

**Treading in Dangerous and Crowded Waters: India's Growing Strategic Ties with Vietnam and its Entry into the South China Sea**

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This paper examines India's growing closeness and strategic partnership with Vietnam, which is emerging as a frontline state in India's eastward pivot, as the territorial conflict and strategic competition with the People's Republic of China is intensifying. The paper argues that India's overtures towards Vietnam should be understood in the context of India's territorial conflict with China along the Indo-Tibet border, and the growing crosscutting international alliance that is emerging against China's territorial expansionism and aggressiveness in South China and East China Sea.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2011, the Indian Naval vessel INS Airavat was hailed by the People's Republic of China Navy (PLAN) as it was heading from the Vietnamese port of Nha Trang to Hai Phong just 45 nautical miles of the Vietnamese coastline. The caller on the open radio channel reportedly warned INS Airavat "you are entering Chinese waters, move out of here."<sup>1</sup> INS Airavat was on a friendly port visit with Vietnam, part of a bilateral naval exchange. Tensions flared between India and China again in 2012 when the then Indian naval chief Admiral D.K Joshi, responded to reporters query and boasted that he was ready to protect "freedom of navigation in international waters" and protect Indian oil interests off the coast of Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> In 2011, the official mouthpiece of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) printed a highly critical article declaring that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) should use "every means possible" to stop India from engaging in oil exploration projects in South China Sea.<sup>3</sup>

The PLAN's deployment of anti-piracy ships in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) since the last decade and the docking of a Song-class diesel-electric submarine in Sri Lanka's Colombo port in September 2014 has been an enormous source of

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<sup>1</sup> Sandeep Dikshit, "No face-off in South China Sea, says MEA," *The Hindu*, 2 September 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-faceoff-in-south-china-sea-says-mea/article2418837.ece>

<sup>2</sup> Dean Nelson, "China warns India on oil exploration," *The Telegraph*, 12 December 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/9726916/China-warns-India-on-oil-exploration.html>

<sup>3</sup> Jason Miks, "India's South China Sea Warning," *The Diplomat*, 18 September 2011, <http://thediplomat.com/2011/09/indias-south-china-sea-warning/>

apprehension in India, which fears encirclement by China. To counter China, the Indian navy has started regular port visits with friendly states such as Vietnam and Philippines. Also the Indian government has revived the somewhat dormant “Look East” or “Act East” policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.<sup>4</sup> One aspect of this newly revised “Act East” policy is to develop stronger relationships with states that have ongoing disputes with China in the South China Sea; India has sought to pressure Beijing on the maritime front in an area that is rife with conflict and overlapping territorial claims. In this regard, Vietnam has emerged as a pivotal state in India’s “Act East” policy and as a strategic partner in countering China’s assertiveness in South China Sea.

In this paper, I examine India’s growing closeness and strategic partnership with Vietnam, which is emerging as a frontline state in India’s eastward pivot, as the territorial conflict and strategic competition with the People’s Republic of China is intensifying. I argue that India’s overtures towards Vietnam should be understood in the context of India’s territorial conflict with China in the Himalayas and China’s encroachment into the IOR, and in the context of growing crosscutting international alliance that is emerging against China’s territorial expansionism and aggressiveness in South China and East China Sea. Although India does not have any direct stake in the highly volatile South China Sea maritime dispute, it increasingly views China’s assertive and domineering behavior in the South and East China Sea as a harbinger of Chinese actions in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and along the

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<sup>4</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “Modi Unveils India’s ‘Act East Policy’ to ASEAN in Myanmar,” The Diplomat, 17 November 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/modi-unveils-indias-act-east-policy-to-asean-in-myanmar/>

highly contentious boundary that India shares with Tibet. India's naval strategy has started to emphasize "sea-control and competitive naval diplomacy" and is attempting to transition out of a "defensive maritime posture" to a more forward-looking posture.<sup>5</sup>

India has had a long-standing friendship with Vietnam that began when India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru met Ho Chin Minh in the 1937. When India gained independence in 1947, it supported Vietnam's anti-colonial struggle against the French occupation. However, the emerging India and Vietnam alliance directly speaks to the collective threat from a highly assertive and hegemonic People's Republic of China that possesses grand territorial designs. The China-India territorial conflict and the China-Vietnam maritime dispute in South China Sea has united India and Vietnam. The following sections of this article will examine the threat perceptions that drive the Sino-Indian border conflict along the Indo-Tibet border, and the thickening Indo-Vietnamese strategic relations in the context of China's growing assertiveness in the South-China Sea region.

### **Threat Perceptions of China**

Delivering the Eighth Annual Air Chief Marshal LM Katre Memorial Lecture, the India's Air Force Chief argued that the India should wake up to the challenge of an assertive China, which is "investing heavily in developing military power, especially aerospace power, laying claims on international waters, island territories

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<sup>5</sup> Srinivas Mazumdaru, "Naval buildup reflects India's 'ambition to project power'," Deutsche Welle News, 23 February 2015, <http://www.dw.de/naval-buildup-reflects-indias-ambition-to-project-power/a-18275292>

and air space over South China Sea and East China Sea.”<sup>6</sup> The Air Chief stressed that India’s greatest security threat is from an assertive China and an intrusive and opportunistic Pakistan. The People’s Republic of China has made forceful moves into the South Asian subcontinent (as it has in other parts of the world) that includes deepening and extending its military partnership with the Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan, enhancing its economic and infrastructure partnership with India’s eastern neighbor Bangladesh, and it is emerging as a leading supplier of military hardware to Sri Lanka and Pakistan. China and its South Asian partners view these exchanges as benign and a part of the normal relations among sovereign states, but all of this is also generating enormous insecurity in New Delhi. India increasingly views China’s moves into the “Indian Sphere of Influence” with a high degree of trepidation and skepticism and does not view its entry through a benign prism. Beijing’s deepening military and security relationship with its smaller South Asian neighbors is described as String of Pearls—a policy of strategic encirclement of India with China friendly countries.<sup>7</sup>

China’s success in going around New Delhi has made it highly wary of China’s growing power and it has sought to confront this with its own diplomatic, economic, and military moves both inside and outside the region. India is seeking to keep up with China in the area of military spending, searching for new avenues for its growing energy demands, and it is seeking strong strategic relationship with Japan,

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<sup>6</sup> India Wary of Assertive China, Intrusive Pakistan, IAF Chief Arup Raha says,” Times of India, 29 November 2014 < <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-wary-of-assertive-China-intrusive-Pakistan-IAF-chief-Arup-Raha-says/articleshow/45319045.cms>>

<sup>7</sup> Gurpreet S. Khurana, “China’s String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean and its Security Implications,” *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 32, no. 1, January 2008, p.1-39.

Australia, United States, Vietnam, and Philippines. These moves point to the growing fears of encirclement and insecurity in New Delhi over the rising Chinese power, but it also demonstrates the determination to establish India's status in the world as an emerging power and deter the Chinese military from securing the upper hand in the sensitive Himalayan border and in the Indian Ocean region.

