
INDIA'S STRATEGIC HEDGING POLICY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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ABSTRACT

India's strategic hedging policy is a foreign policy approach that seeks to balance its relationships with major powers and regional players in order to safeguard its interests and maintain its strategic autonomy. This policy is particularly relevant in the context of the South China Sea, which has emerged as a key theatre of competition between major powers, especially China and the United States. As a rising power in the region, India has been keenly watching these developments and has been actively engaged in the South China Sea.

In this framework, the study's aim is to examine: What are the drivers, challenges and opportunities of India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea region? How effective is India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea in protecting its economic and strategic interests, and maintaining regional stability? How has India's military and diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea evolved over time? What is the impact of India's strategic hedging policy on regional stability and the balance of power in the South China Sea? Therefore, this study is based on the hypothesis: *Firstly*, India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea is driven by a combination of economic, security, and geopolitical factors, including the desire to maintain regional stability and counterbalance China's rising influence in the region. *Secondly*, India's strategic hedging policy presents both opportunities and challenges, such as greater economic integration and cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, but also the risk of antagonizing China and exacerbating regional tensions. *Thirdly*, India's military and diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea has increased in recent years, with a focus on joint exercises, capacity-building programs, and closer security ties with Southeast Asian countries. *Lastly*, India's strategic hedging policy has the potential to impact regional stability and the balance of power in the South China Sea, particularly in relation to China's assertive behavior and the involvement of other regional actors such as the US and Japan.

KEYWORDS: South China Sea, Diplomatic, Economic, Geopolitical, Military, Security, Strategic, Trade

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is a strategically significant waterway located between Southeast Asia and China. It is an area of overlapping territorial claims, with several countries, including China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, asserting their sovereignty over different parts of the sea. The South China Sea is crucial for global trade as it is a major shipping lane for oil and other goods, and it is also home to significant natural resources, including fish stocks, oil and gas reserves, and minerals.

India has significant interests in the South China Sea, both in terms of economic and strategic considerations. India is a major player in the region's energy market, and the South China Sea is

a critical source of oil and gas for India. India also has a large diaspora in Southeast Asia, which makes the region important for cultural and social ties. India has also been a vocal critic of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, which it sees as a violation of international law and a threat to regional stability.

India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea aims to balance its relations with China and other regional players, such as the United States and Japan, while protecting its economic and strategic interests in the region. India has significant interests in the South China Sea, including access to energy resources, trade, and maritime security. At the same time, India also seeks to promote a rules-based international order and maintain regional stability, which it sees as essential for its own security and prosperity.

DRIVERS OF INDIA'S SOUTH CHINA SEA STRATEGY

- **Economic, Security, and Geopolitical factors**

India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea has evolved over time and is driven by several underlying principles. One of the key principles is to maintain a balance of power in the region and to promote peace and stability. Thus, India's policy is driven by a complex set of factors, including its historical experiences, geopolitical position, economic interests, and security concerns. These drivers have shaped India's foreign policy approach in the South China Sea, and have influenced its efforts to balance its relationships with major powers and regional players.

Historical experiences have played an important role in shaping India's strategic hedging policy. India has a long history of conflict and cooperation with China, dating back to their border war in 1962. This experience has led India to view China as a potential threat and to adopt a cautious approach in its dealings with the country. At the same time, India has also sought to cultivate relationships with other regional players, including Southeast Asian countries, as a means of balancing China's power in the region. India has also sought to enhance its maritime capabilities to protect its interests in the region.

