



China's Assertive Behavior in the South China Sea and the Implications for India

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Trouble is brewing in Southeast Asia amid fears that China might be leveraging the Covid-19 pandemic to strengthen its position in the South China Sea. In April, China sailed its giant survey ship the *Haiyang Dizhi 8* off the Malaysian coast to closely shadow a Malaysian oil exploration vessel. In response, the United States ordered the USS *America*—an amphibious assault ship—and two guided-missile warships into disputed waters in the region, where they were soon joined in exercises by an Australian warship. Soon after, China announced that People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy warships and fighter aircraft had “expelled” the USS *Barry*, a guided-missile destroyer, from the vicinity of the Chinese-held Paracel Islands, a claim U.S. officials promptly refuted.

The standoff came days after Chinese militias sank a Vietnamese fishing boat with eight crew members off the Paracel Islands, and Beijing ordered an administrative reorganization of its South China Sea territories. China's State Council has announced two new municipal districts, carving up the governance of the Paracel and Spratly island groups, earlier managed by the local administration of Sansha in Hainan Province, between two sub-authorities that will now function as separate administrative units with jurisdiction over their respective island chains. The move has been deemed controversial because it shifts the administration of the disputed Spratly group to Fierly

Cross Island—one of China's three military-grade artificial islands that sit at the center of the country's territorial disputes with Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines in the South China Sea.

To be sure, Chinese actions have received pushback from regional states. Through a combination of administrative, legal, and operational means, China's neighbors have sought to deter Chinese aggression in their near seas. In December last year, Malaysia approached the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf claiming waters beyond the 200-kilometer limit of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the northern part of the South China Sea—a move prompted by China's extended presence in and around the Luconia Shoals. Weeks later, Indonesia deployed warships and a submarine in the waters off the Natuna Islands after an encroachment by Chinese fishing boats and coast guard ships. In April, Vietnam sent a diplomatic note to the United Nations protesting Beijing's expanding assertions in the South China Sea following an incident in which a Chinese ship rammed and sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat.

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Unfortunately, these actions have not helped moderate Chinese behavior. With Covid-19 sweeping through Southeast Asia, civilian and military leaders have been preoccupied with fighting the pandemic. Regional states, moreover, are increasingly dependent on Chinese investment and medical aid, and many are reluctant to openly criticize China's assertive actions in their near seas. As some see it, China's recent moves are part of a long-standing "salami-slicing" strategy at sea: the slow accumulation of small and stealthy actions, none of which justify a major tactical escalation by other countries but that over time add up to a major strategic shift. China, however, has been astute in denying neighbors the space to mount an effective response in the littoral.

For Indian observers watching from the sidelines, three aspects of the unfolding crisis in the South China Sea seem relevant. First, Chinese militia operations have focused on the region's western end close to the Indian Ocean and target countries with which India has a close political and military relationship. Since September 2018, when a PLA Navy destroyer closed to within a hundred yards of the *USS Decatur* near Gaven Reef in the South China Sea, China's naval and militia operations have harassed Vietnamese and Indonesian law-enforcement agencies, which frequently cooperate with the Indian Navy and Coast Guard in regional security initiatives.

Second, the developments in the South China Sea coincide with a rise in Chinese activity in the eastern Indian Ocean, particularly by Chinese research and survey vessels. In September 2019 an Indian warship expelled the *Shiyan 1*, a Chinese research vessel found intruding into the EEZ off the coast of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. At a time when there is talk of a China-backed plan to construct a canal across the *Thai isthmus* and a secret agreement for a Chinese naval base on the Cambodian coast, a spurt in Chinese presence in the eastern Indian Ocean has triggered disquiet in New Delhi. To add to India's anxiety, China's deep-sea mining vessels and fishing fleets have been making regular appearances in the southern Indian Ocean.

A third factor for Indian analysts to consider has been the increasingly frequent sightings of Chinese *intelligence ships* in the Indian Ocean region. Chinese Dongdiao-class intelligence-gathering ships—known earlier to stalk U.S., Australian, and Japanese warships in the western Pacific—now operate in the waters of the eastern Indian Ocean, keeping an eye on Indian naval movements. One such Chinese spy ship was spotted close to the eastern sea border near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands late in 2019, causing some unease in India's security establishment.

Even so, New Delhi has not abandoned its policy of nonintervention in the security affairs of Southeast Asia. India's policy elite believe that their country is not party to the maritime territorial disputes in the region and must refrain from meddling in a matter that does not directly concern it. Indian decision-makers also know that Beijing operates from a position of strength in the South China Sea, where it has physical control over critical islands. Possession of these features gives Beijing the ability to exert strategic authority over the disputed territory, regardless of the rights and interests of other regional states. More importantly, New Delhi's priority is to preserve the *Wuhan consensus*. It continues to hope that Beijing will respect India's sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean in the same way that New Delhi respects China's in Southeast Asia. Even if Beijing has not acted in good faith recently, the Indian government is unwilling to violate their goodwill pact.

New Delhi is not impervious either to the threat China poses to trade flows in the region or to its significant challenges to Indian energy and strategic interests. Access to the major waterways in Southeast Asia is an important consideration for Indian policymakers, as is the need to build capacity in member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Both are central to New Delhi's Indo-Pacific vision. Yet, when it comes to security issues in the South China Sea, India is wary of provoking China. Notwithstanding the security establishment's deep misgivings about Chinese expansionism in littoral Asia—including in the eastern Indian Ocean—Indian

diplomats and spokespeople almost never make public their reservations about China's maritime assertiveness.

By contrast, India is relatively open about its disagreements with the United States in the interpretation of maritime law and the freedoms enjoyed by foreign warships in a coastal state's EEZ. Indian officials **do not concur** with U.S. claims that warships have a right to uninterrupted passage in coastal zones without prior notification and approval of the coastal state. New Delhi's position on navigation in the South China Sea in fact seems closer to Beijing's, especially on the matter of naval operations in another country's territorial waters claiming innocent passage. The references to India's energy stakes in the South China Sea in media reports can also be misleading. India does have commercial interests in Vietnam's EEZ, but its stakes are not significant.

If there is a constant in India's South China Sea policy, it is **deference** to Chinese sensitivities. Far from expanding

naval operations in the South China Sea, India avoids language in its joint statements with partner states that might upset China. Yet the costs of irking Beijing are far surpassed by the cost of saying and doing nothing. China's growing military footprint in the South China Sea is bound to facilitate greater power projection in the eastern Indian Ocean.

Events of past weeks have shown that the imperative for India is to display solidarity with partners in Southeast Asia. It must do so by publicly stating its discomfiture with Chinese assertiveness and by strengthening its strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia in the Indo-Pacific region. At the same time, Indian officials must initiate a dialogue with China and ASEAN on a rules-based order in Asia, setting the terms of engagement between maritime forces. If New Delhi is not proactive, Beijing will set the terms of conflict and peace in the region. ∞

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