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Geopolitics of South China Sea, China's Interest and India's Strategic Response

SHRIRAM¹ AND UDAYA KUMAR GIRI²

ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century diplomatic world, the foreign policy of a nation, security, and survivability of the world not only limits on territorial land but extends towards the sea and ocean, that is why most of the major countries in the world focus on ocean diplomacy. As Robert Kaplan has rightly argued that the sea has always been an essential and integral component of human civilization, and this appears to be much more accurate in East Asia because of life in this particular region centred on its huge maritime world. So he rightly stated that while Europe is a landscape on the other hand East Asia is a seascape. In this premise, The South China Sea (SCS) has become a significant area of geopolitical contestation, as it is rich in natural resources, strategically located, and home to disputed territories. China's forceful moves in the SCS region in the way of Island construction and maritime territorial claims have become a major concern for India as well as Major World powers. As India seeks to expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific, it has also developed an increasing interest in the SCS due to economic, strategic, and security considerations. It is because the energy resources, maritime trade routes, security concerns, regional alliances, and great power competition pushes to the two mighty powers of Asia to involve in this ocean. So, in this premise, this paper tries to examine the geopolitical importance of the SCS region with a specific focus on the interest of India and China. This paper further tries to analyze India's strategy to counter the Chinese hegemony in this region and its concern for regional stability. Hence in this paper qualitative research design such as historical, analytical, and descriptive methods will be used and Data will be Collected from both Primary and Secondary sources.

Keywords: South China Sea, Strategy, Regional Stability, Hegemony, Ocean Diplomacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is a semi-enclosed water body that is partially confined and is surrounded by many nations including ASEAN countries. It is a critical waterway through which trillions of dollars worth of trade flows annually, making it a significant geopolitical and economic

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hotspot. It holds significant geopolitical importance due to its strategic location, abundant natural resources, and crucial maritime trade routes. China claims almost the entire SCS under its controversial "*Nine-Dash Line*" which extends far beyond its recognized territorial waters and overlaps with the exclusive economic zones of other countries(Hagan, 1942). This expansive claim has been a major point of contention, as it directly challenges the sovereignty and maritime rights of neighboring states. The competing territorial claims in the Sea have led to various disputes, including the Spratly Islands dispute and the Paracel Islands dispute, among others. These disputes have resulted in heightened tensions, diplomatic conflicts, and occasional military confrontations between the countries involved(Yang, 2015).

Robert Kaplan has rightly argued that the sea has always been an essential and integral component of human civilization, and this appears to be much more accurate in East Asia because of life in this particular region centered on its huge maritime world. so he rightly stated that while Europe is a landscape on the other hand East Asia is a seascape(Lyon, 2010). As history demonstrates, western domination was primarily feasible due to their maritime achievements. After centuries of colonization by colonial powers, South East Asian countries are gradually solidifying economic success. There is a widespread conviction that the twenty-first century will be the era of Asia and that South East Asia will play a significant role in this great power shift (Darshan, 2005). The SCS has played a fundamental influence in this consideration. The SCS is critical not just for East Asia but for the entire world, as it is the only maritime communication path between the Indian-Pacific Oceans. The SCS, an area of immense geopolitical importance, has garnered significant attention due to China's assertiveness in the region. China's interest in the SCS extends beyond territorial claims, and it is driven by a combination of strategic, economic, and security factors(Reeves, 2019). In this region, Oil, natural gas, and fisheries are abundant which are essential to China's expanding economy. By gaining control over these resources, China aims to reduce its dependency on external suppliers and ensure long-term economic stability. Furthermore, the SCS holds significant strategic value due to its critical shipping lanes. It serves as a major trade route, facilitating the transportation of goods between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. By exerting control over the region, China can enhance its maritime influence, safeguard its trade routes, and project power beyond its immediate borders.

