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Beyond the Indian Ocean: India and the South China Sea

Abstract:

Border relations between India and China are gradually normalising. This does not eliminate their growing strategic rivalry, which is increasingly spilling over into the maritime sphere. For New Delhi, the South China Sea has ceased to be a peripheral area, linked mainly to trade, and has become a region of growing geopolitical interest within the Indo-Pacific. Against this backdrop, this paper analyses the evolution of India's strategy in the region, particularly through the Act East Policy, the strengthening of relations with ASEAN, and the defence of freedom of navigation and international law.

It also examines the modernisation of India's naval capabilities—which still lag behind China's—as well as the intensification of military and maritime cooperation with South-East Asian countries and other international partners, particularly within the framework of the QUAD. Thus, India's growing presence stems both from the need to protect its economic and energy interests and from the desire to counter China's maritime expansion and extend its security perimeter, without this implying a search for direct confrontation.

Keywords:

South China Sea, China, India, ASEAN, Indo-Pacific

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Introduction: From the land border to the sea

The 18th BRICS Summit, held in New Delhi in September during India's BRICS chairmanship, marked a gradual normalisation of Sino-Indian relations, although it did not completely resolve the two countries' differences over the border dispute. At a bilateral meeting on 12 September, Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping reiterated their commitment to a 'fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable' solution to the dispute, which remains a fundamental obstacle to the development of bilateral relations, despite the gradual resumption of dialogue mechanisms since late 2024¹.

Analyses of this border dispute often overlook an increasingly significant dimension: the rivalry between India and China that is not confined to the land border in the Himalayas but is extending with growing intensity into the maritime domain. The strategic competition between the two countries extends to the Indian Ocean and, increasingly, to the South China Sea. For India, the latter is by no means a distant theatre, as a substantial share of its foreign trade passes through these waters and its key shipping routes linking it to East Asia run through this region.

China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, the consolidation of port infrastructure linked to Beijing as part of the so-called 'String of Pearls' strategy, and the rapid expansion of China's maritime capabilities are fuelling India's perception of mounting strategic pressure. Conversely, India's intensified cooperation with Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, Australia and the United States, as well as its defence of freedom of navigation and respect for international law in the South China Sea, are raising concerns in Beijing.

The maritime dimension is becoming one of the main arenas of Sino-Indian rivalry and is assuming greater geopolitical importance, as it brings together security, trade, alliances and naval presence, as well as competition for the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. In this context, New Delhi has shifted from viewing the South China Sea primarily through an economic lens to treating it as part of its broader strategic environment. This shift enables it, in cooperation with Southeast Asian countries involved in sovereignty disputes

¹ 'President Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 12 September 2026. Available at: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202609/t20260913_12021206.html (Accessed: 12 October 2026).

with Beijing over that sea, to participate in joint military exercises and assess its own maritime capabilities².

The South China Sea and India: a historical and strategic perspective

The South China Sea links the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific, and its sea lanes are essential for India's foreign trade and energy supply; consequently, its stability has a direct bearing on the country's economic security. Given India's historical, economic and cultural presence in the Southeast Asian countries bordering this sea³, this region cannot be regarded as a peripheral area in relation to the Indian Ocean, but rather as an area of strategic importance to New Delhi. This significance is reinforced by China's growing assertiveness, which is altering the balance of power across the entire Indo-Pacific maritime region, particularly in the South China Sea⁴.

At present, two factors explain India's growing strategic interest in the South China Sea. On the one hand, its aim is not to challenge China's territorial control of this area, but to prevent Beijing from attaining a position from which it could control sea lanes, influence the decisions of South-East Asian states and project its power more easily towards the Strait of Malacca and, subsequently, towards the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the South China Sea is emerging as an arena for indirect competition between the two countries, in which New Delhi can respond to Chinese pressure on the land border through actions in the maritime sphere. Indeed, following the clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020, India deployed a warship to the South China Sea as a warning sign amid a possible escalation of the border conflict⁵. This episode reflects the growing strategic importance New Delhi attaches to this area.

² LIM, S.: 'India's economic resilience gives new impetus to ASEAN regional cooperation', ASEAN Perspective, 14 June 2026. Available at: <https://www.aseaninsight.org/es/articles/india-economic-resilience-boosts-asean-cooperation-2026> (Accessed: 1 October 2026).

