

From “Look East” to “Act East”: India as a Security Actor and Security Provider

Jagannath P. Panda

Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), India

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The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, 158 Euljiro
Jung-gu, Seoul 04548
Republic of Korea
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683
Fax 82 2 2277 1684



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Abstract

In its engagement with East Asia, India has preferred so far to become a security actor. Currently, however, the subject matter of India as a possible security provider in East Asia is slowly gaining importance. The conventional wisdom of international politics suggests that a security provider needs not only constant and robust policy engagements but also a serious pursuit of big-power diplomacy. A security provider does not necessarily need a stronger security alliance, but requires to have a leadership vision and presence with reciprocation of a particular region. Besides, a security provider is not meant to participate in conflicting matters and undertake balance-of-power politics. If anything, it participates in the governance process of the region and addresses the non-security challenges as well as traditional security challenges through a responsive and responsible partaking, and upholds peace and stability in the region through its presence and active participation. In brief, to emerge as a leader and security provider to East Asia, India needs to have big-power diplomacy and needs to uphold the acceptance and acceptability of the region, mainly from the three main powers — China, Japan and South Korea — apart from the region itself.

The Premise

As its regional aspirations grow, India continues to factor East Asia as a prime region in its foreign policy discourse. Under the broader compass of “extended neighbourhood”, India’s canvas on East Asia factors South-East Asia and its multilateral mechanisms including ASEAN, North-East Asia and maritime regions such as the Indian Ocean, South China Sea (SCS) and East China

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Sea.¹ Approaching East Asia in a policy ambit of Act East, New Delhi envisions emerging as a prominent actor in East Asia through strategic engagement and partaking with the security undertakings in the region. This aspiration is aptly noticed currently in New Delhi's political prognostication. For instance, highlighting the strategic importance of engaging with the "East" at the India-ASEAN summit in November 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that India's Look East policy has become Act East and engaging with the East is a "reflection of priority" that India holds with East Asia.² He added that the "entire Asia-Pacific region desires integration and cooperation today for which India looks at ASEAN for a leadership role".³ Likewise, India's External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, stated in August 2014 that New Delhi needs an Act East policy much more than just the Look East policy to expand India's engagement and undertaking in East Asia.⁴ No matter what is the outcome of this political vision, the principal intent is to advance an Act East policy to protect and advance India's national interest and improve India's partaking in East Asia as a power. In fact, to enrich its Act East policy, envisioning within a broader context of Asia-Pacific or the newly emergent Indo-Pacific construct, India aims to attach equal importance to the countries as well as institutions or mechanisms in the East Asian region. Positioning ASEAN at the core of its current Act East policy, India has advanced its outreach in the region and has steadily progressed from being just a "Sectoral Dialogue Partner" to a "Strategic Partner".⁵ Countries like Japan, South Korea and Australia, important dialogue partners of ASEAN,⁶ have been India's strategic partners in this configuration in recent years, which has enlarged India's narrative of reaching out to or Acting East.⁷

¹ The definition of East Asia varies according to various countries' perspective. India's perspective on East Asia has expanded over the years. This author does not subscribe to a readymade definition of "East Asia". This paper broadly uses "East Asia" from an open spectrum to include Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, major maritime domains and countries like Australia and New Zealand within a broad construct of Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific. This paper prefers to use "Indo-Pacific" as a construct rather than "Asia-Pacific" to analyse the importance to the maritime domains and the politics surrounding East Asia.

² "English rendering of the Opening Statement by the Prime Minister at the India-ASEAN Summit", Press Information Bureau" Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, 12 November 2014.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Immediately after the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government came to power in New Delhi in 2014, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was reported to have expressed this view in Hanoi in a brainstorming session. This session was attended by 15 Indian Heads of Mission in Southeast and East Asia region. Official details of this session are not available, but media reports indicate that the minister intended to emphasise Act East rather than just a Look East parameter to expand India's positioning in East Asia against the backdrop of the East Asian security structure and the dominant Chinese presence in the region. See for instance, "Sushma Swaraj tells Indian envoys to Act East and not just Look East", *Daily News and Analyses*, 26 August 2016, at <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-sushma-swaraj-tells-indian-envoys-to-act-east-and-not-just-look-east-2013788> (accessed on 29 October 2016).

⁵ Keynote Address by External Affairs Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj at the Inaugural Session of Delhi Dialogue VII in New Delhi, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 11 March 2015.

⁶ India is a dialogue partner of ASEAN along with other countries under the East Asia Summit (EAS). The EAS includes ASEAN member countries plus eight dialogue partners: China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Russia. ASEAN as an institution plays a leadership role in this forum.

⁷ Lavina Lee, "India as a nation of consequence in Asia: the potential and limitations of India's 'Act East' policy", *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 29(2), Fall/Winter 2015, p. 68.



While the premise of its outreach towards the East has continuously expanded, it needs to be seen whether India's political vision has really complemented its security and strategic undertakings in the region, especially when India aims to emerge as a security provider in the East Asian region. Given India's rising profile in the region, ASEAN countries expect India to become a security provider in the region. Japan and South Korea, two important countries in East Asia, perceive India's presence as being conducive to their strategic interests. The Americans have also advocated that New Delhi plays a pro-active role in East Asia and emerge to provide security. For instance, at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore on 30 May 2009, the US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said: "In coming years, we look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond."⁸ Is India positioned to offer security to the region or is India's role limited as a security actor in East Asia and beyond? Indian policymakers have long been saying that India is emerging slowly as a net security provider in the region.⁹ Then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said in May 2013 that India had positioned itself to perform the role of a net security provider in the immediate Indian Ocean region and beyond.¹⁰ The official as well as political intent behind this aspiration to emerge as a security provider is undoubtedly a significant stride in India's Act East outreach. Facts, however, speak otherwise. India's cautious posture on maritime disputes, limited outreach in North-East Asia and lack of depth in strategic partnerships with countries in East Asia limit its posture as a security provider. This paper critically analyses the prospects of India as a net security provider in East Asia.¹¹ Defining India's Act East policy in the context of a security actor and security provider, it analyses India's strategic partnerships in the region, growing security and defence partnerships and exposure to emerging trade architecture and examines the downsides of India's reach in East Asia, including in North-East Asia. It argues that India needs to envision a leadership role in East Asia, capitalize mainly on strengthening its "special strategic partnerships" and position strongly on security and strategic undertakings, which is currently lacking in India's Act East policy. The role of a security provider is an undertaking that is closely associated with a leadership role.

⁸ "America's security role in the Asia-Pacific: Dr. Robert Gates", The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue: Asian-Security Summit, Shangri-La Dialogue 2009, First Plenary Session, Dr. Robert M. Gates, Secretary of Defense, United States of America, 30 May 2009, at <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2009-99ea/first-plenary-session-5080/dr-robert-gates-6609> (accessed on 4 November 2016).

⁹ Ashok K. Kantha, then Secretary (East), has been quoted saying: "India has vital stakes in the Indian Ocean and in harnessing its capabilities as net security provider". See "India stepping up role as net security provider in Indian Ocean", *Business Standard*, 19 September 2013, at http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/india-stepping-up-role-as-net-security-provider-in-indian-ocean-113091900569_1.html (accessed on 7 September 2014).

¹⁰ "India well positioned to become net security provider in our region and beyond: PM", *The Hindu* (Business Line), 23 May 2013, at <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/india-wellpositioned-to-become-net-security-provider-in-our-region-and-beyond-pm/article4742174.ece> (accessed on 7 September 2014).

¹¹ This paper is an improvised, extended and revised version of an earlier write-up of the author on the subject. The argument and perspectives of this paper are, however, fresh and revised. See Jagannath P. Panda, "India in East Asia: reviewing the role of a security provider", in S.D. Muni and Vivek Chadha (ed.), *Asian Strategic Review 2015: India as a Security Provider*, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi and Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2015, pp. 213-229.



