

Security Perspectives of External Parties to the South China Sea Dispute: A Comparative Study of India and Japan

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Introduction

Sam Bateman and I co-published a book on the South China Sea dispute in 2009 that resulted from a conference organised by the Maritime Security Programme at RSIS two years before.¹ This extensive research project was the beginning of a wonderful collaboration and conversation on the dynamics of the South China Sea that Sam and I held whenever we would have lunch at RSIS or meet on the side lines of a conference in the region. While my interests rested predominantly in the geopolitics of the dispute and their impact on conflict management, Sam's knowledge seemed limitless, covering strategic studies, international law, maritime security and safety, environmental and energy considerations, and beyond. His passion for and belief in UNCLOS was best illustrated by him carrying around an old copy of the convention wherever he went and which he would consult in the middle of a discussion to substantiate a specific point. I truly enjoyed our conversations and never stopped learning from them. They always reminded me that the circumstances pertaining to the South China Sea dispute should be studied through an inter-disciplinary approach that combines national and international dimensions.

With this perspective in mind, this chapter seeks to contribute to the vast literature on the South China Sea dispute by reviewing the security perspectives of external parties. The chapter discusses comparatively the diplomatic and strategic roles of Japan and India in the conflict. The case selection can be justified by the need to look at two great Asian powers with key bilateral relations with Beijing and with immediate strategic interests in the semi-enclosed sea. The chapter reviews how the South China Sea dispute has influenced the way Japan and India perceive China as a rising maritime power and how the dispute might have affected their own strategic interests and calculations, including in the East China Sea and in the Indian Ocean, respectively. This is not to say, however, that the involvement of the two Asian powers in the South China Sea should be assessed at a similar level. Instead, it needs to be stressed from the start that Japan is more deeply involved as an external party to the dispute, and this is the reason why its role is discussed first in each section of the chapter.

Japan's involvement in the South China Sea predates the current dispute. For example, a Japanese mining company explored the Spratly Islands in the early 20th century.² During the Second World War, then Imperial Japan established a submarine base on the largest island in the Spratly's and Tokyo renounced control of the islands when it signed the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. Japan did not view the South China Sea dispute as a threat to its security during most of the Cold War era. However, the issue started to generate more interest by the 1990s. Due to a rapid Chinese military build-up and deterioration in China-Japan relations especially in the context of the East China Sea, Tokyo has become increasingly concerned over the last

¹ Bateman, Sam and Emmers, Ralf (eds.), *Security and International Politics in the South China Sea: Towards a Cooperative Management Regime* (London: Routledge, 2009).

² Lam, Peng Er. "Japan and the South China Sea Dispute: Seeking a More Active Political Role." *East Asian Institute Background Brief No. 756*. (2012): 4. Singapore: National University of Singapore.

decade that the South China Sea dispute may have the potential to threaten maritime security in Southeast Asia and the rest of the region.³

Like Japan, India is neither a claimant in the South China Sea dispute nor does it possess any coastline or island territories in the disputed waters. Yet, it has in recent years also played an increasing role in the South China Sea through diplomacy, naval deployments, strategic military partnerships with Southeast Asian states and oil exploration.⁴ The South China Sea dispute is thus influencing India's strategic interests and calculations and having an impact on how New Delhi perceives China's rise.

The chapter discusses the security perspectives of Japan and India as external parties in the South China Sea dispute by first examining their bilateral relations with China. It reviews their interests in the semi-enclosed sea before highlighting their respective objectives in the disputed waters in response to Chinese rising capabilities. The chapter then assesses how Japan and India have been involved in the South China Sea and nuances their different motivations and approaches toward the dispute. It notes that Japan and India are concerned with Beijing's assertiveness and seek to enhance their regional influence. Furthermore, while India's initiatives toward the South China Sea dispute are mostly based on diplomacy, commercial projects, and some joint naval exercises due to its limited power projection capabilities, Japan adds a deeper security dimension to its involvement. Finally, the chapter links the South China Sea dispute to other maritime security flashpoints in Asia critical to Tokyo and New Delhi respectively, namely, the East China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Bilateral relations and great power competition

China and Japan normalised diplomatic relations in 1972 and Tokyo pursued a conciliatory policy toward Beijing for most of the Cold War period. However, the two states have had a tumultuous and war-torn history, and mutual suspicions have persisted. Despite increased economic interdependence, bilateral relations have been troubled by growing nationalist sentiments in China and Japan. Beijing and Tokyo have also been concerned over their respective strategic intentions and both countries remain at odds over disputed boundaries and contested islands in the East China Sea. This has been illustrated through increasing maritime and air encounters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands since 2010.

China has been a rising strategic concern for Japan since the 1990s. The military balance has further shifted toward growing regional competition since then, as China continues to make advancements in strengthening its naval capabilities. Japan has sought to respond by enhancing its capabilities in recent years. Japan's defence budget has been less than one per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). In 2017, Japan announced its plan to scrap its long-standing one per cent GDP ceiling for annual defence spending. This shift in policy has not yet been implemented, however. Tokyo also signalled its intention to bolster its defence capabilities in its 2021 Defence White Paper.⁵ A record sum of 5.34 trillion yen (US\$51.6

³Storey, Ian. (2013). "Japan's Maritime Security Interests in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea Dispute." *Political Science* 65, no.2, (2013): 143-145.