Beijing's accelerating military and security partnership with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, and the overall economic and strategic competition has made the Sino-Indian relations highly volatile and susceptible to periodic ruptures. The Peoples' Republic has made remarkable infrastructural developments in the upper reaches of the Himalayas enabling it to bring troops to the Tibetan frontier region as rapidly as possible. The Tibet issue and the Dalai Lama's residence in Dharamshala, India since 1959, the war of 1962, armed skirmishes in 1967 and 1987, and the repeated border incursions by China has required enormous diplomatic and military effort on the part of India to prevent the outbreak of military hostilities. Frequent confrontations between the Indo-Tibetan border force (ITBF) and Chinese soldiers occur along the Himalayan border as the ITBF seeks to prevent gradual encroachment and occupation.

On the diplomatic front, unburdened by the end of the Cold War, India has sought to move closer to the United States and in an effort to balance against China, which coincided with the Asian Pivot or Re-balance as announced by President Obama.<sup>8</sup> While India's growing alliance with the United States has yielded some

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<sup>8</sup> Hillary Clinton, America's Pacific Century, *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011.

positive results, especially in the nuclear front. The United States also needs India more than ever because it is fighting its own battles with China in multiple avenues, but India has remained wary of being drawn into a broader conflict with China. Former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has maintained that India will not join any formal containment alliance aimed at China and that it would maintain its strategic autonomy. However, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's perceptions of Chinese behavior seems more closely aligned with the United States, especially regarding Chinese assertiveness in South China Sea.

President Obama and Prime Minister Modi issued a joint statement during Modi's visit to the United States in September 2014. In this statement both leaders agreed on "the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea" and they called "on all parties to avoid the threat or use of force" to resolve disputes.<sup>9</sup> Most recently, during Prime Minister Modi's visit to the United States in June 2016, in the joint statement released by India and the United States both "leaders affirmed their support for U.S.-India cooperation in promoting maritime security" and they reiterated the importance of "ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight and exploitation of resources as per international law, including the

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<sup>9</sup> The White House, U.S.-India Joint Statement, 30 September 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement>

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and settlement of territorial disputes by peaceful means.”<sup>10</sup>

US-India rapprochement that began to evolve after the end of the Cold War hit a major hurdle when India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in 1998, but this setback was immediately replaced when strategic contacts were renewed following the 9/11 terror attacks. One of the outcomes of the growing U.S.-India security partnership was the U.S.-India civilian nuclear deal, announced in July 2005 and approved by the Congress in October 2008. The U.S.-India nuclear deal was the first sign that India had decided to strategically shift closer to the United States. Nevertheless, the United States has remained somewhat unsure about bolstering democratic India as a strategic bulwark against China because of the concern that it might alienate Pakistan. Also some doubts regarding New Delhi’s commitment to playing a balancing role still persists in some quarters of the American administration. India has been reluctant to pursue robust defense cooperation with the United States beyond a certain point so as not to provoke any counterforce action from the Chinese or jeopardize its defense relationship with Moscow.

In March 2015, Prime Minister Modi organized a grand welcome for the Chinese Premier Xi Jinping, which included a personal tour given by the Indian Prime Minister to the Chinese Premier in his hometown of Gujarat. The visit by the Chinese Premier was aimed at strengthening bilateral trade and investment

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<sup>10</sup> The White House, “Joint Statement: The United States and India: Enduring Global Partners in the 21st Century,” 7 June 2016 < <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/07/joint-statement-united-states-and-india-enduring-global-partners-21st>>



relations. Subsequently, Modi made a highly successful visit to China in May 2015. These reciprocal visits by Xi and Modi did not yield enormous gains in terms of addressing the festering border issue, but it surely brought a certain level of stability and tamped down some anxieties about the Sino-Indian relationship and strengthened certain aspects of trade and investment. Since the central issue—the border dispute—remains unsettled, India continues to be highly wary and enormously distrustful of Chinese intentions. When the former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met with the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao during the 2012 BRICS Summit he is said to have reiterated that India “will not participate in any strategy aimed at containing China” or allow any “anti-China activities by exiled Tibetans.”<sup>11</sup> It was also reported that India conveyed to China that Tibet was “as an inalienable part of Chinese territory,” and that India “will not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China activities.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite the joint statement issued during Prime Minister Modi’s visit to the United States in October 2014 and June 2016, India has resisted joining any formal coalition aimed against China.<sup>13</sup> Instead India has sought to engage with China at different levels; it has sought to align with China in forums such as the BRICS, G-20, and the newly created Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to counter

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<sup>11</sup> Ananth Krishnan, “China Welcomes India’s Commitment on Two Sources of Friction,” *The Hindu*, 30 March 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-hails-indias-commitment/article3262399.ece>

<sup>12</sup> Ananth Krishnan, “China Welcomes India’s Commitment on Two Sources of Friction,” *The Hindu*.

<sup>13</sup> Hugh White, “Sorry, America: India Won’t Go to War with China,” *National Interest*, 13 March 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/sorry-america-india-wont-go-war-china-12415>

American and European trade, climate change, and intellectual property rights rules. Concurrently, New Delhi has also sought China's consent and positive vote to join the United Nations Security Council as a permanent member and overcome Chinese resistance to India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).<sup>14</sup> The trust-gap between India and China remains huge, and wariness over Chinese power is widespread, India has increased its defense spending to counter Chinese entry into the South Asian sphere and re-energized its diplomatic relations with United States, East and South East Asia, and Central Asia.<sup>15</sup> These moves and counter-moves have also drawn the smaller South Asian states into big-power realpolitik. Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have been able to leverage their relationship with China vis-à-vis India successfully.

### **Arunachal Pradesh Territorial Dispute**

The Arunachal Pradesh territorial dispute could be described as the epicenter of Sino-Indian relations that captures the insecurity that China generates in India and it also demonstrates the intentions of a self-confident China and growing unrest in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), over which Beijing has not been able to fully assert its control. Regular protests and mass immolations by Buddhist monks have revealed the fragility of Beijing's hold over Tibet. India and China share one of the longest land borders—4,056-kilometer (2,520 miles)—

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<sup>14</sup> Times of India, "China and Pakistan join hands to block India's entry into Nuclear Suppliers Group," 12 May 2016, <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/China-and-Pakistan-join-hands-to-block-Indias-entry-into-Nuclear-Suppliers-Group/articleshow/52243719.cms>>

<sup>15</sup> K.M. Seethi, "India's 'Connect Central Asia Policy'," *The Diplomat*, 13 December 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/indias-connect-central-asia-policy/>

between any two neighboring states, but the land border (also known as Line of Actual Control or LAC) remains un-demarcated and undefined in locations where India abuts Tibet. India claims that China is occupying more than 14,000 square miles of its territory in Kashmir (Aksai Chin Plateau or the Western sector), while China is laying claim to 34,000 square miles encompassing the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

In 2005 the Chinese began to reassert their claim over the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh that lies to the east of Bhutan and west of Burma, immediately south of Tibet that has strong historical and cultural linkages with Tibet. India also contests China's occupation of the Aksai Chin region in Kashmir, but the real focus of the India-China border dispute more recently has been on Arunachal Pradesh and on the contested border province of Tawang that has extraordinary significance for Tibetan Buddhism because the Sixth Dalai Lama was born in Tawang. Arunachal Pradesh has come back into play because of the growing concerns in Beijing regarding the announcement of the next Dalai Lama, which Beijing badly wants to orchestrate. Beijing has been engaged in the process of delegitimization and demonization of the fourteenth Dalai Lama, His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso by referring to him as a 'splittist' and "clique leader."<sup>16</sup> China denounced the Dalai Lama of using "spiritual terrorism" to push Tibet towards separatism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Warren W., Jr. Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand? The Tibetan Uprising of 2008 and China's Response*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (2009).

