

# HOW THE SOUTH CHINA SEA SITUATION PLAYS OUT WILL BE CRITICAL FOR INDIA'S SECURITY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's perceptive essay in the latest issue of Foreign Affairs cogently spells out the dilemma that confronts Singapore, and indeed the rest of us in the Indo-Pacific, as the two most consequential powers of the world, the [United States](#), which PM Lee calls the "resident power", and [China](#), which he says is "the reality on the doorstep", are engaged in a fundamental transformation of their relationship. Almost nobody any longer thinks that China will conform to the US worldview, or that China's rise from hereon will be unchallenged.

The Indo-Pacific has prospered under American hegemony for the previous 40 years not just because of their huge investments — \$328.8 billion in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ([ASEAN](#)) alone and a further \$107 billion in China — but also because of the security blanket that it provides. China might have replaced the US as the primary engine of growth in the last decade, but it has come with a cost — the assertion of Chinese power.

Difficult as it might be to admit, the truth is that the benign American military presence has afforded countries the opportunity to pursue economic prosperity without substantial increases in their own defence expenditures or having to look over their shoulders. No group of nations has benefitted more from the presence of the US than the ASEAN.

Chinese military postures, on the other hand, give cause for concern ever since they unilaterally put forward the Nine-Dash Line in 2009 to declare the South China Sea as territorial waters. Their territorial claim itself is tenuous, neither treaty-based nor legally sound. They act in ways that are neither benign nor helpful for long-term peace and stability. In the first half of 2020 alone, Chinese naval or militia forces have rammed a Vietnamese fishing boat, "buzzed" a Philippines naval vessel and harassed a Malaysian oil drilling operation, all within their respective EEZs. Since 2015, they have built a runway and underground storage facilities on the Subi Reef and Thitu Island as well as radar sites and missile shelters on Fiery Cross Reef and Mischief Reef. They conducted ballistic missile tests in the South China Sea in June 2019 and continue to enhance naval patrols to enforce area denial for others.

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PM Lee is absolutely correct in that going forward, the US and China face fundamental choices. But then, so do the rest of us living in the Indo-Pacific. America's role in the preservation of the region's peace and security should not be taken for granted. As COVID imposes crushing costs on all economies, the US may also be weighing its options. Finding justification for Chinese actions in the South China Sea, even as countries in the region help themselves to Chinese economic opportunities while sheltering under the US security blanket, is also fraught with risk. Accommodation may have worked thus far but regional prosperity has come at a mounting cost in geo-strategic terms. The South China Sea is effectively militarised. In the post-COVID age, enjoying the best of both worlds may no longer be an option.

Yet nobody should expect that ASEAN will suddenly reverse course when faced with possibly heightened Sino-US competition. China is a major power that will continue to receive the respect of ASEAN and, for that matter, many others in the Indo-Pacific, especially in a post-COVID world where they are struggling to revive their economies. ASEAN overtook the European Union to

become China's largest trading partner in the first quarter of 2020, and China is the third-largest investor (\$150 billion) in ASEAN. The South East Asians are skilled at finding the wiggle room to accommodate competing hegemony while advancing their interests. This does not, however, mean that they are not concerned over Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea. They need others to help them in managing the situation.

A robust US military presence is one guarantee. A stronger validation by the littoral states of the South China Sea helps the US Administration in justifying their presence to the American taxpayer. Others who have stakes in the region also need to collectively encourage an increasingly powerful China to pursue strategic interests in a legitimate way, and on the basis of respect for international law, in the South China Sea. The real choice is not between China and America — it is between keeping the global commons open for all or surrendering the right to choose one's partners for the foreseeable future.

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How the South China Sea situation plays out will be critical for our security and well-being. In the first place, the South China Sea is not China's sea but a global common. Second, it has been an important sea-lane of communication since the very beginning, and passage has been unimpeded over the centuries. Third, Indians have sailed these waters for well over 1,500 years — there is ample historical and archaeological proof of a continuous Indian trading presence from Kedah in Malaysia to Quanzhou in China. Fourth, nearly \$200 billion of our trade passes through the South China Sea and thousands of our citizens study, work and invest in ASEAN, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Fifth, we have stakes in the peace and security of this region in common with others who reside there, and freedom of navigation, as well as other normal activities with friendly countries, are essential for our economic well-being. In short, the South China Sea is our business. We have historical rights established by practice and tradition to traverse the South China Sea without impediment. We have mutually contributed to each other's prosperity for two thousand years. We continue to do so. The proposition that nations that have plied these waters in the centuries past for trade and other peaceful purposes are somehow outsiders who should not be permitted to engage in legitimate activity in the South China Sea, or have a voice without China's say, should be firmly resisted.

In return, we too have to be responsive to ASEAN's expectations. While strategic partnerships and high-level engagements are important, ASEAN expects longer-lasting buy-ins by India in their future. They have taken the initiative time and again to involve India in Indo-Pacific affairs. It is not as if our current level of trade or investment with ASEAN makes a compelling argument for them to automatically involve us. They have deliberately taken a longer-term view. A restructuring of global trade is unlikely to happen any time soon in the post-COVID context. Regional arrangements will become even more important for our economic recovery and rejuvenation. If we intend to heed the clarion call of "Think Global Act Local", India has to be part of the global supply chains in the world's leading growth region for the next half-century. It is worth paying heed to the words from Singapore's prime minister, who writes that something significant is lost in an [RCEP](#) without India, and urges us to recognise that the value of such agreements goes beyond the economic gains they generate. Singapore is playing the long game. Are we willing to do so, even if it imposes some costs in the short-term?

***This article first appeared in the print edition on June 16 under the title "Why South China Sea Matters". The writer was India's Ambassador to China and Foreign Secretary***

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