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India's South China Sea Policy Actions: Adjustment and Transformation

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Abstract. *In the context of the intensifying game between major powers, the geopolitical importance of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean has become prominent at the same time, and they have become the key areas of strategic competition between China and India. After N. Modi came into power in 2014, he upgraded the "Look East policy" to "Act East policy", aiming at the South China Sea. India is unwilling to remain silent and passive in diplomacy and actions, especially in the past two years, India's attitude has shifted significantly. Like other extraterritorial powers such as the United States, India does not want the South China Sea to be dominated by its rival, China, and its main strategic intent in its continued involvement in the South China Sea is to further complicate the South China Sea issue in order to restrain China and thus ease its own strategic pressure in the Indian Ocean and border areas. Driven by this, the South China Sea issue is increasingly becoming a new negative factor in the relationship between India and China. The proposed article seeks to identify the key points of the conflict and their consequences.*

Keywords: India; South China Sea; checks and balances; Sino-Indian competition; strategic solutions

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Политика Индии в Южно-Китайском море: перестройка и трансформация

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Аннотация. В условиях интенсификации и развития международных событий между крупными державами одновременно обостряется геополитическое значение Южно-Китайского моря и Индийского океана, которые становятся ключевыми направлениями соперничества между Китаем и Индией. После того, как Н. Моди пришел к власти в 2014 г., сменился уровень понимания концепта «политики взгляда на восток» до «политики действия на восток», нацеленного на приоритет в Южно-Китайском море. Индия не стала хранить молчание и проявлять пассивность дипломатии в действиях, поскольку за последние два года позиция Индии значительно изменилась. Как и другие экстерриториальные державы, такие как Соединенные Штаты, Индия не стремится к тому, чтобы в Южно-Китайском море доминировал ее соперник – Китай. Наши исследования показывают, что основная стратегическая цель Индии в продолжающемся участии в соперничестве в Южно-Китайском море состоит в том, чтобы сдержать Китай и таким образом ослабить его собственное стратегическое давление в Индийском океане и приграничных районах. В связи с этим проблема Южно-Китайского моря все больше становится новым негативным фактором в отношениях между Индией и Китаем. Предлагаемая статья направлена на выявление ключевых моментов конфликта и их последствиях.

Ключевые слова: Индия; Южно-Китайское море; сдерживание противобесов; китайско-индийское соперничество; стратегические решения

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Introduction and Materials

India has long avoided a clear tendency to "choose sides" in disputes involving the South China Sea and has acted in a relatively "low-key" manner, not wanting to overly provoke China, but as its economic power grows and the geopolitical landscape changes, India not only sees the Indian Ocean as the "Ocean of India" and "strategic backyard", self-proclaimed regional "net-security provider", but also claims to be an important external player and stakeholder in South China Sea affairs, has begun to steadily increase its presence in the Western Pacific in the hope of playing a greater role in the South China Sea. India is not a littoral state in the South China Sea, and the South China Sea is not a primary area of interest in its maritime security strategy, so why have India adjusted its South China Sea policy in recent years? Its intention and direction deserve our further attention.

As noted in a policy report published by the India Observer Research Foundation in 2021, India's recent statements and actions indicate that India

intends to change its historical "balanced" attitude towards the China and South China Sea disputes, and hopes that in the context of its "Look East" policy play a more active role under the guidance, especially under the Indo-Pacific strategy based on the "Quad" ¹[1]. In recent years, in addition to intervening in the development of sea resources, India has been pursuing its interests in the South China Sea mainly through regular military activities in and around the South China Sea, strengthening strategic partnerships with various littoral states in the South China Sea, and actively speaking out on the South China Sea in various bilateral and multilateral forums to enhance its interaction with some of the claimant states.

Strengthening its Military Presence in the South China Sea

First, actively sending warships through the South China Sea. In June 2020, after the clashes between India and China at the border in Galwan Valley, the Indian Navy took swift action by sending a warship to the South China Sea in a "low-key" manner, during which it also communicated with U.S. Navy ships [2]. Its unexpected presence in the disputed waters was widely seen as a clear warning to China [3]. In early August 2021, the Indian Navy's naval task force of four ships began a more than two-month overseas deployment to Southeast Asia, the South China Sea and the Western Pacific [4].