<sup>17</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, "China Attacks Dalai Lama in New White Paper on Tibet," *The Diplomat*, 16 April 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/china-attacks-dalai-lama-in-new-white-paper-on-tibet/>

The fourteenth Dalai Lama, who resides in Dharamshala, India, where the exiled Tibetan leadership is based, is seen as the head of the group that is plotting the independence of Tibet and it is regarded as a tool of international elements that is plotting the downfall of China.<sup>18</sup> Beijing's inability to make the Tibet issue go away even after more than half-a-century of repression, re-settlement of Han Chinese, and military occupation is one of the critical undercurrents of the Sino-Indian relations. Border conflagrations between India-China not only coincided with the Indo-U.S. civilian nuclear deal, but it also corresponded with the growing dissent and internal unrest in Tibet caused by "accumulated grievances of almost six decades of cultural, religious, economic, and linguistic repression."<sup>19</sup>

Border incursions by the Chinese border forces grew from 140 in 2007 to 280 in 2008.<sup>20</sup> In the first three months of 2011 more than 50 incidents of border incursions as far as seven kilometers into India and over 400 border transgressions in 2013 were recorded.<sup>21</sup> In some instances, rocks on the Indian side were painted in red and marked with "China" to make the Chinese presence evident.<sup>22</sup> Other

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<sup>18</sup> Mohan Malik, *India-China Competition Revealed in Ongoing Border Disputes*, Power and Interest News Report (PINR) October 9, 2007, <http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/China-India/Malik-Dr.-Mohan/India-China-Competition-Revealed-in-Ongoing-Border-Disputes>

<sup>19</sup> Text of United States House Resolution 1077, 110th, U.S. Congress, 2007–2009, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/hres1077/text>

<sup>20</sup> Ben Arnoldy, "Growing Number of China Incursions into India Lead to a Strategy Change," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 29 September 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2009/0929/p06s06-wosc.html>

<sup>21</sup> Saurabh Shukla, "Secret Note to MEA Says Chinese Troops Made 50 Incursions into Indian Territory in Three Months," *India Today*, 29 September 2011, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/secret-note-to-mea-corroborates-chinese-incursion-claims/1/153086.html>

<sup>22</sup> The Sikh Archives, "India-China Relations Worsen Sharply," 15 May 2011, <http://www.sikharchives.com/?p=2946>

telltale markers of Chinese presence such as cigarette butts, soda cans, and food packets are routinely discovered by Indian soldiers during patrols.<sup>23</sup> In May 2013, Chinese soldiers held printed signs in red and white that said, "You've crossed the border, please go back," during a border standoff with India in the Ladakh region of Kashmir.<sup>24</sup> The Indian government is seeking to keep reports of such incursions out of the media and suggesting that Chinese border incursions are not new or out of the ordinary in order to reduce domestic anxieties of an armed Chinese invasion. The former Indian Union Minister of State for Defence M.M. Pallam Raju argued that such incursions were "China's way of putting pressure of (*sic*) resolving the boundary dispute faster" and that India would not "yield an inch."<sup>25</sup> The current Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar has attempted to downplay border incursions, by referring to them as transgressions.<sup>26</sup>

The overall Chinese strategy has been described as "salami slicing," by Brahma Chellaney; make small and "incremental encroachments into India's territory that don't escalate into war but, put together, give Beijing a strategic

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<sup>23</sup> Gurmeet Kanwal "Unending Threats to India's Border," *Indian Defence Review*, 22 September 2012, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/unending-threats-to-indias-borders/>

<sup>24</sup> Manoj Joshi, "Making sense of the Depsang incursion," *The Hindu*, 7 May 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/making-sense-of-the-depsang-incursion/article4689838.ece?ref=relatedNews>

<sup>25</sup> *CNN-IBN News* "India Slams China on Sikkim Intrusion," 19 June 2008, <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/india-slams-china-says-sikkim-is-a-settled-issue/67403-3.html>

<sup>26</sup> *Economic Times of India*, "No Chinese incursion into India's territory: Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar,"

advantage.”<sup>27</sup> Both sides patrol up to their respective judgments of the border, leading to frequent claims of transgressions. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Indian counterparts patrol the border areas based on mutual perceptions and these patrols regularly face each other, but generally both patrols revert back to the previously held positions after some pushing and shoving.<sup>28</sup> However, Indian security analysts believe that Chinese intrusions are a carefully developed tactic to slowly alter the border in their favor.

Srikanth Kondapalli, a professor of Chinese studies at New Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), argues that the Chinese strategy is to constantly alter the perceptions thereby flummoxing the enemy and changing the facts on the ground.<sup>29</sup> Mohan Malik describes, China’s India strategy as “victory without bloodshed” in which “China’s aggressive patrolling along the unsettled border keeps India’s military forces tied down on multiple fronts, tests Delhi’s resolve, heightens its anxiety, exposes its strategic vulnerabilities, and diverts scarce resources away from its naval modernization.”<sup>30</sup> This strategy—identified as Chinese assertiveness—is not different from the methods China is pursuing in South China Sea, establishing and aggressive patrolling its claims and daring other parties to militarily confront

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<sup>27</sup> Niharika Mandhana, “China’s President Talks Trade in India as Troops Face Off at Border,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 September 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-president-xi-jinping-arrives-in-delhi-as-troops-face-off-at-india-china-border-1410968062>

<sup>28</sup> Press Trust of India, “No compromise was made to end stand off with China: Army,” *DNA India*, 17 June 2013, <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-no-compromise-was-made-to-end-stand-off-with-china-army-1849300>

<sup>29</sup> Niharika Mandhana, “China’s President Talks Trade in India as Troops Face Off at Border,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 September 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-president-xi-jinping-arrives-in-delhi-as-troops-face-off-at-india-china-border-1410968062>

<sup>30</sup> Mohan Malik “Victory Without Bloodshed”: China’s India Strategy,” *The Diplomat*, 20 August 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/08/victory-without-bloodshed-chinas-india-strategy/>

Chinese claims. As Dave Finkelstein of Center for Naval Analyses (CAN), a Washington based think-tank, argues that China's assertive actions are the result of "increasing capabilities in support of long-held national objectives" and that also involves responding to claims made by other parties to the dispute with unprecedented vigor.<sup>31</sup>

The Chinese government has deployed very similar tactics in the South China Sea where it has literally and figuratively bulldozed the claims of all disputants in the region and radically altered the facts on the ground through its salami-slicing tactics, land reclamation projects in Spratly and Paracel Islands, patrolling, and by building fortification and airfields. In announcing the establishment of Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013 over the East China Sea area, Beijing declared that it would "require flight plan, transponder, radio and logo identification for all aircraft operating in the zone."<sup>32</sup> The official statement maintained that China's "Ministry of National Defense has full administrative rights over the zone."<sup>33</sup> The establishment of ADIZ by the Chinese military was aimed at countering Japanese claims over the Senkaku islands, but the impact of this move was felt throughout Asia. In May 2015, Chinese navy issued multiple warnings to a P8-A Poseidon surveillance craft that also carried a U.S. TV crew to exit the airspace over