³ On the historical importance of India in the countries of South-East Asia, see DALRYMPLE, W.: *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*. Translated by Ricardo García Herrero. Madrid: Desperta Ferro Ediciones, 2026. ISBN: 978-84-129810-5-6.

⁴ PANT, H. V. and BASU, P.: 'The South China Sea Policy Transition: India's Strategic Shift', in IMPRI Impact and Policy Research Institute, 25 April 2024. Available at: <https://www.impriindia.com/insights/south-china-sea-policy-india/> (Accessed: 1 October 2026).

⁵ 'Indian Navy Quietly Deployed Its Frontline Warship in the South China Sea After the Galwan Clash', in Indian Defence News, 31 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.indiandefensenews.in/2020/08/indian-navy-quietly-deployed-its.html> (Accessed: 12 October 2026).

With a view to preserving a stable maritime order in the South China Sea, India assigns a central role to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states, rather than recognising China as the main regional reference point. This approach forms part of the government's Act East Policy, although internal divisions within ASEAN make it difficult to formulate a common regional position. It also has a normative dimension linked to India's international role: the defence of compliance with UNCLOS (the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) and of a rules-based maritime order. These principles take on particular significance in the South China Sea, where Beijing's claims and actions are the subject of are contested. New Delhi thus links its own strategic interests to the defence of the principles of international governance of maritime spaces.

The Act East Policy and ASEAN: India's strategy

The Act East Policy is the framework that enables New Delhi to pursue an active strategy in South-East Asia. The evolution from the Look East Policy, introduced in the 1990s, to the Act East Policy of 2014 reflects a shift from a policy centred on economic integration with ASEAN to one that broadens the scope of Indian policy to encompass issues relating to maritime security, naval presence and defence cooperation, contributing to a regional balance in the face of China's growth, without this implying a strategy of direct confrontation with Beijing⁶.

The Act East Policy highlights five objectives, including recognition of the connection between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, with the South China Sea serving as the maritime corridor linking the two regions; the deepening of relations with South-East Asia, making its member states key partners in Indian foreign policy; the maritime dimension of security, which leads India to strengthen its naval presence through various mechanisms; and the defence of a rules-based maritime order⁷.

⁶ SINGH, A.K., DAS, O.P., PANDALAI, S., AO, T. and WALIA, S.: 'India's Act East Policy and Engagement with Southeast Asia and Oceania, 2014–2025', in MP-IDSA Monograph Series, No. 102. New Delhi: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2026. Available at: <https://idsa.in/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Monograph-102.pdf> (Accessed 12 October 2026).

⁷ BORUAH, D.: 'India's Strategic Interests and Influence in the South China Sea: Navigating Regional Power Dynamics', in *The Academic: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(1), 2025, pp. 971–976. Available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14852707>

Relations between India and ASEAN have become the cornerstone of this foreign policy towards the South China Sea, linked to the Act East Policy. Institutional engagement with this multinational organisation began in 1992, when India became a sectoral dialogue partner, and it became a dialogue partner in 1995, subsequently reaching summit level in 2002 and elevating the relationship to the status of a strategic partnership in 2012. A decade later, in 2022, both sides took a further step by establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), reinforced by the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and various projects to improve physical and digital connectivity⁸.

The economic dimension of this relationship is very significant, as bilateral trade reached 110,000 million euros in 2025–2026, accounting for around 11% of India's total foreign trade, compared with just 5,200 million in 1996–1997. However, there is a clear imbalance: whilst India exported goods worth approximately 35,000 million euros, it imported goods worth around 75,000 million, resulting in a trade deficit of around 40,000 million euros with the ASEAN countries. Its main trading partners were, in this order, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam⁹. The relationship between India and ASEAN is expanding from economic and diplomatic cooperation towards a more defined strategic and maritime dimension. 2026 marks the ASEAN–India Year of Maritime Cooperation.

The maritime security dimension for India

Since the early 2010s, China's naval expansion in the South China Sea has come to be perceived in India as an issue that goes beyond the territorial disputes in South-East Asia. China's gradual acquisition of maritime projection and area denial capabilities could open up the possibility of using this region as a platform from which to project its power into the Indian Ocean. Consequently, India began to integrate the South China Sea into a broader conception of the Indo-Pacific region and of its rivalry with China. This perception was

⁸ 'Overview of ASEAN-India Relations'. 11 June 2025. New Delhi: Government of India. Available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BRIEF-ON-ASEAN-INDIA.pdf> (Accessed 12 October 2026).