⁴ Scott, David. "India's Role in the South China Sea: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics in Play." *India Review* 12, no.2 (2013): 51.

⁵ Japan Ministry of Defense, "Defense of Japan 2021," July 13, 2021, 2-44.
https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_Digest_EN.pdf

billion) was approved, amid security challenges posed by China.⁶ Notably, then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga asserted Japan's intent to "agree to oppose any attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion in the East and South China Seas and intimidation of others in the region".⁷ Japanese concerns over the rise of China's strength were again reflected in 2021 at the 28th meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) where Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi mentioned China's "continuing and intensifying" unilateral attempts at changing the status quo by force in both the East and South China Seas.⁸

Japan's interest in the South China Sea dispute has traditionally been related to strategic calculations and the enhancement of its status in international affairs.⁹ Japan has engaged China directly on the South China Sea issue and it has sought to obtain a greater security role in the semi-enclosed sea. Then-Foreign Minister Taro Aso articulated this ambition in 2006 in a speech entitled "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons".¹⁰ In 2011, then-Japanese Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto told his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi of his country's interest in freedom of navigation and maritime safety.¹¹ Yang responded by giving his reassurance that the freedom of navigation would be preserved and that the shipping lanes would remain unblocked.

Diplomatic relations between China and India were established in 1950 and ties between them remained cordial for several years. Yet relations began to sour by the late 1950s due to border issues, and the unresolved border question eventually led to the China-India War in 1962. After the end of the military conflict, tensions remained high between the two countries with diplomatic ties being suspended. The 1962 war and the complex normalisation of relations thereafter have created an enduring "trust deficit" between Beijing and New Delhi.¹² At present, some significant border disputes continue to deeply affect relations, and the China-Pakistan relationship adds tension to bilateral dynamics. Additionally, Indian commentators often argue "that China is carrying out 'encircling-India' foreign policies, while the Chinese side sometimes argues that India clubs with the US, Japan, and Australia to check the rising of China".¹³ An illustration of such a countervailing measure is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) that partners the four countries.

Chinese scholars have largely viewed the rise of India as a predestined fact due to its large population, economic growth, nuclear capabilities, and influence in the developing world. In

⁶ Kaneko, Reito, "Japan's defense budget hits new high in FY 2021 amid China threats" *Kyodo News*, Dec 21, 2020. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/12/7a8f70e5ae6a-japans-defense-budget-hits-new-high-in-fy-2021-amid-china-threats.html>

⁷ Sevastopulo, Demetri, "Japan vows to support US in opposing 'coercion' from China" *Financial Times*, April 17, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/59c61d80-df23-4f72-84dd-9ea60d64a989>

⁸ Kyodo News, "US, Japan express concern over S. China Sea, take up China's nukes," Aug 7, 2021. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/08/aabac3a49b5e-update1-us-japan-express-concern-over-s-china-sea-take-up-chinas-nukes.html>.

⁹ Lam, Peng Er. "Japan and the Spratlys Dispute: Aspirations and Limitations." *Asian Survey* 36, no.10, (1996): 996.

¹⁰ Kiyota, Tomoko. "Japan's South China Sea Conundrum" in *Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific*, eds. Pradeep Kaushiva and Abhijit Singh (New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, 2014), 72.

¹¹ Lam (2012): 6.

¹² Palit, Amitendu. *China-India Economics: Challenges, Competition and Collaboration*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 9.

¹³ Hu, Shisheng and Peng, Jing, "The Rise of China and India: Prospects of Partnership." In *Emerging China*, eds. Sudhir Devare, Swaran Singh and Reena Marwah (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 366.

response, Beijing has sought to minimise the involvement of India in East Asia. Rehman noted that China's strategy "is to divert India's attention from East Asia and to prevent it from reaching out beyond South Asia".¹⁴ For example, Beijing has traditionally attempted to exclude or side-line New Delhi from international organisations in East Asia. India's pushback against China partly explains the Indian strategic posture in recent years and policies adopted by the Modi administration have demonstrated more risk-acceptance and a greater willingness to engage and compete with other powers. This was illustrated for instance by the Indian response to the 2020 border crisis in Ladakh. According to New Delhi, the border crisis began due to unexpected and unexplained Chinese troop incursions into Ladakh, a region administered by India and part of a dispute between New Delhi and Beijing. In response, India sent additional military troops to the region and imposed the ban on fifty-nine Chinese web apps, including TikTok, from the Indian market and the introduction of new barriers for Chinese companies to participate in Indian infrastructure projects. Still, scholars like Tanvi Madan argues that "there has been more continuity than change in the Indian view of and approach toward China since 2008".¹⁵