India, despite being geographically distant, has displayed a keen interest in the region. India's interest in the SCS stems from its pursuit of regional stability, safeguarding its maritime trade routes, and countering China's expanding influence. By actively engaging in the region, India seeks to safeguard its economic and security interests, foster strategic partnerships, and promote a rules-based order(Singh, 2012). However, the complex geopolitical dynamics and the rivalry with China pose challenges for India's involvement. So, in this premise, this paper will further

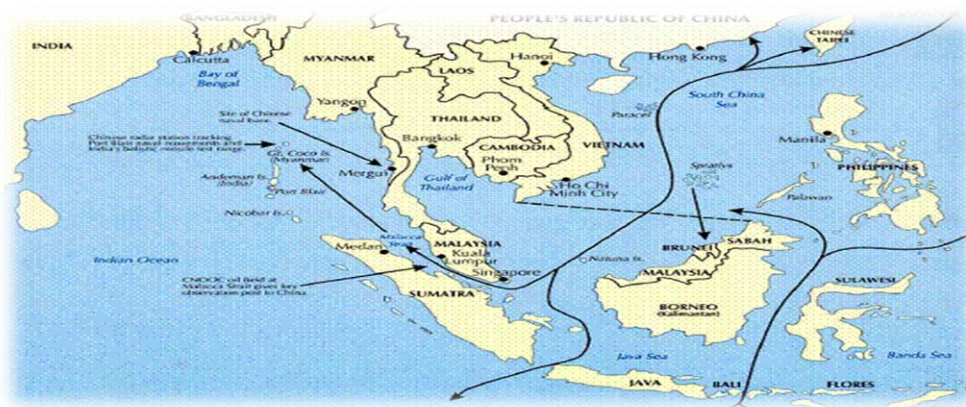
discuss the core objectives in the following phases.

(A) Methodology

This paper tries to analyze the Geopolitical importance of the South China Sea by analyzing its historical, geographical, political, and economic importance. This paper further examines both India and China's interest in this region and analyzes India's strategy to counter Chinese hegemony and promote stability in the South China Sea. So, this paper based on the qualitative research design, especially the descriptive, analytical, and historical research methods will be used. In this paper, both primary and secondary data are used. The primary source includes data from the Ministry of External Affairs, IMF and Secondary data source includes books, Journal article, Newspaper article, Periodicals, etc.

II. GEOPOLITICS OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

SCS, a vast body of water nestled between Southeast Asia and East Asia, holds immense geopolitical significance. Its strategic location, abundance of natural resources, vital shipping routes, and overlapping territorial claims have made it a focal point of international attention. It acts as a key entry point for international trade, linking the Pacific and Indian oceans. Approximately one-third of global maritime trade, including vital commodities such as oil, natural gas, and goods, passes through its waters. It is a major goods trading route for South Asian Countries and Countries in Europe (Hagan, 1942). It is a peripheral Sea that extends from the Charismata and Malacca Straits to the Taiwan Strait, covering an area of around 3,500,000 square kilometers, and is an area of the Pacific Ocean. (Mirski, 2015). This region is an important channel of world trade 1/3th of the world's distribution flows through the Sea and it is rich in fishing, Oil, and Gas resources. In addition, SCS Islands, rocks, and coral reefs are considered the strategic, economic, and political assets for the waterside state.



Map: Major trade route map in SCS, Source-CSIS <https://www.csis.org/>

Furthermore, this Sea is provided with an abundance of natural resources, such as enormous oil and natural gas reserves as well as significant fisheries. The potential economic benefits derived from these resources have attracted the interests of coastal states and global energy consumers.

Further, this region represents a theater for power projection and influence. Countries can project influence, expand their reach, and protect their interests in national security by having defense installations, naval assets, and airfields(Cole, 2017). The SCS has become a focal point for the balance of power and geopolitical dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region. It has led to the formation of strategic alliances and partnerships among countries with shared concerns. These alliances aim to counterbalance the growing influence of dominant powers, prevent the establishment of a unilateral power structure, and preserve a rules-based order rooted in international law, UNCLOS, and regional organizations like ASEAN(Singh, 2012).