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<sup>31</sup> Dave Finkelstein, "Is China Getting Assertive on Territorial Disputes?" *CSIS Roundtable*, 28 October 2011, [http://csis.org/files/attachments/111128\\_Finkelstein\\_China\\_Territorial\\_Disputes.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/111128_Finkelstein_China_Territorial_Disputes.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Erickson, "Watch This Space: China's New Air Defense Zone," *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 November 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2013/11/25/watch-this-space-chinas-new-air-defense-zone/>

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Erickson, "Watch This Space: China's New Air Defense Zone,"

South China Sea.<sup>34</sup> In May 2016, prior to President Obama's visit to Asia, two Chinese fighter jets performed unsafe intercept maneuvers of an American military aircraft that was on a routine patrol.<sup>35</sup>

In 2012, four Indian naval ships were hailed by the PLAN with the message, "Welcome to the South China Sea, Foxtrot-47."<sup>36</sup> The Indian naval vessels were on a month long tour of East Asia in June of 2012 when they were buzzed as they were departing Philippines and heading to South Korea. The Chinese Navy frigate insisted on providing "unscheduled escort to the four Indian vessels" even though the ships were in the international waters. This action was deliberately aimed to demonstrate to the transiting Indian warships that they had "entered Chinese waters."<sup>37</sup> The naval escort was there to ensure that the Indian naval ships did not veer from the set course and establish that the Chinese navy was actively patrolling the area. Importantly, the act of escorting was aimed to demonstrate that Chinese Navy owns or controls the South China Sea and they have taken up policing duties. In other words, the Chinese Navy was acting as if the entire South China Sea is their internal waters.

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<sup>34</sup> Dan Lamothe, "U.S. Navy releases video of South China Sea aerial surveillance," *Washington Post*, 21 May 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/05/21/u-s-navy-releases-video-of-south-china-sea-aerial-surveillance/>

<sup>35</sup> Idrees Ali, "Chinese fighter jets challenge US aircraft over South China Sea," *AFR Weekend*, 19 May 2016, <http://www.afr.com/news/policy/defence/chinese-fighter-jets-challenge-us-aircraft-over-south-china-sea-20160519-goylv1-ixzz4BIJLcYcb>

<sup>36</sup> Ananth Krishnan, In South China Sea, a surprise Chinese escort for Indian ships, *The Hindu*, 14 June 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/in-south-china-sea-a-surprise-chinese-escort-for-indian-ships/article3524965.ece>

<sup>37</sup> Ananth Krishnan, In South China Sea, a surprise Chinese escort for Indian ships," *The Hindu*,



Beijing is feverishly building artificial islands over the disputed islands over the highly contested islands in South China Sea in violation on international law and maritime agreements, and strong objections by some of the claimants. According to news reports, the American P-8 aircraft was issued as many as eight warnings that repeated—“This is the Chinese navy ... you go!”<sup>38</sup> Satellite imagery revealed that China is constructing a runway on the artificial island on the Fiery Cross Reef in Spratly Islands in the South China Sea and that it has even placed mobile artillery vehicles.<sup>39</sup> This artificial island is estimated to be 3,000 meters long and between 200 and 300 meters wide and large enough to accommodate a dock for warships.<sup>40</sup> When challenged, the Chinese foreign ministry official vociferously asserted that China is determined to “safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity is as hard as a rock.”<sup>41</sup>

### **India-Vietnam, and the South China Sea Dispute**

India feels insecure and encircled on all sides by China friendly hostile neighbors and it is not persuaded that China’s rise is peaceful. A leading Chinese

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<sup>38</sup> Justin McCurry, “China warns US plane to leave airspace over disputed islands,” *The Guardian*, 21 May 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/21/china-warns-us-plane-to-leave-airspace-over-disputed-islands>

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Rosenbergmay, “China Deployed Artillery on Disputed Island, U.S. Says,” *New York Times*, 29 May 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/30/world/asia/chinese-artillery-spotted-on-spratly-island.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/30/world/asia/chinese-artillery-spotted-on-spratly-island.html?_r=0)

<sup>40</sup> James Hardy, London and Sean O'Connor, “China building airstrip-capable island on Fiery Cross Reef, *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 20 November 2014, <http://www.janes.com/article/46083/china-building-airstrip-capable-island-on-fiery-cross-reef>

<sup>41</sup> David Brunnstrom and Michael Martina, “U.S., China clash over disputed South China Sea,” *Reuters*, 16 May 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/16/us-usa-kerry-china-southchinasea-idUSKBN00104Q20150516>

strategic thinker Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University argues that the slogan of China's peaceful rise is a dangerous strategic concept because it has the potential to lead challenger states (such as India) to believe that China will not resort to the use of force.<sup>42</sup> Xuetong wants China to demonstrate its willingness to use force and make such claims explicit to telescope intentions clearly to others. Although Yan Xuetong was talking in the context of using Chinese military force to thwart any moves by Taiwan towards independence, Indian strategic thinkers have taken note that this argument applies as much to India as it does to Taiwan.

Indian decision makers in New Delhi are taking the Chinese threat very seriously and they have embarked on a massive military modernization program, which includes expanding the size of the Indian army, improving the technological sophistication of all three branches of the military, and of course it has also been quietly expanding its nuclear arsenal and the indigenously developed ballistic missile delivery systems.<sup>43</sup> Security analysts and popular sentiments in India reflect enormous anxiety about China and its assertive actions in the South China Sea, which has been described as salami slicing and changing the facts on the ground.<sup>44</sup> The latent impact of Chinese actions in the South China Sea and its implications has alarmed Indian planners sufficiently to embark on its "Act East" policy and Vietnam

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<sup>42</sup> David Shambaugh, "Coping with a Conflicted China," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Winter 2001, pp. 7-27, <http://www3.nccu.edu.tw/~lorenzo/Shambaugh.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Walter C. Ladwig III, "Could India's Military Really Crush Pakistan?" *National Interest*, 2 July 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/could-indias-military-really-crush-pakistan-13247>

<sup>44</sup> Gurmeet Kanwal, "India's Military Modernization: Plans and Strategic Underpinnings," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, 24 September 24, 2012, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=275>

has emerged as the centerpiece of Indian diplomatic efforts to reach out to countries that are in conflict with China over maritime security and territorial rights.<sup>45</sup>

India has no direct stake in the South China Sea dispute, with the exception of following some broad notions of keeping sea-lanes of communication open for trade and commerce. A former Indian Foreign Ministry official remarked that India's position on South China Sea (SCS) dispute was to advocate that the "channels of trade and communication should be kept open" and that India has always stood for "freedom of navigation on high seas."<sup>46</sup> India continues to emphasize the centrality of ASEAN, the Code of Conduct for South China Sea, and the United Nations Convention on the Law of Seas (UNCLOS).