With regards to the South China Sea issue, India's primary interest in the semi-enclosed sea is arguably the security of SLOCs. Yet New Delhi's interest in the dispute is often associated in Beijing with an attempt at denying Chinese preponderance in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. New Delhi has established stronger diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian nations and the notion of having India as a countervailing force has been welcomed by some in the region. Rehman notes that some Southeast Asian countries, such as Singapore and the Philippines, are "particularly mindful of the need to have an Indian counterweight in the region if ever their American allies should decide to sizably reduce their military presence in the area".¹⁶ India has greater capabilities than the individual Southeast Asian claimants to the South China Sea conflict. New Delhi has responded to Chinese assertiveness through demonstrations of military resolve including the deployment of a warship to the disputed area in June 2020.

While India rejects any notion of it being a countervailing force against China, this has not ceased speculation that it is trying to deny Chinese pre-eminence in the South China Sea. For example, Scott points out that while India's "Look East" policy may have initially started off as a trade-centric policy, it has since developed into a soft balancing of China. India is likely to cooperate with other major powers to prevent Beijing from controlling the South China Sea as that would bring "Chinese maritime forces to the Strait of Malacca choke point looking out onto the Indian Ocean, and a point of entry into India's backyard".¹⁷ The "Look East" policy was later reformulated into an "Act East" policy. At the 2021 Raisina Dialogue, Indian Navy Chief Admiral Karambir Singh commented on how China's "flag follows trade", tacitly

¹⁴ Rehman, Iskander, "Keeping the Dragon at Bay: India's Counter-containment of China in Asia." *Asian Security* 5, no.2, (2009): 118.

¹⁵ Madan, Tanvi, "Managing China: competitive engagement, with Indian characteristics, 'Global China: Assessing China's Growing Role in the World.'" *Brookings Institute* (Feb, 2020): 3. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/managing-china-competitive-engagement-withindian-characteristics/>. See also Paul, TV., *The China-India rivalry in the globalization era*. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Rehman (2009): 131.

¹⁷ Scott (2013): 54.

reflecting Delhi's concern that Beijing's powerplay in the South China Sea could be replicated in the Indian Ocean.¹⁸

When comparing both sets of bilateral ties, the risk of open conflict in the naval arena is arguably greater in the China-Japan relationship than between China and India due to several reasons. Tokyo, more so than New Delhi, is concerned with Beijing's assertiveness due to the Chinese naval build-up and the maritime geography of East Asia. Additionally, the bilateral territorial dispute in the East China Sea and the role of the US as a treaty ally of Tokyo adds additional dimensions to the China-Japan relationship. In short, both countries "see each other as acting assertively".¹⁹ In contrast, the China-India relationship is less strained in the naval arena. However, New Delhi continues to have an existing land border dispute with Beijing and both countries have shed blood over it. The risk of open conflict at the border is arguably increasing due to rising great power competition. That said, the Himalayas form a natural border between the two countries which makes it harder for either side to project its military power to the other. India is also mindful of its relative military weakness, especially after the 2018 Doklam standoff, and it is cautious of not rousing China's core interests in the South China Sea. This is consistent with Beijing's rhetoric of the availability of headroom for both "dragon and elephant".²⁰

Japanese and Indian interests in the South China Sea

Japan is primarily concerned with the security and preservation of the sea lanes that cross the South China Sea. According to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the oceans are "public goods' where free navigation must be secured".²¹ Japan imports most of its oil from the Middle East and Southeast Asia. As such, it is highly vulnerable to any interruptions in oil supplies that travel through the semi-enclosed sea. Alternative routes through the Pacific Ocean would be more costly and time-consuming. Moreover, Beijing's quest to diversify its energy supplies has led some Japanese analysts to view Chinese initiatives in the South China Sea as "aggressive efforts which may obstruct Japan's own energy security goals".²² Japanese security would be undermined if China were to gain access to the energy deposits of the South China Sea or be able to limit the freedom of navigation in the disputed waters. Graham notes that since the early 1990s, "concern has grown among Japan's policy-makers over the direction of Chinese foreign and defence policies and the implications for Japan's long-term maritime security".²³

Furthermore, Japan views the South China Sea dispute in the wider context of a rising and more assertive China. In early 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe went as far as to assert

¹⁸ Singh, Rahul, "Flag follows trade: Navy Chief on China." *The Hindustan Times*, April 15, 2021.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/flag-follows-trade-navy-chief-on-china-101618426615642.html>

¹⁹ Bateman, Sam, "The Future Maritime Security Environment in Asia: A Risk Assessment Approach." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 37, no.1 (2015): 51.

²⁰ The Hindustan Times, "Dragon and elephant dancing together: Envoy on India-China Ties," Jan 13, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/dragon-and-elephant-dancing-together-envoy-on-india-china-ties/story-a0K6rAKymxmuaM76YCGPIL.html>

²¹ Lam (2012): 2.