India's geopolitical position also drives its strategic hedging policy. India is situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean, and has emerged as a key player in the region. Strategically, the South China Sea is an important arena for regional and global competition, and India seeks to balance its relationships with major powers in the region. Therefore, this strategic location has led India to adopt a more assertive foreign policy and to pursue closer ties with other regional players as a means of protecting its interests and maintaining its influence in the region. India has sought to strengthen these relationships in recent years. One example of India's efforts to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian nations is its participation in the ASEAN-India Summit. India has been participating in the ASEAN-India Summit since 2002, which serves as a platform for dialogue between ASEAN countries and India on various issues of mutual interest, including trade, investment, and security. In addition to the summit, India has also been actively engaged in several other regional forums, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). India also sees itself as a

major power in the Indo-Pacific region and seeks to maintain its strategic autonomy and promote a multipolar world order. India's presence in the South China Sea is viewed as an important aspect of its strategic engagement in the region.

Economic interests also play a significant role in driving India's strategic hedging policy. The South China Sea is an important source of energy and a critical transit route for Indian trade with East Asia. India is highly dependent on energy imports, and the South China Sea is believed to contain significant oil and natural gas reserves. Diversifying energy sources is thus a key economic imperative for India, and the region is seen as an important potential source of supply. In addition to economic factors, India is acutely conscious of the potential threats arising from China's heightened assertiveness in the region. As a result, India has sought to promote greater economic integration with Southeast Asian countries and has pursued a range of initiatives aimed at boosting trade and investment in the region. For instance, one such initiative is the Act East Policy, which was launched in 2014 to enhance India's economic engagement with the ASEAN countries and promote regional connectivity.

Finally, security concerns are a key driver of India's strategic hedging policy. India is facing a range of security challenges, including terrorism, piracy, and territorial disputes, and has sought to address these challenges through a combination of military and diplomatic means. India has pursued closer security ties with Southeast Asian countries and has also sought to promote greater regional cooperation in areas such as maritime security and counterterrorism. One example of India's efforts in this regard is the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a regional organization that aims to promote regional cooperation and sustainable development in the Indian Ocean region. India has been actively involved in the IORA and has sought to expand its engagement with Southeast Asian nations through this forum. India has also been cooperating with Southeast Asian nations in the area of maritime security. For instance, India has been conducting joint naval exercises with several countries in the region, including Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, under the umbrella of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). In addition, India has been cooperating with Southeast Asian countries on counterterrorism. India has signed several bilateral agreements on counterterrorism with countries in the region, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. India has also been participating in the ASEAN Regional Forum on Counterterrorism, which provides a platform for regional cooperation on counterterrorism issues. For example, in 2002, India signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Counterterrorism with Indonesia, which provides for the exchange of information and cooperation in areas such as training and capacity building. In 2006, India signed a similar agreement with Malaysia, which includes provisions for intelligence sharing and cooperation in investigations and prosecutions. In addition, India has been participating in the ASEAN Regional Forum on Counterterrorism since its inception in 2004, which brings together countries from the region and beyond to discuss and coordinate efforts to combat terrorism. Furthermore, India has been providing assistance to countries in the region to build their counterterrorism capabilities, including through the provision of training programs and technical assistance.

The drivers of India's strategic hedging policy are complex and multifaceted. These factors reflect India's unique position and interests in the region. By balancing its relationships with major powers and regional players, India seeks to protect its interests and maintain its strategic autonomy in an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment. India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea is guided by a commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the region, promoting a rules-based international order, and protecting its own interests.

- **India's regional Engagement in the South China Sea**

India's engagement with other regional players in the South China Sea is shaped by its strategic interests and the challenges it faces in the region.

China is a major player in the region and its growing strength in the South China Sea is seen as a significant challenge by India. India has traditionally had a complex relationship with China, marked by both cooperation and competition. While India has sought to engage with China on issues of mutual concern, such as economic cooperation and regional stability, it has also taken a firm stance against China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. India has joined with other regional players, such as Japan and the United States, in calling for a peaceful resolution to the territorial disputes and for the upholding of the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.

The United States is another major player in the region and India has sought to deepen its strategic engagement with the US in recent years. The two countries have conducted joint naval exercises in the South China Sea and signed various defense agreements, including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in August 2016. India considers the US a key partner in promoting stability in the region and upholding the rules-based international order.