Defining “Act East”

Experts and scholars are still debating over the geographical confines of the region of East Asia. No matter what remains the corollary of this debate, India has emerged as an important power in East Asia and its outreach is still growing. India’s enunciation of its Act East policy is a result of two and a half decades experience which started as its Look East policy in the early 1990s. The transition from Look East to Act East has evolved gradually through outreach activities in terms of strategic partnerships, economic contacts and political interactions. Reaching East Asia has been a serious construct of India’s “extended neighbourhood” conception.¹² Pranab Mukherjee, then External Affairs Minister of India, explained the official parlance of India’s “extended neighbourhood” by stating that India’s political, economic and defence tryst with West Asia, Central Asia, South-East Asia as well as in the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) explained this portent.¹³ This concept of “extended neighbourhood” signifies a classic mixture of soft-power and hard-power outreach with continuous multilateral political, economic and ideational engagements that India steadily employs in different parts of Asia. Further, this signifies strongly in East Asia through India’s sustained soft-power and hard-power reach.

India’s Act East policy consists of a range of institutional, economic, political and security engagements. The principal contours of this engagement are growing institutional contacts with ASEAN, quest to search for energy resources and maritime resource ambitions. Contacts with ASEAN-centred multilateral mechanisms have become the main drivers of India’s engagement with the East, where India is strongly connected with the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+). A further corollary of India’s East Asian progression and engagement is that India shares “strategic partnerships” with all three main countries in East Asia, such as China, Japan and South Korea, including the most important multilateral institution, ASEAN. Formally started in 2012, India has consolidated its “strategic partnership” outreach substantially with the countries in East Asia. A review of India’s course of strategic partnership with the East Asian countries suggests, however, that India’s outreach and presence is still a chapter in progress, which limits India’s role as a security provider. For instance, the South-East Asian community has seen India’s presence on a “positive scale” in recent years¹⁴ and entails India’s emergence in East Asia as a strategic advantage. But India’s security engagement in South-East Asia is still somewhat tenuous.

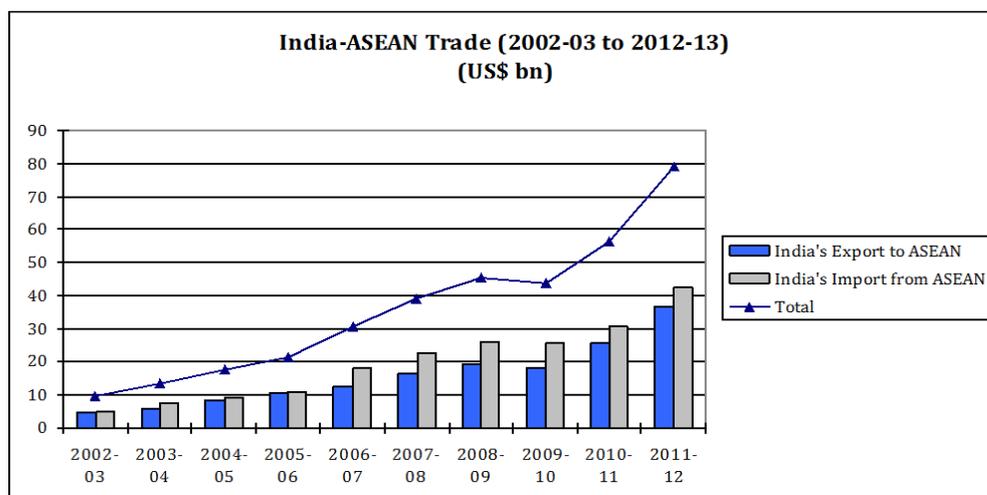
¹² Keynote address by Secretary (East) at the 6th IISS-MEA Dialogue on “India’s extended neighbourhood: prospects and challenges”, at IDSA, New Delhi, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Media Centre, New Delhi, 4 March 2014, at <https://www.iiss.org/en/research/south%20asia%20security/south%20asia%20conferences/sections/2014-ba9a/sixth-iiss-mea-foreign-policy-dialogue-5724> (accessed on 31 October 2016).

¹³ Pranab Mukherjee, “Indian foreign policy: a road map for the decades ahead”, Speech, 46th National Defence College Course, MEA Media Centre, 15 November 2006, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/2395/Indian+Foreign+Policy+A+Road+Map+for+the+Decade+Ahead++Speech+by+External+Affairs+Minister+Shri+Pranab+Mukherjee+at+the+46th+National+Defence+College+Course> (accessed on 31 October 2016).

¹⁴ David Brewster, “India’s defence strategy and the India ASEAN relationship”, *India Review*, 12(3), 2013, p. 151.



Figure 1. India-ASEAN trade, 2002/3-2012/13 (US\$ bn)



Source: Dept. of Commerce: Ministry of Commerce and Industry; Govt. of India.

The main threshold of India's Act East policy is ASEAN. India's engagement with ASEAN has been institutionalized progressively. The growing trade and economic contacts demonstrate this (see Figure 1). Engagement with ASEAN provides a base for India to engage with East Asia institutionally and structurally.¹⁵ Instituting sectoral linkages with ASEAN has been a key priority of India's Look East/Act East policy.¹⁶ The process started in 1992, when India was inducted as a sectoral partner of ASEAN. This was followed by India's promotion with ASEAN as a dialogue partner in 1996 and later as a summit-level partner in 2002. The two sides signed an Instrument of Accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-East Asia and a Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism and a Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation at the Bali Summit. In 2004 the two sides signed an instrument for Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity,¹⁷ which was followed up with a Plan of Action, which was implemented from 2004-2010 and later from 2010-2015.¹⁸

India's engagement with ASEAN received high attention with the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in December 2012, which marked the 20 years of India's engagement with ASEAN and further received strategic contours through the 10th anniversary of India-ASEAN summit-level partnership, to convert the ties into a "strategic partnership".¹⁹ Endorsing the primacy of

¹⁵ David Scott, "India's 'extended neighbourhood' concept: power projection for a rising power", *India Review*, 8 (2), April-June 2009, pp. 107-43.

¹⁶ Currently, more than 26 India-ASEAN intergovernmental mechanisms exist, covering a range of areas such as security, political, economic and institutional engagements.

¹⁷ ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity, ASEAN, at <http://www.asean.org/news/item/asean-india-partnership-for-peace-progress-and-shared-prosperity-2> (accessed on 31 October 2016).

¹⁸ Plan of Action to implement the ASEAN-India partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity (2010-2015), ASEAN, at <http://www.asean.org/asean/external-relations/india/item/plan-of-action-to-implement-the-asean-india-partnership-for-peace-progress-and-shared-prosperity-2010-2015> (accessed on 3 September 2015).

¹⁹ ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, ASEAN India: Progress & Prosperity, at <http://www.aseanindia.com/summit-2012/> (accessed on 3 September 2014).



India-ASEAN security partnership, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated in December 2012: “We see our partnership with ASEAN not merely as a reaffirmation of ties with neighbouring countries or as an instrument of economic development, but also as an integral part of our vision of a stable, secure and prosperous Asia and its surrounding Indian Ocean and Pacific Regions”.²⁰ Thrusting the India-ASEAN partnership further, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stated that “both India and ASEAN are in favour of enhancing cooperation to advance balance, peace and stability in the region”.²¹ The intent is to make the partnership more “pragmatic, action-driven and result oriented”.²² “ASEAN lies at the core of India’s Act East policy” and complements India’s vision of the Asian century.²³ However, India continues to remain a rudimentary power in terms of defence and security engagements with the ASEAN members.

India’s reach in East Asia is mostly ASEAN-centric currently, even though India shares a strategic partnership with China, Japan and South Korea. But the India-ASEAN partnership has not yet matured to the scale where India can perform the role of a security provider to ASEAN. Neither has India preferred to take an open stance on the maritime disputes in the region. A security provider must possess the competency of addressing traditional and non-traditional security issues.²⁴ Capacity building, carrying serious military diplomacy, offering military assistance and deployment of military troops or forces are essential components of a security provider.²⁵ A review of India’s strategic partnerships and presence, multilateral and maritime reach, exposure to trade architecture and approach to regional security matters explains that India’s role is currently limited to that of a security actor only.

