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The Journal of Indian Ocean Studies is a publication of the Society for Indian Ocean Studies (SIOS). Having completed thirty years of publication, the Journal, published three times a year-in April, August and December, aims at bringing out articles contributed by defence experts, diplomats, eminent scholars and renowned thinkers on the various aspects of the Indian Ocean and the littoral regions of South and Southeast Asia, Africa, the Gulf and Australia.

The Editorial Advisory Board comprising strategists and former practitioners of foreign affairs and defence as well as distinguished scholars on economy, history, etc. of the region provide regular guidance and advice. The Journal has a vast readership among the Parliamentarians, think-tanks, maritime establishments, universities and institutions of excellence in various fields as also individual scholars.



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**India and ASEAN: Perspective
and Vision on the Indo-Pacific**



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Readers are encouraged to contribute articles for the Journal of Indian Ocean Studies. Generally, a theme for each issue is decided three months in advance. Articles are therefore expected to fall within/connected to the theme. However, papers/articles related to aspects of maritime economy, maritime security and geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific, will also be welcome. The following template/style is preferred:

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Editorial

Prime Minister Modi's day-long visit to Jakarta on 7th September, 2023 for the ASEAN -India Summit and the East Asia Summit marked India's earnest and keen desire to continue to contribute meaningfully in the ongoing dialogue with ASEAN and to the process of regional cooperation in the wider Indo-Pacific.

India's evolving relationship with ASEAN which has seen an upgradation from strategic partnership to a comprehensive a strategic partnership in past ten years clearly points to the vision of mutual friendship and cooperation across a wide range of issues and areas when the whole region is beset with such conflicts as the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas war, the Sino-U.S rivalry or the South China Sea imbroglio.

Even as India raised the level of its engagement with ASEAN from 'Look East' to 'Act East' policy and has continued to reaffirm the centrality of ASEAN in the geopolitics of the region, ASEAN has welcomed closer security cooperation with India including in the field of defence. There is a new emphasis on the areas such as modern technology, pharma industry, solar energy, space facilities ,vaccine research etc.

In the last few years, the two sides have given priority to maritime issues, especially maritime security and economic cooperation. India propounded the vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and came up with the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). While India's Indo-Pacific policy was outlined in Prime Minister Modi's speech at the Shangri-la Dialogue in June 2018, the ASEAN came out with its own Indo-Pacific Outlook (AOIP) in 2019. Global Maritime Fulcrum was the lynchpin of the Indonesian President Jokowi's policy. India participated in the ASEAN Maritime Forum and the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative as well as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and proposed ASEAN participation in IPOI. With the introduction of the new construct of the Indo-Pacific the two sides have spelt their outlooks to the vast oceanic space and the region that it occupies. How the relationship between India and ASEAN (and the individual countries within it) is being shaped in the context of the dynamics of the larger Indo-Pacific region constitutes a future challenge. It is to study this

(ii) *Sudhir T. Devare*

aspect that we decided to devote an issue of the Journal to this subject. The analytical articles included here from former practitioners of diplomacy as well as former defence officers and academics reflect their views on the vision and perspectives of India as well as ASEAN on the Indo-Pacific.

Ambassador Gurjit Singh regards India and ASEAN as extremely important partners in the Indo-Pacific, which is the flavour of the regional order. From 2018 onwards both are serious at Summit level about maritime security. The ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the Indian construct IPOI form the cornerstone of India's ASEAN policy on the Indo-Pacific. He believes that Indo-Pacific is a strategic concept evolving from the economic-oriented Asia-Pacific concept. It is born from China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the region at large. India-ASEAN maritime cooperation was, according to him, dependant on how apprehensive ASEAN would be about China. By 2018, this apprehension was apparently overcome and ASEAN announced in 2019 AOIP despite China's aversion to it. India in the meantime brought its Act East Policy, IPOI and SAGAR to bear on cooperation with ASEAN.

In his article on 'China-Philippines Spat over SCS' Prof. Rajaram Panda writes at length on the result of the International Court of Justice's Tribunal in June 2016 which termed the Chinese claim of nine-dash line in SCS as invalid. While the Philippines position was upheld in the Tribunal the latter lacked jurisdiction to consider the implications of the stand-off. Prof. Panda believes that the present President of the Philippines Ferdinand Marcos Jr is more assertive than his predecessor. The collision incident on 22nd October 2023 between a Philippines supply boat and the Chinese Coast Guard has escalatory potential. The risk of conflict is considerable due to accident or miscalculation.

In his paper Ambassador Manoj Bharti has dwelt mainly on India's and Indonesia's outlooks on the maritime issues and the Indo-Pacific. He finds that since 2011 'protecting Indonesia's sovereign waters or archipelagic waters' has been the main aspect of Indonesia's foreign policy termed the Global Maritime Fulcrum. Even as Indonesia is disturbed by China's posturing in the South China Sea, it criticises the international initiative such as Quad without the inclusion of Indonesia. However, both India and Indonesia have a shared vision in the Indo-Pacific narrative. They believe in expanding maritime security and cooperation, achieving economic integration, trade connectivity and people-to-people ties. With regard to the future challenges the author thinks that India needs to project itself as a benevolent companion on the path

of collective economic growth with ASEAN rather than a competing power.

Prof. Vibhanshu Shekhar believes that in view of rising great power rivalries in the Indo-Pacific, strategic initiatives and diplomatic negotiations for cooperation are growing and India-ASEAN are no exception to it. India's policy however reflects its own strategic logic and interests. India wished to be part of economic dynamism in the Asia-Pacific. India continues to support ASEAN centrality and ensures that its Quad membership does not undermine interests of ASEAN countries. He notes new frontiers of Indian diplomacy in ASEAN such as Cyber dialogue (in the light of rapid digitisation in both) as well as development-Driven cooperation in Science and Technology. According to him, its maritime image gives a politico-diplomatic assurance. He finds that India's strategic overtures to ASEAN are not as a result of U.S-China rivalry or alignment with the U.S but India's own compulsions and conviction as a major power. India also leverages the non-ASEAN platforms to support ASEAN's development agenda.