Japan is also an important player in the region and India has sought to deepen its engagement with Japan as part of its "Act East" policy. Japan has been a strong supporter of India's strategic interests in the region and the two countries have engaged in joint naval exercises, defense cooperation, and infrastructure development projects in Southeast Asia. India and Japan have also called for the peaceful resolution of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

In summary, India's engagement with other regional players in the South China Sea is shaped by its strategic interests, including its economic and security imperatives. While India seeks to balance its relationships with major powers, including China and the United States, it also seeks to promote regional stability and maintain the rules-based international order in the region.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF INDIA'S STRATEGIC HEDGING POLICY IN THE REGION

India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea presents both opportunities and challenges in the region. These opportunities include:

- **Opportunities**

One of the opportunities is greater economic integration and cooperation with Southeast Asian nations. India's 'Act East' policy seeks to deepen its economic ties with Southeast Asia, which is a rapidly growing market with significant potential for India. The South China Sea is an

important shipping route, and the region is rich in resources, including oil and gas reserves. By increasing its economic engagement in the region, India could gain access to these resources and help drive regional economic growth.

India's strategic hedging policy can provide an opportunity for the country to **strengthen its existing alliances** with the ASEAN countries, Japan, Australia, and the United States. By engaging more deeply with these countries and building trust, India can create a more cohesive regional security architecture that can help to addressing China's more aggressive behavior in the region.

India's strategic hedging policy can also provide an opportunity for the country to **enhance its maritime security** capabilities in the South China Sea. By increasing its naval presence in the region and conducting joint patrols with other countries, India can contribute to maintaining freedom of navigation and keeping the sea lanes open for trade.

India's strategic hedging policy can also provide an opportunity for the country to **deepen its economic ties** with the ASEAN countries, which are some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. By investing in infrastructure and connectivity projects, India can enhance its trade and investment ties with the region, which can have significant economic benefits for the country.

India's strategic hedging policy can provide an opportunity for the country to **assert its leadership in the region** and promote a rules-based international order. Advocating for international law and peaceful resolution of disputes can help India demonstrate its commitment to regional stability. Besides, it can serve as a means for India to push back against China's policy of expansion.

Another opportunity is to strengthen regional security and balance China's growing control in the region. India has been stepping up its military and defense cooperation with Southeast Asian countries to address common security concerns, such as piracy, terrorism, and territorial disputes. This can help build trust and confidence among regional countries and contribute to a more stable and secure region.

Hence, India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea presents several opportunities for the country to strengthen its regional alliances, enhance its maritime security capabilities, boost economic ties, and assert regional leadership. These opportunities can help to safeguard India's interests and promote regional stability in the face of increasing Chinese influence in the region.

- **Challenges**

Despite India's efforts to implement a strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea, there are several challenges and limitations that need to be taken into consideration in pursuing its interests in the South China Sea. The region is marked by territorial disputes, with China claiming a large part of the sea and its islands. China's increasing assertiveness actions in the region is evident in its construction of military facilities on disputed islands. These actions have raised concerns among regional powers, including India. Balancing its relationships with major powers, including China and the United States, is also a challenge for India. Also, India's limited naval capabilities and resources pose a challenge to its ability to project power in the region.

One of the challenges is the **risk of antagonizing China** and exacerbating regional tensions. As China asserts its influence in the South China Sea, India's growing engagement in the region may be seen as a provocation by China, which may view these activities as attempts to contain its rise. India's strategic hedging policy may increase tensions with China, which is a major trading partner and a key regional power. India's growing military and diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea could be perceived as a threat by China and could lead to a further deterioration of India-China relations. This could lead to a more confrontational relationship between India and China, which could further destabilize the region. India needs to manage this risk by avoiding any direct confrontations with China and by maintaining a balanced approach to its foreign policy.