Between Partnerships and Presence

ASEAN members like Vietnam, the Philippines and Singapore have long expected India to play a leadership role in the region. For instance, praising the active policy of the current Indian government and viewing India as a key “strategic partner” in the evolving South-East Asian security architecture, Vietnam’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Pham Binh Minh, appealed to India for a greater role in ensuring “freedom of navigation, maritime safety and security in the

²⁰ “Prime Minister’s Statement at the India-ASEAN Summit”, 30 October 2010, MEA, at <http://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?747/Prime+Ministers+statement+at+the+8th+IndiaASEAN+Summit> (accessed on 31 October 2016).

²¹ Opening Statement by the Prime Minister at the India-ASEAN Summit”, n. 2.

²² Keynote Address by External Affairs Minister, n. 5.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ S.D. Muni, “Introduction”, in S.D. Muni and Vivek Chadha (eds.), *Asian Strategic Review 2015: India as a Security Provider*, IDSA, New Delhi, and Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2015, pp. 1-8.

²⁵ Anit Mukherjee, “India as a net security provider: concept and impediments”, Policy Brief, Rajarathnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, August 2014, p. 2, at https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PB_140903_India-Net-Security.pdf (accessed on 5 November 2016).



South China Sea region”. He added that “India’s strategic partnership owes its strength to the fact that your Look East policy meets our ASEAN’s outward looking policy.”²⁶

India’s strategic partnership with ASEAN has been mostly bilateral-centric,²⁷ covering a set of dialogue mechanisms, high-level visits of defence personnel, training and education, coordinated patrols, joint military exercises, etc. India’s maritime and defence engagements with individual ASEAN countries are still rising (see Table 1) but are yet to be established ones. Most of India’s current defence and security engagements are with ASEAN members who are primarily engaged with China on maritime disputes or want to see India as a potential rising power that can provide security in the region vis-à-vis China. India’s current defence engagements are mostly bilateral-centric and its security engagements are mostly multilateral-centric. Institutionally, India shares a security dialogue engagement with the leading ASEAN institutions such as ARF, ADMM+ and the Shangri La Dialogue. India’s defence engagements with the region are confined to Vietnam and Singapore only at present, and defence engagements with Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Malaysia are at growing stage.²⁸ India’s overall defence engagements with most South-East Asian countries however lack comprehensiveness.

India’s defence and security relations with Vietnam are the most appealing phenomenon of its Act East policy. Prime Minister Modi’s recent visit to Vietnam, the first by an Indian Prime Minister since 2001, has certainly renewed the strategic vigour between India and Vietnam. But in contrast with Pakistan’s “all-weather friendship” with China, with which some tend to draw an analogy for strengthening India’s relations with Vietnam, unlike Pakistan, Vietnam is not a self-destructive country which will engage with India to balance China.²⁹ Nevertheless, there is a greater scope for India-Vietnam relations, especially in security and defence engagements. During Prime Minister Modi’s visit, India extended US\$500 million Line of Credit to Hanoi for promoting deeper defence cooperation, by establishing a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” with Vietnam.³⁰ Modi said that India’s intent to upgrade ties with Vietnam from simply a “strategic partnership” to a “comprehensive strategic partnership” was to offer “new direction, momentum and substance” to India-Vietnam ties.³¹ What limits India’s emergence as a security actor and security provider is that Vietnam is aware of the massive Chinese presence in the region.³² Vietnam is pragmatic in its relationships with China and realizes the challenge involved in confronting that country.

²⁶ “Vietnam seeks greater role for India in South China Sea”, *Zee News India*, 25 August 2014, at http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/vietnam-seeks-greater-role-for-india-in-south-china-sea_957303.html (accessed on 31 October 2016).

²⁷ Brewster, “India’s Defence Strategy and the India ASEAN Relationship”, n. 14; Scott, “India’s ‘Extended Neighbourhood’ Concept ...”, n. 15.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Manoj Joshi, “Vietnam will never be for India What Pakistan is to China”, *The Wire*, 3 September 2016, at <http://thewire.in/63871/vietnam-will-never-india-pakistan-china/> (accessed on 2 November 2016).

³⁰ Jaishree Balasubramanian, “India extends USD 500 mln to Vietnam to bolster defence ties”, *Press Trust of India*, 3 September 2016, at http://www.ptinews.com/news/7833794_India-extends-USD-500-mln-to-Vietnam-to-bolster-defence-ties (accessed on 2 November 2016).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Joshi, “Vietnam will never be for India What Pakistan is to China”, n. 29.



Table 1. India's naval exercises with ASEAN members

Name and Mode	Countries Involved/Year Commenced	Major Focus
Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX): Annual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singapore, 1993-94 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance inter-operability and mutual understanding • Maritime search, security and rescue operations
MILAN (Multi-nation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1995; 17 countries participated in 2014, 7 of them ASEAN members (Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Philippines) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief • Peace and rescue operations
India-Indonesia coordinated Patrol Naval Exercise (IND-INDO CORPAT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indonesia • Biannual Exercise • Started in 2000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held along the International Maritime Boundary Line • Held normally in April and October • Joint patrol for sea search, coordination against piracy, armed robbery, poaching, illegal immigration, human trafficking, drug trafficking, etc. • Launched in line with India's Look East policy
Indo-Thai Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thailand • Started in 2005 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counter piracy, poaching and arms smuggling • Enhance inter-operability • Effective implementation of the Law of the Sea to prevent illegal activities
KOMODO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seventeen countries including India, Indonesia, USA, China, Russia, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, and Laos participated • Inaugural multilateral naval exercise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) exercise • The second exercise to focus on peacekeeping operations under the UN flag
RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific Exercise)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Began in 1971 • India became active participant in 2012 (before which it was an observer country) • RIMPAC 2016 includes forces from Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, People's Republic of China, Peru, Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Tonga, the UK and the United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation of the combined forces and improve individual war fighting competencies • Focuses largely on Disaster relief maritime security operations, sea control and complex war-fighting • India sent ship for the first time in 2014 • This year also marked the first time hospital ships participated • People's Republic of China also participated for the first time in 2014 • Theme of RIMPAC 2016 was "Capable, Adaptive, Partners"



ADMM Plus Ex MS & CT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 countries namely, Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, Japan, China, India, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Russia and the US participated • Started in 2016 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectively address maritime and terrorism threats • Strengthening bilateral ties between India and ASEAN countries • Performing extensive maritime interactions between India and ASEAN countries
IMCOR (Indo-Myanmar Coordinated Patrols)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Started in 2013 between India and Myanmar • Fourth edition conducted from February 2016 along International Maritime Border line (IMBL) in Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening India-Myanmar defence relationship • Conducting coordinated naval patrols, strengthening naval interactions

Source: Information compiled from open sources like Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence: Government of India, *The Hindu*, *Times of India*, Embassy of India in Thailand, *Jakarta Post*, etc.

India's relations with Singapore are also on the upswing.³³ Singapore trains its defence personnel at Indian military institutes owing to its land scarcity. The two countries have a range of cooperation such as in defence and scientific research covering defence technology. India has enjoyed a natural trust with Singapore in its defence contacts, principally with the signing of 2003 India-Singapore Defence Cooperation Agreement.

A prime aspect of India's defence diplomacy with ASEAN member states is its maritime approach with the region. Most ASEAN members like Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia are important to India's maritime diplomacy in the north-east Indian Ocean, where India has usually maintained its maritime authority. The core of India-ASEAN naval engagement all these years has evolved through joint naval exercises, bilateral dialogues and exercises and a few exercises like MILAN, that are crucial to regional naval understanding for upholding peace and security in the Indian Ocean region³⁴ (see Table 1). India has deployed at regular intervals its vessels and fleets in the SCS region as well as in the Malacca Strait and Sunda Strait. Further, the Indian Navy travels at regular intervals to the ports of ASEAN members like Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Cambodia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Also, the vitality of the Bay

³³ "Singapore sets sights on deepening ties with India", *Hindustan Times*, 6 September 2014, at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/singapore-sets-sights-on-deepening-ties-with-india/story-w9GdExHcwO2DZbPSIPa7KL.html> (accessed on 5 November 2016).