Over the last several years India has been expanding its trade and security relationship with Vietnam and few other Southeast Asian states and inevitably wading into the volatile South China Sea territorial dispute. The reason why India has taken greater interest in the South China Sea issue is because this fits in with its objective of widening the arc of India's "Look-East or Act East" policy that involves developing long-term strategic partnership with Southeast Asian states; especially those are who are currently being menaced by China. India has sought to broaden and deepen its engagement with ASEAN and it has placed special emphasis on its relationship with Vietnam and Philippines in Southeast Asia, and Japan in Northeast Asia. The Indian Prime Minister visited two countries in May 2015—South Korea

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<sup>45</sup> Sylvia Mishra, India and Vietnam Can Rescue Asia's Balance of Power, National Interest, 25 April 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/india-vietnam-can-rescue-asias-balance-power-15902>

<sup>46</sup> Zachary Keck, "India Wades Into South China Sea Dispute," *The Diplomat*, 12 March 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/03/india-wades-into-south-china-sea-dispute/>

and Mongolia to enhance and economic and strategic ties—that have not featured very prominently in Indian foreign policy.<sup>47</sup>

Prime Minister Modi gave India's much hyped "Look East" policy a makeover by dubbing it "Act East" policy at the ASEAN Summit in Naypyidaw, Burma. Many aspects of this "Act East" policy focused on trade, ease of doing business in India, energy cooperation, infrastructure, health, and investments.<sup>48</sup> But the most critical aspect of Modi's speech clearly signaled a change India's approach to the South China Sea Dispute. In his address to the ASEAN Summit, Prime Minister Modi emphasized the critical importance of "maritime trade and passage," and the significance of "maritime security."<sup>49</sup> He underlined the responsibility of all states to "follow international law and norms on maritime issues."<sup>50</sup> With regards to the South China Sea dispute, the Prime Minister specially pointed that for the purposes of "peace and stability in South China Sea, everyone should follow international norms and law" and adhere to the "1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea."<sup>51</sup> Prime Minister Modi, expressed hope that ASEAN members would be

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<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Roche, "Modi to begin three-nation Asia tour on 14 May, first stop China," *Live Mint*, 5 May 2015, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/ZFnNheCF7D4PBjdhung38K/China-says-Indian-Prime-Minister-Narendra-Modi-to-visit-next.html>

<sup>48</sup> Ankit Panda, "Modi 'Acts East' at East Asia Summit," *The Diplomat*, 14 November 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/modi-acts-east-at-east-asia-summit/>

<sup>49</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, "Remarks by the Prime Minister at 12th India-ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar," *Government of India*, 12 November 2014, <http://mea.gov.in/aseanindia/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/22567/Remarks+by+the+Prime+Minister+at+12th+IndiaASEAN+Summit+Nay+Pyi+Taw+Myanmar>

<sup>50</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, "Remarks by the Prime Minister at 12th India-ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar," *Government of India*, 12 November 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, "Remarks by the Prime Minister at 12th India-ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar," *Government of India*, 12 November 2014.

able to “successfully implement the Guidelines to the 2002 Declaration on Conduct and that the Code of Conduct on South China Sea can be concluded soon on the basis of consensus.”<sup>52</sup>

Prime Minister Modi’s statement is one of the most pointed remarks ever made by a senior Indian leader in a global forum that directly addressed heightening tensions caused by the escalating maritime disputes in South China Sea. Prime Minister Modi’s remarks at the ASEAN summit, followed the joint statement made by President Obama and Prime Minister Modi in September 2014 during his visit to the United States in which they jointly “reaffirmed their shared interest in preserving regional peace and stability, which are critical to the Asia Pacific region's continued prosperity.”<sup>53</sup> In addition, both leaders “expressed concern about rising tensions over maritime territorial disputes, and affirmed the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea.”<sup>54</sup>

The Indian Prime Minister and the U.S. President “called on all parties to avoid the use, or threat of use, of force in advancing their claims,” and “urged the concerned parties to pursue resolution of their territorial and maritime disputes through all peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognized principles of

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<sup>52</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, “Remarks by the Prime Minister at 12th India-ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar,” *Government of India*, 12 November 2014

<sup>53</sup> The White House, U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, 25 January 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>; The White House, “U.S.-India Joint Statement,” 30<sup>th</sup> September 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement>

<sup>54</sup> The White House, U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, 25 January 2015.

international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”<sup>55</sup>

What is even more remarkable about this U.S.-India joint statement is that the Prime Minister agreed to the language drafted by the United States without disputing any part of it. The U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region released in January 2015 highlighted how regional prosperity depends on maritime security. Both India and the United States re-affirmed the “importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout” the South China Sea region.<sup>56</sup>

Admiral Harry Harris Jr., of the United States during his visit to New Delhi reiterated that “South China seas are international waters and India should be able to operate freely wherever India wants to operate.”<sup>57</sup> Admiral Harris was pointedly referring to incident in 2011 when the Chinese Navy buzzed an Indian military vessel that was on routine visit to the Haiphong port in Vietnam. The visiting U.S. Admiral also expressed deep misgivings about land reclamation projects in South China Sea raised concerns about China’s attempt to change “facts on the ground” and uncertainty over the sea lanes of communication.<sup>58</sup> This position is also shared by India and they are particularly worried about the uncertainty created by Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Although the idea of U.S.-India Joint Patrols in South

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<sup>55</sup> The White House, U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, 25 January 2015; The White House, “U.S.-India Joint Statement,” 30<sup>th</sup> September 2014,

<sup>56</sup> The White House, U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, 25 January 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Vishnu Som, “In South China Sea Row, Top US Commander Roots for India,” *NDTV News*, 4 March 2015, <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/in-south-china-sea-row-top-us-commander-roots-for-india-743991>.

<sup>58</sup> Vishnu Som, “In South China Sea Row,”

China Sea were proposed and differing public stances are apparently in display, one analyst from the American Foreign Policy Council has suggested that there is not much daylight between Indian and American positions on the South China Sea, but regards the issue of Joint Patrols as highly sensitive.<sup>59</sup>

### **India-Vietnam Strategic Partnership**

During the Indian President's Pranab Mukerjee's visit to Vietnam in September 2014, both the Indian President and President of Vietnam Truong Tan Sang issued a joint communiqué in which both leaders "agreed that freedom of navigation in the East Sea/South China Sea should not be impeded and called the parties concerned to exercise restraint, avoid threat or use of force and resolve disputes through peaceful means in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the UNCLOS-1982."<sup>60</sup> Presidents Sang and Mukerjee, also applauded the "collective commitment of the concerned parties to abide by and implement the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and to work towards the adoption of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea on the basis of consensus."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Jeff M. Smith, "Setting the Record Straight on US-India South China Sea Patrols," *The Diplomat*, 8 June 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/setting-the-record-straight-on-us-india-south-china-sea-patrols/>

<sup>60</sup> President of India, Joint Communiqué between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of India, 15 November 2015, <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/press-release-detail.htm?1105>

<sup>61</sup> President of India, Joint Communiqué between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of India, 15 November 2015.