⁹ 'India-ASEAN bilateral trade hits \$128 billion in 2025–26 amid AITIGA review push', in Nation Press, 8 July 2026. Available at: <https://www.nationpress.com/sciencetech/india-asean-trade-hits-dollar128-bn-in-2025-26> (Accessed 12 October 2026).

reinforced in 2011, when the Indian vessel *INS Airavat* received a warning from another Chinese vessel whilst sailing near Vietnam.

India reiterated its position of full respect for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), under which arbitral awards relating to the South China Sea were issued but not recognised by China. India regards this maritime area as a common good and maintains that its stability must be preserved through international law¹⁰. The existence of a 'South China Sea dilemma' for India has also been raised, comparable, from a conceptual point of view, to China's so-called 'Malacca dilemma'. The latter refers to China's need to guarantee the security of its supplies and seek alternatives in the event of a possible closure or obstruction of maritime traffic in the Strait of Malacca, a key route for supplying its economy. If China's militarisation and coercive capacity in the South China Sea continue to increase as a result of an ever-growing military presence, India could perceive a similar risk to its interests in the region¹¹.

India faces two main threats. Firstly, the vulnerability of its maritime communication routes, given that approximately 55% of its maritime trade passes through this region. Freedom of navigation is therefore essential to preserving India's strategic autonomy and preventing it from being left at the mercy of Chinese decisions. Secondly, energy security is a key concern, as India has various interests in the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons in this sea, particularly in collaboration with Vietnam. A hegemonic position by China could hinder these projects and limit future access to certain resources, against a backdrop where India's economic growth is also increasing the country's energy needs¹².

¹⁰ ROMERO, A.: 'India's PM backs UNCLOS, rules-based order in the seas', in *The Philippine Star*, 27 January 2018. Available at: <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/01/27/1781816/india-pm-backs-unclos-rules-based-order-seas> (Accessed 12 October 2026).

¹¹ See MOHAN, C.R.: **India and the Rebalancing of Asia**. Adelphi Series, vol. 65, nos. 517–519. London: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2025. ISBN: 978-1-041-19225-1, and SINGH, A.: *India and the South China Sea: Upscaling Maritime Diplomacy*. New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation, 2024. ISBN: 978-93-91498-27-6. Available as [a full PDF document](#) (accessed 12 October 2026).

¹² 'India, Vietnam Deepen Oil & Gas Ties, Expand Clean Energy Cooperation', in *ENERGDIVE*, 7 May 2026. Available at: [ENERGDIVE – India, Vietnam Deepen Oil & Gas Ties](#) (Accessed 12 October 2026).

India's growing naval capabilities

Another risk perceived by India in the South China Sea is the increase in China's maritime capabilities and its expansion into the western Pacific Ocean and the waters adjacent to the Indian Ocean, which could give China a decisive advantage over the Indian Navy. New Delhi is responding in two ways: by expanding its own naval capabilities and by participating in international alliances and cooperation mechanisms. Indeed, maritime security occupies a central position in Indian policy and in its relations with ASEAN¹³.

The Indian Maritime Doctrine of 2015—originally published in 2004, revised in 2009 and updated in 2015—regarded the South China Sea as an area of secondary interest¹⁴. Over the following decade, concerns grew over the need to develop India's own naval projection capability to contribute to the strategic balance with China. New Delhi has accelerated the modernisation of its Navy with the aim of transitioning from a primarily regional force to an ocean-going navy capable of maintaining a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean and projecting power into the western Pacific.

The publication of a new version of the Doctrine in December 2025 marked a significant evolution in Indian naval strategic thinking towards the Indo-Pacific, against a backdrop of increasing competition with China and the need to adapt Indian naval capabilities to new technologies. The protection of trade and of the sea lanes essential to the Indian economy constitutes one of the cornerstones of this approach. Thus, the South China Sea ceased to be viewed solely as a secondary area, distant from India's naval centre of gravity, and came to be integrated into a broader strategic conception of the Indo-Pacific¹⁵.