In his article Prof. Pankaj Jha thinks that upgradation of India-ASEAN ties to comprehensive strategic partnership should help in realising the potential in science and technology areas thereby promoting India's 'Make in India' initiative. He observes that in recent years, India's approach to ASEAN was regarded to be lukewarm as compared to more interaction it had with QUAD + countries and India may therefore need to take a more comprehensive approach. With India's plans to upgrade its Andaman and Nicobar command, it would need to develop better understanding from ASEAN for protecting its sea-based assets in order to counter China's aggressive designs. He further suggests that India should aspire to build a consensus with ASEAN on emerging issues related to maritime security, cargo insurance and safety of the sea lanes. With regard to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, he believes that the Outlook is aimed at enhancing ASEAN's community-building while it would amplify the role undertaken by various ASEAN-centred mechanisms for the future regional and global order. Dr. Jha thinks that the Outlook places Indo-Pacific as an extension of the existing mechanisms which are working under the ASEAN rubric and the challenge for ASEAN, is to maintain its centrality despite the headwinds related to Indo-Pacific architecture.

In his article 'The Arctic Routes and the Indian Ocean' Vice-Admiral A.K. Chawla believes that the warming of the Arctic waters has prompted speculation that a shorter and faster route between Europe and Asia might reduce the importance of the Indian Ocean as the 'key to the seven seas.' He

(iv) *Sudhir T. Devare*

goes on to describe the Arctic Sea Routes as the Northern Sea Route (NSR), the Northwest Passage (NWP), the Transpolar Sea Route (TSR) and the Arctic Bridge Route.

Prof. Dr. Anshu Joshi writes in her paper ‘India and ASEAN: Perspectives and Opportunities’, that the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region and the Indo-Pacific remains cumulative between India and ASEAN. IOR is a hub of competition among various nations holding different national interests. According to her, the U.S considers India as its regional representative in IOR. The author also mentions some of the developments in the Indo-Pacific region such as the recently held IOR Forum in China, the approval in Japan for a major plan to focus on maritime security and the strategic challenges concerning Maldives. Dr. Joshi finds that today India and ASEAN have 30 dialogue mechanisms and contribute to ensuring safe, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific and influence-free IOR.

In his paper on India’s Engagement with Asia Group Captain (Retd) Dr. D.K. Pandey calls India’s relationship with ASEAN as a strategic alliance to foster peace, stability and economic success in the Indo-Pacific. Referring to the ASEAN-India Joint Statement at the 18th ASEAN-India Summit he finds that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiatives (IPOI) have common values. How to execute AOIP with particular emphasis on maritime cooperation, connectivity and SDGs, and potential areas of economic cooperation is the main challenge. The author regards India’s conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific to be fundamentally built upon the central role of ASEAN and its shared commitment to achieve collective advancement. Both, according to him, are upholding a system of international governance based on established regulations, maritime passage and regional stability. He believes that India’s collaboration with ASEAN is not oriented towards containment or confrontation with China. But it is to foster a comprehensive and rule-based Indo-Pacific region.

Prof. Dr. Akhilesh Prabhakar in his comprehensive survey of India-ASEAN relations has shared data about ASEAN’s economy, investment flows to and from India, trade figures etc. He has listed 12 points agreed at the above mentioned Jakarta summits. In discussing economic cooperation, Dr. Prabhakar has provided data about India’s trade with individual countries and refers to, in detail, about high-level of investments from and to Singapore. The author lists a long list of 25 recommendations covering a wide range including connectivity, economic integration, educational exchanges, renewable

energy etc to create an integrated, resilient and prosperous future for both India and ASEAN.

We have also published the Review of Japanese scholar Shiraishi Takashi's book titled 'Maritime Asia Vs Continental Asia: National Strategies in a Region of Change' done by Prof. Neeta Khandpekar. The book discusses internal political influences in regional politics within maritime and continental Asia. In the four sections, it highlights the long term trends in Asia, the geopolitical framework covering the rise of China, the domestic structures and strategic thinking in the Asian region and Japan's place in it. Dr. Khandpekar finds that the book is articulate, and lucid and sheds light on current affairs in the region from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and beyond.

India-ASEAN relations are today on the trajectory of sustained growth and improved understanding. They however need to be maintained and strengthened further given the geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific being highly volatile and uncertain. They can in turn play a useful role in providing stability to the region.

Sudhir T. Devare
Editor-in-Chief

28th December, 2023

India and ASEAN Share Perspectives on the Indo-Pacific

*Gurjit Singh

On the eve of the high-profile G20 Summit in New Delhi in September, PM Modi made a deeply appreciated visit to Jakarta on 7th September 2023. This was for the 20th India- ASEAN annual summit and the East Asia Summit.

The fact that PM Modi made this effort at such a busy time to yet visit Indonesia was because Indonesia, in particular and ASEAN in general, are extremely important partners in the Indo-Pacific whose rising importance is now the flavour of the regional order.

Another significant aspect is that as the Indo-Pacific concept evolved, ASEAN -India engagement on maritime security has gained prominence. It is recalled that between 2012 and 2017, which was the peak period of Chinese aggressive intent in the South China Sea, ASEAN was flustered. Their code of conduct negotiations had ground to a halt. China was taking over islets, shoals and parts of ASEAN countries EEZ at will.

From 2018 onwards, ASEAN became more coherent in its response and any misgivings that it had in engaging India evaporated. All the ASEAN leaders joined Prime Minister Modi for the 25th anniversary commemoration of India ASEAN dialogue partnership and as chief guests at Republic Day 2018. Their retreat focused on maritime security. This was the first time that India and ASEAN at Summit level had really looked at this.