³⁴ "New naval air station INS *Baaz* commissioned by CNS", 31 July 2012, at <http://indiannavy.nic.in/print/1431> (accessed on 20 September 2014).



of Bengal has induced India to take up maritime diplomacy with these ASEAN members seriously. Currently, India has stepped up cooperation with Vietnam in the maritime sector, keeping in view the rise of the Chinese navy and its capability in the Indian Ocean region. Importantly, India has built a few bases south of Visakhapatnam for its Eastern Fleet, and a new naval airbase, known as INS *Baaz*, south of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India's territory of Andaman and Nicobar allows New Delhi to maintain a psychological advantage to reach quickly the Bay of Bengal region as well as the Malacca Strait. To increase the scope of maritime surveillance in the region, the Indian Navy has opened a new "forward airbase" on Greater Nicobar in July 2012.³⁵ India has also sent INS *Sudershini* as part of the India-ASEAN commemorative expedition to mark the ancient and contemporary maritime linkages between the two sides.³⁶

For India, opportunities and options exist to emerge as a stronger security and military power in East Asia. The then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said at the Plenary Session of the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in 2012: "As maritime nations, India and ASEAN nations should intensify their engagements for maritime security and safety, for freedom of navigation and for peaceful settlement of maritime disputes in accordance with international law."³⁷ A foremost attempt in this endeavour could be to advance further the multilateral and institutional presence that India shares with the East Asian region. India's current forte in East Asia is linked with its longstanding engagement not only with ASEAN and its members, but with other great powers in the region such as Japan and South Korea. *Is India in a position to enhance its leadership in East Asia?*

The Leadership Role and China

In East Asia, Beijing has always given priority thrust to ASEAN since the crafting of the "strategic partnership" in 2003. China's core aim has been how to generate confidence and optimism over its rise. ASEAN members have sceptically debated the "peaceful" nature of China's rise in the East Asia region and beyond for quite some time,³⁸ Vietnam and the Philippines in particular, whereas Chinese authorities have sought to assure them that China's progress and development is indeed

³⁵ The Government of India has recently launched a number of infrastructure steps and projects in the Andaman and Nicobar chain of islands, notably, forwarding operating bases in Kamorta in Nicobar and in Diglipur in Andaman.

³⁶ "Navy Expedition Asean-India: Progress and prosperity", <http://www.aseanindia.com/navy/about/> (accessed on 23 September 2014).

³⁷ "Opening statement by Prime Minister at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit", Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 20 December, <http://www.pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=91052> (accessed on 23 September 2014).

³⁸ Jagannath P. Panda, "Sino-ASEAN strategic partnership: the missing trust", *IDS Comment*, 7 August 2013, at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Sino-AseanStrategicPartnership_jppanda_070813.html (accessed on 4 November 2016).



an “opportunity for ASEAN”.³⁹ Meanwhile, the “peaceful rise” of China projection, which was floated by Zheng Bijian, the then Vice-Principal of the Central Party School of China during the Boao Forum for Asia in 2003 to dispel the China threat theory, has moved concurrently with the Sino-ASEAN strategic partnership.

At official level, the main thrust of the Sino-ASEAN strategic partnership is to advance a comprehensive and an inclusive bilateral engagement. In October 2003, the Sino-ASEAN strategic partnership was forged through a joint declaration, titled A Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity.⁴⁰ Since then the two sides have signed numerous agreements to boost this partnership, but an inclusive Sino-ASEAN engagement is still missing. Meanwhile, Beijing has emerged as ASEAN’s biggest trading partner and ASEAN as China’s third-largest trading partner. Statistics suggest that their bilateral trade has increased fourfold since 2002. By 2015, China and ASEAN expressed their ambition to push the bilateral trade figure to US\$500 billion.⁴¹ ASEAN is one of China’s most preferred destinations for foreign direct investment (FDI), and Beijing stays connected with ASEAN in +1, +3 and +6 institutional mechanisms. It may be noted, however, that elsewhere in the world strategic partnership is not all about trade contacts and economic engagement. A strategic partnership must also have political and strategic bearings of a bilateral relationship. In the Sino-ASEAN strategic partnership, this seems to be quite problematic currently, specifically given the dispute over the SCS. ASEAN summits have failed to evolve a code of conduct (COC) on the issue, exposing ASEAN’s internal divisions over the issue.

The leadership in Beijing wants to be judicious and moderate in resolving the dispute. China insists on an “Asia way” and advocates an “ASEAN way”⁴² for two correlated reasons. First, China does not want ASEAN countries to seek outside powers’ intervention on maritime issues, mainly of the USA.⁴³ In the recent past, the PLA has taken a keen interest in the SCS, has conducted regular “combat-readiness patrol system” and has upgraded its military vigilance over the sea. Secondly, Beijing wants to keep outside powers away from the regional politics, so that it can easily remain the predominant power in the region. Even though the Chinese leadership has been cau-

³⁹ Ng Teddy and Andrea Chen, “Xi Jinping says world has nothing to fear from awakening of ‘peaceful lion’”, *South China Morning Post*, 28 March 2014, at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1459168/xi-says-world-has-nothing-fear-awakening-peaceful-lion?page=all> (accessed on 4 November 2016).

⁴⁰ “Joint Declaration of the Heads of State/Government of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the People’s Republic of China on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity”, 8 October 2013, at <http://www.asean.org/news/item/external-relations-china-joint-declaration-of-the-heads-of-stategovernment-of-the-association-of-southeast-asian-nations-and-the-people-s-republic-of-china-on-strategic-partnership-for-peace-and-prosperity-bali-indonesia-8-october-2003> (accessed on 5 November 2016).

⁴¹ Zhao Yinan and Zhong Nan, “China, ASEAN set 2015 as goal for upgrading free trade agreement”, *China Daily*, 14 November 2014, at http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-11/14/content_18911804.htm (accessed on 4 November 2016).

⁴² Tang Qifang, “Foreign Minister’s view on South China Sea reasonable and clear”, *China Daily*, 13 August 2015, at http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-08/13/content_21583229.htm (accessed on 5 November 2016).

⁴³ “China far from being ‘aggressive’ in South China Sea”, *China Daily*, 13 May 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-05/13/content_17505247.htm (accessed on 4 November 2016).



tious in branding India as an outside power in the ASEAN region, it has given enough hints that New Delhi must keep itself detached in the SCS zone.

China has gradually argued in favour of “Asian integration” in which “ASEAN community building” remains central. For China, the “Asian integration” process is, however, a difficult entity to achieve, whereas “ASEAN community building” is viable economically though not politically. Beijing nevertheless pursues the discussion of “Asian integration” to establish a leadership case. This is noticed in China’s constant backing for the establishment of an integrated South-East Asian community.⁴⁴ For instance, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, stated at the 2015 Boao Forum that “by the end of 2015, ASEAN will establish three communities — political-security, economic and socio-cultural community — which are important milestones of Asian integration.”⁴⁵

Taking this state of affairs a step forward, the Chinese leadership has proposed a “2+7” framework to augment China’s interaction with ASEAN. The Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, proposed this framework during the 16th China-ASEAN Leaders Meeting held in Brunei in 2013. The “2” entails political consensus on deepening strategic trust and improving economic developmental cooperation; the “7” refers to cooperation in areas like politics, trade and economy, interconnection and building trust, finance, security, ocean, and humanity.⁴⁶ Further on, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi has made a comprehensive “ten-point” proposal of China-ASEAN cooperation.⁴⁷ This ambitious engagement programme of China is hard to match for India.

More than ASEAN as an institution, what attracts China to take South-East Asia seriously and maintain supremacy in the region is the SCS dispute. Geographically, SCS is a slice of the Pacific Ocean, encompassing the waters from Singapore to the Taiwan Strait in the north-east. Three correlated factors that drive the Chinese to take a somewhat hard stance on the issue are: (i) this is a key maritime transportation zone for China’s future energy and maritime posture; (ii) it is an energy-resourceful region; and (iii) the legality of this sea zone is a vital factor in maritime diplomacy. Crucial for the Chinese is the unique distinction of the SCS as the “maritime transportation” zone between Asia-Pacific and the rest of the world.

There has recently been an escalation in China’s aggressive posture on the issue. As widely expected, the Philippines secured a favourable SCS arbitration ruling on 12 July 2016 which, unsurprisingly, China has spurned. Many may read the ruling as a legal triumph for the Philippines’

⁴⁴ Bai Shi, “Renewing partnership”, *Beijing Review*, no. 33, 10 August 2015, at http://www.bjreview.com/world/tx/2015-08/10/content_699381.htm (accessed on 4 November 2016).

