



INDIA AND SOUTH CHINA SEA - GS II MAINS

Q. discuss india's evolving foreign policy towards the south china sea and its implications for regional security and strategic alliances. (15 marks, 250 words)

News: india's nuanced approach in the south china sea

what's in the news?

- india's external affairs minister expressed full support for the philippines' sovereignty during his visit to manila in march 2024.
- this support comes amidst the ongoing south china sea dispute between the philippines and china.

key takeaways:

- recent joint statements between india and philippines reflect a departure from india's previous cautious and neutral stance on the south china sea.
- a 2023 joint statement called for china to adhere to maritime rules and respect the 2016 icj ruling in favour of the philippines.

south china sea:

- located in southeast asia, the south china sea is a branch of the western pacific ocean.
- bordered by **china, vietnam, the philippines, malaysia, brunei, indonesia, singapore, and taiwan (roc)**.
- notable features include the paracel islands, spratly islands, and scarborough shoal.



significance of south china sea:



1. geopolitical significance:

- vital link between the indian ocean and the pacific ocean via the strait of malacca.
- one-third of global shipping, valued in trillions, traverses its waters annually.
- rich marine biodiversity supports southeast asian fisheries, ensuring regional food security.
- estimated vast oil and gas reserves beneath its seabed attract economic interest.

2. strategic importance:

- crucial for international trade, serving as a major transit route for energy supplies to key economies like the u.s., japan, and south korea.
- geopolitical tensions arise due to territorial disputes among neighbouring countries.
- high traffic volume underscores its status as one of the world's busiest waterways.

Ongoing disputes in south china sea (scs):

1. disputes over sovereignty:

- in the northern part of the scs, china, taiwan, and vietnam contest sovereignty of the paracel islands.
 - china has occupied them since 1974.
- in the southern part of the sea, china, taiwan, and vietnam each claim all of the approximately 200 spratly islands, while brunei, malaysia, and the philippines, claim some of them.
- in the eastern part of the sea, china, taiwan, and the philippines claim scarborough shoal; china has controlled it since 2012.
- china's "nine-dash line" and taiwan's similar "eleven-dash line" overlap with the theoretical 200 nautical-mile (nm) exclusive economic zones (eezs) that five southeast asian countries - brunei, indonesia, malaysia, the philippines, and vietnam could claim from their mainland coasts under the 1994 united nations convention on the law of the sea (unclos).

2. dispute over freedom of the seas:

- the united states and most other countries interpret unclos as giving coastal states the right to regulate economic activities within their eezs, but not the right to regulate navigation and overflight through the eez, including by military ships and aircraft.
- china holds the minority view that unclos allows them to regulate both economic activity and foreign militaries' navigation and overflight through their eezs.
 - unclos allows state parties to claim 12-nm territorial seas and 200-nm eezs around their coastlines and "naturally formed" land features that can "sustain human habitation."

3. dangerous encounters at sea:

- the u.s. and other governments have accused prc military and non-military ships and aircraft of conducting unsafe manoeuvres in and over the scs that put other regional actors at risk.
- the u.s. the department of defense (dod) reported a "sharp increase in unsafe and unprofessional behaviour" by prc military ships and aircraft in 2021-2022.

4. tensions between china and other claimants:



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- over the past decade, tensions escalated notably between china and the philippines. in 2013, following a confrontation at scarborough shoal, the philippines initiated arbitration under unclos against china's actions in the scs.
- in 2016, an unclos arbitral tribunal ruled that china's nine-dash line claim lacked legal basis and that china violated the philippines' sovereign rights by interfering with philippine vessels and engaging in reclamation work in the philippines' eez.

5. china's artificial islands:

- from 2013 to 2015, china conducted extensive land reclamation in the spratly island chain, creating approximately five square miles of artificial landmasses on disputed sites.
- china militarised these outposts, deploying advanced missile systems and military infrastructure, surpassing other claimants' reclamation efforts in scale and militarization.

6. dismantled regional cooperation:

- china and asean have been negotiating a code of conduct for the scs since 2002. however, progress has been hindered, with observers alleging that china's prolonged negotiations aim to consolidate its position in the region.

stand of India with respect to south china sea:

1. change in india's position:

- in july 2016, after an arbitral tribunal ruled on the philippines' case against china's actions in the south china sea, india merely acknowledged the award, avoiding taking sides to maintain neutrality.
- however, in 2020, india shifted its stance, emphasising the importance of peaceful dispute resolution and adherence to international law, marking a departure from its previous neutral position.

