

WRAP Exams · wrapexams.com

Prelims PYQ, Mains model answers, and copy evaluation. Write to the desk for this paper, a doubt, or the AI waitlist.

ask@wrapexams.com · +91 85951 84903 · wrapexams.com

Q16

South China Sea has assumed great geopolitical significance in the present context. Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · GS I · 12 marks · World's Physical Geography

Salient features of world's physical geography.

Core demand of the question

- Comment on why the South China Sea has high geopolitical weight today
- Cover trade routes, energy, islands, law, and the major powers

Revision summary

The South China Sea sits on the main sea road between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Trade, oil and gas hopes, and fisheries give it economic and food value.

Overlapping island claims and reclaimed airstrips make it a military geography.

UNCLOS and the 2016 award clash with China's dash-line claim.

US, ASEAN, and India's Act East all treat open lanes there as a live strategic interest.

Introduction

The South China Sea is a semi-enclosed sea between South-East Asia and southern China. It has become a geopolitical hinge because world trade, energy, island claims, and naval power all meet there, and because no single legal settlement has stuck.

Body**Location and the trade artery**

- The sea links the Indian Ocean to the Pacific through the **Strait of Malacca** and nearby passages, so a large share of world seaborne trade, including East Asian energy imports, must pass its approaches.
- For Japan, South Korea, China, and ASEAN exporters, a blocked or unsafe South China Sea would raise freight cost and strategic risk at once.
- India cares because its Act East trade, energy shipments, and the security of sea lanes from the Andaman Sea eastward sit on the same map.

Energy, fish, and resources

- The basin is believed to hold oil and gas, though estimates vary; even a modest field matters when several claimants need energy.
- Fisheries feed millions in Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and southern China; militia boats and banned fishing turn protein into a security issue.
- Seabed minerals and future blue-economy plans add a long-term resource layer to the dispute.

Islands, reefs, and military geography

- The Paracels, Spratlys, Scarborough Shoal, and many reefs are claimed in overlapping ways by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan.
- Reclamation and airstrips turn rocks into outposts; whoever sits on them can watch and, in a crisis, harass shipping and aircraft.
- China's nine-dash (later ten-dash) line claim covers most of the sea and collides with exclusive economic zones drawn from ASEAN coasts under **UNCLOS**.

Law, great powers, and regional order

- **UNCLOS** gives coastal states EEZs; the **2016 arbitral award** in the Philippines-China case rejected historic rights inside the **nine-dash line**, which Beijing refused to accept.
- The United States and partners run freedom-of-navigation operations to deny the idea that the sea is a Chinese lake.
- ASEAN is split between claimants and states closer to China's economy, so a binding Code of Conduct has been slow.
- Japan, Australia, and extra-regional navies treat the sea as a test of whether rules or force will order the Indo-Pacific.
- For India the issue is not a land border but the principle of open lanes, **UNCLOS**, and partnerships with Vietnam and other ASEAN states.

Why the 'present context' is sharp

- After 2010, more patrols, more reclamation, and more great-power rivalry have made incidents likely even without a planned war.
- Any clash would hit insurance, oil prices, and Asian supply chains within days.

Way forward for the answer

- Rank Malacca trade, energy and fish, militarised reefs, **UNCLOS** versus the dash line, and US-China-ASEAN-India stakes as the comment.

Flow diagram

Malacca trade energy lanes -> Geopolitical weight
Oil gas fish reefs -> Geopolitical weight
Nine dash vs UNCLOS EEZ -> Geopolitical weight
China ASEAN US partners India -> Geopolitical weight

Conclusion

The South China Sea matters because it is a world trade and energy corridor, a disputed resource bowl, and a naval chessboard. Overlapping island claims and the clash between **UNCLOS** and expansive historic lines have turned a regional sea into a test of Indo-Pacific order.

Facts & figures

Strait of Malacca

Chokepoint linking the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and the Pacific trade system.

Nine-dash line

Chinese historic claim covering most of the South China Sea, disputed by several ASEAN states.

UNCLOS

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the legal basis for EEZs and navigation rights.

2016 arbitral award

Philippines-China ruling that rejected historic rights inside the nine-dash line; China rejected the award.

Spratly and Paracel Islands

Main island groups whose occupation and reclamation drive the military standoff.

WRAP Exams · Write. Read. Analyse. Practice. · <https://wrapexams.com/upsc/mains-answers/gs-1/2016/south-china-sea-has-assumed-great-geopolitical-significance-in-the-present-context-comment/> · ask@wrapexams.com · wrapexams.com