



International Relations in Southeast Asia

INDIA'S STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Tridib Chakraborti and Mohor Chakraborty



India's Strategy in the South China Sea

The tensions in the South China Sea pose considerable challenges to the rules-based liberal international maritime order. The situation demonstrates the interplay between maritime nationalism and geostrategic rivalry; fuelling militarisation and endangering freedom of navigation, over-flight and exploitation of natural resources. China's dedicated "terraclaims", land reclamation and island-building spree – enhanced with military surveillance, communications and logistics infrastructure-building in the form of port facilities, military installations and airstrips – have escalated these tensions. China declares that these territories are an integral part of its "core interests", taking an uncompromising stance on the question of sovereignty and its determination to protect the domain militarily. India, although not a South China Sea littoral state, sees both the general principle of the rules-based order and the specific issue of navigation between the Indian and Pacific Oceans as core to its own national interest.

Chakraborti and Chakraborty assess the rationale and implications of India's strategies and responses *vis-à-vis* the South China Sea dispute, and their impact on its overall "Act East" initiative in Southeast Asia policy. They also analyse the implications of India's stance on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), five member-states of which (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam) are involved in territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. The analysis focuses on the administrative tenures of both the United Progressive Alliance from 2004 until 2014 and the National Democratic Alliance from 2014 onwards.

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Foreword by Sudhir T. Devare

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Chakraborti, Tridib, 1956- author. | Chakraborty, Mohor, author.

Title: India's strategy in the South China sea / Tridib Chakraborti, Mohor Chakraborty.

Description: First. | New York : Routledge, 2020. |

Series: International relations in Southeast Asia |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019047493 (print) | LCCN 2019047494 (ebook) | ISBN 9780367136772 (hardback) | ISBN 9780429027994 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: South China Sea--International status. | South China Sea--Strategic aspects-. | India--Foreign relations--Southeast Asia. | Southeast Asia--Foreign relations--India. | Maritime boundaries--China.

Classification: LCC KZA1692 .C43 2020 (print) |

LCC KZA1692 (ebook) | DDC 327.54059--dc23

LC record available at <https://ccn.loc.gov/2019047493>

LC ebook record available at <https://ccn.loc.gov/2019047494>

ISBN: 978-0-367-13677-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-02799-4 (ebk)

Dedicated to my parents, my brothers, Sri Prabir Chakraborty and Dr. Anirban Chakraborty; my sisters, the late Pragati Chakraborty and Smt. Srabani Chakraborty; and my wife, Dr. Paramita Bhattacharjee.

Dr. Tridib Chakraborti

Dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, Sri Krishna Chandra Chakraborty, Smt. Suhashini Chakraborty, Sri Pashupati Nath Banerjee and Smt. Anita Banerjee, and my father-in-law, Sri Priyatosh Roy Chowdhury.

Dr. Mohor Chakraborty

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Acknowledgements

In writing this book, we have received valuable counsel and motivation from a host of people and institutions, and we take this opportunity to express our whole-hearted gratitude to all of them.

We are especially indebted to Ambassador Sudhir T. Devare, Former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, for consenting to write the Foreword of this book, which has added immense value to our work.

We are also grateful to the Staff and Officials of the major libraries in New Delhi and Kolkata for their valuable support and academic assistance. We would like to extend our gratitude to the staff and library staff of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore for their help, guidance and support. We would also like to express our thanks for the editorial assistance and support provided by the Routledge team (Social Sciences), and their encouragement at every step of this endeavour has been a rewarding experience.

This acknowledgement would remain incomplete without extending our heartfelt thanks to our family members for their encouragement and support. Finally, we would like to thank the Almighty for arming us with the spirit, health, tenacity and intellectual capability to successfully bring this book to fruition.

Professor (Dr.) Tridib Chakraborti and Dr. Mohor Chakraborty

Foreword

From ancient times the seas east of India have beckoned the seafarers, sages, princes and traders from India. The existence of India's extensive footprint in Southeast and East Asia even today is a testimony to the longstanding connection that India has had with this region. In the post-World War period if the country's interest in the East appeared to have declined it was largely due to the geopolitical equations which developed as a result of the alliance arrangements of the rival great powers in the Asia-Pacific with which India had chosen not to be associated.