Thereafter, Prime Minister Modi laid out India's Indo-Pacific policy at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018. In 2019, ASEAN announced its own Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. By 2021, India and ASEAN had signed

**Amb. Gurjit Singh, a seasoned diplomat, has served as the Ambassador of India to Ethiopia, ASEAN and Indonesia before retiring as the Ambassador of India to Germany. Ambassador Singh is a prolific writer on international affairs and has a well-received book on Africa titled to his credit.*

a common statement of intent on how the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) would develop cooperation with India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) which was announced in 2019 at the EAS.

Since then, the AOIP-IPOI engagement has become the cornerstone of India ASEAN policy on the Indo-Pacific.

At the India-ASEAN summit in September 2023 a further India ASEAN joint statement on maritime cooperation ensued.¹ In paragraph four of the Chairman's statement of the 20th India-ASEAN Summit² it is noted thus:

'We appreciated India's long-standing partnership with ASEAN for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and its strong commitment to upholding ASEAN Centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms and fora. We welcomed opportunities to promote practical cooperation with India in the key priority areas identified in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) within ASEAN-led mechanisms, namely, maritime cooperation, connectivity, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 and economic and other possible priority areas of cooperation in line with the objectives and principles of the AOIP. Towards this end, we welcomed India's support and active contribution to the ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Forum: Implementation of the AOIP held in Jakarta, 5th-6th September 2023. We also encouraged ASEAN and India to exert concrete efforts to materialise the implementation of the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability and Prosperity in the Region, which is based on the shared principles between AOIP and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). We also welcomed the adoption of the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation as a means to explore and promote maritime cooperation between ASEAN and India.'

Why and how do ASEAN and India coordinate their Indo-Pacific policies? The main reason is that both the AOIP and the IPOI share relevant basic principles of promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the region. They

¹ ASEAN-INDIA JOINT STATEMENT ON MARITIME COOPERATION, MEA, 7 September 2023 https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/ASEAN-India-Joint-Statement-on-Maritime-Cooperatio_230907_160027.pdf

² CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT OF THE 20TH ASEAN-INDIA SUMMIT, ASEAN, 7 September 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-20th-ASEAN-India-Summit.pdf>

recognize the importance of the Indian Ocean and its associated seas as important factors in driving growth and prosperity. They realize that there is a need to address emerging maritime issues many of which are non-traditional threats. Human trafficking, drugs and weapons smuggling, terrorism, piracy IUU fishing, marine pollution all require regional cooperation

The AOIP-IPOI Emergence and Cohesion

India and ASEAN commemorated 30 years of dialogue partnership in 2022. Theory raised this to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP).³ This envisaged to 'Explore concrete activities to implement the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region through enhanced cooperation between the AOIP and the IPOI, with a focus on maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and other possible areas of cooperation.' These were quite deeply embedded in the region as mentioned in Paragraph 23 of the CSP statement: Explore potential synergies with sub-regional frameworks, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), Singapore-Johor-Riau (SIJORI) Growth Triangle, Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia- Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), and Mekong sub-regional cooperation frameworks, including Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Ayeyawady Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), and to support ASEAN and India's efforts in promoting equitable development by aligning sub-regional growth with the comprehensive, mutual growth and development of ASEAN and India.

However, the region is more strategically sensitive than ever before.

The Indo-Pacific is the dominant aspect of strategic thinking and focus globally. Besides the countries of the region, there is interest from the USA, Europe and China. Many countries announced Indo-Pacific policies, even those far from the region like Canada or Lithuania. If these were functionally cooperative efforts, the region would certainly benefit. However, since the Indo-Pacific is a strategic concept, evolving from the more economically-

³ Joint Statement on ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, ASEAN, 13 November 2022, <https://asean.org/joint-statement-on-asean-india-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

inclined Asia-Pacific concept, the strategic heft into regional thinking is greater. The Asia-Pacific concept brought together post-Vietnam War cohesion in the region. The Indo-Pacific concept is born from Chinese assertiveness in the region, facilitated by American absence for some years. Thus, contention and confrontation mark the evolution of the Indo-Pacific. Its emergence and of the Quad thereafter manifested several conflict zones which instigated a strategic rethinking and the Indo-Pacific concept for wider partnerships to confront new rivalries.

While some of these are perhaps the focus of Indo-Pacific strategic intent, some others are persistent problems of the region which go on despite changes in strategic concepts. Between 1995 and 1999, communist countries that opposed the US in the Vietnam War, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam (CLV), were integrated into ASEAN. This led to their inclusion in ASEAN- centric bodies like the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, the ADMM plus and the extended ASEAN maritime forum (EAMF). Some of these institutions are directly linked to managing conflict, preventive diplomacy and confidence building measures to which the CLV now contributed. Chinese aggression in the South China Sea (SCS) upset some of these efforts. ASEAN was always apprehensive of Chinese actions. Since 2002, it pursued a Code of Conduct (COC) but has to survive on the declaration regarding the COC of 2002. In 2022, when China and ASEAN marked the 30th anniversary, it was also the 20th anniversary of the start of discussions around the COC. To date, the COC has not been concluded.⁴

The evolution of India's Act East Policy

India's sectoral dialogue partnership started with ASEAN in 1992, soon after India announced its Look East Policy (LEP). The LEP was a consequence of India's economic liberalization and an economic construct. In 1996, India's partnership was raised to a Dialogue Partnership. In 2002 it was enhanced to the summit level. In 2005, ASEAN was instrumental in bringing India into the East Asia Summit, a major ASEAN- centric institution.

⁴ Gurjit Singh: Indo-Pacific: Unravelling Strategic Rivalries and Regional Challenges, DefStrat, Vol 17 Issue 3 Jul – Aug 2023, p27, https://www.defstrat.com/magazine_articles/indo-pacific-unravelling-strategic-rivalries-and-regional-challenges/

India and ASEAN marked their 20th anniversary with a Strategic Partnership in 2012. The 25th anniversary summit was held in January 2018. The 10 ASEAN leaders were chief guests at the Republic Day celebrations.