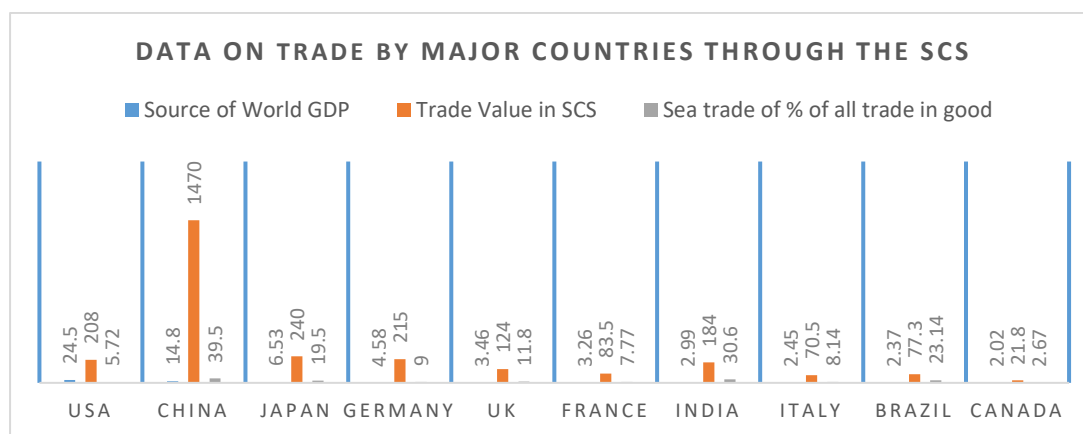
So, in a nutshell, the geopolitical dynamics of the SCS have attracted the attention of major powers beyond the region. In order to counter what it perceives as disproportionate maritime claims, the United States, for example, has conducted freedom of navigation operations in response to China's aggression. Other nations, including Australia and Japan, have also expressed their worries and supported a rules-based order and peaceful resolution of disputes and India wanted to establish a collaborative situation in this region at the same time try to counter the hegemony of China.

III. HISTORICAL OUTLOOK OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

SCA stands as a hotspot for the territorial claim by the five littoral countries. Out of the five countries Vietnam and the Philippines most active claimants. It is because, after the Vietnam War, it occupied the western parcels of SCA and annexed certain partly land in this region. But this claimant's narrative changed after the independence of most of the East Asian Countries from the colonial period. As a result, the next century saw a surge in significance in this region, and independent states started to claim space in SCS. In 1955, China and Taiwan recognized permanent presence on several important islands likely Spratly Island in SCA(Nair, 2022). However, by the early 1970s, the claimants reignited the issue again. The Philippines was the first country to take action. China responded quickly with a well-coordinated seaborne invasion of multiple islands. In 1988, a decade of relative quiet was shattered by violence when Beijing invaded the Spratly Islands, starting a new wave of claimant **occupancy**(Mishra, 2013). When Beijing forcibly seized Johnson Reef, murdering a large number of Vietnamese fishermen, tensions hit their peak. For a few years, tensions subsided before picking up again in 1995 as a result of China building bunkers on Mischief Reef's crest in reaction to a Philippine oil concession. China received a 43-point Notification and Statement of Claim that was concurrently submitted to the UNCLOS on January 22, 2013(Cole, 2017). According to Article 279 of UNCLOS, states parties shall resolve any disagreements regarding the interpretation or purpose of this convention through peaceful methods in order to claim territory in the SCA(Jawli, 2016).

