

India as a Middle Power in the South China Sea Dispute

This paper examines India's approach towards the South China Sea dispute and the role it can play as a middle power in the region.

Introduction

The South China Sea dispute today is the most volatile hotspot in the Asian maritime domain. While the territorial dispute is between six sovereign nations, developments in these crucial commercial and strategic waters have drawn attention from the global community. The dispute stands at a critical junction in the Asian security order, with the Permanent court of Arbitration (PCA) issuing a judgment on the matter and China's refusal to acknowledge the ruling. Beijing took a strong stand against the ruling, claiming "China solemnly declares that the award is null and void and has no binding force. China neither accepts nor recognizes it."

The events following this judgment will feed into the discourse on emerging security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, setting precedence for future dispute resolutions and norms of behaviour. Beijing's disregard for international law in international waters takes the dispute out of the region and places it at a global level. While the territorial disputes remain a concern only for the involved parties, what happens in the South China Sea now concerns every nation in consensus with the validity of the UN. It matters to every nation whose interests lie in upholding international rules and norms and, more importantly, in reaffirming a security order that respects consensus as opposed to unilateral changes.

As the environment in the SCS grows increasingly hostile, managing tensions in these waters has become crucial. This essay examines India's approach towards the South China Sea dispute and the role it can play as a middle power in the region. The paper argues that New Delhi's stance on the issue has gone through prominent changes under the leadership of Narendra Modi in line with India's changing outlook on maritime security as a whole. The first section examines India's approach towards the South China Sea, underlining the changes in its policies. The second section explores the role of a middle power and New Delhi's contribution in stabilising the situation. The conclusion briefly suggests further avenues for cooperation that would establish a constructive role for New Delhi in its relationship with Southeast Asia.

India's changing approach

During the UPA government in India (2004–14), New Delhi's approach to competing claims on regions of the South China Sea was to maintain distance from the territorial disputes. This was in line with India's policy of non-interference in the affairs of other sovereign nations, which is how it perceived the issue. On the matter of freedom of navigation New Delhi's position has been clear: international waters must remain free and open to facilitate global trade. As far as disputes on international waters are concerned, they must be resolved directly by the parties involved and in accordance with international rules and norms. In essence, New Delhi saw little to no role to play in the simmering South China Sea dispute, heightened by the advent of the Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012. In the final East Asian Summit the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, encapsulated India's approach: "A stable maritime environment is essential to realize our

collective regional aspirations. We should reaffirm the principles of maritime security, including the right of passage and unimpeded commerce, in accordance with international law, and peaceful settlement of maritime disputes.”

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014 under the NDA government, India’s views on the South China Sea have remained the same except in one area: New Delhi’s role in stabilising the region. The Modi government saw a role and responsibility as a regional power to contribute towards maintaining peace and security in international waters. While the new government was still debating the level of engagement and the role it was willing to play, opinions began to emerge in speeches and remarks in the top leadership. At his first India–ASEAN summit as Prime Minister (PM), Modi emphasised India’s position of maintaining international law: “We all have the responsibility that we all follow international law and norms on maritime issues, as we do in the realm of air passage.” Modi’s remarks were an indication of the new willingness of the Indian state to play its part in negotiations. While India’s stand on the matter remains the same – i.e., no interference in the affairs of other sovereign nations, and that disputes must be resolved in accordance with international law – its voice on the issue since 2014 has grown more strident. At the same India–ASEAN summit, Modi initiated the “Act East Policy”, the second phase of the Look East Policy launched in the early 1990s.

Gradually, the South China Sea began to feature in India’s bilateral discussion with other nations and at regional forums. During Modi’s first visit to the United States (US) in 2014 as the PM, the joint statement mentioned the South China Sea – “The leaders expressed concern about rising tensions over maritime territorial disputes, and affirmed the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea.” When Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited India in 2014, he thanked Modi for India’s “position regarding the East Sea issue and India’s continued cooperation with Vietnam in oil and gas exploration and extraction in the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of Vietnam in the East Sea.” With the Philippines, New Delhi did not hesitate to refer to the South China Sea as the West Philippine Sea, Manila’s preferred term.

Without changing the core of its position, New Delhi under Modi managed to transform its approach into a more engaged and supportive policy. This change aligns with India’s own shift in its maritime outlook as well as its increased willingness to play an active role in the region. Maritime security under Modi has become a priority driven largely by his Foreign Secretary, Dr. S. Jaishankar. The current leadership has been able to recognise the role cooperation in maritime security can play in New Delhi’s foreign affairs. Additionally, this leadership has also taken into consideration the changing security environment in the Asia-Pacific, leading to a revision of its maritime outlook. In the last two years, New Delhi has taken a number of steps to engage with its neighbouring states and partners on maritime security. India is renewing its commitments with old partners, prioritising areas of concern, and strengthening its bilateral relationships. The Indian Ocean region was always a priority for the Indian Navy, but now it is also reflected in New Delhi’s foreign policy. Modi is paying special attention to India’s neighbourhood, emphasising New Delhi’s commitment to the region.

...

Darshana M. Baruah is a research analyst with Carnegie India. Her primary research focuses on maritime security in Asia with a focus on the Indian Navy and its role in a new security architecture.

The paper was presented at the Conference: "The South China Sea in the Broader Maritime Security of the Indo-Pacific Conference", 28-30 September 2016, Canberra, Australia. This conference is co-organized by UNSW Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV), and the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA).

Click [here](#) for full text.