The LEP transitioned to the Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014. It sought a deeper and diversified economic and related cooperation. It enhanced cooperation in varied sectors. In 2015, ASEAN created three communities through which it organized its development and relationship with its partners. These were the Political-security community, the Economic community and the Socio-cultural community.

India's ASEAN partnership is mainly economic; the socio-cultural aspects were largely privately pursued or some fledgling efforts under the plans of action. It was believed that the strategic aspect of the relationship required greater attention. This embraces traditional and non-traditional security challenges including HADR, security cooperation and freedom of navigation as the key areas for maritime cooperation. These were discussed at the Delhi Dialogue X in July 2018.⁵ 'Its theme was Strengthening ASEAN-India Maritime Cooperation.' This was a month after PM Modi articulated India's Indo-Pacific policy at the Shangri-La Dialogue.⁶

ASEAN remain anxious about its relationship with China, particularly in the South China Sea. There is little progress on the code of conduct, being negotiated since 2002. China grabbed and consolidated its hold over its 'claims' under the nine-dash line over islets and waters of five ASEAN countries. In view of this, India-ASEAN maritime cooperation became dependant on how apprehensive ASEAN would be about China. By 2018 this manner of engaging India based on what China would think was perhaps overcome.

The Emergence of the AOIP and IPOI

Meanwhile, the Indo-Pacific concept emerged more clearly. PM Modi

⁵ Remarks by External Affairs Minister at Delhi Dialogue X, MEA, July 19, 2018, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30138/Re-marks_by_External_Affairs_Minister_at_Delhi_Dialogue_X_July_19_2018

⁶ Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue, MEA, 1 June 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>

enunciated India's policy at the Shangri-La dialogue in 2018. Japan, Australia and the US announced their policies too. In 2019, despite Chinese aversion, ASEAN announced an ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).⁷

This was a significant landmark. At the 14th East Asia Summit in Bangkok, in November 2019, India announced its Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)⁸ emphasising the need to work together to seek common solutions while following a rule based international order. The IPOI sought a safe, secure and stable maritime domain in the region. Partnerships among willing countries to enhance maritime security, sustainability of marine resources, disaster prevention and management were sought. IPOI synchronised with priority areas in AOIP, and the EAS statement for a Partnership on Sustainability.

At the 18th ASEAN-India Summit on 28th October 2021 the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region was enunciated.⁹

This amalgamated some mutual preferences. The Indo-Pacific concept is strategic in conception; the AOIP and joint statement are decidedly functional. They focus on peace and stability for attaining prosperity. There is an intent to support ASEAN community building process through development cooperation; it aims to grasp opportunities emanating from current and future regional and global events though since then these are more challenging. The avenues of cooperation among the AOIP and the IPOI include the four priority areas of the AoIP, namely maritime cooperation, connectivity, the SDGs and economic and related cooperation. The SDGs and the non-strategic maritime cooperation are within the socio-cultural cooperation pillar while the economic and connectivity aspects are across sectors.

⁷ ASEAN OUTLOOK ON THE INDO-PACIFIC, ASEAN, 23 June 2019, https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf

⁸ Prime Minister's Speech at the East Asia Summit, MEA, 4 November 2019, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32171/Prime_Ministers_Speech_at_the_East_Asia_Summit_04_November_2019

⁹ ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region, ASEAN, 28 October 2021, <https://asean.org/asean-india-joint-statement-on-cooperation-on-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific-for-peace-stability-and-prosperity-in-the-region/>

Areas of Cooperation

There are 21 detailed activities agreed upon under paragraph four of the Joint Statement. Among them merely one is security related: 4.21 referring to ‘maritime security, efforts to counter piracy and armed robbery against ships, maritime safety and search and rescue (SAR) operations’ The other 20 aspects are all within socio-cultural or economic pillars of collaboration.

‘Narrowing the development gaps and capacity building development of social infrastructure including public health vaccine and pharmaceutical research and cooperation among universities than research agencies in the health sector are important aspects. ‘Narrowing the development gaps’ refers to ASEANs internal balancing between its original five and the last four members, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (the CLMV) which are at a lower level of development and LDCs. With the admission of Timor-Leste as the 11th member soon this aspect will be accentuated. India has always been a determined partners in ‘Narrowing the development gaps.

Human capital development through technical and vocational education; People to People connectivity through education, women empowerment, youth, tourism media, think tanks and local governments are all key priority areas. Science, technology, smart and green infrastructure, sustainable cities and engaging with the ASEAN Smart Cities Network emerge from this cooperative document. Renewable energy, reducing carbon imprint, bio-circular green development, environment protection, waste management, marine debris management and the like are specifically mentioned areas of collaboration.

Cooperative ventures on maritime education, research, development, innovation and pilot projects are introduced through this delineating. Supporting the ASEAN Centre for biodiversity through regional capacity building efforts and measures for climate change adaptation and mitigation as well as disaster risk reduction and management including through cooperation with relevant ASEAN centres all find specific inclusion.

While the joint statement is intended as a strategic one, in actuality, it is functional, focusing on aspects of the socio-cultural cooperation even more than in economic cooperation. Most of these are covered under the India

ASEAN Plan Of Action 2021–2025.¹⁰ Since no financing mechanism is mentioned in the document the POA funds will be utilized.

The enunciation of the AOIP was important from the point of view of ASEAN because it took the ASEAN-centric Asia Pacific concept to a wider concept across the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN placed itself within the new strategic construct of the Indo-Pacific, but hedged it with large dosage of functionality to make it tenable for ASEANs inherent nature. In fact, while talking about its AOIP in June 2019, ASEAN emphasised that the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions were economically vibrant and experiencing geopolitical and geostrategic dynamism. The AOIP grasps at opportunities since mostly the challenges were beyond the ability of ASEAN to contend with.

