



Natural Resources in the South China Sea: India's Strategic and Economic Interests

Dhruv Nilkanth

Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University

Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) is a marginal sea located in the western Pacific Ocean bordered by Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam with Cambodia, Thailand and Singapore also being important stakeholders due to their proximity to the SCS. It is one of the most important trade routes, with an estimated US \$3.4 trillion,ⁱ or 20% to 33% of sea trade passing through the area.ⁱⁱ SCS also holds one of the world's largest proven hydrocarbon and mineral reserves. An average of US, Chinese, and other national and international agency estimates shows the presence of 107 billion barrels of crude oil and 21.6 trillion cubic metres of natural gas in the SCS.ⁱⁱⁱ Minerals such as titaniferous magnetite, zircon, monazite, tin, gold, and chromite are also found in abundance.^{iv} India already has a stake in resource exploration in the SCS. In 1988, the overseas arm of the state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited (ONGC), known as ONGC Videsh (OVL), acquired 100% rights for petroleum exploration in a Vietnamese offshore block (Block 06.01).^v In 2003, the block resulted in India's first overseas oil production output. In 2006, India acquired a 100% stake in another Vietnamese offshore block (Block 128), which it currently operates. The SCS is a possible hotspot for future exploration and extraction of natural resources. Given India's established presence in the region, it could be one of the frontrunners in the extraction of natural resources in the SCS. Therefore, the question is, should India increase its role in maritime resource exploration in the SCS? If so, then what are India's interests in doing so; the possible opportunities; and what would be the challenges to this?

India's interest in maritime resources in the SCS

India's interest in exploring resources in the SCS is attributable to two main factors. India's primary interest in natural resource exploration in the SCS stems from the objective of supporting India's energy security.^{vi} It can be explained using the lateral pressure theory (LPT).^{vii} Lateral pressure refers to a country's tendency to expand its activities beyond its borders or established sphere of influence for political, economic, military reasons, etc. The LPT explains the relationship between a country's internal perceived demands as well as its capabilities and their impact on its foreign policy.^{viii} India is currently the fastest growing major economy in the world with a projected growth rate of 8.2% of gross domestic product (GDP) for 2022.^{ix} Combined with the billion plus population of the country, India's growth requires a large resource base. India is the third largest energy consumer in the world and its energy demand is rapidly rising,^x with primary energy consumption crossing 2,00,000 MW in 2021.^{xi} It is estimated to grow by 6.5% for the next three years and to double by 2050.^{xii} Energy security is a core interest for India as it is an essential component for India's economic growth. The LPT also explains that it is not only the demands but the perceived capabilities that cause a country to expand its influence. India's entry into the SCS also corresponds with its rise as a leading military power. India has the second largest armed forces in the world in terms of active personnel. It spent more than \$76 billion on the military in 2021 and has the third largest military expenditure, amounting to 3.6% of global military spending.^{xiv} However, while the LPT explains India's expansion into the SCS from the energy security perspective, it does not address the geo-economic and strategic aspects. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which is considered India's "own backyard", accounts for more than 58% of the world's total oil and 46% of natural gas proven reserves. Why has India then ventured into the SCS, which is not only more distant but also not a contiguous geographical region for India? There are two reasons for this. First is the geo-economic reality. The SCS is a marginal sea and much smaller than the vast IOR, which spans from eastern Africa to Australia. The size and proximity to land make resource exploration easier and more cost-effective. Secondly, the SCS is an important factor in India's strategic interests.

Resource exploration in the SCS acts as an indirect contributor to India's strategic interests in the region. Chinese expansionism under Xi Jinping in recent years has been one of the biggest challenges for India. Apart from the repeated border clashes between 2017 and 2022, China has also been increasing its presence in India's sphere of influence, i.e., South Asia and the IOR. Firstly, China has pledged investments of more than \$100 billion in South Asia under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).^{xv} Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh have been recipients of major investments. Some of the key projects include the Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network (THMCN) between China and Nepal as well as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. China is also in talks with the Taliban about possible copper mining in Afghanistan. Chinese trade in South Asia increased from \$8 billion in 2005 to more than \$52 billion in 2018, making it the largest exporter and the biggest trading partner for the region.^{xvi} In terms of military presence, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has increased its activities in the IOR. According to a statement by the Indian Navy Chief in 2021, the Indian Navy has observed the regular presence of the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean for more than a decade and that it is expected to increase

even further.^{xvii} China also has a naval base in Djibouti, on the eastern edge of the Indian Ocean. China has either direct control of or access to ports across the Indian Ocean region, including Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan. China is also developing the Kyaukphyu port in Myanmar. According to the String of Pearls hypothesis released in 2004,^{xviii} Chinese investments and ports across the Indian Ocean Region were seen as possible future naval bases for China. China is also undertaking multiple deep sea mining projects contracted by the International Seabed Authority in the Indian Ocean.^{xix}