Second, frequent military exercises were conducted with countries around the South China Sea. 26-27 December 2020, the Indian Navy's stealth frigate INS Kiltan arrived at Nha Rong Port in Ho Chi Minh City for joint exercises with Vietnam [5]. During the overseas deployment of the Indian naval task force in August 2021, The Indian warships arrived in Vietnam's Kim Nam Bay on the 15th of that month and held joint military exercises with Vietnam in the South China Sea [6], and held military exercises with the Philippines on the 23rd, and began the Malabar 2021 multilateral joint exercise with the United States, Japan and Australia in the Philippine Sea on the 26th, and held the "SIMBEX" exercise with Singapore in the southern fringe of the South China Sea from September 2 to 4. This series of high-profile actions demonstrates India's intention to further strengthen military relations with Southeast Asian countries, to promote the substantive development of the "Quad" and to highlight its involvement and presence in the region. On June 24, 2022, an Indian fleet

¹ Quad – Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

consisting of the new Indian Navy frigate INS Sahyadri and the anti-submarine frigate INS Kadmat visited Vietnam again, during which the two countries' warships conducted joint training on maritime communication and formation changes [7].

Third, increase arms sales to Vietnam, the Philippines and other claimants. On December 21, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered in Vietnam one of the 12 high-speed patrol boats built for Vietnam with a \$100 million loan from the Indian government during video talks with Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc [8]. On March 3, 2021, Indian Ambassador to the Philippines Shambu Kumaran met with Philippine On March 3, 2021, Indian Ambassador to the Philippines Shambu Kumaran and Philippine Undersecretary of Defense Raymund Elefante officially signed a defense cooperation agreement entitled "Implementing Arrangements for the Acquisition of Defense Materiel and Equipment" to support the Philippines' purchase of Indian weapons such as the Brahmos"[9]. In early June 2022, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh visited Vietnam and also signed a Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defense Partnership by 2030 and a Memorandum of Understanding on mutual logistical support [10].

Diplomatic Sphere has Become More Direct in its Stance

In recent years, India has joined forces with some of the claimants or coordinated its policy stance with the US in the South China Sea issue, and actively voiced its voice on the South China Sea affairs to show the trend of India's consistent position. A few days after Pompeo's South China Sea statement on July 13, 2020, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs had stated that "South China Sea is a part of the global commons and India has an abiding interest in peace and stability in the region. We firmly stand for the freedom of navigation and overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce in these international waterways, in accordance with international law, notably UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea)" [11]. To work with the United States to pressure China over the South China Sea issue. In a relatively "rare" move at the 15th East Asia Summit on November 14, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar expressed "concern" expressed concern about "actions and incidents that erode trust" in the South China Sea, and he also stressed "the importance of compliance with international law, respect for territorial integrity

and sovereignty, and the promotion of a rules-based global order" [12]. On February 15, 2021, at an event, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar even stated his intention to work with Japan to enhance connectivity "from the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea" [13]. On June 16, attending the 8th ASEAN² Defense Ministers' Meeting, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh made a reference to developments in the South China Sea hinting at China's "expansionist policy", he stressed that India supports freedom of navigation and overflight in international waterways, and reiterated "India hopes that the Code of Conduct negotiations will lead to outcomes that are in keeping with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)³ and do not prejudice the legitimate rights and interests of nations that are not a party to these discussions" [14]. On August 4, S Jaishankar re-emphasized at the 11th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting that the Code of Conduct negotiations should be fully consistent with the Convention and should not undermine the legitimate rights and interests of non-participating states [15]. Since then, India has repeatedly reiterated this statement to echo the position of the U.S. and other extraterritorial powers on the "COC"⁴ consultations.

Results

As the strategic competition between China and India intensifies, India has begun to change its strategic thinking, and its high-profile involvement in the South China Sea must have multiple purposes and considerations. Out of political motives and strategic intentions, while pursuing economic interests, India hopes to use its comparative maritime advantage to politically check and balance China, so as to achieve the effect of killing two birds with one stone.

Economic Interests

As claimed by other countries outside the region, India claims to have major economic interests in the region and considers the security of the South China Sea important to its trade routes and energy imports. One is that "South China Sea is a major waterway and over US\$ 5 trillion trade pass through the sea lanes in this region. As per information available, over 55% of India's trade

² ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

³ UNCLOS – United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

⁴ COC – Code of Conduct in the South China Sea

passes through South China Sea and Malacca Straits” [16] and it is necessary to ensure the safety of trade routes and smooth sea lanes in the region. Second, in its "Act East" policy Driven, India has close trade ties with East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, and thousands of Indian citizens are studying, working and investing in ASEAN countries, China, Japan and South Korea [17]. Third, attracted by the rich oil and natural gas resources in the South China Sea, India is already Vietnam investing huge sums of money in the exploration and development of Block 127 and Block 128, which is related to its future energy security [18].