⁴⁵ “Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the session ‘Asean Community: a major milestone for Asian integration’” of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2015, 28 March 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/t1252648.shtml (accessed on 5 November 2016).

⁴⁶ Wang Yuzhu, “Premier Li improves prospects of China-Asean relationship”, *CCTV.com*, 18 November 2014, at <http://english.cntv.cn/2014/11/18/ARTI1416299817197110.shtml> (accessed on 5 November 2016).

⁴⁷ These comprise: dialogue, implement the spirit of Joint Declaration, treaty on China-Asean good-neighbourliness, international production capacity cooperation, connectivity, maritime cooperation, promote sub-regional cooperation, aim to sign nuclear weapon-free zone, defence and security cooperation, and peace and stability in the South China Sea. See *chinese-embassy.no* 2015.



claim on the SCS, but realistically, Beijing may not have entirely lost the battle. To Beijing's advantage, the ruling has generated a patriotic fervour among the Chinese people, which will be crucial to Beijing's future approach to the dispute. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in its ruling has stated unequivocally that neither does China secure any historic rights to the SCS waters nor does Beijing's "nine-dash line" have any legal sanctity. Second, the status features in the SCS do not belong to Beijing only. Third, China violated the sovereign rights on the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that notably belongs to the Philippines. Fourth, China is aggravating the dispute through construction of artificial islands and securitizing the zones to its advantage. And fifth, China must conduct itself peacefully and must respect the Philippines' rights and freedoms. This ruling will undoubtedly have regional consequences stemming from the SCS dispute.

China has dismissed the award and has stated that it does not hold any legal implications. Beijing has persistently held that The Hague court is not the appropriate forum to decide the matter, which involves other South-East Asian countries as well, besides the Philippines. In Beijing's view, The Hague court should not be confused with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) since the former lacks an enforcement mechanism. Also, the Chinese have questioned the procedures and the jurisdictional process of the court in handling such disputes.

To fight off the arbitration ruling, one day after the award, Beijing on 13 July released a White Paper titled *China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea*.⁴⁸ The White Paper builds a context in which China is open to negotiation and discussion with the disputant parties, including the Philippines. The Chinese state media were also quick to depict The Hague court as a puppet of the United States and Japan. To further up the ante, the *China Daily* reported that more than 70 countries share commonalities with the Chinese perspective on the SCS dispute, which paradoxically figured among them Malaysia and India. China has also gone to work to arrange official meetings and bilateral contacts with a chain of countries around the world. Chinese embassies and Chinese intellectuals have also been engaged in a public relations exercise to take China's cause forward.

Has the ruling left any impact on Chinese diplomacy over the SCS, especially concerning the ASEAN community? In other words, will China now adopt a more combative or conciliatory approach in the matter? National security- or sovereignty-related land and sea issues are core subject matters in the Chinese decision-making process. Consequently, a conciliatory approach on China's part is unlikely. As a result, one might witness an aggressive Chinese posture in terms of a continuous strategy of land reclamation and militarization in the SCS zone. Boosting such an endeavour is the growing nationalism in China on the matter. This nationalism will probably flourish in the light of the focus on "national rejuvenation" and the quest to achieve the Chinese dream advocated by Xi Jinping's leadership. This nationalism targets the United States, which is an ally

⁴⁸ *China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea*, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, Beijing, China, July 13, 2016, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-07/13/c_135509153.htm (accessed on November 10, 2016)



of the Philippines. Sending a strong signal, authorities in Beijing have declared that China may demarcate an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) over the SCS if Chinese security interests are threatened. An aggressive posture on China's part is thus on the cards.

On the other hand, China may not immediately opt for an outright intensification of the SCS dispute. Indeed, one may witness a moderate and soft Chinese approach in the near future, which will be more bilateral-centric in order to reach out to the disputant countries to resolve the dispute. The title of the White Paper, for example, speaks of "negotiation" with the Philippines. Both Chinese and Philippines officials are trying to have bilateral contacts to start discussion on the matter. The new Philippines President is also in favour of talks. At the same time, the bottom line for Beijing in any bilateral or regional negotiation over the SCS would be to reinforce its "nine-dash line" claim.

Overall, China may adhere to a "multipronged" strategy over the SCS, involving, besides a "soft" and "hard" power strategy, a "smart" power strategy which would allow Beijing to sustain its continued influence over ASEAN in future. Even though the ASEAN community is largely divided over the SCS dispute to Beijing's advantage, still China would like to maintain a path in the immediate future which would allow it to present a "peaceful" posture in South-East Asia. Its "peaceful development" has been vital for China and the ASEAN community, since the campaign is intended to convince China's neighbours that its rise is not detrimental to their strategic interests. China may pursue a moderate policy through a careful and slow securitizing process in the SCS zone also because the core of the strategic engagement between China and ASEAN is trade and economic relations.

The Indian Tryst

Politics in East Asia is linked closely with South-East Asia as well as with the changing dynamics of Asia-Pacific. Economic multilateralism and maritime politics are two important aspects that must impel India to rise to the occasion and play a pro-active role. New Delhi's thrust so far has been on building closer relations with ASEAN, ADMM+, ARF, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) to propel a good understanding on maritime security issues, including other security and governance issues that are keys to the East Asian regional architecture. India's official advocacy is to thrust the focus on ASEAN and commit to peace and a stable regional security architecture through forums like ARF and ADMM+, including expanded maritime interactions. Historically, the South-East Asian countries were initially lukewarm to India's entry into ARF. In the post-cold war phase, India slowly raised its engagement with ASEAN and joined the ARF in 1996. Gradually, ASEAN members realized India's importance and standing and started seeing India's emergence as a vital factor in South-East Asian security. Some of them, like Singapore, started viewing India as a possible counterbalance to the



rising Chinese presence in the region.⁴⁹ Since then, through its institutional bonding with ASEAN, India has deepened its engagement with ARF and ADMM+.

East Asian Integration (EAI), from an Indian perspective, for example, highlights New Delhi's approach to the East Asian community as well as Asia-Pacific. In India's official policy phraseology, "The East Asia Summit is the forum for building an open, inclusive and transparent architecture of regional cooperation in the Asia Pacific region."⁵⁰ The context and importance of EAS is implied and argued in Indian foreign policy mainly within a construct of realizing the importance of ARF and ADMM+.⁵¹ India's official perception of ARF was aptly outlined by the speech of its then Minister for External Affairs at the 20th ARF meeting in Brunei Darussalam: first, ARF as a dialogue forum is a useful mechanism provided it is backed with commitments by all nations; second, ARF can be a conduit of hope and solution for addressing security issues, including terrorism and maritime security; and third, ARF can be pushed ahead as a multilateral cultural tactic to address Asia's growing security and political dynamics.⁵² This official dialogue is, however, mostly rhetorical: neither has ARF been forthcoming about its perception of regional peace and stability nor has it helped in uniting the thoughts and spirit of its constituents the way it was originally meant to address. Besides, India is still not sure what should be its role in ARF and how it should approach ARF as a forum.

Compared to ARF, ADMM+ is a relatively new security mechanism. Given the security conditions in Asia-Pacific, ADMM+ is supposed to be a confidence-building mechanism and to uphold peace and stability through dialogue and discussion. ADMM+ has promoted a "new mode of multilateralism" combining ASEAN members as well as eight dialogue partners (Australia, China, Japan, India, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the US) in the Asia-Pacific region to discuss key security issues and promote confidence in the region. Counterterrorism, building cooperation in areas of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, peacekeeping, and maritime security have been the main areas of discussion in this forum. But to what extent ADMM+ will uphold peace and stability in the region is yet to be seen. For India, ADMM+ has not been an attractive mechanism so far. Neither has India been quite forthcoming nor has shown much interest in attending its security dialogue meetings.⁵³ In ADMM+ meetings India has raised the issue of the SCS dis-

⁴⁹ Anindya Batabyal, "Balancing China in Asia: a realist assessment of India's Look East strategy", *China Report*, 42(2) 2006, pp. 179-97.