India's response to the growing Chinese presence has been two-fold. This includes countering China at home and in their own sphere of influence through internal and external balancing.^{xx} In terms of internal balancing, India is in the process of modernising its armed forces, especially the navy. In 2021, the Indian Navy's capital expenditure on crucial acquisitions was ₹12,000 crores more than the allocated budget. This year, the budgetary allocations for this purpose have been increased by 45%.^{xxi} While India does not have the capacity to completely block out the PLA Navy from the IOR, it has attempted to counter China by entering its own backyard. India has made efforts to increase both its economic and military presence in Southeast and East Asia under its Act East Policy. The SCS is particularly important in this regard due to the Chinese territorial claims in this region. China's claims go much beyond the UNCLOS defined territories of countries surrounding the SCS and include almost the entire SCS region, including all the island groups based on its "historical rights." India entered the SCS through its naval activities. The navy mentioned the SCS as an area of its strategic interest in the 2007 maritime military strategy.^{xxii} India has increased its naval activities in the region, especially since 2016.^{xxiii} As part of its external balancing strategy, India has been using naval power projection^{xxiv} through participation in multilateral exercises such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus and regular bilateral exercises with countries including Singapore,^{xxv} Vietnam, the Philippines, etc. The presence of Indian ships in the SCS is a direct challenge to Chinese sovereignty based on their territorial claims in the SCS. The presence of Indian-controlled exploration blocks in the SCS is an advancement of this idea. Unlike naval exercises, where Indian ships are seen as passing through China's territory, exploration blocks signify the presence of Indian-owned infrastructure in Chinese territorial waters.

Resource exploration provides further opportunities for India's balancing strategy in the SCS. Exploration activities allow the presence of mapping vessels and equipment in the region. The setting up of offshore rigs for oil extraction will provide grounds for India to increase the deployment of private ships to set up such infrastructure as well as naval ships to provide security to these structures. This would also increase the access for Indian ships to ports and harbours in the countries surrounding the SCS. Since more than 55% of India's trade passes through the SCS, increased naval presence would also serve the secondary purpose of providing greater security to commercial ships belonging to India and foreign ships carrying goods to and from India. Trade security in the western Pacific has been a concern not only due to the threat of China blocking open access to sea lines of communication (SLOCs), but also due to the risk of piracy, especially in the southern part of the SCS near the Malacca Strait.^{xxvi} The revenue generated from the hydrocarbon extraction facilities in the SCS would help finance the Indian Navy's functions of providing trade security and power projection^{xxvii} activities. Resource exploration would also contribute to strengthening the idea of the Indo-Pacific.^{xxviii} China does not recognise the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a single geographical unit as claimed by India, the US, and its allies. While the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) recognised the Indo-Pacific in 2019, its acceptance of the concept is limited to it being an integrated region rather than a contiguous geographical unit. However, Indian exploration infrastructure and naval presence in the SCS would help reinforce the concept of the Indo-Pacific.



Figure 1: Showing the EEZs of each country as per UNCLOS and Chinese claims^{xxix}

Opportunities

The potential for resource exploration in the SCS is immense. The SCS can be divided into two main parts: the marginal areas and the central part of the SCS, which includes the disputed island groups of the Paracels, Spratlys, and Scarborough Shoal. It is estimated that most of the extractable hydrocarbons and minerals are located in the marginal areas that fall under the territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of countries.^{xxx} Similarly, the marginal areas have already been surveyed to a greater extent compared to the central parts. Therefore, the possibility of extraction activities is higher in these regions, while the scope for exploration is higher further into the sea. Both have certain merits. For example, the marginal areas are easier to exploit due to their proximity to land and existing survey data and would provide faster returns. On the contrary, exploration of island groups and the central SCS requires greater resources and is suitable for long-term benefits. However, there is an added advantage of the central SCS not falling under the territorial waters or EEZ of any country, which would mean any country has the right to explore and exploit resources in that region. In India's case, the logical approach would be to continue with its current involvement in solely extraction activities in marginal areas and perhaps gradually move towards the internal regions since it currently lacks the resources for such extensive exploration. Furthermore, China controls most of the islands in the SCS, which goes against the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) demarcations. India would not want to risk a direct naval confrontation with China on the issue of resource exploration.

The optimal approach to resource exploration in the SCS would be through joint development. There have been multiple calls for this, including from China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, etc. Joint development can either be multilateral or bilateral. Until now, the realisation of multilateral resource development has not succeeded due to the disputed territorial claims of countries in the SCS. On the other hand, bilateral initiatives such as the Malaysia-Thailand and Malaysia-Brunei Joint Development Areas have been launched.^{xxxi} Therefore, India should look at bilateral joint development of resource extraction in the SCS. The prospective countries include Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.^{xxxii}

Vietnam

Vietnam is clearly the first choice since it shares a strategic partnership with India. India already has a stake in two operational oil blocks in Vietnam's EEZ. Vietnam has invited further Indian involvement in similar projects, with the latest public invitation coming in early 2018. Even after multiple Chinese expressions of dissatisfaction against existing projects and warnings against further Indian involvement,^{xxxiii} Indo-Vietnamese engagement has been progressing. Both countries have conducted bilateral naval exercises in the SCS annually since 2018. Vietnam has faced increasing Chinese intrusion into its EEZ and territorial waters. India and Vietnam's shared interests in resource exploration in the SCS are born out of Chinese expansionist practices. Therefore, India should continue to invest in Vietnam's offshore oil and gas reserves while simultaneously increasing economic and military bilateral engagement even amidst Chinese pressure.