The overall message of the Vietnamese and the Indian leaders focused on “cooperation in ensuring security of sea-lanes, maritime security, combating piracy and conducting search and rescue operations.”<sup>62</sup> Sushma Swaraj, the Indian Foreign Minister, and the Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, made statements during her visit to Vietnam in August 2014 to promote bilateral trade relations and strengthen security relations. Joint statements made by Vietnam and India emphasized that the South China Sea maritime dispute should be resolved by the involved parties according the principles outlined in the UNCLOS.<sup>63</sup> Vietnam and India also emphasized the “free right of navigation and access to natural resources in that region.”<sup>64</sup>

India-Vietnam strategic partnership hit significant milestone when both countries inked the *Joint Declaration for Strategic Partnership* in 2007. Both countries agreed given their “extensive maritime interests” to work closely to ensure “security of sea-lanes” and pledged “to strengthen cooperation in defence supplies, joint projects, training cooperation and intelligence exchanges.”<sup>65</sup> As per

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<sup>62</sup> Puja Mehra, “India, Vietnam for access to South China Sea,” *The Hindu*, 16 September 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/india-vietnam-for-access-to-south-china-sea/article6414115.ece>

<sup>63</sup> The Times of India, “Sushma Swaraj in Hanoi, India examining Vietnam’s South China Sea oil blocks offer,” 25 August 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Sushma-Swaraj-in-Hanoi-India-examining-Vietnam-s-South-China-Sea-oil-blocks-offer/articleshow/40870356.cms>

<sup>64</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, “Transcript of Media Briefing by Official Spokesperson on External Affairs Minister’s meetings in Nay Pyi Taw, *Government of India*, 9 August 2014, <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/23879/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+by+Official+Spokesperson+on+External+Affairs+Ministers+meetings+in+Nay+Pyi+Taw+August+9+2014>

<sup>65</sup> Embassy of Vietnam, “Vietnam-India joint declaration on strategic partnership,” 6 July 2007, [http://www.vietnamembassy-brunei.org/vnemb.vn/tin\\_hddn/ns070709100141](http://www.vietnamembassy-brunei.org/vnemb.vn/tin_hddn/ns070709100141)



this partnership, India has agreed to sell a variety of military hardware, including potentially the *Brahmos* anti-ship cruise missiles to Vietnam that was jointly developed in cooperation with Russia.<sup>66</sup> Although providing Vietnam with an advanced anti-ship cruise missile might be perceived as an escalating action, India and Vietnam are moving ahead with this defense exchange. It is expected that India's decision to sell Brahmos to Vietnam would be finalized during the Indian Defense Minister's visit to Vietnam in mid June.<sup>67</sup>

India has extended an export credit line of \$100 million to Vietnam to facilitate the transfer of four naval offshore patrol vessels.<sup>68</sup> India and Vietnam are also in the process of finalizing a deal for training pilots in the Russian built Sukhoi Su-30 MK fighter jets.<sup>69</sup> Over 500 Vietnamese Navy personnel have been trained to operate the Russian-origin Kilo-class submarines in India; this training includes "underwater combat training" at the Indian Navy's submarine school. Additionally, India has also supplied spare parts for the "Russian-origin Petya class warships and OSA-II class missile boats of the Vietnamese Navy."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Carl Thayer, "India and Vietnam Advance Their Strategic Partnership," *The Diplomat*, 11 December 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/india-and-vietnam-advance-their-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>67</sup> Rahul Bedi, "India aims to supply BrahMos cruise missiles to Vietnam," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 1 June 2016, <http://www.janes.com/article/60876/india-aims-to-supply-brahmos-cruise-missiles-to-vietnam>

<sup>68</sup> Suhasini Haidar, "India to modernise Vietnam's defence forces," *The Hindu*, 29 October 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indiavietnam-bilateral-ties-india-to-modernise-vietnams-defence-forces/article6542138.ece>

<sup>69</sup> Rajat Pandit, "After submarine training, India likely to train Vietnamese pilots to fly Sukhois," *Times of India*, 28 October 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/After-submarine-training-India-likely-to-train-Vietnamese-pilots-to-fly-Sukhois/articleshow/44954895.cms>

<sup>70</sup> Rajat Pandit, "After submarine training, India likely to train Vietnamese pilots to fly Sukhois," *Times of India*, 28 October 2014.

India is expected to complete an agreement to launch Vietnam's satellites and plans are afoot to establish a satellite tracking station in Ho Chi Minh City. India is also enhancing its oil and energy relations with Vietnam by exploring for oil in five blocks in the South China Sea along the Vietnamese coast. The Indian Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) Videsh Limited (OVL) has invested around US\$225 million into Vietnam, despite strong attacks on this energy partnership in the official press in China. In 2012 when China severely objected to India's drilling in Blocks 127 and 128 and tried to return Block 128 back, India was persuaded to continue its exploration work.<sup>71</sup> When the Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited India in October 2014 and both countries agreed to enhance their bilateral trade relations and the "possibilities for deeper engagement with the regional bloc."<sup>72</sup> India and Vietnam also agreed to launch direct flights between Mumbai and Ho Chi Minh City, and New Delhi and Hanoi.

The entry of the Indian shipbuilding companies into the Vietnamese and Philippines market, signing offshore oil exploration contracts, and the growing military cooperation with Vietnam and Philippines has strategic implications for the high octane South China dispute. American Navy top brass seem to share the view that China has no right to oppose Indian naval operations in the disputed South China Sea's international waters and any country could choose to operate either at

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<sup>71</sup> Vu Trong Khanh and Nguyen Anh Thu, "Vietnam, India to Expand Oil Exploration in Contested South China Sea," *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/vietnam-india-to-expand-oil-exploration-in-contested-south-china-sea-1410777168>

<sup>72</sup> Business Standard, "Vietnam PM on India visit; signs of growing closeness," 27 October 2014, [http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/vietnam-pm-on-india-visit-signs-of-growing-closeness-114102700319\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/vietnam-pm-on-india-visit-signs-of-growing-closeness-114102700319_1.html)

the behest of the coastal state or in the high seas. In 2014, China also protested the India-Vietnam offshore oil exploration agreement by arguing that India was drilling in Chinese territorial waters. United States, India, and several other states are concerned that China's is changing facts in the ocean by building infrastructure and laying claim to vast maritime territory over which its rights remain disputed at best.

What is particularly striking is the coalescing of India, Vietnam, and the United States positions on South China Sea. All three countries have articulated statements that strongly reflect the need to respect international maritime law, particularly the UNCLOS of 1982, and demand that all states that share South China Sea value freedom of navigation, open skies agreement, and settlement of disputes through negotiations by all the disputants. Former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said in a famous speech in 2012 during the ASEAN Summit that the United States believes that the "nations of the region should work collaboratively together to resolve disputes without coercion, without intimidation, without threats and certainly without the use of force."<sup>73</sup> Secretary Clinton also called for a "robust code of conduct" to "calm the waters" and produce "better outcomes."<sup>74</sup> However, Beijing has openly and defiantly challenged all claimants and all parties with outright claims over sovereignty over the entire South China Sea. At the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum held in Hanoi, Yang Jiechi China's Foreign Minister exploded with anger that

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<sup>73</sup> Andrew Quinn, "Clinton warns against coercion in South China Sea dispute," *Reuters*, 3 September 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/03/us-china-usa-clinton-idUSBRE8820CI20120903>

<sup>74</sup> Peter Alford, "Hillary Clinton's robust plan for South China Sea," *The Australian*, 4 September 2014 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/hillary-clintons-robust-plan-for-south-china-sea/story-e6frg6so-1226464558270>

“China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact,” in a pointed reference to Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states.<sup>75</sup>