⁵⁰ "Statement by PM at the 6th East Asia Summit Plenary Session", Bali, 19 November 2011, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?6974/Statement+by+PM+at+the+6th+East+Asia+Summit+Plenary+Session> (accessed on 5 November 2016).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "External Affairs Minister's intervention on 'exchange of views on regional and international issues'", 20th ARF meeting in Brunei Darussalam, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2 July 2013, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?21891/External+Affairs+Ministers+Intervention+on+Exchange+of+views+on+regional+and+international+issues+at+20th+Asean+Regional+Forum+ARF+meeting+in+Brunei+Darussalam> (accessed on 5 November 2016).

⁵³ In the Brunei ADMM+ meeting, which was the second such meeting, the then Defence Minister A.K. Antony did not participate and deputed his Minister of State Jitendra Singh. See, *pib.nic.in*, 'Second Asean Defence



pute but has not advocated a perspective that will augment its own position on freedom of navigation and oil exploration.⁵⁴ India and ASEAN discussed pushing forward maritime cooperation in the region during their Commemorative Summit in 2012.

It may be noted that actors like Vietnam and the Philippines, who are parties to the SCS disputes, along with Taiwan, Brunei and Malaysia, which have some disquiet over the issue, are concerned about the Chinese authority and do not want to sit at the negotiating table with China. In the SCS, the Chinese authorities have unilaterally proposed “joint development” of oil or energy exploration in disputed areas. The Chinese Defence Ministry has also cautioned that countries that want to carry out projects for their self-interest in the SCS region should confine them to the range of freedom of navigation; besides, freedom of navigation should not be a factor in “territorial and ocean rights” of the countries involved.⁵⁵ Yang Yujun, the spokesman of the ministry, in reply to a question on the US-Philippines understanding to protect the freedom of navigation in South-East Asia, has stated: “The so-called protection of freedom of navigation is in fact a false proposition.... We call on the countries concerned not to seek private interests under the guise of freedom of navigation.”⁵⁶ China has described India’s joint oil exploration with Vietnam as illegal and has opposed India’s commercial moves in the SCS.⁵⁷

India needs to take serious note of this Chinese stance. There is scope for India to shape a well-crafted maritime drive over the SCS region. In this, a coordinated approach with likeminded countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, which share strategic interests similar to those of India and see India as a power, would be useful. It may be noted that the Vision Statement of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit points out that both ASEAN and India look to each other in “strengthening cooperation to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation” and “safety of SLOCs [sea-lines of communication] for unfettered movement of trade in accordance with international law, including the UNCLOS [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea]”.⁵⁸

In its vision of ADMM+, India has stressed two key aspects: the vitality of ARF and the scope of ADMM+ in the regional security architecture. There is huge scope for these two multilateral frameworks to emerge as effective confidence-building mechanisms to address the security environment of the region. Though India has stressed time and again the importance of ARF and ADMM+ in the Asia-Pacific region, New Delhi’s future outlook with regard to these two institu-

Ministers’ Meeting (Plus) Joint Declaration’, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 29 August, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=98856> (accessed on 23 September 2014).

⁵⁴ “Second ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (Plus) Joint Declaration”, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 29 August 2013, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=98856> (accessed on November 5, 2016).

⁵⁵ “Freedom of navigation in South China Sea unaffected”, *China Daily*, 29 August 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/ethnic/china/2013-08/29/content_16930540.htm (accessed on November 5, 2016).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ “India makes waves with South China Sea oil and gas exploration”, *Global Times*, 18 September 2011, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/7598163.html> (accessed on November 5, 2016).

⁵⁸ “Vision Statement ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit”, 21 December 2012, <http://www.asean.org/news/asean-statement-communicues/item/vision-statement-asean-indiacommemorative-summit> (accessed on November 5, 2016).



tions should be on how to safeguard India's maritime interests in this region through their intervention. Besides, India must pursue the dialogue of regional integration prudently through ARF and ADMM+. The progression of regional economic integration should forge with the ASEAN+6 mechanism and should converge with the sentiments of EAS, where India is a factor. India's aim and core thrust currently is to build a stable regional economic and political order through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) mechanism among the prospective members of the region. India needs to push forward the RCEP mechanism with a view to renovate and transform the region with higher economic growth through more robust cross-border trade and investment along with inter-regional economic collaboration.

Responding Trade Architecture

Multilateral trade in Asia is entering a new chapter of interaction and integration with the RCEP initiated by ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and US-centred Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Two compelling regional issues – trade liberalization and economic integration – have been at the core of these initiatives.⁵⁹ The backdrop of these efforts is US “pivot to Asia” vis-à-vis “rebalancing” strategy, prevailing maritime disputes in the region and a range of free trade agreements (FTAs).⁶⁰ Regional politics in Asia, mainly in South-East Asia and Asia-Pacific, has now entered a new level of power play with the arrival of RCEP and TPP that involve both smaller and bigger economies.

India's debate over RCEP is increasingly distributed between the strategic preference that both China and the US hold in world politics and its bearing on New Delhi's foreign policy. Nevertheless, from the outset, India has supported the idea of RCEP and has participated in launching the RCEP negotiation process. In fact, India has shown keen interest in joining RCEP though it is still hesitant about an FTA with China, and there are worries that Chinese goods may flood the Indian market through RCEP.⁶¹ Moreover, India faces a huge trade deficit with China, an issue that Beijing has constantly neglected to address. Overall, the significance of ASEAN in Indian foreign policy makes New Delhi take the RCEP negotiation seriously. RCEP would not only facilitate India's greater presence in the South-East or East Asian market; it will also facilitate and punctuate India's Act East policy massively in economic dealings.

⁵⁹ For an excellent discussion on the issue of trade liberalization, see Raymond Hicks and SooYeon Kim, “Reciprocal trade agreements in Asia: credible commitment to trade liberalization or paper tigers?” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 12(1), January-April, 2012, pp. 1-29.

⁶⁰ In the current debate on Asian integration, the socio-cultural and historical bonding among the East Asian community is at the core. Ironically, it is the same set of issues and politics in the post-cold war period that placed them apart. See Gwi-Ok Kim, “Building a peaceful East Asian Community: origins of a regional concept and visions for a global age”, *Asian Perspective*, 37(2), April-June, 2012, pp. 233-54.

⁶¹ Sreeram Chaulia, “Trade bloc blues: can India draw the maximum advantage out of the RCEP and TPP tussle?” *Economic Times*, 15 December 2012, http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2012-12-14/news/35820026_1_rcep-free-trade-regional-comprehensive-economic-partnership (accessed on 27 May 2013).



India's political perspective on RCEP is linked to the growing India-ASEAN dynamics. India is primarily a South Asian country, but both China and the US to an extent want to include New Delhi in the ambit of East Asian and Asia-Pacific politics. The geography and politics of the EAS encompass India in its periphery.⁶² Manmohan Singh, then Prime Minister of India, had stated that India attaches the "highest priority" to the integration process of ASEAN. Given the priority that New Delhi holds with regard to ASEAN and regional integration process, RCEP becomes conducive to India's Act East policy. Not only does India share an FTA with ASEAN but also with two of the main dialogue partners of ASEAN – Japan and South Korea. RCEP will provide a substantial platform for India to maximize its trade profile and economic, services and communications contacts with the ASEAN communities, which will lead to greater cooperation in areas like banking, tourism and societal interactions.⁶³ In short, India's dialogue with RCEP is based on three broader formulations: (i) RCEP will help India enter the region of East or South-East Asia more deeply; (ii) India will be more closely connected to ASEAN as an institution, as RCEP will evolve from the agenda and basics of ASEAN; and (iii) apart from China, India will not only be connected more closely with Japan and South Korea, but also with Australia and New Zealand. Above all these, partaking in the RCEP will enhance India's Asia-Pacific undertaking.