²² Wishnick, Elizabeth, "Competition and Cooperative Practices in Sino-Japanese Energy and Environmental Relations: Towards an Energy Security 'Risk Community'?" In ed. Caroline Rose (2011), 260-261.

²³ Graham, Euan, *Japan's Sea Lane Security, 1940-2004: A Matter of Life and Death?* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 211.

that “Chinese power is increasingly transfiguring the South China Sea into ‘Lake Beijing’”.²⁴ In response, Japan perceives the US military presence to be critical to guarantee regional stability. This has resulted in heightened tensions between China and Japan.

The South China Sea bears geostrategic significance to India for several reasons.²⁵ The semi-enclosed sea is the eastern access to the Indian Ocean, and it is, therefore, the key maritime link between East Asia and the Indian Ocean. New Delhi has reiterated in recent years the importance of access to the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea. The significance of the semi-enclosed sea to India is evidenced by how the Indian Maritime Military Strategy has identified the South China Sea as a “secondary area” of operational interest for the Indian Navy.²⁶ The headquarters of India’s first joint command is based in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands from where India can project naval power.²⁷ These islands are geographically closer to Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia than the Indian mainland, and they are used by New Delhi to project naval power into Southeast Asia.²⁸

Still, India remains at an early stage in its ability to project naval power beyond the Indian Ocean and its deployment in the semi-enclosed sea is affected by geography and the absence of forward bases. This has been mediated to some extent by the provision of facilities by Singapore and Vietnam. Beyond its strategic concerns in the South China Sea, India has pivotal economic interests in preserving the security of sea lanes in the semi-enclosed sea which is vital for Indian seaborne trade. Indian oil companies have also been active in the South China Sea.

Japan and India have often been described as “natural allies”.²⁹ The Chinese military build-up has been a source of concern for both countries, which share an interest in limiting the extent of Beijing’s regional influence. China represents their greatest strategic challenge, while neither “is a potential security threat to the other in the near or distant future”.³⁰ This is bolstered by the fact that, unlike some other countries in Asia, India bears no historical animosity toward Japan. Then Prime Minister Abe even remarked that India-Japan relations will become Japan’s “most important bilateral relationship in the world”.³¹ When Abe visited New Delhi in his first term as Prime Minister, he articulated his vision as a “‘broader Asia’ that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form”.³² New Delhi and Tokyo have agreed to strengthen cooperation between their navies. They have held reciprocal naval exercises and have conducted several defence exchanges. Simon suggests that “from Delhi’s

²⁴ Cited in, Caceres, Sigfrido, *China’s Strategic Interests in the South China Sea: Power and Resources*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 63.

²⁵ Vinodan, C., “Maritime Dimensions of Energy Security: China and the South China Sea.” In *Foreign Policy and Maritime Security of India* ed. KS. Pavithran (New Delhi: New Century Publications, 2013), 119-121.

²⁶ Vinodan (2013): 120.

²⁷ See Baruah, Darshana M., “The Andaman and Nicobar Islands: India’s Eastern Anchor in a Changing Indo-Pacific.” *War on Rocks* (March 21, 2018).

²⁸ Pardesi, Manjeet, “Is India a Great Power? Understanding Great Power Status in Contemporary International Relations.” *Asian Security* 11, no.1 (2015): 15.

²⁹ Zhao, Hong, *China and India: The Quest for Energy Resources in the Twenty-First Century*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 118. See also Basrur, Rajesh and Kutty, Sumitha Narayanan (eds), *India and Japan: Assessing the Strategic Partnership* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

³⁰ Zhao (2010):118.

³¹ Cited in, Ladwig III, Walter, “Delhi’s Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, ‘Look East’ and India’s Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific.” *Asian Security* 5, no.2 (2009): 100.

³² Kiyota (2014): 72-73.

perspective, Japan-Indian security ties help to legitimise an Indian role in eastern Asia” and that “in turn, Tokyo obtains an implicit Indian pledge to provide security for Japanese shipping in the Indian Ocean”.³³

Nevertheless, due to its non-alignment tradition, it is unlikely that India’s deepening relations with Japan will lead to alliance formation with Tokyo. That said, India has joined Australia, Japan, and the United States in the Quad, which arguably constitutes a countervailing strategy against a rising China especially in the maritime domain. While India and Japan share similar interests, their underlying motivations in the South China Sea are slightly different. Whereas India is concerned about China as a rising power and keen to display its own regional influence, Japan may also be driven by a growing sense of insecurity associated with its strategic interests in East Asia. India’s increased involvement in the South China Sea has been interpreted by Chinese scholars as aimed at expanding its influence rather than simply targeted at China.³⁴ India “is an important regional actor and one that sees itself, like China, as the embodiment of a major civilisation with similarly great expectations about its place in the international system”.³⁵ In contrast, Japan makes China the main focal point of its interest in the South China Sea dispute. An immediate source of concern for the Japanese is the “rapid increase in and the lack of transparency surrounding Chinese defence expenditures”.³⁶ China’s maritime strategy is seen in Tokyo as driven by a desire to control ocean resources while expanding its sphere of influence towards the creation of a “new oceanic order” in Asia.³⁷ As evidence of this threat perception, Japan has named China since 1996 as a focus of its national defence in its annual Defence White Paper.

