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India edges up against China in the South China Sea.

by David Scott



As a post-Covid India and China stare at each other across a fraught land frontier, on the maritime front, India has edged up its presence in the South China Sea, largely claimed by China under its “nine-dash line”, the scene of reclamation and militarization of islands and reefs, and one of its “core interests”. India’s edging up is part of India’s own rising stature, as well as part of its de facto balancing towards China. It is also an attempt to counter pressure from China on its land frontiers and in the Indian Ocean. In addition, it provides leverage on other issues. Chinese analysts like [Wang Dehua](#) correctly argue that “New Delhi makes geopolitical calculation[s] in playing [the] South China Sea Card” as “[b]y playing the card of the South China Sea issue, it wants Beijing to make compromises on the border disputes”.

The first edging up by India in the South China Sea was the “sail by” carried out by INS Kolkata and the tanker INS Shakti in May 2019. The presence of Indian navy vessels in the South China Sea is not new and has been well established since 2004. Indeed, India has long been conducting naval drills with Singapore in the SIMBEX

exercises which take place in the southern reaches of the South China Sea. The last one took place in May 2019, with INS Kolkata and INS Shakti exercising with two Singaporean warships. These are serious exercises, including live fire and anti-submarine drills. However, the Indian navy has not operated with other external navies. This time, though, it did. The sail-by was conducted with two Japanese warships (including the helicopter carrier JS Izumo), and one US warship. It was not a full-blown exercise, but nevertheless the ships carried out formation exercises and communications drills.

This external drilling was further manifested in August 2020 when two warships of the Indian navy were dispatched to the South China Sea, where they maintained continual contact with US warships also stationed in the area. The [Global Times](#) accused India of playing the South China Sea card against China. Again, it was not joint exercising, but rather it was joint “presencing”. The context was significant, occurring soon after the Galwan confrontation which had resulted in Indian casualties. Indian warships had been deployed to the Strait of Malacca during the Ladakh crisis as well. These deployments were China-related, and something raised by [Beijing](#) in the discussions over the summer to try and defuse tension along the land frontier.

The second edging up was political. In a clear critique of China, the Minister for External Affairs [Subrahmanyam Jaishankar](#) took the opportunity of attending the East Asia Summit in November 2020 to directly comment on the South China Sea and how China’s actions were eroding “trust”, the importance of adhering to international law, and a rules-based global order.

The third edging up was made with Vietnam. There has long been a defence partnership between India and Vietnam. Joint naval exercises in the South China Sea were initiated in May 2018. [Xu Liang](#) denounced the activities: “[b]y stirring up the currently calm and tranquil South China Sea, the primary goal of India is to contain China”. The logic for India-Vietnamese defence cooperation was simple. [Liu Zongyi](#) argued in 2018 that “[c]ontaining China in strategy and security is the driving force of India-Vietnam ties”.

In the wake of the Galwan confrontations, it was no coincidence that the [India-Vietnam Joint Vision](#) in December 2020 marked a noticeable strengthening of defence ties. The document conveyed the following key points:

1. an “enhanced defence and security partnership between India and Vietnam will be an important factor of stability in the Indo-Pacific region”;
2. they would “intensify their defence industry collaboration building on India’s defence credit lines extended to Vietnam”;
2. they would also institutionalize military exercises;

3. “the importance of maintaining peace, stability, security and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, while pursuing the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), without resorting to threat or use of force. Both leaders underscored the importance of non-militarization and self-restraint in the conduct of all activities”.

These represent a tacit pushback by India. The first point indicates this because China is averse to the Indo-Pacific terminology, the second because it represents India helping to strengthen Vietnam’s military power on China’s southern flank, the third because it deepens Indian naval involvement within the South China Sea alongside Vietnam, and the fourth because it supports the principle of “freedom of navigation and overflight” and the importance of UNCLOS adherence. This is aimed against China’s positions on the South China Sea and its failure to accept the adverse ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on the South China Sea delivered in July 2016.

In a *Global Times* article, [Liu Zongyi](#) immediately responded:

India has poked its nose into the South China Sea [...] New Delhi's naked ambitions mean it does not simply want to make a show of the South China Sea issue. It really wants to counter China in the oceans, as it is boastful of its maritime advantages, especially in the Indian Ocean. [...] We can see that India will not give up its hope of counterbalancing China by playing the South China Sea card.

Developments in 2021 that will indicate further Indian edging up in the South China Sea include:

Highly probable: Renewing the license to explore in Block 128, the source of friction with China over the past decade. It is due for renewal in June 2021.

Fairly probable: Initiating proper joint exercising with the US, and/or Japanese, and/or Australian navies in the South China Sea. India already exercises with them in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific.

Low probability: Carrying out freedom of navigation exercises. India has agreed in principle with upholding them and in the validity of the 2016 PCA ruling against China’s artificial island claims.

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