ASEAN intent is to prevent a lack of trust leading to miscalculations and to induce Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) while at the same time working to improve the life of the people in the region. The IPOI in turn relooks at the Indo-Pacific to create a functionality and confidence building for a rule based maritime order. The IPOI supports an open inclusive, resilient, prosperous Indo-Pacific; it seeks to build practical cooperation including with Quad partners like Australia, Japan and the US besides with ASEAN.

Through IPOI, bilateral objectives with a variety of partners are converted into chosen pillars of cooperation within the defined parameters. The Australia India Joint Declaration on a shared vision for maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,¹¹ is a part of the Australia India comprehensive strategic partnership of June 2020. It augments IPOI. The IPOI is aligned with bilateral preference among various partners and includes cooperation that both Australia and India have with ASEAN and its member states under the AOIP. These commonalities are also very well captured in the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on cooperation on AOIP which now acts as a beacon to guide our engagement in the region.

¹⁰ PLAN OF ACTION TO IMPLEMENT THE ASEAN-INDIA PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE, PROGRESS AND SHARED PROSPERITY (2021–2025), ASIAN, <https://www.indmissionasean.gov.in/pages/NDg>

¹¹ Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Between the Republic of India and the Government of Australia, DFAT, Australia, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/india/joint-declaration-shared-vision-maritime-cooperation-indo-pacific-between-republic-india-and-government-australia>

It is noted that the elucidation of the AOIP at the EAS in November 2019 followed the AOIP and sought closer engagement between India and its partners in the region to protect the oceans and seas, improve maritime security, defend marine resources, and capacity building. HADR, R & D, academic cooperation and mutually beneficial trade and the like, were important aspects. The IPOI has seven pillars.¹² Capacity Building and Resource Sharing;

Disaster Risk Reduction and Management; Maritime Ecology; Maritime Resources; Maritime Security; Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation; and Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport. To cooperate on any of these pillars of IPOI India identified partners for each of the IPOI pillars to generate ideas and develop studies. These include NCCR/INCOIS for Marine Ecology, NMF and ICWA for Marine Security, FSI, Mumbai and NIOT Chennai for Marine Resources, NIO Goa, INCOIS Hyderabad, ICWA for Capacity Building and Resources Sharing, NDMA for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management, FSI, Mumbai, IOM, Chennai, NIO Goa, and INCOIS Hyderabad for Science, Technology and Cooperation, RIS for Trade, connectivity and Transport.

These pillars are not specifically mentioned but are covered among the 21 paragraphs which are written from the ASEAN contextual framework. The IPOI needs each partner countries to engage selected pillars. India is the lead in Disaster Risk Reduction and Maritime Security pillar of the IPOI. Australia is the lead partner on the maritime ecology pillar. In 2020, Japan agreed to lead the connectivity pillar. France and Indonesia lead the Maritime Resource Pillar. Singapore is associated with the academic and S & T pillar. Philippines and Vietnam are potential affiliates. The partners are expected to plant seed funding into their activities and if this should expand, then the plans will fructify.

IPOI is a regional partnership effort to focus cooperation, and it can link with existing regional mechanisms and institutions, including those with ASEAN through AOIP, the IORA and the Pacific Islands Forum besides BIMSTEC. It requires an ASEAN + approach. ASEAN and India agree on AOIP-IPOI cooperation. India will implement some of the AOIP objectives as part of its ASEAN partnership. For IPOI Indian partners could link with individual ASEAN members.

¹² Australia-India Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative Partnership, Australia HC India, <https://india.highcommission.gov.au/ndli/AIIP1.html>

Conclusion

ASEAN has been astute enough to grasp that the time of the Indo-Pacific construct had come and if ASEAN did not engage with it, it would simply bypass ASEAN. The enunciation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific allowed ASEAN to come up to speed with the fast-moving developments on the Indo-Pacific. Though the AOIP is not a strategic or military doctrine, it lays down the parameters on how ASEAN will engage with the Indo-Pacific.

In this India has resonated well and brought its Act East Policy, the IPOI and the SAGAR to bear upon cooperation with ASEAN through its preferred AOIP parameters. At governmental level therefore, India and ASEAN have juxtaposed their Indo-Pacific policies well, and created a matrix of cooperation. This cooperation is a reorientation of existing India ASEAN cooperation, but new elements are being added, like the annex to the POA in 2023, which adds newer and modern dimensions to cooperation.

Since the 30th anniversary of dialogue partnership in 2022, India and ASEAN have held their first Defence Ministers Meeting and the first ever India ASEAN maritime exercise. Therefore, many things which India does with ASEAN member states are now being done at the ASEAN level. Conversely, whatever India and ASEAN have jointly decided, can move faster if carried out with individual ASEAN member states than await full consensus and everybody is moving forward at the same time. ASEAN is cognisant and appreciative that India does not seek to draw ASEAN into criticism of China in any way. ASEAN believes in its own capability to deal with China. This reassurance that collaborating with India is not an anti-China position encourages ASEAN responsiveness to collaboration with India on the Indo-Pacific.

This seems to be the way to go ahead. India and ASEAN have a coherent matrix of cooperation and understanding on the Indo-Pacific. Specific areas of cooperation always depend on individual country preferences and capabilities. In this, India will remain connected with ASEAN using the Indo-Pacific not as a dividing line, but as another opportunity to connect, collaborate and cooperate for a shared future and prosperity.



China-Philippines Spat Over South China Sea: Implications for the Region

*Rajaram Panda

Introduction

There are serious fault-lines in the Indo-Pacific region that threaten the existing power equilibrium and since this adversely impacts trade and commerce amongst many maritime nations, this has kept many stakeholders engaged so that peace and stability in the region are not disturbed. In this respect, maritime security is extremely important as disputes relating to maritime matter across the vast South China Sea have ratcheted up in recent years as an increasingly assertive China militarises disputed islands and confronts regional rivals over their competing claims in the strategically important and resource-rich waterway.