For its part, the Maritime Security Strategy published in 2026 consolidates a multi-domain approach to operations and incorporates capabilities in the so-called 'grey zone', hybrid threats and deterrence below the threshold of armed conflict, including in the maritime

¹³ VINH, V.X., HIEP, T.X. and HUNG, V.M.: 'India's engagement in the South China Sea', in *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, 17(2), pp. 64–77. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2021.2022287>.

¹⁴ This was set out in the 'Indian Maritime Doctrine', in Naval Strategic Publication (NSP) 1.1. Originally published in 2009, updated in 2015. New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy). Available at: <https://indiannavy.gov.in/sites/default/files/Indian-Maritime-Doctrine.pdf> (Accessed 12 October 2026). On page 68, the South China Sea is listed among the areas of secondary interest.

¹⁵ 'What Is India Maritime Doctrine 2025? The Hidden Strategy Behind India's Expanding Indo-Pacific Naval Reach', in *Indian Masterminds*, 17 March 2026. Available at: <https://indianmasterminds.com/news/india-maritime-doctrine-2025-indo-pacific-focus-191771/> (Accessed 12 October 2026).

domain. This approach is reflected in deployments and operations such as Sindoor, carried out off the coast of Pakistan in May 2025 and which mobilised 36 vessels; Operation Sankalp, focused on the safety of navigation in the Indian Ocean; and Operation Urja Suraksha, launched in March 2026 to protect energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz¹⁶.

The new Doctrine is also linked to national initiatives such as Viksit Bharat 2047, Maritime India Vision 2030 and MAHASAGAR, which connect economic development, maritime connectivity and India's international projection. However, the Indian Navy's capabilities remain far inferior to those of the People's Liberation Army Navy. According to Global Firepower, China has 841 naval vessels, compared with India's 343, and a fleet of over 3 million tonnes, compared with India's approximately 632,000 tonnes—this represents a ratio of roughly five to one in terms of tonnage. Furthermore, China has three aircraft carriers, compared with India's two; 61 submarines, compared with 18; 53 destroyers, compared with 13; 46 frigates, compared with 18; and 50 corvettes, compared with 21. These figures illustrate the structural imbalance between the two navies¹⁷.

According to the analysis by Janes, updated in September 2026, the Indian Navy is undergoing a process of modernisation and expansion aimed at strengthening its capabilities, and currently has more than 50 ships and submarines under construction. Its budget has risen from approximately €4,605 million in the 2020–2021 financial year to €9,614 million in 2025–2026, increasing its share of total defence expenditure from 15% to 21%. Its projection capability centres on the aircraft carriers *INS Vikrant* and *INS Vikramaditya*, supported by Visakhapatnam- and Kolkata-class destroyers, modern frigates and BrahMos supersonic missile systems. These capabilities are complemented by maritime patrol aircraft, anti-submarine helicopters, and conventional and strategic submarines. The modernisation programme includes the acquisition of 26 Rafale Marine fighter jets and new submarines¹⁸.

¹⁶ 'Indian Navy releases maritime security strategy at commanders' conference', in Defence Standard, 17 April 2026. Available at: <https://defencestandard.com/indian-navy-releases-maritime-security-strategy-at-commanders-conference/> (Accessed 12 October 2026).

¹⁷ 'Comparison of China and India Military Strengths'. Global Firepower 2026. Available at: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.php?country1=china&country2=india> (Accessed: 12 October 2026).

¹⁸ 'Indian Navy: Capability, Role, Deployments, Procurement and Outlook'. In Jane's Defence Intelligence. Information updated as of September 2026. Specialised subscription-based database.

At the same time, multinational cooperation and information-sharing mechanisms are also strengthening India's maritime presence and its ability to operate alongside other navies. In May 2026, a ministerial meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), comprising the United States, India, Japan and Australia, was held in New Delhi and highlighted the need to ensure safe and unimpeded maritime trade. The statement also reaffirmed the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight, rejected coercive or unilateral actions, and expressed concern over the militarisation of disputed geographical features, in a reference to the context of maritime tensions in the Indo-Pacific¹⁹.

India thus emerges as a western anchor of the QUAD's maritime architecture and its new surveillance and information-sharing initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. Notable among these is the Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration (IPMSC), launched at the May 2026 meeting, alongside the development of a Common Operating Picture (COP) to improve shared awareness of the maritime environment. The maritime information fusion centre in Gurugram is a key piece of infrastructure for the exchange of information in the Indian Ocean and its links with South-East Asia. However, New Delhi continues to avoid commitments to collective defence and reiterates that the QUAD is not a military alliance specifically directed against China, but rather a cooperation mechanism that also addresses issues such as connectivity, supply chain resilience and technological development.

