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**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**India's approach in the South
China Sea**

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INDIA'S APPROACH IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Context

- Recently, India delivered the strategic **BrahMos cruise missile** and articulated its full support in upholding national sovereignty for the **Philippines**.

About the South China Sea

- It is one of the most strategically and economically important waterways in the world, extending from the Strait of Malacca in the southwest, to the Strait of Taiwan in the northeast.
 - ♦ It is a crucial **maritime gateway** and junction for shipping **between the Pacific and Indian Oceans**.
- It is surrounded by several nations, including China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam.
- The region is rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and fisheries, and serves as a crucial trade route for various economies.

Economic Importance of the region

- **Trade Route:** The South China Sea serves as a crucial trade hub for various economies of East Asia, South Asia, and beyond.
 - ♦ A trade of more than \$5.3 trillion happens on these waters. It makes up about one-third of all marine traffic.
- **Natural Resources:** The region has proven oil reserves of around 7.7 billion barrels, with an estimate of 28 billion barrels in all.
 - ♦ Natural gas reserves are estimated to total around 266 trillion cubic feet.
 - ♦ The **Philippines is counting on the US** and its allies to play a crucial role in its plans to explore energy resources in the disputed South China Sea.
- **Fisheries:** More than half of the world's fishing vessels are in the South China Sea, and millions of people depend on these waters for their food and livelihoods.



Territorial Disputes

- The territorial disputes in the South China Sea primarily involve China and several Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries.
- **China claims sovereignty** over virtually the entire South China Sea, putting it at odds with the **Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Brunei**, who all maintain claims over islands, reefs, and undersea resources in the region.

- ◆ These disputes have implications for the freedom of navigation and overflight.
- The South China Sea dispute essentially revolves around **multiple claims** to the land features — islands and reefs — and associated territorial waters.

India and South China Sea

- India's stance on the South China Sea has seen a significant shift in recent years, reflecting its broader strategic and economic aspirations on the global stage.
- **India** has been **increasing cooperation, defence as well as economic**, with these countries to take its resistance to maritime Chinese influence to China's own backyard.

India's Evolving Position

- Recently, India articulated its full support for the Philippines in upholding its national sovereignty amid the ongoing South China Sea dispute between Philippines and China.
- In 2023, **a joint statement** between India and Philippines had called for **China to adhere to the rules-based maritime order** and acknowledge the **International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling (2016) in favour of the Philippines**.
 - ◆ These are part of an **evolving approach** that signals a departure from India's earlier more cautionary and neutral position vis-à-vis the South China Sea.
- India has significantly enhanced its military and diplomatic engagement with claimant states such as the **Philippines and Vietnam**.
 - ◆ It has been offering military aid and more supportive rhetoric to China's rival claimants.

Economic Stakes and Strategic Engagements

- **India's engagement** with the region was **initially primarily economic, driven by its Look East Policy**, which aimed to enhance economic integration with Southeast Asia and the imperative to secure energy resources to fuel its growing economy.
- The participation of Indian state-owned enterprises, such as the **ONGC Videsh**, in oil and gas exploration projects in **Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)** and other similar ventures not only signified India's economic stakes in the region but also its support for the **principle of freedom of exploration and exploitation of maritime resources** within the bounds of international law, specifically UNCLOS.

Policy Transformation

- The **transformation of India's policy** orientation from Look East to Act East has marked a shift **towards a more strategic and active engagement** with the **Indo-Pacific region**.
- It reflects India's acknowledgment of the changing geopolitical landscape and the need for a more proactive and multifaceted foreign policy approach with the Act East Policy emphasising not only economic integration but also **strategic partnerships** and expanded security cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific **including Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore, besides the Philippines**.

Geopolitical Impact and International Stance

- Major Asia-Pacific economies could lose up to 12% of their GDP if the geopolitical tensions were to force closure of key trade routes in the region.
- The United States champions a free and open Indo-Pacific and has made clear that Beijing's claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them.
 - ◆ The U.S. stands with its ally, the Philippines, in the face of this escalation that directly threatens regional peace and stability.

Way Ahead

- The disputes in the South China Sea require a political framework, which can only be created through dialogue.
- Leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should try to find a political solution through 'quiet diplomacy'.
 - ◆ The potential for resolving this issue through legal methods is very low.
- One of the most important ways to de-escalate the current tensions in the South China Sea for both parties is to avoid hostile actions against each other, uphold a more reconciliatory attitude and emphasise the need to cooperate rather than compete.

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] How effective do you think India's approach in the South China Sea dispute has been in balancing its strategic interests and maintaining regional stability?