Japanese and Indian involvement in the South China Sea

Japan has sought to play a greater role in Southeast Asian affairs and to be more involved in the South China Sea issue, especially since 2017 when Japan put forth its Free and Open Indo-pacific (FOIP) vision that sought to unify and connect Southeast Asia with Tokyo’s strategic thinking. Japan has direct economic interests in the semi-enclosed sea, including in the exploitation of fisheries and hydrocarbon resources. Tokyo has traditionally relied on economic diplomacy to enhance its regional interests by being a major provider of economic aid and foreign direct investments (FDI). Since 2010, there has been a significant increase in visits to Southeast Asia by senior Japanese officials. Most notably, Abe’s first overseas trip after his return to power in late 2012 was to visit Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam in early 2013 prior to the traditional trip to the US. Storey remarks that the main purpose of these visits has been to “raise Japan’s profile and strengthen economic ties with Southeast Asian states”.³⁸

Apart from diplomatic and economic ties, Japan has deepened the security aspect of bilateral relations with several Southeast Asian nations. In particular, Zenel argues that Japan’s sense of insecurity vis-à-vis China has driven it to pursue deeper economic and military cooperation

³³ Simon, Sheldon, “Conflict and Diplomacy in the South China Sea: The View from Washington.” *Asian Survey* 52, no.6 (2012):1010.

³⁴ Zhao (2010):118.

³⁵ Beeson, Mark and Li, Fujian, *China’s Regional Relations: Evolving Foreign Policy Dynamics*. (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2014), 142.

³⁶ Singh, Bhubhindar, “The Development of Japanese Security Policy: A Long-term Defensive Strategy.” *Asia Policy*, no.19 (2015) :57.

³⁷ Graham (2006): 218.

³⁸ Storey (2013):153. See also

with Vietnam and the Philippines.³⁹ Japan and Vietnam announced a strategic partnership in 2010 and Tokyo has offered to provide patrol vessels to improve Vietnam's maritime surveillance and interdiction capabilities.⁴⁰ In 2020, JICA agreed to loan Vietnam 36.6 billion yen (US\$349 million) to finance the procurement of a second batch of six patrol vessels for the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) by 2025.⁴¹ Furthermore, Japan has agreed to transfer military shipbuilding technology to Vietnam as well as to strengthen ties between the Vietnamese Army and Japan's Group Self-Defence Force.⁴² Such Japanese initiatives aim to improve Vietnam's capacity in maritime safety and security.

Yet the most significant strategic development has been with the Philippines due to a convergence of threat perceptions. China's behaviour in the South China Sea is not only perceived as a threat to the Philippine claims but also as "an implicit threat to Japan's oil and raw materials lifeline".⁴³ In 2011, Japan and Philippine officials discussed the formation of a working group to manage policies related to Asian maritime disputes. Security concerns in the semi-enclosed sea led to a 2011 military cooperation agreement to expand joint naval exercises. During an official visit to Manila in August 2013, then Prime Minister Abe and Philippine President Benigno Aquino agreed to expand the scope of the Japan-Philippines Strategic Partnership to include maritime security cooperation and Abe offered ten patrol vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard. Trajano explains that this cooperation "can be seen as a clear response to a common threat – China's maritime build-up in the East and South China Seas".⁴⁴ The bilateral defence relationship was boosted further when Philippine Defence Secretary Voltaire Gazmin visited Japan in January 2015 and emphasised closer cooperation between the Japan Maritime Self Defence Forces and the Philippine Navy. The scope and scale of the commitment and cooperation are also illustrated by regular visits by Japanese military flights and submarines to Clark Air Base and Subic Bay in the Philippines.⁴⁵

Defence cooperation with the Philippines has continued under the Duterte administration and Abe was even the first foreign dignitary to visit the Philippines after the election of the Philippine president. In 2020, Japanese corporation Mitsubishi Electric signed a 100 million agreement with the Philippine defence ministry for four radar systems that will be used to detect fighter jets and missile activity. It is Tokyo's first export of a complete defence product since 1967.⁴⁶ Moreover, the Japanese government is reportedly pursuing a radar-coverage sharing

³⁹ Zenel Garcia, *China's Military Modernization, Japan's Normalization and the South China Sea Territorial Disputes*. (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2019), 61-77.

⁴⁰ Storey (2013):154.

⁴¹ Teo, Victor, "Japan's weapons transfers to Southeast Asia: Opportunities and Challenges" *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 70, May 25, 2021, 5. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_70.pdf

⁴² Huynh, Tam Sang, "Vietnam-Japan Relations: Growing Importance in Each other's eyes" *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 31, March 16, 2021, 6. https://www.think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/13361/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_31.pdf?sequence=1

⁴³ Simon (2012): 1009.