IV. WHY SOUTH CHINA SEA MATTERS FOR THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES?

This region is a hotspot for the western part of the globe because it connects to the east and the southern part of the globe which helps them for their trade exercises. According to the UNCTD report, there are around eighty percent of the trade of global trade by volume and seventy percent by value are transported by sea, but only sixty percent of maritime trade passes through the SCA which carries 1/3th of global shipping, and estimated 3.37 trillion Dollar Annually

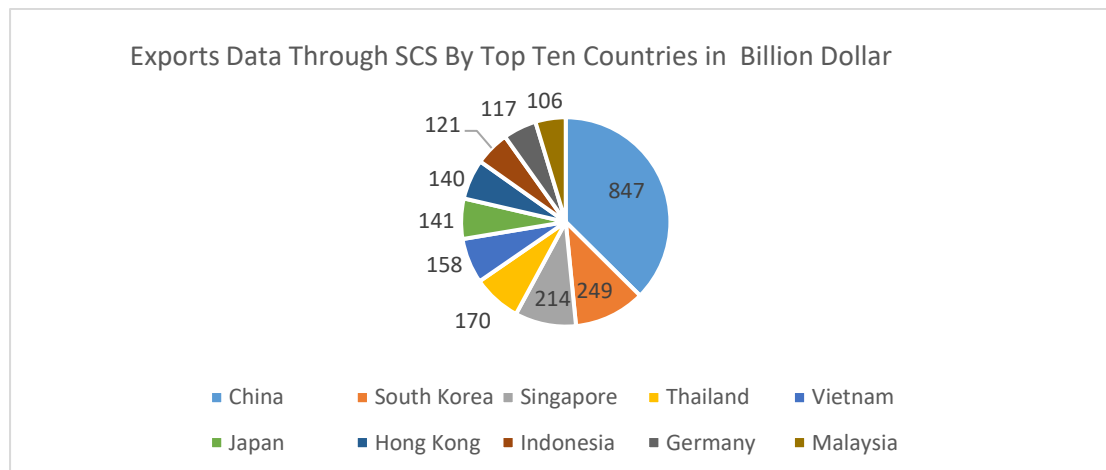


Graphical representation of total trade by the major countries through SCS in the year 2021, Source-International Monetary Fund

The above graph represents the trade data through the SCS route by the top ten major countries that directly or indirectly depend upon the SCS to expand their trade. With this, the above graphs also represent the country-wise contribution of the top ten major countries to the world GDP and show the trading Value, particularly in this region. With this, it also shows the percentage of all trade by the above ten major countries in the form of goods. By analyzing the above graphs, it can be summarised that China is one of the most trading countries by using the SCS trading route which constitutes around 39.5 percent of total trade in the region. While Germany represents the lowest amount of trade i.e. 1.9 percent. India, Brazil, and Japan are the major countries that follow the SCS trading route as a means of import and export channel and represent 30.6, 23.14, and 19.5 percent respectively. The USA is the third lowest trading country in the SCS region which constitute around 5.72 percent of the total trade in this region.

The geopolitical importance of this region makes it so important to other states because it makes a link from the Pacific Ocean to the South Asian region. So, this region makes an important gateway to other regions for their trade exercises. This Sea is full of natural resources and Gas that became a major source of attraction for the industrial mighty powers and even for the littoral states. There is a big field for fisheries and marine resources which is also a deterring factor for those countries. According to the EIA report the United States has a substantial deposit of oil, estimated to be 7.7 billion Barrels, with a total reserve of 28 billion barrels and with this consists of 266 trillion cubic feet of Natural gases(Basrur, 2013). The natural gas reserves in the Spratly

Islands appear to be greater than those in the Paracel Islands. Thus, SCS is rich in natural resources obviously there is a fight among all littoral nations and other nations for it. Another major source for the importance of SCS is it is the most versatile trading route for the major neighboring export countries.



Graphical representation of Export Data Through SCS Trade Route. Source-International Monetary Fund

According to the above data, China is the major source of exporters of goods and supplies by the SCS route and Germany is the lowest exporter. The major items like fisheries, fish, oil, natural gas, stationary, and technological items are exports by this trade route. China, South Korea, and Vietnam are the major countries that depend upon the SCS for the major export to the other nation.