Importance of South China Sea

This strategic water body is bracketed by China and several Southeast Asian nations. It is a place where a number of great powers and regional players contend for influence. This water body has emerged as one of the most potentially explosive regions in the world today. What can be done to reduce the possibility of conflict, solve the outstanding territorial problems and harness the potential of the sea to promote regional development, environmental sustainability and security are critical issues to be addressed. Multiple governments make claim to parts of the vital economic passage, especially areas that fall within their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) while Beijing asserts ownership over almost the entire waterway in defiance of an international court ruling.

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Over the past two decades, China has occupied a number of obscure reefs and atolls far from its shoreline across the South China Sea, building up military installations, including runways and ports. Competing claimants, such as the Philippines, say such actions infringe on their sovereignty and violate maritime law. The US that upholds global laws and pleads for a rules-based international order regularly sends its Navy destroyers on freedom of navigation operations close to contested islands, leading to fears that the South China Sea could become a flashpoint between the two superpowers.

Importance of South China Sea, competing claims and tribunal ruling of 2016

The 1.3-million-square-mile waterway is vital to international trade, with an estimated two-third of global shipping worth trillions of dollars passing through each year. It is also home to vast fertile fishing grounds upon which many lives and livelihoods depend. Much of its economic value remains untapped, however.

According to the US Energy Information Agency, the waterway holds at least 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil. Who controls those resources and how they are exploited could have a huge impact on the environment. The South China Sea is home to hundreds of largely uninhabited islands and coral atolls and diverse wildlife at risk from climate change and marine pollution.

Beijing claims “indisputable sovereignty” over almost all of the South China Sea, and most of the islands and sandbars within it, including many features that are hundreds of miles from mainland China. The Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and Taiwan also hold competing claims.

In a landmark maritime dispute, an international tribunal in The Hague to which Philippines had approached contesting China’s claims, gave its ruling in July 2016 and concluded that China has no legal basis to claim historic rights to the bulk of the South China Sea.¹ It marked the first time an international court ruled on the region’s mess of overlapping claims. Chinese President Xi Jinping rejected the decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, saying

¹ Katie Hunt, “South China Sea: Court rules in favor of Philippines over China”, 12 July 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/12/asia/china-philippines-south-china-sea/index.html>

categorically that China will never accept any claim or action based on the awards. China also boycotted the proceedings. China was aware that while the ruling of the Tribunal was regarded as legally binding, there was no mechanism to enforce it. Therefore, it kept its interests on the resource-rich hot spot, which sees \$5 trillion worth of ship-borne trade pass through each year. As expected, Chinese reaction has left lasting implications to the region where claimants are having frequent spats over issues of intrusion, water canon-firings, etc.

The Tribunal concluded that China does not have the right to resources within its “nine-dash line,” which extends hundreds of miles to the south and east of its island province of Hainan and covers some 90% of the disputed waters. As the Wolf warrior, China’s Ambassador to the US, Cui Tiankai, accused the Tribunal of “professional incompetence” and “questionable integrity.” He also accused the US of engaging in military exercises that constituted “military coercion.” In return the US reminded China that the US and the world expect China to commit to non-militarization.

Since the ruling, China has become more belligerent. As a result, tensions have escalated. The US with global interests has been at odds with China over trade issues and also over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. It has urged all parties “to avoid provocative statements and actions.” Such counsel has no effect on China and its expansionist approach continues.

No doubt Philippines rejoiced with the victory but other claimants over large areas of the sea also felt emboldened. Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia have also taken exception to China’s growing presence in the region. The lawyers who led the Philippines’ legal team issued a statement arguing that if China’s nine-dash line is invalid as to the Philippines, it is equally invalid to those States and, indeed, the rest of the international community. Vietnam, which like China claims the Paracel and Spratly islands, strongly supported the ruling. The Spratlys, in particular, are heavily contested, with China, Taiwan and Vietnam claiming all of them, and parts claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. While supporting the ruling, Vietnam argued that all disputes should be resolved by peaceful means, including diplomatic and legal processes and refraining from the use or threats to use force and in accordance with international law. Japan, a key US ally and China’s neighbour, issued a statement saying it “strongly expects that the parties’ compliance with this ruling will

eventually lead to the peaceful settlement of disputes in the South China Sea.”

US Role

As said, the US, with its global interests, is a major player in the region and is also security partner with some of the Asian countries. Citing international law and freedom of movement and to maintain maritime order, it has sent warships and military aircraft around the South China Sea. By conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea, the US defends every nation’s right to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows. It says the waters are crucial to its national interest of guaranteeing freedom of the seas worldwide. China’s response to this has been harsh and it accuses the US of escalating tensions and denounces such operations as illegal.

Though the US takes no position on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, it called for an immediate end to land reclamation. Even the former US President Barack Obama during his visit to Vietnam in May 2016 urged peaceful resolution of the dispute and said that big nations should not bully small ones.² Unfortunately, the US is not among the 180 countries that have ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, thereby undermining its clout on this issue.

Among the key findings of the ruling are that the EEZ of the claimant countries give these countries maritime rights to resources such as fish, oil and gas within 200 nautical miles of that land mass. It deemed they were rocks or low-tide elevations such as reefs, rather than islands. Because China had no rights to the area as an EEZ, the Tribunal found that some of its activities in the region were in breach of the Philippines’ sovereign rights. The ruling said, China had violated those rights by interfering in fishing and oil exploration, constructing artificial islands and failing to stop Chinese fishermen from fishing on the zone. The panel also found China had caused “severe harm” to coral around the site of its artificial islands and “violated its obligation to preserve and protect fragile ecosystems.” The Tribunal was dismayed that Chinese fisherman had killed endangered sea turtles and giant clams “on a

² Oliver Holmes, “Obama Backs Vietnam in South China Sea Dispute with Beijing”, *The Guardian*, 24 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/24/obama-backs-vietnam-in-south-china-sea-dispute-with-beijing>

substantial scale” with the full knowledge of China.