Since the end of the Cold War the situation in this region has undergone a remarkable transformation. While the US naval presence in the western Pacific and its alliance structures with countries like Japan, South Korea, Thailand and Australia remain in force the rise of China and the rapid modernisation and expansion of its armed forces has introduced a significantly new factor in the dynamics of the region. For the past decade or so, China, which for long had chosen not to concentrate on or to highlight its disputes with Japan on the Senkaku islands in the East Sea or with the five states – Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan on the South China Sea (SCS) islands and the sea itself, has been addressing the SCS as one of the three national "core interests". With its ongoing Maritime Silk Road project (as a part of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative) the Chinese are expected to give even closer attention to it. For over a decade now the standoff between China and the five claimant states, especially Vietnam and the Philippines, has cast a shadow of great concern for security and peace not only over the SCS but beyond in the Asia-Pacific. The western Pacific is once again a zone of much tension and therefore cause of concern not only to the littoral states but to the neighbouring countries like India which has huge political, strategic and economic interests in the stability of the region.

How does India look at the situation in the SCS and what are India's plans and strategies to help maintain security in this area? The SCS is a waterway of critical importance. An estimated US\$5 trillion of international trade passes through this water body. It is a vital sea-lane for India as well as over 50 per cent of its sea-borne trade passes through this sea. In view of this a situation of tension in the SCS acquires significance even as the global centre of gravity is seen to be steadily shifting to the East and India's own presence in the newly designated Indo-Pacific is being increasingly recognised and respected. The topicality and anxiety that the developments in the region evoke have therefore a clear bearing on India's own policy to the East and inevitably profound implications. This has very aptly led the scholars, Prof. Tridib Chakraborti and Dr. Mohor Chakraborty from Kolkata to come up with a detailed analysis of the whole issue and a discussion on the possible strategic response and policy options for India. As described by them it is indeed a case study of the challenges to the liberal rules-based maritime order for which no ready solution seems in sight. A comprehensive discussion on the subject was therefore a timely need which happily the two experienced academics have taken up.

The issue, namely, the claims of individual states on the littoral of the SCS, China's aggressive and assertive stand of declaring the whole water body as its own (in open defiance of world opinion) and consequent reclamation and militarisation of the islands is outlined in full detail. The political fall-out within ASEAN is already manifest in a serious threat to the unity and centrality of this regional grouping, which the authors have highlighted in their book. How this delicate question can impact on India's own geostrategic and economic interests and what strategies India needs to adopt to deal with this challenge needs careful examination. In analysing India's position, it is also instructive to see whether there is any scope for a broad consensus with ASEAN, the US or Japan. The Indo-US Joint Statement in 2014, the US National Defence Strategy (2018) and the re-designation of the Asia-Pacific as Indo-Pacific, the Japanese Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (2016), the explicit reference to the SCS issue in the India-US-Japan Trilateral (2015) and the India-ASEAN Joint Statement at the Commemorative Summit in January, 2018 all seem to point towards it.

The vast asymmetry between India and China as indeed between ASEAN and China in their gross domestic product or defence spending poses the question whether India or ASEAN can adopt a strategy to deal with China's defiant and arbitrary stand on the SCS issue and equally importantly will be able to sustain it. Despite their economic or military weakness *vis-à-vis* China a number of countries in Southeast Asia have voiced their strong opposition to the latter on the SCS issue. Indonesia has declared a 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone north of their Natuna Islands as the North Natuna Sea. India, which believes that it can act as a security provider and a responsible player in the Indo-Pacific, will have to find various ways in which to address the challenge of China's claim. The authors have referred to India's possible approaches of "external balancing" and "internal balancing". External balancing is suggested to involve forging regional security mechanisms with regional navies and strengthening and supporting relevant institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM+), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Maritime Forum, etc. as well as regular maritime and Coast Guard multilateral meetings like MILAN, MALABAR, etc.

The "internal balancing" on the other hand would involve building India's defence capabilities including implementing the Make in India programme with regard to defence equipment and weaponry.