V. CHINA'S INTEREST IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

China has significant strategic, economic, and security interests in the SCS, which have driven its assertive actions and territorial claims in the region. The SCS is the only sea route that connects China to other sea routes, and it is the only sea through which any enemy country of China can easily threaten its national security (Ghoshal, 2010). As China is a big competition in the world with its huge military power and rising economic power over other Western countries, it is very much important for China to secure its only coastal area in SCS. This region is a storage house of natural gas oil, other sea animals, and materials. China being an emerging economy needs natural resources to maintain stability and for the smooth running of its economy, for this reason, the heavy necessity of China can be fulfilled through this sea. It claims historical rights over the region based on historical records and ancient maps through the "Nine Dash Line" (Singh, 2012). By asserting control over the disputed islands, reefs, and shoals, Beijing aims to expand its territorial boundaries and extend its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), enabling it to control and exploit the region's resources.

The SCA is believed to have vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and fisheries. China's interest in

the region is driven by its need to ensure energy security and access to these resources to fuel its growing economy. By controlling and exploiting the resources in the Sea, it aims to reduce its reliance on foreign energy sources and maintain economic stability. The serves as a crucial maritime trade route, facilitating the transportation of goods and energy supplies between East Asia, Southeast Asia, and other global markets(Kang, 2012). As the world's largest trading nation, Beijing is heavily dependent on these sea lanes for its economic growth and export-oriented industries. The region provides strategic depth and a buffer zone for China's coastal areas. By establishing military installations and conducting naval patrols, China aims to project its power, deter potential threats, and safeguard its maritime interests, including its nuclear submarine fleet based on Hainan Island(Nair, 2022). Most importantly from the geostrategic point of view, SCS is one of the influential regions that influence not only China but to its regional powers. By gaining control over the disputed islands and exerting dominance in the region, China aims to shape the regional security architecture and challenge the United military presence and alliances in the Asia-Pacific(Kang, 2012). One of the objectives of the foreign policy of China is national unity and territorial integrity, resonating with Chinese nationalism. Demonstrating strength and resolve in the face of external challenges is seen as essential for maintaining social stability and popular support within China. So that it is one of the prominent regions that can maintain unity and security among the locals.

VI. INDIA'S INTEREST

India's strategic interest in the SCS has grown in recent years due to a combination of economic, security, and geopolitical factors. By actively engaging in the region, India aims to safeguard its energy supplies, promote regional stability, balance China's influence, and enhance its strategic positioning in the Indo-Pacific. India seeks to maintain stability, uphold international norms, and protect its interests while engaging with regional partners to counterbalance China's influence. India inherited the idea of expanding its neighbourhoods in 2000 to occupy territories other than South Asia, which are essential for advancing diplomatic goals. From a geopolitics, strategic geopolitics, and geoeconomics perspective, India acts as the pole of SCS(Lyon, 2010). Although India is not a neighbour to the SCS region it has a great interest in SCS riverbank countries. Indians have been curious about the geographical position of the SCS due to its location at the interceding water expansion between the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean(Shah, 2018). The Indian Navy has initiated a new engagement with the western Pacific in conjunction with the US and Japanese navies to gain access to the sea. Until 2014 China did not have any interest in the Indian Ocean and after the increase in geopolitical importance with the involvement of the economically developed countries it raises its interest in the Indo-Pacific region which puts a threat to the maritime security of India(Basrur, 2013). To stabilize the Chinese aggregation in the Indo-Pacific region and maintain balance in world politics India

extends its interest in the SCS region. According to the report of MEA, “for India, the South China Sea region holds significance in terms of its trade with the Asia-Pacific region. Over 55 percent of India’s trade goes through the South China Sea, therefore peace and firmness must be there in the region” (MEA,2021). So, in a nutshell India’s interest can be summarised on the following ground.