⁴⁴ Trajano, Julius, "Japan and the Philippines Unite against China." *East Asia Forum*, Aug 21, 2013. www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/08/21/japan-and-the-philippines-unite-against-china/.

⁴⁵ see Bradford, John, "Japan takes the lead in Western Pacific Maritime Security," *Asia Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2021.

⁴⁶ Abe, Daishi, "Philippines radar deal marks Japan's first arms export," *NIKKEI Asia*, Aug 29, 2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Aerospace-Defense/Philippines-radar-deal-marks-Japan-s-first-arms-export>

agreement with the Philippines due to Tokyo's interest in monitoring Chinese military activity in the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Batanes Islands.⁴⁷

India has sought to establish a greater presence in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea since the beginning stages of its "Look East" policy and has continued this work under its subsequent "Act East" policy.⁴⁸ The latter has had several objectives, namely, to deepen diplomatic and economic ties with regional partners, to create additional diplomatic space as New Delhi extends its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, to secure better access to energy resources, and finally to tap onto the economic growth of the Southeast Asian region.⁴⁹ The "Look East" policy was initially driven by an economic agenda but it has over the years acquired a security focus as well. To help achieve its strategic objectives, India has been conducting joint naval exercises with several Southeast Asian nations since the early 1990s. New Delhi conducts regular naval exercises with Singapore, and in 2005 the Singapore-Indian Maritime Bilateral Exercise SIMBEX was held in the South China Sea for the first time although in a nearby and undisputed portion of the semi-enclosed sea where the Singapore navy normally conducts exercises. Moreover, India has developed stronger ties with Thailand, including coordinated naval patrols on the west side of the country, and it has also reached bilateral defence agreements with Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, and Indonesia, and it has provided military aid to Myanmar.⁵⁰ Significantly for the purpose of this chapter, India has strengthened its naval relations with two Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea dispute, namely, the Philippines and Vietnam. The India-Vietnam relationship is of particular significance in strategic terms and both countries held their first Maritime Security Dialogue in 2019.

In 2012, India appealed directly for a peaceful resolution of the China-Philippines stand-off at Scarborough Reef. Philippine naval authorities had discovered several Chinese fishing vessels anchored at the Shoal disputed by both countries. A Philippine Navy ship attempted to arrest the Chinese fishermen allegedly accused of poaching and illegal fishing, but two Chinese maritime surveillance ships intervened and prevented the arrest from occurring. This incident resulted in severe tensions between Beijing and Manila that lasted for several weeks. The Indian diplomatic intervention was perceived as an unusual move by New Delhi. It signalled India's "sense of being an interested party to general stability" in the disputed waters and provoked an immediate reaction from Beijing labelling the Indian intervention as "uncalled-for meddling".⁵¹

India's naval presence in Southeast Asia has been well received, as the country is perceived regionally as a benign power and that New Delhi is not a claimant party in the South China Sea dispute. The absence of immediate strategic ambitions and territorial claims thus contrasts India's position with China. Separately, Ladwig notes that the engagement of the Indian Navy in Southeast Asia is "not simply about power projection; it has also attempted to cultivate soft

⁴⁷ Roblin, Sebastien, "Japan Strikes First Arms Export Deal — Can Tokyo Find More Buyers For Its Pricy Weapons?" *Forbes*, Sept 11, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastienroblin/2020/09/11/japan-strikes-first-arms-export-deal-can-tokyo-find-more-buyers-for-its-pricy-weapons/?sh=276635702a5e>

⁴⁸ See Singh, Abhijit, "The Nautical Dimension of India's 'Act East' Policy," *Policy Report*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (April 2018), pp. 1-19.

⁴⁹ Zhao (2010): 117.

⁵⁰ Vinodan (2013): 119.

⁵¹ Scott (2013): 60.

power within the region”.⁵² For example, India’s regional reputation was bolstered in the wake of the 2004 tsunami when the Indian Navy embarked on its largest peacetime mission to provide humanitarian assistance to Indonesia and Thailand. The Indian Navy has also held anti-piracy exercises with these two countries, and it has offered to assist in securing the sea lanes that cross the Southeast Asian region.

Apart from naval cooperation, India has deepened collaboration in petroleum exploration with several Southeast Asian claimant states. New Delhi cooperates with Hanoi for the exploration of oil at sea while it has agreed with Kuala Lumpur on a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement. The Indian Navy has publicly declared that it will protect any Indian assets worldwide, including in the South China Sea.⁵³ Controlled by the Government of India, ONGC Videsh has invested in Vietnamese offshore energy blocks since the late 1980s, which has angered Beijing. One point of controversy emerged when exploration began in block 128, which fell within the Chinese nine-dash line. While there was little protest from Beijing when the deal was first signed in 2006, China protested when ONGC Videsh and PetroVietnam signed a three-year agreement in 2011 to promote the hydrocarbon industry in the South China Sea. China issued a statement to oppose the exploration of oil and gas in its waters and it later announced plans to expand seabed mineral exploration in the Indian Ocean. ONGC subsequently disclosed its intentions to vacate block 128 owing to technical difficulties encountered in exploration, fueling rumours that “this was a geopolitical decision taken in deference to China”.⁵⁴