Turning Around the Disadvantage of Border Confrontation

With the land border confrontation stalled and unable to gain an advantage, India hopes to use its comparative advantage in the maritime domain to find another way to counterbalance China at sea, so as to increase the bargaining chips in the border negotiations and seek benefits. As retired Rear Admiral Raja Menon wrote in July 2021, the Chinese army is impeccable on land, the Indian Army cannot compete with China, and 70% of its oil imports rely on the Indian Ocean sea route is China's "only strategy weakness". In this regard, he suggested that "India should give the navy and air force a greater role, transfer the combat space to a favorable geographical location for India, and attack China." After the Galwan conflict in 2020, the Indian Navy quickly dispatched warships to the South China Sea, in an attempt to force China to make concessions on the border confrontation negotiation by means of "surrounding Wei and saving Zhao" to ease its geographical pressure.

Balancing China's Influence in the Indian Ocean Waters

China's presence and influence in the Indian Ocean region has increased significantly in recent years, and even though China has been keeping a low profile here, India still believes that the so-called "Pearl Chain Strategy" is coming true and poses a greater strategic threat to its national security. Moreover, Indian analysts believe that China's construction and control of islands and reefs in the South China Sea also poses a threat to India's dominant position in the Indian Ocean, and India is deeply troubled and anxious as China's further control of the South China Sea signals greater projection capabilities into the eastern Indian Ocean [19]. To this end, India realizes that it needs to accelerate the pace of entering the South China Sea and the Western Pacific.

Strategic Adjustment Towards China

In the context of the current intensified strategic competition between China and the United States and the deterioration of Sino-Indian relations, India began to shift its strategic thinking and adjust its China policy, trying to take advantage of the successive provocations and pressure from various extraterritorial countries on China and the deterioration of the maritime security environment to take a more "proactive" stance to benefit from the sea, especially in the South China Sea crisis. In a speech given at the time of the standoff between India and China, Indian National Security Advisor Doval said, "We are fighting not only on our own territory but also on foreign territory where the security threat comes from" and "there is no need to fight only where you want [20]. This is clearly a threat to China, hoping to pre-empt its own strategic objectives. As seen today, India's South China Sea policy adjustment further confirms this point, and it has become an important tool in its strategy toward China.

Discussion and Conclusion

In fact, with the efforts and restraint of China and ASEAN countries, the situation in the South China Sea has been generally stable and controllable in recent years, with no major conflicts, and positive progress has been made in the consultations of the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea", economic cooperation, stable development and environmental protection and other issues. If there are unstable factors in the South China Sea, the only concern is the increased involvement of extra-territorial countries in the South China Sea and their frequent military provocations, which have adversely affected the regional security situation and the building of mutual trust. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "The biggest risk currently affecting peace and stability in the South China Sea is precisely the improper involvement and frequent interference of extraterritorial powers"[21]. In recent years, extraterritorial forces led by the United States have intensively launched political, diplomatic and military offensives against China around the South China Sea, not only to provoke relations between China and ASEAN countries, but also to actively draw in India, whose relations with China have deteriorated due to border conflicts. In this context, India's action with the United States is undoubtedly adding fuel to

the fire, making the already complicated situation in the South China Sea further deteriorate.

The fundamental initiative of the South China Sea issue always lies with China and regional countries, and the intervention of any extra-territorial country is not enough to change the regional situation and promote the fundamental solution of the South China Sea issue. If India really cares about the safety of navigation in the South China Sea, the best way should be to respect China's territorial sovereignty and security, rather than appearing in the South China Sea as a military threat. In China's view, India's move is not only futile but also comes at a price, one of which is inevitable to continue the downward spiral of fragile Sino-Indian relations. There is no way out of confrontation, and military provocation is the stupidest option. For India, although it may be right to change its strategic thinking and intervene in the South China Sea to balance China's ideas and directions, what is wrong is that it does not have a correct assessment and a clear understanding of its own capabilities and the corresponding consequences. Indian policymakers should clearly realize that the key area of the Indian Ocean is where India's main interests lie. If the Indian Ocean, its own "home ground", is unable to do what it can, and expects to invest limited resources in the distant South China Sea to contain China and change the situation of strategic competition. Undoubtedly whimsical, destined to be futile and counterproductive.

In the long run, the decline of US hegemony is inevitable, and the rise of the "Asian Century" is proceeding smoothly, and it truly serves the interests of countries and people in the region. China and India both belong to Asia and are neighbors to each other. They should work together to promote their own development and the rejuvenation and prosperity of the "Asian Century", rather than sacrificing their own interests and the interests of the people in the region to maintain the so-called "US strategic position in the region." In this regard, both China and India should maintain a clear understanding.

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