India is one of the world's largest energy consumers, and its rapidly growing economy requires access to diverse and stable energy sources. The SCS holds significant oil and natural gas reserves, and India has invested in the region's exploration and production projects. These resources are crucial for India's energy security and for reducing its dependence on a few energy suppliers that maximize India’s interest(Rabbani, 2019). This Sea is a vital **maritime trade route**, handling a significant portion of global trade, including a substantial portion of India's maritime trade. For **India's trading and economic interests**, preserving freedom of passage and guaranteeing unhindered access to these maritime lanes is crucial. Any disturbance or violence in the SCS could impact India's trade links with East Asia, Southeast Asia, and beyond. India has a stake in **maintaining stability and security** in the Indo-Pacific region. The region's stability is critical for India's economic growth and security(Jacobs, 2014). New Delhi is concerned about the escalation of tensions, militarization, and the potential for conflicts in the SCS. So, it advocates for peaceful resolution of disputes, adherence to international law, and respect for freedom of navigation and overflight. India came up with Act East Policy to deepen its engagement with East and Southeast Asia. As part of this policy, India seeks to enhance economic cooperation, expand strategic partnerships, and strengthen maritime security cooperation with countries in the region. The SCS region is an integral part of India's vision of an integrated Indo-Pacific region, and engagement in the region is seen as a means to bolster India's influence and connectivity. To counter this hegemonic existence of China in the Sea, New Delhi must stronghold its position(Cole, 2017). India views China's actions in the region as a challenge to the rules-based international order and its aspirations as a rising power. It seeks to promote a multipolar and inclusive regional order and actively engages with countries involved in the SCS.

VII. INDIA’S STRATEGY AND RESPONSE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

India's approach to challenging China in the SCS is characterized by a combination of diplomatic, strategic, and cooperative measures. While India does not have territorial claims in the SCS, it seeks to protect its interests and support a rules-based international order. However, India’s strategy can be summarized on the following ground

India strengthens its **diplomatic ties** with the neighbor nation of SCS, conducts joint naval exercises, and participates in regional security dialogues to demonstrate its commitment to

regional stability and **security**. It also provides **maritime assistance** and capacity building to countries in the region, including patrol vessels, training programs, and hydrographic surveys. Such cooperation enhances the maritime capabilities of partner countries, enabling them to protect their interests and contribute to regional security. Indian naval vessels sail through international waters in the region, including near disputed islands and features, to uphold the freedom of navigation norms. It is in favor of international laws and their fundamental principles, especially **UNCLOS**. New Delhi has advocated for adherence to international laws and standards in the SCS and emphasized the necessity of peaceful resolution of conflicts based on UNCLOS. India has backed arbitration procedures to settle territorial disputes, such as the settlement reached in the Philippines v. China case. India is actively involved in promoting regional connectivity initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, including the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). These initiatives aim to enhance the region's economic cooperation, connectivity, and maritime security, providing an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

After the above analysis, it can be concluded that the geopolitics of the SCS is characterized by complex dynamics shaped by overlapping territorial claims, power projection, economic interests, and regional stability concerns. To protect important trade routes, gain access to abundant natural resources, and increase its maritime dominance, China is interested in the SCS. Tensions have increased in the area as a result of its military expansion, the pursuit of territorial claims, and the creation of artificial islands. China's actions have prompted countries like India to take a keen interest in the SCS to safeguard their own economic and security interests, promote a multipolar order, and counterbalance China's growing influence. India's interest in the SCS stems from its desire to balance China's dominance, preserve regional stability, and safeguard marine trade routes. India recognizes the value of the region for its national economy and security, especially in terms of preserving freedom of passage and avoiding monopolization of vital maritime routes. India wants to support a rules-based system and aid in the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes. For this, it promotes strategic partnerships and collaborates in multilateral projects.

Moving forward, both countries must prioritize dialogue, cooperation, and adherence to international norms to mitigate tensions, promote peaceful resolutions, and maintain stability in the SCS. The international community must work together to ensure the rights of all countries to access and utilize the region's resources fairly and equitably, fostering an environment of shared prosperity and mutual respect.

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