India has adopted initiatives to transfer and sell military equipment to Southeast Asian states, however, progress has been limited. In 2019, India had signalled its intention to sell BrahMos missiles to Indonesia, a country that has a potential dispute with China over the sovereignty of the Natuna islands along the South China Sea. Yet, while there has been speculation over the sale, nothing official has been signed at the bilateral level. The issue is further complicated by the fact that Russia is a co-developer of the BrahMos missiles raising concerns regarding US sanctions on Russian made weaponry.⁵⁵ Likewise, Vietnam has also sought India’s help in the modernisation of its military hardware. Yet, the Modi government has been stalling the sale of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to Vietnam, for fear that the sale could antagonise China.⁵⁶ Hence, India’s failure to play a more robust military role in the region could be attributed to New Delhi’s uncertainty and vacillation on China.⁵⁷

In sum, India’s involvement in the South China Sea dispute has largely focused on diplomacy, joint naval exercises, and commercial projects. In addition to these areas, Japan has included a deeper security aspect to its activities with Southeast Asian states and strengthened its alliance with the US, as Washington shares its concerns over the freedom of navigation principle. Amongst other security initiatives, Japan has relied on its Coast Guard and Maritime Self Defence Force to play a role in the semi-enclosed sea. Until at least 2010, for example, the

⁵² Ladwig III (2009): 96.

⁵³ Scott (2013): 56.

⁵⁴ Smith (2013): 193.

⁵⁵ Bedi, Rahul, “India Ready to sell BrahMos, but Exports remain Hostage to Concerns over CAATSA,” *The Wire*, 4 March 2021. <https://thewire.in/trade/india-brahmos-exports-hostage-russia-caatsa-sale>.

⁵⁶ Bedi, Rahul, “Four Years After Modi’s ‘Act East’ Promise, India No Closer to Selling BrahMos to Vietnam,” *The Wire*, July 2, 2019. <https://thewire.in/security/india-vietnam-brahmos-missile>.

⁵⁷ Pant, Harsh and Rej, Abhijnan, “Is India Ready for the Indo-Pacific?” *The Washington Quarterly* 41 no. 2 (2018): 51.

Japanese Coast Guard was arguably more active in Southeast Asia than the Japanese navy. In contrast, India is not yet capable to project a similar security influence in the South China Sea although the Indian military is now more engaged in Southeast Asia in terms of ship visits and bilateral engagements.

It is important to conclude this section of the chapter by highlighting a caveat. The above discussion has, to some extent, conflated the Japanese and Indian involvement in the South China Sea dispute with various activities undertaken in the disputed waters and broader maritime security cooperation with Southeast Asian states. Yet some maritime cooperation and training exercises take place in the semi-enclosed sea without being driven primarily by strategic interests and by the role that Japan and India want to play in the South China Sea conflict. For example, Japan's maritime security cooperation with Southeast Asian states predates Japanese concern with the South China Sea dispute as they started in the 1960s and were later expanded in the late 1990s due to a spike in the number of maritime piracy attacks. Hence, while the South China Sea dispute has in recent years become a factor in such forms of maritime cooperation, other factors unrelated to the conflict continue to play a role as well.⁵⁸

The South China Sea and other regional security flashpoints

Strong linkages are drawn between the South China Sea and the East China Sea, as recurrent skirmishes have occurred between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. Like the South China Sea dispute, the East China Sea issue is driven by nationalism, the exploitation of natural resources as well as by geopolitical considerations. Tokyo observes with great interest how China behaves in the South China Sea, as there is a Japanese perception that the two disputes are closely linked. Storey notes that “for Tokyo, Beijing’s strategy in the two seas is, to all intents and purposes, identical, and Japan has increasingly expressed concern that China’s actions in both areas risk undermining international legal norms, freedom of navigation and peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific”.⁵⁹ Chung adds that Japan perceives the two disputes to be closely related in terms of “China’s growing military ambitions and assertiveness in staking territorial claims”.⁶⁰ For instance, in 2012, Abe, as president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), linked the East China Sea dispute with the South China Sea issue and other questions pertaining to the freedom of navigation.⁶¹

India watches closely China’s naval build-up and its wider strategic aspirations. New Delhi is particularly concerned that the maritime competition observed in the South China Sea could be extended into the Indian Ocean. The South China Sea dispute is therefore of interest to India, as it may influence key Indian strategic objectives in the Indian Ocean. In response, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has further deepened relations with Japan, Australia, and some Southeast Asian nations since taking office in May 2014 as part of a wider “Act East” policy.

⁵⁸ On this issue, see Bradford, John, “Understanding Fifty Years of Japanese Maritime Security Capacity Building Activities in Southeast Asia”, *Foreign Expert Perspectives*, National Institute of Defense, 30 September 2018, pp. 1-39.

⁵⁹ Storey (2013): 137.