From a bilateral perspective, the Indian Navy conducts joint exercises and pursues cooperation initiatives with neighbouring countries in South-East Asia, such as the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand and Cambodia. Three partners stand out in particular. Vietnam has become one of India's key maritime partners: the two countries have carried out joint naval exercises, training programmes, coastguard cooperation and information sharing. The Philippines, for its part, has established cooperation agreements with India and has proposed strengthening collaboration through the exchange of information on maritime traffic. Singapore also plays a prominent role, with the joint SIMBEX naval exercises, which have been held since 1994.

¹⁹ '2026 Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi', Office of the Spokesperson, Fact Sheet, 26 May 2026. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/05/2026-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting-in-new-delhi/> (Accessed 12 October 2026).

Another key initiative is the Malabar exercise, which began as a bilateral manoeuvre between India and the United States in 1992 and has gradually incorporated the other QUAD partners: Japan and Australia. The exercise has also expanded its geographical scope to the Western Pacific, in addition to its traditional focus on the Indian Ocean. Similarly, the Indian Navy has stepped up its joint manoeuvres with European navies, particularly the French Navy, whose naval cooperation is one of the most significant for India and is symbolised by the bilateral VARUNA exercise, which has been held since 2001. It also maintains cooperation with the British and Italian navies and with other naval forces from European Union countries. This growing collaboration includes participation in activities linked to the EUNAVFOR Atalanta mission, as well as joint exercises and manoeuvres with units from other European navies, including the Greek and Spanish navies²⁰.

Conclusions: greater assertiveness, greater risk diversification

From a geopolitical perspective, the South China Sea has ceased to be merely a peripheral maritime area for India—linked to trade and access to energy resources—and has instead become an extension of the Indo-Pacific strategic arena and, increasingly, another chapter in the Sino-Indian rivalry. Through the evolution of the Act East Policy, this process of Indian assertiveness has gradually expanded geographically and extended to various sectors, ranging from the economic sphere to military cooperation, including naval exercises, agreements on maritime security and the strengthening of relations with South-East Asian countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines.

Thus, India's growing presence in the South China Sea can be interpreted both as a defence of freedom of navigation under international law and of India's own economic interests, and as a means of projecting its influence into the maritime sphere, beyond the Indian Ocean, another dimension of the existing strategic rivalry with China, within the framework of the ambiguity that characterises the relationship between these two major powers, beyond their disputes and agreements concerning the land border.

²⁰ 'The frigate Reina Sofía, deployed as part of Operation Atalanta, takes part in a joint exercise with the Indian Navy', Spanish Ministry of Defence, 4 June 2025. Available at: [Defence General Staff – Official press release](#) (Accessed: 12 October 2026).

The result of this increased Indian presence is the expansion of its security perimeter, comparable to the expansion of China's security arc in South-East Asia. Although the Indian Ocean remains India's priority maritime area, it can no longer be analysed in isolation from its connection to the South China Sea and, more broadly, to the Indo-Pacific as a whole.

As a result of all this, the relationship between India and ASEAN is taking on a distinct geopolitical and economic dimension, as India is strengthening its appeal both as a market for Southeast Asian exports and as a destination for investment and for the development of supply chains that already had a long-standing presence in the region. Although this strategy does not seek a maritime confrontation with China, it is fostering ever-greater complementarity between India and the countries of South-East Asia. In this way, India's economic and strategic strengthening also provides ASEAN states with an alternative for diversifying their trade, production and security relations in a regional context marked by China's enormous influence.

The main limitation on India's assertiveness in South-East Asia is its relative capacity compared to China. Although some countries regard greater Indian involvement in the region as desirable, there is a marked asymmetry between China's historically consolidated influence and that of India, which is perceived as a potential counterweight, albeit one that still raises questions. Greater Indian involvement will depend on deeper economic integration with the coastal states—which is being fostered through agreements and initiatives—as well as on India's consolidation as a partner in security and defence matters, particularly through a greater naval and diplomatic presence in this region, which is of great strategic importance to China.

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