Escalation of China-Philippines Spat

Both the Philippines and China have long been at odds over Beijing’s claims of sovereignty over large swaths of the South China Sea. Tensions between the two escalated after Manila took its fight to The Hague court in 2013. Having rejected the ruling when it came in July 2016, China reclaimed land in massive dredging operations, turning sandbars into islands equipped with airfields, ports and lighthouses. Despite strong ruling against China, the decision offered no clues to what happens next.

The Tribunal lacked the jurisdiction to consider the implications of a stand-off between the Chinese and Philippines military, especially at Second Thomas Shoal, and said any resolution of the dispute was “excluded from compulsory Settlement.” The Tribunal did not order China to take any particular step to remedy the situation, dismantle construction on the islands or provide reparations to the Philippines. The Chinese government issued a statement saying that it was ready to resolve relevant disputes peacefully through negotiations “on the basis of respecting historical facts.”

What it implied was that the historical facts as understood by China were non-negotiable and it remained unclear on what the Philippines would negotiate. By implications, China probably meant that other nations making claims can join China to jointly develop the relevant maritime areas to achieve win-win results. What China wanted was full compliance to its terms and the claimants abrogate their own rights.

After ignoring the ruling, Beijing continued to send its maritime militia to Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal in the Philippines EEZ. In the southern portion of the sea is the Spratly Island chain which Beijing calls the Nansha islands. The archipelago consists of 100 islets and reefs of which 45 are occupied by China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam or the Philippines. The north-western part of the sea, known as the Xisha islands in China, has been controlled by Beijing since 1974 despite claims from Vietnam and Taiwan. China also claims the self-governing Taiwan as its own territory, despite having never controlled it, and threatens to use force to integrate with the mainland.

With the long-term intention to impose its exclusive domination over the entire South China Sea, Xi Jinping has launched a massive program of naval build-up and already built the world's largest naval fleet, with more than 340 warships. Until recently, it has been regarded as a green-water navy, operating mostly near the country's shores. Actually, China's shipbuilding reveals blue-water ambitions. It has also launched large guided-missile destroyers, amphibious assault ships and aircraft carriers with ability to operate in the open sea and project power thousands of miles from its shores. In addition, China controls a maritime militia that is hundreds of vessels strong and acts as an unofficial – and officially deniable – force that Beijing uses to push its territorial claims both in the South China Sea and beyond.

Most of Beijing's military build-up is concentrated along the Spratly and Paracel island chains, where sustained land reclamation saw reefs being destroyed first and then built on. China's strategy has often been its vessels to first encircle various atolls and islets, and then send dredgers to build artificial islands large enough to harbor tankers and warships. Over the past decade, China has added more than 3,200 acres of land to its seven occupied outposts in the Spratly Islands, which now feature airfields, berthing areas, and re-supply facilities to support persistent China's military and paramilitary presence in the region.

When Philippines approached The Hague court for adjudication in 2013, China speeded up military construction in 2014 and quietly began massive dredging operations on seven reefs in the Spratlys. According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Beijing has constructed military bases on Subi Reef, Johnson Reef, Mischief Reef and Fiery Cross Reef, fortifying its claims on the chain. Automatic Identification System (AIS) data on Chinese surveys from 2020 and 2021 demonstrates that China's survey activities span the entire South China Sea and regularly occur in the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of its Southeast Asian neighbours.³ Those facilities are now bristling with some of China's most advanced weaponry, including stealth fighters.

³ "What lies beneath: Chinese Surveys in South China Sea", 1 March 2022, <https://amti.csis.org/what-lies-beneath-chinese-surveys-in-the-south-china-sea/#:~:text=Automatic%20identification%20system%20%28AIS%29%20data%20on%20Chinese%20s>

Indeed, since early 2018, China steadily equipped its Spratly Island outposts — including Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross — with an increasing array of military capabilities, including advanced anti-ship cruise missiles, long-range surface-to-air missile systems, J-20 stealth fighter jets, laser and jamming equipment, and military radar and signals intelligence capabilities. In 2014, China installed exploratory oil rigs, which sparked anti-China riots in Vietnam, a competing claimant. More recently, cruise ships have taken Chinese tourists to the militarized reefs.

Recent Tensions

After Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr. became President of the Philippines in 2022, he chose to take assertive steps to protect his country’s claim to shoals in the South China Sea, more than his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte. This soon led to several confrontations with Chinese vessels in waters off the Philippine islands. The standoffs started between Chinese coast guard militia boats and tiny wooden Philippine fishing vessels. Chinese coast guard vessels used water cannons and blocked the resupply of shipwrecked Philippine military outpost. When a lone Filipino diver used a knife to sever a massive floating Chinese barrier, China was enraged. The Chinese actions suggested that China has become increasingly aggressive and confident in its actions against smaller countries like the Philippines, which can be cajoled easily.

While Philippine Coast Guard remains committed to upholding international law, safeguarding the welfare of Filipino fishermen and protecting their rights in the Philippines territorial waters, China defends the behaviour of its vessels in the waterway as it is committed to safeguard its territorial sovereignty.

Global Implications

Since, the South China Sea is widely seen as a potential flashpoint for global conflict, the recent confrontations between Manila and Beijing have global implications as the incident threatens potentially to develop into an international conflict. Such a possibility can actually happen if China decides to act more forcefully against the Philippines, a US treaty ally.

Washington and Manila are bound by a mutual defence treaty signed in 1951 that remains in force, stipulating that both sides would help defend each other if either were attacked by a third party. Marcos Jr. has strengthened

relations with the US that had frayed under his predecessor. When the US and the Philippines held their largest military exercise in April 2023, China warned that US-Philippine military cooperation “must not interfere in South China Sea disputes.” The US, however, has condemned China’s recent actions in the contested sea and threatened to intervene under its mutual defence treaty obligations if Philippine vessels came under armed attack there. With Marcos Jr. committed to stand up to Chinese bullying and coercion, a regional conflict looks real.