Brunei

Another probable country for cooperation is Brunei. Brunei holds large offshore petroleum and natural gas reserves. India imports petroleum and gas worth almost \$400 million.^{xxxiv} While ties between the two countries have been limited, a defence pact was signed in 2016 to increase defence engagement.^{xxxv} Brunei and China have competing claims in the SCS, and engaging with India would help Brunei hedge against China and diversify its foreign policy. Both countries would benefit mutually from exploring hydrocarbons in Brunei's SCS territory.^{xxxvi}

Malaysia

Another prospective partner could be Malaysia. While diplomatic relations between India and Malaysia have been rocky in recent years, Malaysia surpassed Indonesia to become India's largest palm oil supplier in 2021.^{xxxvii} Malaysia is one of the leaders in offshore exploration in the SCS with both domestic and bilateral development projects. Malaysia has also been at the receiving end of maximum Chinese warnings aimed at discouraging its resource exploration even within its legitimate EEZ as per the UNCLOS.^{xxxviii} The potential for such a collaboration is high. Furthermore, Malaysia is located in the southern part of the SCS, making it closer and easier for India to venture into. Similarly, it makes it more difficult for the Chinese to counter or threaten such a partnership. If both countries can maintain stable diplomatic ties and agree on joint development, the potential for such a collaboration would benefit both countries economically as well as counter China.

Indonesia

India shares friendly relations with Indonesia ranging from economic to military ties. Indonesia is the second largest palm oil exporter to India and used to be the first until last year.^{xxxix} Since 2002, the navies of both countries have conducted a biannual coordinated patrol. Indonesia's resource exploration is centred around its multiple small and medium islands in the SCS. There is talk about Indonesia following the Philippines in finalising a deal to acquire BrahMos missiles from India.^{xl} Given the extensive ties between the two countries, joint resource exploration should be considered by both countries as the next step in their relationship. Indonesia recently announced its plans to go ahead with a gas development project in the disputed Natura islands, which are also claimed by China. Soon after, India's INS Sindhuakesari submarine docked at the Sabang port in Indonesia. Both these actions were strongly condemned by China.^{xli} This provides Indonesia an opportunity to mount an opposition to China by collaborating with India on joint exploration in the SCS. However, this would require Indonesia to move away from its non-confrontational approach to Chinese claims in the SCS.

The Philippines

The Philippines is strategically located on the periphery of the SCS. Most of the Spratlys and the Scarborough Shoal are located in its EEZ, making it a potential hotspot for hydrocarbon and mineral exploration. However, China has taken control of many of these islands and has installed military and

civilian infrastructure in the Philippines' EEZ. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favour of the Philippines and quashed China's historical claims to the nine-dash line while upholding the UNCLOS provisions.^{xliii} India-Philippines ties have also seen increased trust and defence engagement as the Philippines acquired BrahMos missiles from India in 2022.^{xliiii} Thus, India and the Philippines could develop exploration facilities together. However, the risk of direct confrontation with China would be high for India due to the Philippines' proximity to China as well as the large-scale PLA naval presence in the Philippines' EEZ.

Challenges

India faces two main challenges to increasing maritime resource exploration in the SCS. Firstly, China's pressure and threats against not only Indian entry into the SCS but also against ASEAN countries exploring resources in their own EEZs. India also faces certain risks to increasing resource exploration in the SCS, such as an aggressive Chinese response either in the SCS, the IOR, or on the Sino-Indian border. Apart from this, Indian players hydrocarbon and oil companies such as OVL face competition from existing giants such as ExxonMobil, Shell, and other companies from the US, UK, Japan and Australia, who control exploration blocks in the SCS and are vying for more future exploration rights.^{xliiv} Lastly, the economic viability of oil exploration in the SCS is also a challenge for India. Since OVL acquired the rights to Block 128 in 2006, they have not found any commercially viable oil resources there.^{xliv} However, India has to be prepared to play the long-game and bear short-term economic losses for big-picture strategic gains.

Conclusion

The importance of resource exploration in the SCS and India's interests in the same are clear. What India needs to do is conduct a thorough cost-benefit analysis of taking such a step from the strategic and economic lens. If the proposition is economically viable and the possible benefits outweigh the risks involved, then such a step should be a priority for India. The Chinese presence in India's sphere of influence is steadily increasing. India has the opportunity to strike China back by entering the SCS in a considerable manner. Quick action would mean India would become the first external power to enter the resource exploration sector in the SCS. This could also pay off in the long term for India's major power ambitions. The sentiment against Chinese expansionism amongst most SCS countries and their willingness to collaborate for resource exploration presents India with a golden opportunity to not only secure its strategic and economic interests, but also to emerge as a challenger to Chinese hegemony in the SCS.

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