### **Confronting China's Escalatory Maritime Tactics**

No Southeast Asian country with the possible exception of Vietnam and the Philippines, which tangled with China over the Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012, has directly collided with the Chinese Navy. Vietnam has borne the brunt of PLAN's belligerent actions in the South China Sea. Reports of the Chinese Navy ramming and sinking Vietnamese boats, including fishing vessels, have become routine.<sup>76</sup> In 2012 China placed a massive offshore oil-drilling rig HD-981, just 120 miles of the Vietnamese coast and well within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This ignited a bitter fight in the seas with ramming of boats and firing of water cannons and shrill diplomatic denunciations.<sup>77</sup> The sinking of Vietnamese boats also sparked massive anti-China protests in Vietnam. Tensions escalated again in 2014 when the Chinese navy chased and rammed a Vietnamese boat and sinking it.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> John Pomfret, “U.S. takes a tougher tone with China,” *Washington Post*, 30 July 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/AR2010072906416.html?sid=ST2010072906761>

<sup>76</sup> Sam LaGrone, “Report: Chinese Navy Warship Rammed Two Vietnamese Fishing Vessels,” 7 August 2015, *USNI News*, <https://news.usni.org/2015/08/07/report-chinese-navy-warship-likely-rammed-two-vietnamese-fishing-vessels>

<sup>77</sup> Ankit Panda, “Chinese Ship Rams and Sinks Vietnamese Fishing Boat in South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, 28 May 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/chinese-ship-rams-and-sinks-vietnamese-fishing-boat-in-south-china-sea/>

<sup>78</sup> Paul Armstrong, “Vietnamese boat sinks after collision with Chinese vessel in disputed waters,” *CNN*, 28 May 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/27/world/asia/vietnam-china-paracels-fishing-boat-collision/>

The routine and regular ramming of the Vietnamese boats has been described as an “unequal war of attrition” because these boats are “two to four times lighter in weight.”<sup>79</sup> The tactic of ramming boats is deliberately designed to cause so much damage that Vietnamese navy and its auxiliary forces will not have enough boats to challenge Chinese maritime supremacy or the placement of its oil drilling rigs.<sup>80</sup> According to one analysis, the PLAN is targeting the communication equipment of the Vietnamese vessels with water cannons to degrade the ability to coordinate with other ships.<sup>81</sup> Chinese Navy has employed other methods of maritime intimidation “such as unsheathing deck cannons and other weapons and aiming them at Vietnamese vessels.”<sup>82</sup> Beijing’s decision to move the offshore oil-drilling rig HD-981 so close to a highly contested area was a “premeditated move of territorial assertion” that was clearly aimed at “inciting a diplomatic crisis speaks to the planned, political nature of this move.”<sup>83</sup> The Chinese government has embarked on a methodical strategy to “alter the status quo by pushing the Vietnamese Coast

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<sup>79</sup> Carl Thayer, “Vietnam Mulling New Strategies to Deter China,” *The Diplomat*, 28 May 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/vietnam-mulling-new-strategies-to-deter-china/>

<sup>80</sup> Carl Thayer, “Vietnam Mulling New Strategies to Deter China,” *The Diplomat*, 28 May 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Scott Bentley, “Vietnam and China: A Dangerous Incident,” *The Diplomat*, 12 February 12, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/vietnam-and-china-a-dangerous-incident/>

<sup>82</sup> Carl Thayer, “Vietnam’s Maritime Forces,” in *Perspectives on the South China Sea*, eds, Murray Hiebert Phuong Nguyen Gregory B. Poling, September 2014, p. 147

<sup>83</sup> Ankit Panda, “Why Did China Set Up an Oil Rig Within Vietnamese Waters?” *The Diplomat*, 13 May 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/why-did-china-set-up-an-oil-rig-within-vietnamese-waters/>

Guard and Fishery Surveillance Forces back beyond China's self-proclaimed nine-dash line."<sup>84</sup>

Even the American actions have fallen substantially short of what is needed to counter the tactic of salami-slicing to occupy the contested islands in South China Sea. China's maritime policy has not been directly affected by American patrols in South China Sea and the land reclamation projects have continued unabated along with overt proclamations of Chinese sovereignty. A major challenge for all the disputants in South China Sea and the United States is that "China is working so quickly that its assertion of sovereignty could become a *fait accompli* before anything can be done to stop it."<sup>85</sup>

One of the fundamental dilemmas faced by the United States, including the regional powers, particularly Vietnam and Philippines face is "do they escalate an incident each time China slices the salami and risk open conflict, or stand down and allow China to augment its territorial claims."<sup>86</sup> The answer to this vexing question is that no action—military or diplomacy—pursued by Vietnam, Philippines, United States, and the most immediate outside powers such as Japan and India has halted the breakneck speed with which China has expanded land reclamation and fortified the little islands in South China Sea. American Secretary of Defense, Ashton B.

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<sup>84</sup> Carl Thayer, "Vietnam Mulling New Strategies to Deter China," *The Diplomat*, 28 May 2014.

<sup>85</sup> David E. Sanger and Rick Gladstone, "Piling Sand in a Disputed Sea, China Literally Gains Ground," *New York Times*, 8 April 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/world/asia/new-images-show-china-literally-gaining-ground-in-south-china-sea.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/world/asia/new-images-show-china-literally-gaining-ground-in-south-china-sea.html?_r=0)

<sup>86</sup> William Choong, "China's South China Sea strategy: simply brilliant," *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 18 May 2015, <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-south-china-sea-strategy-simply-brilliant/>

Carter, during his visit to Asia in June 2015, said Beijing's land reclamation activities and occupation activities has escalated tensions and reduced the "prospects for diplomatic solutions" in South China Sea over which Philippines and Vietnam, and even Taiwan has claims.<sup>87</sup> During the May 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore, U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter delivered a strongly worded address in which he asserted that the "The United States will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, as U.S. forces do all over the world."<sup>88</sup> Secretary Carter added that converting "underwater rock into an airfield," does not give "the rights of sovereignty or permit restrictions on international air or maritime transit," and that the United States will "not be deterred from exercising these rights."<sup>89</sup>

Confronting China over its salami-slicing tactics in South China has been very difficult simply because no country has been able to or willing to militarily challenge the PLAN. Two countries—the United States and India—that have the ability to challenge the Chinese navy don't have a direct territorial stake the South China Sea. Japan has restricted itself to the East China Sea to maintain its claim over the disputed Senkaku islands. Australia also has adopted a more neutral tone regards this maritime dispute. United States and India are not particular keen on directly

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<sup>87</sup> David E. Sanger and Rick Gladstone, "Piling Sand in a Disputed Sea, China Literally Gains Ground," *New York Times*, 8 April 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/world/asia/new-images-show-china-literally-gaining-ground-in-south-china-sea.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/world/asia/new-images-show-china-literally-gaining-ground-in-south-china-sea.html?_r=0)

<sup>88</sup> Tyrone C. Marshall Jr., "Carter: Asia-Pacific Will Continue to 'Rise' With Strong Security Architecture," U.S. Department of Defense, 30 May 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128941>

