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# The Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) Jindal School of International Affairs

## Panel Discussion

on

# ASEAN and China in the South China Sea Disputes

25 April 2018



In recent years, the South China Sea became a playground for superpower rivalry. The disputes that started between China and four other claimant states involve the stakes of not only the neighbouring and regional actors but actors and organizations across the globe. In order to contribute to the pool of growing discourse on the subject, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs organized a panel discussion on *ASEAN and China in the South China Sea Disputes*. The panel comprised of Dr. Swaran Singh, Professor for Diplomacy and Disarmament at the Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Mr. Abhijit Singh, Senior Fellow and Head of the Maritime Policy Initiative, Observer Research Foundation; Dr. Udai Bhanu Singh, Senior Research Associate and Coordinator of Southeast Asia and Oceania Centre at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, Delhi; and Captain Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, Senior Fellow, National Maritime Foundation. The discussion was chaired by **Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen**, Associate Professor and Executive Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. The main themes for discussion centred around Great Power Rivalry in the South China Sea; ASEAN Perspective on the South China Sea Disputes; The 2016 Arbitration Ruling and the Ramifications; and China's Position and Strategy in the South China Sea Disputes.



#### The 2016 Arbitration Ruling and the Ramifications

**Dr. Swaran Singh**, Professor for Diplomacy and Disarmament at Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

**Dr. Swaran Singh** commenced the discussion by highlighting the significance of the South China Sea disputes due to a shift in focus from land to the ocean and the economic prowess and geographical location of China in the disputed waters. He also highlighted the growing importance of the Asian region in the global political arena. Dr. Singh described the dispute to be 'critical and contentious'. According to him, the unilateral claim of China coupled with the muscle-flexing attitude is anxiety driven. He remarked that "Not only do the Chinese make claims, they also have the capacity to assert it." Dr. Singh also discussed the position of other claimants such as Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia along with other stakeholders of world politics like the

United States, Australia and India. He stressed on the growing importance of 'Blue Economy' of the South China Sea and its relation with not only commercial lanes of communication and energy, but also food security as the basis for global concern in the disputed waters. Dr. Singh discussed the July 2016 UNCLOS Arbitration award and the changing political stance of the Philippines under President Duterte. He regarded the changing stance to undermine the credibility of rules-based order, reputation of the Philippines and the centrality of ASEAN.



#### Great Power Rivalry in the South China Sea

**Mr. Abhijit Singh**, Senior Fellow and Head of the Maritime Policy Initiative, Observer Research Foundation, Delhi

**Mr. Abhijeet Singh** started his talk by explaining that every subject has a black-hole and the South China Sea dispute is the black-hole of the maritime geopolitics. China is using coercion as an inducement for their own greater development and not taking into account the influence of this on other countries. In the session, he shared several personal anecdotes which included China's withdrawal from the tribunal and the Philippines taking them to the court. He said the dispute is more than just a territorial issue. He raised three important points. The first is that the conflict is less about the region and more about cultural identity. The second is that the entire discourse is actually being mediated by only two countries namely the United

States and China. The third and last point is that under heavy pressure, small states are doing 'Strategic Hedging'. Overall, he gave an extremely insightful interesting analysis of the dispute by explaining the situation from different perspectives.



### ASEAN Perspective on the South China Sea Disputes

**Dr. Udai Bhanu Singh**, Senior Research Associate and Coordinator of the Southeast Asia and Oceania Centre at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, Delhi

**Dr. Udai Bhanu Singh** discussed the broad contours of the South China Sea disputes with an introduction of the Indo-Pacific region in order to help contextualize the evolving nature of maritime security in the region. He was of the view that the Indo-Pacific region is replacing the importance once enjoyed by the Pacific-Atlantic region. An important factor contributing to the importance of the region is the transformation of economies in this region from 'tiger economies' to a rising China and India. Economic development is responsible for transforming maritime security through advancements and upgradation of critical infrastructure, for instance, arterial form of shipping. The speaker placed emphasis on the significance of the

South China Sea owing to the presence of choke points, reserves of crude oil, global LNG trade and SLOCs that amount for half of the global ship tonnage. The next point of discussion was grounded in the current situation of unresolved maritime disputes, uncertainty about the freedom of navigation, protection of energy resources etc. The speaker specifically mentioned three landmark years that help explain the role of ASEAN in the current SCS disputes. It was in 1992 that ASEAN adopted the Declaration on the SCS which urged self-restraint by all parties. Next, 2002 saw ASEAN and China signing a non-binding Declaration of the Conduct of Parties and lastly, 2012, which saw a failure on the part of ASEAN to produce a Joint Communique due to differences within the regional organization. The speaker ended with developments observed in ASEAN nations owing to the ongoing disputes. The most significant of which were, an increase in military budget, expansion of navies, accumulation of weapons, etc. The rationale behind this arms buildup is geo-political in nature. The speaker voiced concern over the 'Code of Conduct' between ASEAN and China being a mere channel of communication because of its non-binding nature.



### China's Position and Strategy in the South China Sea Disputes

**Captain Sarabjeet Singh Parmar**, Senior Fellow, National Maritime Foundation

**Captain Sarabjeet Singh Parmar**, the fourth and the final panelist highlighted China's position and strategy in the South China disputes. By tracing a map of the region, from Natuna and the Spratly islands, all the way to the Pratas, Captain Parmar emphasized the importance of geopolitical factors in play. One of the strategic interests of the People's Republic of China lay in creating a buffer to the mainland catering for strategic defense in depth. By doing so, it would also isolate Taiwan, making it easier for Beijing to use Taiwan as a springboard for its power projection. A focus on energy and trade in addition to a strong leadership to combat the United States presence in the region is also evident. According to Captain Parmar, this was made easier by a weak and contentious ASEAN that has continually failed to keep China in check. As a

result, a shift in the balance of power in the region to favor China is inevitable. By using Organsky's diagram, Captain Parmar analyzed a shift in China's stance from 1998 to its current position as a middle power with great power leanings and dominant nation aspirations. China's continued military modernization with a focus on offshore water defense with open seas protection has heavily depended on "informatization." The parallel for Anti Access Area Denial (A2AD) in Chinese strategic terms is Active Strategic Counterattack on Exterior Lines (ASCEL) and is to be conducted throughout any conflict far away from the mainland. Finally, Captain Parmar concluded his views on China's strategy by mentioning the existing maritime jurisdiction and China's Four Sha claim that came about after the UNCLOS arbitration ruling. His prognosis was that China will continue its military modernization and PLA reforms as there has been fervent rising nationalism in the country to fulfill the Chinese dream for the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."



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