Geography · GS - I

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

EXAM YEAR	PAPER	SUBJECT
2016	GS - I	Geography

MARKS	WORD LIMIT
15	~250 words

Answer Hint

Strategic location; maritime trade; energy resources; territorial disputes; freedom of navigation; regional powers; international law

Model Answer

Introduction

The South China Sea is a strategically important maritime region connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Its location, resources and competing territorial claims make it a major centre of geopolitical rivalry.

Reasons for Its Geopolitical Significance

1. Strategic Maritime Location

The sea connects major East Asian economies with global markets through important shipping routes and chokepoints. A substantial volume of international trade and energy shipments passes through the wider region.

2. Natural Resources

Its seabed is believed to contain significant hydrocarbon resources, while its waters support valuable fisheries. These resources contribute to competing claims and economic interests.

3. Territorial Disputes

China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan have overlapping claims involving islands, reefs and maritime zones. China's expansive claims and island-building activities have intensified regional tensions.

4. Military Competition

The construction and militarisation of artificial islands, naval deployments and surveillance activities have increased strategic competition. The United States conducts operations to support freedom of navigation and maintains security partnerships in the region.

5. International Law

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides the principal legal framework for maritime rights. The 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling in the Philippines-China case rejected the legal basis for China's claimed historic rights within the so-called nine-dash line insofar as they exceeded UNCLOS entitlements. China rejected the ruling.

6. Implications for India

India has interests in freedom of navigation, maritime security, international law and economic ties with Southeast Asia. Instability in the region can disrupt trade and affect Indo-Pacific security.

Conclusion

The South China Sea is central to regional power competition and global commerce. Peaceful dispute resolution, adherence to international law and diplomatic engagement are essential to maintaining stability.

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