The Indian perspective of TPP is equally an evolving one. India sees itself in a better situation today, as the US return to Asia is directly intended to restrict the growing Chinese influence in Asia-Pacific. TPP also takes onboard the ASEAN countries, a fact that is important for India and its Act East policy. Like most powers, India has neither committed itself to be a part of TPP, nor has it dismissed the idea outright. Currently, TPP does not really look to India as a possible member; but there is a discourse emerging in the West that countries like India may be asked to join in future if the negotiation process among the Asia-Pacific countries moves smoothly and successfully. India would not like to join TPP in its current form, as TPP rules compel member countries to amend their domestic rules and norms with regard to climate change, environment and human rights to WTO+ standards.⁶⁴ All these require intense domestic debate and reform, and India may not accept these readily. Besides, India is still not a member of APEC, which would have helped New Delhi to integrate with the Asia-Pacific economies closely. The Chinese and Indian perspectives over RCEP and TPP discussed so far are fundamental for a variety of reasons: (i) the US is a dividing factor between China and India; (ii) ASEAN's massive engagement with both China and India; (iii) India's newly invigorated Act East policy; and (iv) maritime politics, mainly the SCS disputes.

Chinese scholars and experts view India as a pro-US country in their global calculations and formulations along with Japan and Australia. The Chinese acuity over RCEP and TPP is part and

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ "RCEP is huge for Indian businesses which should scale up": Surojit Gupta's Interview with Ganeshan Wignaraja, *Times of India*, 6 February 2013, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-02-06/interviews/36765453_1_rcep-indian-businesses-regional-comprehensive-economic-partnership (accessed on 27 May 2013).

⁶⁴ Jyoti Malhotra, "In RCEP vs. TPP alphabet trade bloc soup, India refuses to choose", *Business Standard*, 25 November 2012, http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/in-rcep-vs-tpp-alphabet-trade-bloc-soup-india-refuses-to-choose-112112503008_1.html (accessed on 21 May 2013).



parcel of its broader regional view and understanding of this “four-nation alliance”.⁶⁵ The Chinese dialogue and perspective on RCEP and TPP are centred less around South-East and Asia-Pacific politics and are more concerned with the US return to Asia and how to challenge American clout and economic supremacy under TPP.⁶⁶ The arrival of both RCEP and TPP creates a golden juncture for India to advance its Act East policy because there is a strong possibility that China might be induced to agree to an ASEAN+6 mechanism in the region with the lead of RCEP. Given this, ties with ASEAN will be a key to India’s policy advancement in this matter. The then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated in his speech at the Plenary Session of the 7th East Asian Summit: “For India, ASEAN has been the bridge to East. It is also central to the evolution of a regional architecture and its different cooperative frameworks.... India welcomes the launch of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership negotiations and supports the Phnom Penh Declarations on East Asia Summit Development Initiative.”⁶⁷ This advocacy projects a comprehensive engagement. But the prime task for India would be to maintain a balance between the emerging politics and economics, and identify areas of cooperation on key policy areas at a time when regional politics is rapidly changing and the ASEAN countries are looking to India seriously as a regional power. In crafting a more decisive policy towards ASEAN, India must capitalize on maximizing trade and economic contacts with it. The India-ASEAN trade and economic contact has seen rapid and sustained progress recently (see Figure 1); associating with RCEP and its negotiation will certainly boost these contacts further. By joining RCEP, India can further expand the mode of liberalizing the India-ASEAN economic engagement, and simultaneously enter into bilateral FTA negotiations with China, Australia and New Zealand.⁶⁸ Besides, the established strategic partnership between India and ASEAN must move to the next stage of trade and economic contacts. Actualizing ASEAN+6, RCEP will help further its objectives of Act East policy.

North-East Asia: India’s Need for a Savvier Approach

The main downside of India’s Act East policy is that New Delhi is still an insignificant player in the North-East Asian security matrix. India’s exposure to North-East Asian security goes back to the early 1960s and India has played traditionally a significant role towards the reunification of

⁶⁵ Zhao Qinghai, “The four-nation alliance: concept vs. reality”, *China International Studies*, no. 7, winter, 2007, pp. 11-24.

⁶⁶ Experts argue that TPP is not a tool to contain China, because TPP members themselves who are involved in Asia’s production network with China may not support this kind of adventure. Besides, Beijing has bilateral trade pacts with five TPP countries and is engaged massively with three TPP countries under the ASEAN bonding. See, Sanchita Basu Das, “The Trans-Pacific Partnership as a tool to contain China: myth or reality?” *East Asia Forum*, 8 June 2013, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org> (accessed on 13 June 2013).

⁶⁷ “PM’s statement at Plenary Session of 7th East Asia Summit”, 20 November 2012, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, http://pmindia.gov.in/content_print.php?nodeid=1251&nodetype=2 (accessed on 11 February 2013).

⁶⁸ Kristy Hsu, “The RCEP: integrating India into the Asian economy”, *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 8(1), January-March 2013, pp. 41-51.



the two Koreas. Still, India's tryst with North-East Asia in recent years has not really grown to match its historical role and prominence. This enormously limits India's character and posture in East Asia as a security actor as well as security provider. Two critical aspects therefore are vital to India's Act East policy, which will eventually be helpful for India to emerge as a security provider. First, to position and react to the North Korean nuclear complexity; and second, to nurture the strategic partnerships in the region to its own advantage.

India and North Korean Nuclear Complexity⁶⁹

To Improve its image as a security actor as well as security provider, India needs a savvier approach to deal with the North Korean nuclear complexity. This approach must be carried out after a serious policy deliberation since India is not an immediate neighbouring country to North-East Asia. A prime motive of India in this respect should be how to generate an international debate about the consequences of the North Korean nuclear complexity, which affects India's security and remains a security matter for the region.

North Korea's nuclear and missile cooperation with Pakistan is an established fact. In the 1990s, Pakistan purchased long-range missiles from North Korea and in return helped it with nuclear enrichment technologies and dual-use items. Yet, Indian concern in this matter has received little attention from the US, Japan and South Korea, the three countries that are most immediately concerned by North Korea's nuclear and missile tests. Besides, China's soft approach on this issue serves as a boost for North Korea. Now, North Korea claims that it has developed the expertise to use nuclear warheads on strategic ballistic rockets.⁷⁰ North Korea's repeated tests have helped it develop expertise on plutonium-based nuclear warheads, which will allow miniaturization of the warhead for fitting into a missile system.⁷¹ Pyongyang might share this expertise with Islamabad as well. It may also be noted that the 9/11 terrorist attack raised the concern about the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, which forced the then President General Pervez Musharraf to relocate some of the nuclear weapons to new secret places and detain some suspected nuclear scientists in Pakistan.⁷²

Within India itself, however, there is scepticism in the media over India's adherence to UN sanctions on North Korea, considering that India is allowing science students from that country

⁶⁹ This part has been published earlier as a commentary in IDSA. See Jagannath P. Panda, "DPRK's nuclear provocations and the Indian response", *IDSA Comment*, 27 September 2016, at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomment/s/dprk-nuclear-provocations-and-the-indian-response_jppanda_270916 (accessed on 4 November 2016).

⁷⁰ Choi Kyong-ae and Kim Soo-yeon, "(4th LD) N. Korea conducts 5th nuclear test", *Yonhap News Agency*, 9 September 2016, at <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2016/09/09/0401000000AEN20160909002554315.html> (accessed on 22 September 2016).

⁷¹ Pranab Dhal Samanta, "North Korean nuclear test and Pakistan in border, a lethal cocktail for India", *Economic Times*, 13 September 2016, at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/north-korean-nuclear-test-and-pakistan-in-border-a-lethal-cocktail-for-india/articleshow/54305675.cms> (accessed on 16 September 2016).

⁷² "Pakistan nuclear weapons", Federations of American Scientists, at <http://fas.org/nuke/guide/pakistan/nuke/> (accessed on 24 September 2016).



to study in Dehradun in violation of the norms of these sanctions.⁷³ But the Government of India has clarified that this move is in the knowledge of UN representatives.

How should India approach the entire issue? First, New Delhi needs to strengthen North Korea-specific bilateral dialogues with the USA, Japan and South Korea. India has a “global partnership” with the US, but North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests have not really figured in India-US bilateral dialogues. With Japan as well, India should carry out specific dialogue on this matter. India’s dialogue with South Korea on its neighbour’s nuclear and missile tests must also become an important persuasion. New Delhi and Seoul decided to establish a 2+2 dialogue mechanism on 18 May 2015 during Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Seoul,⁷⁴ but no substantial progress has taken place to push ahead this dialogue mechanism. Establishing stronger intelligence sharing mechanism on the Korean peninsula will also be in the interests of India and South Korea, especially after the US-South Korea decision to deploy THAAD.