India's response and strategy to the SCS issue could take into account the following.

1. India's maritime security has come into greater and sharper focus in recent years. During the time of Prime Minister Vajpayee's term, the arc of India's maritime security was defined as the one extending from the Gulf of Aden in the west to the Strait of Malacca in the east. The Naval Doctrine brought out in this regard affirms it. This arc has now been further extended to include the SCS in the east and the Persian Gulf and the southern Indian Ocean including the east African coast. For the Indian Navy this whole region is of direct and utmost consequence. The maritime activities of the Navy, including visits to the countries on the littoral, exercises with the navies of these countries and overall cooperation and friendly relations with these countries are therefore an essential part of their natural responsibility.
2. The Chinese position on the SCS of declaring a nine-dash line in the SCS and calling the entire sea and the islands in it their own has been strongly contested by the claimant states. The Philippines took the case of the Chinese intransigence on the issue to the UN. Even after the verdict of the UN-sponsored Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in July 2016 China has refused to give up its assertion of the nine-dash line and the ownership of the entire Sea. This is seen by the claimant states (as well by most ASEAN members) as an open threat to the freedom of navigation and overflights in clear violation of the international law on the seas. For India, which believes in open navigation and uninterrupted trade in the seas and which has had joint venture oil and natural gas projects with Vietnam in the SCS for nearly two decades, the Chinese arbitrary contention cannot be acceptable. India's decision to join with the US, Japan and Australia in setting up the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) clearly reflects its assessment and future approach towards freedom of navigation and adherence to the international norms in the SCS. This grouping is not a military alliance or a confrontational outfit of any kind but essentially the coming together of like-minded countries which subscribe to the principle of open seas to establish a cooperative response.
3. India's strategic view of the SCS issue also needs to keep in mind the pressures that the dispute has brought upon the member-states of ASEAN and how the very basis of ASEAN unity and its centrality in the ASEAN-led dialogue processes in the East is being eroded. It was noteworthy that in 2012 the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting ended without even a communiqué on this issue. For India the very core of its engagement and Act East policy is the strength and integrity of ASEAN. India can ill-afford to see ASEAN weakening on account of the differences within ASEAN on the SCS question. India should therefore welcome the ongoing negotiations between ASEAN and China to evolve a Code of Conduct (COC) to replace the Declaration of Conduct (DOC). The negotiations which started in August 2017 following a framework agreement are now believed to have arrived at a draft text though there is no indication if and when the CoC will be concluded.
4. The recent re-designation of the Asia-Pacific Ocean as the Indo-Pacific Ocean should be seen as a development with a clear meaning for most

countries bordering this vast oceanic space. The recognition of the strategic integrity of the Pacific and Indian Oceans brings in its wake the need for countries to resolve their disputes through discussions and negotiations. It is also hoped that the East Sea, the SCS and the Indian Ocean will see greater exchanges and cooperation in the future. As a centrally located maritime state, India should be playing a direct and major role as expressed in the Indian Prime Minister's concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). It is for this reason India's approach of "inclusiveness" for dealing with the maritime issues of the Indo-Pacific was projected at the Shangrila Dialogue in Singapore in 2018.

5. India's primary response to the SCS issue should be in the form of its enhanced cooperation with ASEAN – in the three areas identified by both, namely, commerce, connectivity and culture. A stronger India-ASEAN relationship would enable ASEAN states to deal with the SCS issue with greater confidence and effectiveness.

In the six chapters that Prof. Tridib Chakraborti and Dr. Mohor Chakraborty have included in their book they have covered all aspects of the issue, namely, the genesis and canvas of the issue, China's intractable stand, India's interests, India's strategy and military response and the positions of President Trump and Prime Minister Abe.

India's foreign policy will be strongly influenced by the developments in the Indo-Pacific in the coming years in which the SCS issue could be a dominant aspect. It is therefore essential to have an in-depth study of the Indian perspective on the subject. This book will be an excellent and extremely useful reference or textbook for students, research scholars, practitioners of international relations and all those interested in India's profile abroad, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

Sudhir T. Devare
Former Secretary,
Ministry of External Affairs,
Government of India
May 17, 2019