<sup>89</sup> Tyrone C. Marshall Jr., "Carter: Asia-Pacific Will Continue to 'Rise' With Strong Security Architecture," U.S. Department of Defense, 30 May 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/604750/carter-asia-pacific-will-continue-to-rise-with-strong-security-architecture>

engaging the PLAN because of the chances of escalation are high and the consequences of direct naval engagement would be enormously destabilizing for the region. For India, which is already fending-off the People's Liberation Army (PLA) along the tense Indo-Tibet boundary, the consequence of escalation could be extremely unpredictable, especially if Pakistan engages in opportunistic action and decides to press India on the Kashmir Front. On the South China Sea issue, Pakistan has fully backed the Chinese position. During the fifth China-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue, Pakistan's "Foreign Secretary Jalil Abbas Jilani reiterated his country's unwavering support on issues related to China's core interests. Jilani announced that Pakistan strongly backs "China's stance on the South China Sea issue and the Diaoyu Islands issue."<sup>90</sup>

## **Conclusion**

India's engagement has always been in the periphery of South China Sea issue. It has pursued an active strategic and economic partnership with Vietnam over the last decade. Markedly, India has pursued offshore oil drilling off the coast of Vietnam in the highly contested waters of South China Sea, in spite of Chinese concerns and threats. India and Vietnam's strategic and military partnership has rapidly expanded since the Indo-Viet Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed in 2007. The primary concern for India is how to grapple with a highly assertive and overassertive China. The Sino-Indian bilateral relationship is dominated by enormous distrust and mutual anxieties notwithstanding growing trade linkages. An

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<sup>90</sup> China Central Television News (CCTV), "Pakistan supports China on S. China Sea and Diaoyu Islands," 11 March 2012, <http://english.cntv.cn/program/asiatoday/20121103/104620.shtml>



overwhelming security dilemma drives Indian strategic thinking as it responds to swiftly accelerating Chinese military and maritime power.

Concerns and mistrust on the Indian side are mostly driven by the PLA's repeated intrusions and pressure along 4000-kilometer Himalayan boundary. The routine and often provocative incursions across the Line of Actual Control makes New Delhi extraordinarily tense because the lessons of ill-fated 1962 Sino-Indian border war hangs like dark shadow over the Indian defense psyche. Indian strategic elite both inside and outside the government and popular opinion has signaled acute concerns over the power differentials between India and China. The specific concern is that China would rely on its superior military, economic, and diplomatic powers to wrest more territory by "salami slicing" and changing the facts on the ground as it is doing in South China Sea. The Indian navy is extremely alarmed by the Chinese submarine activity in the Indian Ocean region and it has started to accelerate acquisition of submarines and construction of naval vessels.<sup>91</sup>

Another perpetual worry for India is a nuclear Pakistan, which has relies on First Use Nuclear Doctrine and sustained asymmetric warfare to keep India preoccupied on its Western front and in Kashmir. The challenge for Indian defense planners is to preclude a two-front conflict with Pakistan and China simultaneously because of their very strong military ties. Hence, India has attempted to tread lightly in the volatile waters of South China Sea and not open up the maritime front and provoke China. However, the support seeking states—Vietnam and Philippines—

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<sup>91</sup> Sanjeev Miglani and Tommy Wilkes, "Rattled by Chinese submarines, India joins other nations in rebuilding fleet," *Reuters*, 2 December 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/03/us-india-china-navy-idUSKCN0JG2GM20141203>

have urged India to play a more active role in the South China Sea to counter Chinese maritime assertiveness. Laura Q Del Rosario, Deputy Minister for International Economic Relations of the Philippines, urged India to go East, and “not just Look East.”<sup>92</sup> The former U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates urged India to “be a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.”<sup>93</sup> Singapore’s Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen urged India to play larger role in South China maritime zone because “India is a big country and it’s an influential country.”<sup>94</sup> Southeast Asian states are eager for India’s involvement and they are hoping that it will allow them push back against China’s overarching maritime claims.

India’s tepidness and unwillingness to challenge the People’s Liberation Army Navy in South China Sea along with the growing uncertainty over intended American actions has only hastened China’s land reclamation and fortification in the disputed island chains. China’s rapid island strengthening activities, placement of mobile artillery on the islands, sustained harassment and ramming of Vietnamese boats, and drilling in Vietnam’s EEZ has become its fait accompli. Beijing is daring the United States, India, Australia, and Japan to do something about it and testing the resolve of smaller countries such as Vietnam and Philippines. Despite forceful rhetoric and vigorous postures by India and the United States, both of them have

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<sup>92</sup> Business Standard, “India to engage with ASEAN on sea-lane security,” 11 March 2014, [http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/india-to-engage-with-asean-on-sea-lane-security-114031100497\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/india-to-engage-with-asean-on-sea-lane-security-114031100497_1.html)

<sup>93</sup> Robert M Gates, “Forward, together,” *Times of India*, 19 January 2010, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/opinion/edit-page/Forward-together/articleshow/5473680.cms?referral=PM>

<sup>94</sup> Sharon Chen, “India Should Play Bigger Role in South China Sea, Says Singapore,” *Bloomberg News*, 16 March 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-16/india-should-play-bigger-role-in-south-china-sea-says-singapore>

dared not to directly interfere with China's land reclamation and fortification efforts or come in direct aid of the Vietnamese navy. The unwillingness of any of the major powers in Asia Pacific—United States, Japan, Australia, and India—to go beyond rhetoric has emboldened China. Occasional port visits by Indian naval vessels and oil exploration off the Vietnamese coast, and U.S. spy patrols has not deterred China from its island occupation spree. None of the major powers in the Asia-Pacific region are eager to jeopardize bilateral relations with Beijing at the expense of coming to the aid of the smaller Southeast Asian states such as Vietnam.

The inability to deter China from hurriedly engaging in the “Salami Slicing” or “Cabbage Patch” tactics remains the fundamental challenge to all countries that have a direct or an indirect stake in South China Sea. Although India has rapidly expanded its economic and strategic partnership with Vietnam, one is not sure whether this is sufficient to deter China from asserting its sovereignty and changing the facts or creating new facts on the ocean. India's strategy is to arm and strengthen Vietnamese defense forces and leave the naval battles to Vietnam, but unfortunately the power asymmetries and the military balance is heavily tilted in favor of Chinese Navy. If the Chinese are able to fly fighter jets out of the newly constructed runway in the Spratly islands, it would “provide a new, proximal platform to target Vietnam's naval-controlled shore-based artillery and missile systems, viewed by many strategic analysts as Hanoi's strongest deterrent to a potential Chinese attack.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Shawn W. Crispin, “Vietnam Muddles China's South China Sea Challenge,” *The Diplomat*, 13 June 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/vietnam-muddles-chinas-south-china-sea-challenge/>

Vietnam's response has been equally complicated because of internal power struggles within the leadership in Hanoi. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung has actively sought defense cooperation with India and the United States to strengthen Vietnam's slipping position in South China Sea. But, President Truong Tan Sang and Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong prefer to soothe relations with Beijing and roll back on Vietnam's effort internationalize the South China Sea issue.<sup>96</sup> Chinese charm offensive has already split the already divided ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and this has left Vietnam to fend for itself against adroit Chinese naval and political maneuvers.

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<sup>96</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, "South China Sea Clash Complicates Vietnam-China Meeting, *The Diplomat*, 16 June 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/south-china-sea-clash-complicates-vietnam-china-meeting/>