India needs to **manage its relationships with neighboring countries such as** the ASEAN members to safeguard its strategic autonomy. Although India shares many strategic interests with these countries, there are also divergences in their perspectives on regional security and economic issues. In future, India must meticulously manage these relationships to steer clear of any entanglement in conflicts or alliances that could jeopardize its strategic interests. Additionally, India must strike a **balance in its relations with regional players** like the US and Japan. While these relationships can provide India with strategic advantages, including access to advanced technology and defense cooperation, they also carry risks. For example, closer ties with the US and Japan may be perceived as provocative by China, which could lead to a more confrontational relationship between China and India.

India faces **limitations in its military and economic power**, which may constrain its ability to implement an effective strategic hedging policy. India's military capabilities are still largely focused on its immediate neighborhood, and it has limited capacity to project power beyond its borders. Similarly, India's economic power is still relatively modest compared to China, which has been the dominant economic player in the region.

India's strategic hedging policy may also be **constrained by domestic factors**, including political instability and bureaucratic inefficiencies. These factors may hinder India's ability to implement a coherent and effective foreign policy approach in the South China Sea.

In conclusion, India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea presents both opportunities and challenges in the region. It is important for India to navigate these opportunities and challenges carefully, and to pursue a policy that promotes regional stability and security while avoiding a confrontation with China.

INDIA'S MILITARY AND DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

India's military and diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea has evolved significantly over the past decade. As a rising power in the region, India has been keenly watching the developments in the South China Sea, which has emerged as a key threat of competition between major powers, especially China and the United States. India's military and diplomatic engagement in the region has been aimed at countering China's augmenting self-assertion, promoting regional stability, and safeguarding its economic and strategic interests.

On the military front, India has been actively engaged in a range of activities in the South China Sea, including joint military exercises, port visits, and capacity-building programs with Southeast Asian countries. India had conducted several joint military exercises with Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia. In 2012, India participated in a joint naval exercise with Singapore called SIMBEX, which aimed to enhance mutual understanding and inter-operability between the two navies. India also participated in a joint counterterrorism exercise with Indonesia called Garuda Shakti in 2014. Furthermore, India has also conducted joint military exercises with other countries in the region such as Vietnam and Myanmar. In 2013, India participated in a joint naval exercise with Vietnam called VINBAX, which aimed to improve maritime security cooperation between the two countries.

India's diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea has also increased over time. India has also been actively involved in diplomatic efforts to promote regional stability in the South China Sea. India has participated in various regional forums, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), which provide a platform for regional dialogue and cooperation on issues such as security, trade, and development.

India has been a vocal advocate for a rules-based international order in the region and has called for the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes through dialogue and negotiation. India has also signed several agreements and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with Southeast Asian nations on issues such as maritime security, defense cooperation, and trade. One example of India's advocacy for a rules-based international order in the South China Sea is its stance on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). India has consistently upheld the UNCLOS as the legal framework for resolving maritime disputes and has emphasized the

Diplomatic Policy

- 2000: Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation with Vietnam.
- 2003: Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN.
- 2005: Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Singapore.
- 2008: India-Myanmar Border Area Development Agreement.
- 2010: Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of a Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism with Indonesia.

importance of respecting the rights of all countries under the convention. In 2016, India issued a statement reaffirming its commitment to the UNCLOS and urging all parties in the South China Sea to resolve disputes through peaceful means and in accordance with international law. Moreover, India's diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea has also been aimed at countering China's growing influence in the region. India has sought to cultivate closer ties with Southeast Asian countries, including through the establishment of a trilateral dialogue with Japan and the United States. India has also been active in engaging with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and has supported efforts to strengthen ASEAN's role in regional security architecture.

Likewise, In terms of capacity-building programs, India has provided technical assistance and training to Southeast Asian nations to help improve their maritime infrastructure and capabilities. Such as in 2014, India provided Vietnam with a \$100 million credit line to purchase patrol boats for its coast guard, and in the same year, India provided the Philippines with a \$10 million credit line for the purchase of defense equipment, including maritime surveillance systems.

