization of Vietnam's defence and security forces, according to Prime Minister Modi's 2014 media statement. This will entail joint exercises, cooperation in the development of defence equipment, and the extension of our training programme, which is already rather extensive. The 100 million dollar Line of Credit that will allow Vietnam to purchase new naval warships from India will be swiftly operationalized. In April 2021, Vietnam launched the second high-speed patrol boat it had constructed with technical and financial support from India. Vietnam is purchasing 12 high-speed patrol boats under the 2014 Extended Line of Credit.

Vietnam received the first patrol boat built in India in December of the previous year.

India has increased its military relations with Vietnam while staying out of the maritime disputes. India participating more actively in the SCS would surely draw China's ire. However, Chinese leaders would undoubtedly view India's decision to end its economic and defence cooperation with Vietnam in response to China's imperiousness because of "its dominance in economic production and a presumed divine entitlement to global dominion" as kowtowing to Beijing's leaders.

Because of India's strategic thinking, which sees Vietnam as "a counterweight in much the same way Pakistan has been for China," Vietnam has long been of strategic significance to India. At the same time, strengthening defence ties and giving Vietnam air and naval capabilities would strengthen India's relationships with the United States because Hanoi and Washington have been developing their relationship. Given that Vietnam is seen by the US as "the most strategically-thinking of all the ASEAN countries," there is a chance that the relationship will improve over the next years.

A strong India-US cooperation can "anchor peace, prosperity, and security from Asia to Africa and from [the] Indian Ocean to the Pacific," as then-US president Donald Trump said in a statement praising the improving ties between the two countries. The alliance between the US and India "can assist [the US] handle a lot of global difficulties," US president Joe Biden stated in September 2021. When New Delhi and Hanoi are acknowledged as "major regional powers" and partners of the United States in the Biden administration's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, India can strengthen its naval cooperation with Vietnam by using Vietnam as the SCS's lynchpin. In addition, in the face of China's confrontational actions, India and Vietnam can potentially forge stronger connections with the United States.

As India's Act-East Policy gained a significant maritime advantage and the two middle powers began to care about the security of sea lanes and China's hegemony over the SCS, defence cooperation between India and Vietnam was given a fresh boost. The Indian Navy favours maritime interactions with Vietnam and has assisted that country in developing the necessary capabilities for maintaining and repairing its defence platforms. Vietnam has received assistance from India in "the acquisition of weapons and military gear, capacity building, and collaboration in the area of warship building and repair." At 2011, the Indian Navy offered Vietnam berthing rights in the port of Nha Trang in exchange for access to naval training and capacity-building facilities.

India has become one of Vietnam's major defence suppliers after recent gains. By starting a number of military contracts, India has strengthened its military ties with Vietnam. A \$100 million Defense Line of Credit, which was implemented by New Delhi, assisted in the construction of 12 high-speed patrol boats for the Vietnam Border Guard Force. The two





nations have been working hard to strengthen their defence connections as indicated by the security cooperation to “improve coastal security and deter illegal activities.” Essentially, India’s contributions to maritime security show a soft alignment between the two like-minded states.

Given China’s increasing aggressive activities toward Vietnam in the SCS, naval cooperation between India and Vietnam remains essential. The Indian Navy and the Vietnam People’s Navy conducted the second edition of their bilateral naval exercises off the coast of Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, over a four-day practise period in April 2019, following the first exercise held near Da Nang in May 2018. A composite training programme in submarine, aircraft, and dockyard training was part of the navy-to-navy collaboration, which boosted interoperability and exchanged best practises from both sides.

Due to the expanding bilateral relationship, the Vietnamese government has invited Indian ships to make yearly visits to some of Vietnam’s main ports, including Dinh Vu (Hai Phong City), Tien Sa (Da Nang City), Sai Gon (Ho Chi Minh City), and Nha Trang (Khanh Hoa Province). Regular trips to Vietnam by Indian naval officers have strengthened India’s maritime commitment and increased Indian presence in the SCS.

India “has not taken a strong posture against Chinese intimidation attempts,” despite the SCS being clearly “a neutral navigation field outside the sovereign bounds of the littoral countries.” India’s role in maintaining the international system of rules-based order at sea has so far developed to include transferring defence equipment and weaponry to Vietnam.

India and Vietnam have been in talks since 2014 over the potential of Vietnam buying Indian Brahmos and Akash missile systems, but India is now no closer to giving either missile system to Vietnam out of concern for upsetting China. There are many causes for this deficiency. One reason is that money has not been agreed upon between India and Vietnam, and another is that Vietnam may decide to purchase the Brahmos cruise missile from Russia rather than India. However, Russia’s relations with Beijing, which has increasingly served as its ally against the West, could be harmed by the potential export of the Brahmos medium-range missile to Vietnam. This is especially true in light of Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine. As of now, New Delhi and Hanoi have exercised good judgement by keeping their discussions private rather than allowing public audiences to learn about their intentions.

## CONCLUSION

The extremely ambitious Act-East Policy and the advent of the Indo-Pacific vision in Indian strategic thought have given India’s SCS engagement a justification in order to protect its interests and counterbalance China’s expanding military might. China’s expanding influence in the SCS and abroad has made India more vulnerable to threats and difficulties. As China is determined to transform the SCS into its “internal lake” and has openly taken advantage of the weakness or patience of big powers to irritate its neighbours, regional security can barely be

maintained. It turned out to be a foolish move for former US president Barack Obama to accept Chinese president Xi Jinping’s 2015 pledge that China would never militarise the SCS. India could therefore start over by playing a counterbalancing role in the sea that China has long regarded as its sole fishing ground.

India and Vietnam have been watching China’s hard-power projection over their shoulders, which could push both nations into a unified front to address their shared concerns. Examples of the continuous honest and solid connection that stand out are the development of India-Vietnam cooperation in the area of SCS security, the persistence in oil and gas exploration and exploitation, and the improvement of Vietnam’s military power. However, the two countries should refrain from “a direct confrontation” with Beijing and instead encourage the SCS’s expansion of like-minded nations like the US, Japan, and Australia.

India should closely coordinate with Vietnam to strengthen deterrence and defence against China with an eye toward the security of the SCS, and it should tie maritime challenges posed by China to its long-term interests. By holding combined naval drills, India, a historic middle power, and Vietnam, a developing middle power, could further adopt a more resolute strategy. Participating in marine discussions and naval drills with “joint role[s] in regional decision making, expanding maritime connectivity, and focusing on efforts toward maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific” could potentially strengthen India and Vietnam’s relationship. Vietnam’s defensive capability could be improved by combined marine operations with India while Hanoi’s defence costs are reduced.

In response to China’s escalating hostility, a strengthened India-Vietnam alliance might give Beijing the message it needs to hear. First, strengthening relations between India and Vietnam during China’s maritime aggressiveness demonstrates India’s desire to increase its involvement in the SCS. Second, Vietnam is expected to continue seeking closer defence connections with nations that share its views, with India serving as a prime example. Growing bilateral connections create the possibility of a strengthened alliance between India and Vietnam, which Chinese leaders must take into account before stepping up their presence in the SCS.

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