



India wades into the South China Sea

By Richard Javad Heydarian

MANILA – India has waded more overtly into territorial disputes between China and Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea, a move that promises to raise tensions between the New Delhi and Beijing. "Not that we expect to be in those waters [South China Sea] very frequently, but when the requirement is there for situations where the country's interests are involved ... We will be required to go there and we are prepared for that," Indian navy chief Admiral D K Joshi said last month.

Notwithstanding India's evolving and complex bilateral relations with China, and its usual reticence in confronting its Asian rival, Joshi's statement could represent a watershed moment in defining New Delhi's future position towards China's rising assertiveness in the South China Sea and signal a more ambitious Indian naval vision.

After decades of low-profile diplomacy in the Pacific, where it has been constantly overshadowed by the likes of the United States, Australia, China, and Japan, an increasingly confident India is gradually stepping up its engagement with the wider region and flexing its increasingly robust naval muscle in the process.

India's booming trade with Southeast Asian countries, paved by New Delhi's "Look East" policy towards the region in response to a period of fast economic growth in the 1990s, has given a refurbished Indian Navy more reasons to develop an expeditionary outlook and transcend its traditional areas of operation, principally in the Indian Ocean.

Against the backdrop of rising rivalry between the US and China, and Japan's resurgent foreign policy under a more hawkish new leadership, India's entry into the South China Sea drama promises to transform the Pacific theater into a truly multi-polar strategic battle for power and influence.

ASEAN-India nexus

Increasing economic and political integration between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India has resulted in three, significant inter-related trends, namely:

- 1 An ASEAN-India economic symbiosis where both sides have emerged as new centers of economic growth and dynamism, creating tremendous potential for large-scale bilateral trade and institutionalized economic integration.
- 2 A mutual strategic recognition first initiated by India's "Look East" policy in response to the rising economic importance of East Asian countries in the 1990s. ASEAN has in turn progressively raised its estimation of India as an important strategic dialogue partner in recent years.
- 3 India's broadening interests in the South China Sea through deepened investments in hydrocarbon projects in the disputed territories. New Delhi has consistently reiterated its commitment to the freedom of navigation in the area. The past year marked a dramatic escalation in the South China Sea disputes. Under Cambodia's rotational leadership, ASEAN failed to converge around a multilateral dispute settlement mechanism to address the simmering territorial conflicts. The disputing states, especially China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, more aggressively pushed their claims.

The US's "pivot to Asia" policy has precipitated a gradual but decisive revitalization of strategic military ties with regional partners. At the same time, the policy shift in Washington has added volatility to the ongoing conflicts by strengthening the hands of hawks in both China and among the US's Asian allies.

As a rising Asian power with broad trade and strategic interests across the globe, India can not afford to ignore the spiraling territorial conflicts. While New Delhi is not a direct party to the conflicts, it is heavily invested in crucial hydrocarbon projects in one of the most turbulent areas of the disputed waters, where Vietnamese and Chinese forces have occasionally squared off.

Despite vehement Chinese opposition, Indian companies have plowed into various exploratory energy projects off the coast of Vietnam. The Indian state-run Oil & Natural Gas Company (ONGC) has not only been a major shareholder in a joint offshore gas project with TNK Vietnam, but it also recently renewed a two-year joint-exploration project with Petro Vietnam.

Rising maritime role

Joshi's recent comments should thus be analyzed in the specific context of China's increasingly aggressive posture in the immediate aftermath of Beijing's highly sensitive leadership transition from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in early November.

Despite earlier hopes of a more amicable Chinese approach under Xi ahead of the November 2012 ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, Beijing continued to press its advantage by encouraging Cambodia to block any unified regional measure on the maritime disputes.

To consolidate its domestic leadership, the Xi-led new leadership also upped the ante by engaging in even more provocative measures, which not only spooked many Southeast Asian states, especially claimants Vietnam and the Philippines, but also arguably encouraged greater Indian involvement in the issue.