⁶⁰ Chung, Chienpeng, *Contentious Integration: Post-Cold War Japan-China Relations in the Asia Pacific*. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014): 147.

⁶¹ Nakano, Ryoko, “The Sino-Japanese Territorial Dispute and Threat Perception in Power Transition.” *The Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2016): 179.

Beijing relies on energy imports that go through the Indian Ocean leading to an increased Chinese interest in the region, as any disruption in shipping would have ramifications for the Chinese economy. Beijing has sought to develop alternative routes and pipelines to reduce its dependency on the Malacca Straits as an oil supply waterway (known as China's "Malacca dilemma"). It has done so by establishing a naval presence along with various maritime points in the Indian Ocean. This presence, widely referred to as the "String of Pearls," includes the acquisition of commercial maritime facilities and naval bases in countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka and the strengthening of diplomatic ties with other Indian Ocean states.

Nevertheless, some analysts have perceived China's Indian Ocean policy as one that is "directed against India rather than being a legitimate reflection of Chinese interests in its SLOC across the Indian Ocean".⁶² New Delhi is concerned over the rising Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean, which is viewed as posing a threat to India's maritime interests. As a result, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean are linked as part of a wider maritime rivalry. In both the cases of a perceived Indian intrusion into the South China Sea and a perceived Chinese intrusion into the Indian Ocean, Beijing and New Delhi are "increasingly being seen as, and assuming characteristics of, an offensive strategy".⁶³

When it comes to conflict resolution, most of the claimants involved in the South China Sea dispute are unwilling to make significant concessions on sovereignty, leaving the territorial issue at an impasse. Little progress has also been made toward the negotiation of a joint development agreement (JDA). The latter is meant to temporarily set aside sovereignty issues so that the joint development of natural resources might proceed on an agreed basis between the claimant states only. In 2019, Xi Jinping told President Roberto Duterte to "put aside" the South China Sea dispute and focus on oil and gas deals.⁶⁴ This has been China's stance since Deng Xiao Ping's administration of "shelving the disputes and developing jointly".⁶⁵ Japan faces a dilemma on this question. On the one hand, if conflict breaks out in the semi-enclosed sea, regional stability and the SLOCs will be gravely affected. On the other, if Japan supports the shelving of sovereignty and favours the joint development of resources in the disputed waters, countries that have territorial disputes with Japan (e.g. China and South Korea) could apply the same logic to territories controlled and/or claimed by Tokyo.⁶⁶ However, the Japanese approach has changed over time especially since China has become more assertive in the East China Sea and troublesome around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Conclusion

The naval competition between China and the US is well-known and broadly documented. The US rebalancing to Asia and its focus on the South China Sea have angered Beijing, especially as there is a perception in China that the US is interfering in what it considers bilateral issues with the Southeast Asian claimant states. Likewise, Washington has become increasingly

⁶² Kumar, S., "India, US and the Indian Ocean: The Strategic Interest and Converge." In ed. KS. Pavithran (2013), 71.

⁶³ Smith (2013): 235.

⁶⁴ Wong, Catherine, "Xi Jinping tells Rodrigo Duterte to 'put aside' South China Sea dispute and focus on oil and gas deal," *South China Morning Post*, Aug 30, 2019 <https://ph.news.yahoo.com/xi-jinping-tells-rodrigo-duterte-142301703.html>.

⁶⁵ Qi, Huaigao, "Joint development in the South China Sea: China's incentives and policy choices," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 8, no. 2(2019): 220.

⁶⁶ Lam (1996):1001.

concerned over the rise of the Chinese military capabilities and uncertain over China's commitment to the freedom of navigation in the semi-enclosed sea. In response, the Trump and Biden administrations have increased maritime security drills with regional allies and partners. Yet, beyond the China-US rivalry, less attention has been given to how other great powers in Asia have perceived the South China Sea dispute.

This chapter has attempted to fill this vacuum by focusing comparatively on the security perspectives of Japan and India as external parties to the South China Sea dispute. It has reviewed their security and economic interests in the semi-enclosed sea and how the issue may have influenced their bilateral ties with Beijing. Tokyo and New Delhi share similar perspectives, and both have become increasingly involved in the matter. The issue is seen in both capitals in the wider context of a rising China as well as linked to strategic developments in the East China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Yet, while sharing similar interests in the security of sea lanes, this chapter has also highlighted divergences in terms of their motivations and involvement in the South China Sea dispute. Japan is particularly concerned with Beijing's assertiveness while India is focused on China but also keen to demonstrate its rising influence as a regional player. In addition, Tokyo brings a stronger security dimension to the dispute, which New Delhi still lacks due to its limited power projection capabilities.

In short, beyond the overlapping claims involving the littoral states, the South China Sea dispute remains a symptom of geopolitical transformations taking place between China and the US but also involving other external parties like India and Japan as well. Ultimately, the situation in the South China Sea will depend on larger geopolitical adjustments and the territorial dispute will continue to risk complicating pivotal bilateral security relations in Asia.