Additionally, in order to foster increased regional collaboration, India has offered training and support to Southeast Asian countries in fields such as counterterrorism, peacekeeping operations, and disaster relief.

So, India's military and diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea reflects its commitment to promoting

regional stability, safeguarding its economic and strategic interests, and dealing with the growing dominance of China. While India faces several challenges in implementing this policy, including the risk of antagonizing China and the need to manage its relationships with other regional players, its engagement in the region is likely to remain an important element of its foreign policy approach in the years ahead.

Overall, India's military and diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, closer ties with Southeast Asian nations can help promote regional stability, enhance economic integration, and offset the influence of China's growing power in the region. On the other hand, these activities could be seen as provocative by China, leading to tensions and potential conflict.

In summary, India's military and diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea has evolved over time, driven by its strategic interests in the region. India's engagement activities include joint exercises, capacity-building programs, and security ties with Southeast Asian nations. These activities aim to promote regional stability, equalise China's control, and enhance India's defense and diplomatic capabilities in the region.

IMPACT OF INDIA'S STRATEGIC HEDGING POLICY ON REGIONAL STABILITY AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

India's strategic hedging policy has significant implications for regional stability and the balance of power in the South China Sea. India's engagement with Southeast Asian countries through joint exercises, capacity-building programs, and security ties has helped to strengthen its maritime capabilities and neutralise China's assertiveness in the region.

However, India's policy of strategic hedging has also presented diplomatic challenges, as India seeks to balance its relations with China and other regional actors, including the US and Japan.

- Disaster relief: India provided relief and assistance to Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis in 2008, and also conducted joint exercises with Indonesia and Thailand on disaster response.
- Counterterrorism: India provided training and assistance to the Philippines in counterterrorism operations, including in the areas of bomb detection and disposal.
- Peacekeeping operations: India provided training and assistance to Cambodia and Laos in peacekeeping operations, including in areas such as logistics and engineering support.

India's growing ties with the US and Japan have been viewed with suspicion by China, which sees these partnerships as an attempt to contain its rise as a regional power.

Moreover, India's military engagement in the region also presents risks of escalation and potential conflict. India's joint exercises with the US and Japan in the South China Sea have been viewed by China as a provocative act, leading to increased tensions in the region.

Despite these challenges, India has played a significant role in promoting a rules-based international order in the South China Sea. India has emphasized the importance of freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes, calling for a multilateral approach to regional security issues.

Moving forward, the potential for conflict and cooperation among regional actors, including China, the US, and Japan, remains a key factor in determining the impact of India's strategic hedging policy on regional stability and the balance of power. India's ability to balance its relations with China and other regional actors while promoting a rules-based international order will continue to be a significant challenge.

Therefore, it is important to carefully evaluate the impact of India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea on regional stability and the balance of power and to explore ways in which India can pursue a policy that promotes regional stability and security while avoiding a confrontation with China.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea is a reflection of its growing regional ambitions and the need to protect its economic and strategic interests. As a major player in the region, India faces significant challenges in pursuing its objectives, including balancing its relationship with China, managing its ties with the United States, and engaging with other regional players like Japan. Despite these challenges, India has demonstrated its willingness to engage actively in the region, both diplomatically and militarily. India has successfully established itself as a credible and reliable partner for countries seeking to balance against China's growing influence. Through its military and diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asian nations, India has positioned itself as an important regional actor and sought to promote a rules-based international order in the region.

The impact of India's policy on the balance of power in the region remains a subject of debate, and the potential for conflict and cooperation among regional actors, including China, the US, and Japan, underscores the importance of continued engagement and dialogue in the region. Ultimately, India's strategic hedging policy in the South China Sea will continue to shape the geopolitical landscape of the region in the years to come.

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