In November, China published a new official map including South China Sea features that clearly fell within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Moreover, provincial authorities in the southern Chinese Island of Hainan announced new maritime regulations to search and intercept foreign vessels straddling Beijing's claimed maritime territories in the area.

The last straw for India was Vietnam's allegation that a number of Chinese paramilitary members harassed the Vietnamese Binh Minh 2 seismic survey vessel off the coast of Vietnam, where India's ONGC is currently operating.

China's subsequent decision to issue new controversial passports, bearing a map that lays claim to all its disputed territories across Asia, also reportedly irked India.

Joshi's controversial comments coincided with renewed Sino-India talks over disputed territories in the Himalayas, which sparked the 1962 India-China border war that China won and has ever since embittered bilateral relations.

In December, against the backdrop of more Chinese provocations, the ASEAN-India Summit kicked off with a common goal of boosting bilateral trade and, more importantly, fostering maritime security. Judging by the statements of ASEAN leaders at the meeting, nearly all sought greater Indian involvement in the disputes.

"At this time of rising concerns about maritime issues, the need to maintain a high level of maritime security and freedom of navigation offers us [India and the ASEAN]...an opportunity for enhanced cooperation," Philippines Vice President Jejomar Binay stated, prodding further Indian commitment to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung went one step further by directly soliciting India's support to peacefully resolve the territorial disputes, based on agreed-upon regional and international principles. The summit significantly closed with a decision to upgrade bilateral relations from a "dialogue partnership" to "strategic partnership", underscoring growing common interests vis-a-vis China.

Both sides also agreed to raise bilateral trade to as much US\$200 billion in the next decade. The summit's concluding document, announced as a "common vision", expressed both sides' interests in ensuring maritime security in the South China Sea: "We are committed to strengthening cooperation to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation and safety of sea lanes of communication for unfettered movement of trade in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS."

Budding giant rivalry

In light of China's meteoric rise, fuelling its appetite for energy resources and coincident rapidly advancing naval capabilities, India has undergone a strategic soul-searching over the optimal way to deal with Beijing's growing muscle.

Unlike China, India is still heavily embroiled in territorial disputes with continental neighbors, especially with Pakistan over Kashmir, and until recently has had less time to focus on developing its naval capabilities. That strategic oversight, however, is now changing rapidly.

After a decade of robust economic growth, a more confident India is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain a low-profile presence in crucial regional and international spheres. In addition, India's booming economy has also expanded its global strategic horizons, with major Indian companies searching for raw materials, technology and markets in new territories.

Indian strategists have thus fixed their gaze on developing a truly formidable navy to protect India's emerging global interests, especially the safe and predictable flow of strategic commodities from surrounding waters. In the last decade, the Indian Navy's share of total military expenditures has increased from 15% to 19%.

In the coming decade, the navy will be joined by an armada of new acquisitions, including: two new aircraft carriers, at least three Kolkata class destroyers, indigenously-designed nuclear submarines, a Boeing P-8I Neptune maritime multi-mission aircraft, and advanced stealth frigates led by the Sahyadri and Satpura. All told the acquisitions will place up to a total of 140 warships in India's service.

In the last decade, the Indian Navy has intensified its joint-exercises with major naval powers, especially the US Pacific Command, to enhance its operational readiness and inter-operability with allies. Those enhanced ties may have been motivated in part by past Chinese provocations.

In 2011, Chinese warships reportedly threatened an Indian Navy vessel patrolling off the coast of Vietnam. At the time, New Delhi's response to the incident was subdued. More recently, top Indian officials have repeatedly denied that Joshi's comments suggest Indian "interference" in the South China Sea disputes.

"There are fundamental issues there that do not require India's intervention," External Affairs Minister Salman Kurshid stated with respect to Southeast Asian maritime disputes during the ASEAN-India Summit. "[These sovereignty issues] need to be resolved between the countries concerned".

India has consistently sought to maintain a cordial working relationship with China, not least because bilateral trade is booming, surpassing the \$70 billion mark last year. And while it is still too early to expect India – known for its tradition of independent foreign policy – to join a US-led anti-China bandwagon, New Delhi is clearly beginning to push back.

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