2. joint military exercises:

- in may 2019, the indian navy conducted joint exercises with the u.s., japanese, and philippine navies in the south china sea, followed by exercises with several other countries in subsequent years.
- india's participation in joint exercises with asean states in may 2023 marked a significant milestone in its engagement in the region.

3. increased military cooperation:

- india has augmented its military cooperation with countries like the philippines and vietnam, exemplified by the export of 100 brahmos missiles in january 2022 to the philippines.
- in june 2023, the delivery of a light missile frigate to vietnam (became the first country to buy from india).

4. complex relationship with china:



- india's evolving stance on the south china sea is intertwined with its complex relationship with china, marked by long standing border disputes and periodic tensions, including incursions into indian territory and recent border clashes like the galwan valley incident of 2020.

Reasons for India's shift in south china sea policy:

1. strategic importance of southeast asia:

- india views southeast asia as a crucial gateway to the indian ocean, with strategic interests, freedom of navigation, and access to oil and gas resources driving its expanded involvement.
- concerns about potential escalation of tensions in the south china sea, threatening india's dominance in the indian ocean, have prompted increased indian presence in the region.

2. look act-east policy:

- india's transition from the look east policy to the act east policy underscores a strategic shift towards more active engagement in the indo-pacific region.
- this policy evolution reflects india's recognition of the evolving geopolitical landscape and the need for proactive foreign policy, emphasising economic integration, strategic partnerships, and security cooperation.

3. trade security:

- with half of its foreign trade passing through the malacca strait, india prioritises free and secure navigation in the south china sea to safeguard its trade interests.
- despite lacking maritime disputes with china or asean countries, india's intervention in the south china sea issue is driven by the imperative of trade security.

4. energy resource diversification:

- indian state-owned enterprises, such as ongc videsh, engage in oil and gas exploration projects in vietnam's eezs, reflecting india's economic interests and support for freedom of maritime resource exploration.
- this diversification of energy resources aligns with india's commitment to international law, particularly unclos, in the face of regional tensions.

5. alignment with the united states:

- india finds common cause with the united states in the indo-pacific, as both countries share interests in promoting a rule-based world order and countering china's dominance in the south china sea.
- membership in the quad underscores this alignment, strengthening india's resolve to engage in south china sea disputes.

6. responsibility as an indo-pacific stakeholder:

- india's centrality in the indo-pacific requires it to take clear positions on critical issues, moving beyond its traditional focus on the indian ocean.



- as a responsible stakeholder, india supports asean centrality and endeavours to bolster regional stability despite internal differences within the asean grouping.

way forward:

1. india's strategic calculations in the south china sea:

- india's deepening trade, investment, and defence ties with asean nations incentivize it to assert its regional ambitions through involvement in the south china sea disputes.
- by taking a more active stance, india aims to complicate and internationalise the disputes, potentially altering the regional dynamics.

2. countering china's border advantages:

- india perceives its increased involvement in the south china sea as a means to offset china's advantages along the sino-indian border.
- following the galwan valley clashes in may 2020, india has intensified its engagement in the south china sea, viewing it as a strategic lever to restrain china's strengths along the border.

3. collaboration with the united states:

- india anticipates support from the united states to intervene in south china sea disputes, leveraging ongoing tensions between china and the u.s.
- with stable relations between india and china uncertain in the aftermath of border conflicts, india seeks to capitalize on opportunities for collaboration with the u.s. to counterbalance china's regional influence.

4. fostering dialogue:

- asean leaders should seek a political solution through quiet diplomacy, recognizing the limitations of legal methods.
- greater understanding among asean nations is crucial to conveying a unified message to china.

5. india's advocacy for a rules-based international maritime order:

- india's emphasis on a rules-based international maritime order, particularly unclos, challenges unilateral actions threatening regional stability.
- it positions india as a responsible stakeholder committed to regional security.

thus, india's escalating involvement in the south china sea may unsettle china, yet it faces constraints due to lacking strong alliances and military presence compared to the united states. india's primary focus remains on maintaining dominance in the indian ocean rather than supplanting china in the south china sea. despite aligning more closely with the philippines and the u.s. india aims to avoid provoking china, constrained by its traditional nonaligned stance and strategic autonomy.