The North-East Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) has been put in place by the Park Geun-hye administration in South Korea to foster peace and cooperation within an ambit of “infrastructure of trust” in North-East Asia. India should try and become a part of this process and it must pursue the matter strongly with South Korea. Both Prime Minister Modi and President Park have agreed to “find complementarities” between New Delhi’s Act East policy and South Korea’s NAPCI initiative. India is not part of the NAPCI, while countries such as the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and Mongolia are part of this process. India must also have a special communication with members of the Six-Party Talks, which has as its members South Korea, North Korea, USA, China, Japan, and Russia. The Six-Party Talks have undoubtedly become irrelevant at present but there is hope that this mechanism might be revived at some stage.

Nurturing the Strategic Partnerships on Security Matters⁷⁵

The second most important factor that may improve the Indian standing as a security actor as well as a security provider is to nurture further the strategic partnerships that India shares with South Korea and Japan in the region. Strategic partnership with Japan is important for India when it comes to the broader Indo-Pacific calculus, but India must seriously nurture its strategic partnership with South Korea to improve the posture in North-East Asia. This is important when there is a subtle power rivalry emerging between the US and China to maintain their respective regional supremacy.⁷⁶ If India has to enhance its positioning in East Asia, boosting further the

⁷³ Nilanjana Bhowmick, “India’s embarrassing North Korean connection”, *Al Jazeera*, 21 June 2016, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/06/india-embarrassing-north-korean-connection-160620195559208.html> (accessed on 16 September 2016).

⁷⁴ “India-Republic of Korea Joint Statement for Special Strategic Partnership”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 18 May 2016, at http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25261/India__Republic_of_Korea_Joint_Statement_for_Special_Strategic_Partnership_May_18_2015 (accessed on 16 September 2016).

⁷⁵ “India in East Asia: Reviewing the role of a security provider”, n. 11.

⁷⁶ Kang Seung Woo, “Political dynamics of Northeast Asia shifting”, *Korea Times*, 7 July 2014, at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2014/09/180_160530.html (accessed on 23 September 2014).



defence and strategic cooperation with Japan and South Korea in the region must be a priority. India has a Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue (FPSD) with South Korea that is aimed at promoting understanding on key security and defence matters such as space, nuclear, collaboration in defence production, maritime and cyber security, etc.⁷⁷ These matters need serious policy deliberations. On a larger scale, the regional order in Asia has become fragmented and there is a necessity of a liberal order in Asia. As a consequence, there is a need for India and South Korea to play a constructive role in building a “multipolar East Asia”,⁷⁸ which would not only be beneficial to the South Korean strategic interest but also improve India’s strategic undertaking.

More than these, India needs to improve its presence through intense participation in East Asia. The Seoul Defence Dialogue (SDD) is a forum where India must show seriousness to participate and slowly work towards improving India’s posture as a power in East Asia. Importantly, China has not shown much interest in the SDD and has been passively partaking in it.⁷⁹ India must aim to fill this gap as a major player through serious participation.

Nurturing relations with Japan is also an important factor to India’s Act East outreach in North-East Asia. India’s relations with Japan are still conditional in nature, based on the strategic factors, including balancing China in the region. India must aim to nurture an exclusive and autonomous relation with Japan. In order to do that, India has to enhance its partnership with Japan both in the bilateral and regional contexts by emphasizing a comprehensive and strategically deep partnership that will be sustainable.

India has so far maintained neutrality on the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute, maintaining that it must be resolved “peacefully”. But to see this matter from an open spectrum, how does its stance on the matter help India? Powers that aim to offer a leadership role cannot afford to maintain a cautious or a conservative stance. India must show a pro-active stance over the maritime disputes in East Asia and point out more openly how the dispute affects regional peace and stability. Besides, India must have a pointed discussion with Japan and China on maritime security issues, which is currently missing. These will undoubtedly enhance India’s standing in the region.

⁷⁷“3rd India-Republic of Korea Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2 September 2013, at <http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/22144/3rd+India++Republic+of+Korea+Foreign+Policy+and+Security+Dialogue> (accessed on 4 November 2016).

⁷⁸ Skand Tayal, “Emerging security architecture in East Asia: India’s strategy towards the Koreas and Japan”, *Issue Brief*, No. 246, Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), February 2014, p. 5.

⁷⁹ Jaeho Hwang, “Seoul Defence Dialogue: new horizons for Korea’s diplomacy”, *Korea Herald*, Brookings, 13 November 2014, at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/seoul-defense-dialogue-new-horizons-for-koreas-diplomacy/> (accessed on 4 November 2016).



Summing Up

India's Act East outreach is still nascent. East Asia is a key to India's extended neighbourhood policy, positioning and posturing in Asia and beyond. India's current stance in East Asia signals a potential power. This potential needs a comprehensive engagement that is currently missing. A real security provider needs a comprehensive engagement in East Asia, a persuasion of big-power diplomacy and robust policy engagement across the East Asia region. To emerge as a security provider, India needs to engage comprehensively with the sub-regions of East Asia, be it South-East Asia or North-East Asia. India also needs to take along all the ASEAN members besides ASEAN itself, ARF and ADMM+. India must also build up a strong relationship with Japan and South Korea, the two main powers other than China in the East Asian region.

As regards the maritime politics in the SCS, India must emphasize more on network building and thrust its emphasis on both bilateral and multilateral interactions. Equally, India needs to show courage on most of the conflicting issues in the region, including both the SCS and East China Sea. Three pointers need to be taken seriously if India aims to emerge as a leader in the region. First, upgrade the bilateral security and defence ties with ASEAN as well as other big powers. Second, pursue a proactive stance on most of the conflicting issues, including the maritime issues. And third, upgrade and maximize the multilateral contacts and presence, where building trusted mature relations with Japan and South Korea is an important step.

Above all, India needs to have a constructive vision on Indo-Pacific since East Asia is an important geopolitical construct of Indo-Pacific. A policy on Indo-Pacific must help India intensify and strengthen its ties across the East Asian region. India is not a member of APEC and must consider how to become one in times to come. Further, the challenge for India is whether it can adopt an independent and autonomous Indo-Pacific construct with the lead of East Asia. In this context, India's main objective should be how to position itself neutrally and improvise the image as a power both in East Asia as well as in the broader context of Indo-Pacific. ■



Author's Biography

Jagannath P. Panda

Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), India

Dr. Jagannath P. Panda is a Research Fellow and heads the East Asia Centre as Coordinator at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. He is in the charge of the Centre's academic and administrative activities, including the Track-II and Track 1.5 dialogues with the Chinese, Japanese and Korean think-tanks and institutes. He is a recipient of the V.K. Krishna Menon Memorial Gold Medal (2000) from the Indian Society of International Law & Diplomacy in New Delhi.

He is the author of *India-China Relations: Politics of Resources, Identity and Authority in a Multipolar World Order* (Routledge, 2016). He is also a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Asian Public Policy* (Routledge). He is Director Research (honorary) at India office of the Institute of Transnational Studies (ITS), Germany/Italy.

Dr. Panda has received a number of prestigious fellowships such as the STINT Asia Fellowship from Sweden; Carole Weinstein Fellowship from the University of Richmond, Virginia, USA; National Science Council (NSC) Visiting Professorship from Taiwan; Visiting Scholar (2012) at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), USA; and Visiting Fellowship from the Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS). He has been invited as lead speaker to talks, seminars, conferences and symposiums and has also chaired prominent events.

Dr. Panda has published in leading peer-reviewed journals like *Journal of Asian Public Policy* (Routledge), *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (Sage), *Asian Perspective* (Lynne Reiner), *Journal of Contemporary China* (Routledge), *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* (Georgetown), *Strategic Analysis* (Routledge), *China Report* (Sage), *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* (MD Publication), *Portuguese Journal of International Affairs* (Euro Press), etc.

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- Young-Hwan Shin, the Executive Director of EAI Fellows Program
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 107) fellowships@eai.or.kr
- Typeset by Young-Hwan Shin