The situation is turning ugly day by day as either side is not prepared to back out. In the latest series of maritime confrontations, both traded accusations over a collision in disputed waters of the South China Sea as Chinese vessels blocked a Philippine boat supplying forces there on 22nd October 2023. The Philippines has been sending supplies to troops stationed on a rusted World War II-era transport ship used as an outpost on the shoal, prompting China’s coast guard to repeatedly deploy vessels to block the resupply missions. Manila’s Task Force for the West Philippine Sea said in a statement that China’s “dangerous, irresponsible and illegal actions” were “in violation of Philippine sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction.” It further remarked that by its “provocative, irresponsible, and illegal action”, the Chinese coast guard vessel “imperilled the safety of the crew” of the Philippine boat. China’s coast guard retaliated saying the Philippine vessel had ignored repeated warnings, crossed the bow of the Chinese ship and “deliberately provoked trouble” causing the collision.

After the collision, Manila summoned Beijing’s ambassador to protest the Chinese coast guard’s “illegal and dangerous” behaviour that resulted in the collisions in the highly disputed South China Sea.⁴ The act by the Chinese coast guard provoked condemnation by the US, which has a mutual defence pact with the Philippines. The risk of miscalculation rose as a result. The site near Second Thomas Shoal is a particular flashpoint. The Philippines have repeatedly accused China of trying to block its re-supply missions. Undeterred, China accused the Philippines’ boat of “deliberately” stirring up trouble by reversing in a “premeditated manner” into a Chinese fishing vessel. Though

⁴ Rebecca Ratcliffe, “The Philippines summons Chinese ambassador after two South China Sea collisions”, *The Guardian*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/23/china-philippines-ships-boats-collision-south-china-sea-vessels-spratly-islands>

no Filipino personnel were harmed, the Philippines accused China for escalation as Chinese coast guard boats have no business to be in the West Philippine Sea. If the Chinese do not stop its dangerous behaviour as it eyes on the significant reserves of oil and natural gas in the strategically located water body, which is also one of the world's busiest trading routes, such escalation could bring the US, a Philippine ally, into confrontation with its rival, China.

Beijing must not overlook the fact that the US has reaffirmed its mutual defence treaty with Manila "extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, and aircraft, including those of its Coast Guard, anywhere in the South China Sea" and therefore desist from making the situation messier. Several other Western countries also raised concerns. While the EU ambassador to the Philippines termed the collision as "dangerous and very disturbing", Canada's embassy called China's actions "unjustified" and expressed concern that China's "continuing acts of intimidation and coercion undermine safety, stability, and security across the region, and increase the risk of miscalculation." Besides the US, EU and Canada, Japan and Australia too voiced support for the Philippines and concern over China's actions.

Indeed, Chinese acts have created an explosive situation with significant escalatory potential involving two superpowers.⁵ The issue is further complicated as China and Russia are drawn together in the wake of the Ukraine conflict. Both had joint drills in August off the coast of Alaska and expanding military coordination. This development adds to the heightening of tensions further. Indeed, Beijing's risky behaviour in the region has the potential to draw the two powers into conflict even without intending to do so. China's mission to expand its control in the South China Sea is based on a warped historical narrative that bears little relation to the evidence.⁶

The Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea are often cited as potential flashpoints but recent developments suggest that the spark for conflict could

⁵ Helen Davidson, "China-Philippine dispute could escalate into superpower conflict, say analysts", *The Guardian*, 8 August 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/08/china-philippines-dispute-could-escalate-into-superpower-conflict-say-analysts>

⁶ Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (2014), Yale University Press, pp. 294

be lit in the South China Sea, most likely over an accident or miscalculation.⁷ As mentioned earlier, the 3.4 million square kilometre South China Sea hosts several of the world's most critical sea lines of communication and is home to states that depend on them for their livelihood, including Japan and South Korea. And, since a third of global shipping — worth trillions of dollars — including food, manufactured products and energy supplies, moves through the waterway each year, a major crisis in this area would not only affect North and Southeast Asia, but also the global economy. China too shall be affected as its economic security is closely tied to this resource-rich waterway, as it conducts over 60 % of its trade in value by sea.

What prompted the recent flare-up in tensions was because Marcos Jr. chose a more assertive stance on territorial disputes, breaking his predecessor's staunch pro-China policies and vowed not to lose “an inch” of territory and regularly expose China's behaviour at sea. According to the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, of the 465 Philippine protests made against China since January 2020, more than 26% were filed under the Marcos administration, including 55 in 2023. The Marcos Jr. administration also suspended a military exchange program with China. Besides its security treaty with the US, Marcos Jr. has also been deepening defence ties with the like-minded countries such as Japan and Australia.

In February 2023, Manila granted US forces access to four more military sites, in addition to a previously agreed to five, providing Washington with an even firmer strategic foothold in the south-eastern edge of the disputed South China Sea.⁸ Though the spate of grey-zone activities threaten to an armed conflict, China has so far managed to achieve its goals without resorting to military means, though its coast guard or maritime militia have kept tensions, but below the threshold of armed conflict. But miscalculations could always lead the situation to ugly and escalation could be difficult to contain if an incident resulted in fatalities and inflamed nationalist sentiments. The spark of conflict could also be lit by an accident involving military assets, possibly as

⁷ Gabriel Dominguez, “After collisions at sea, could Sino-Philippine tensions boil over?”, *The Japan Times*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/10/23/asia-pacific/politics/south-china-sea-crisis-explainer/>

⁸ See, Rajaram Panda, ““US-Philippines Base Deal aimed to Check China”, 17 February 2023, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2023/february/17/us-philippines-base-deal-aimed-to-check-china>

China challenges US freedom-of-navigation operations or similar air and maritime patrols by the US and allied forces. Philippines could also be dragged into war if the Chinese military were to use the Philippines' EEZ, which extends 200 nautical miles from its coast to attack Taiwan.

What is India's stance on China-Philippines Spat?

When tensions flared up between China and the Philippines, India called the parties on 11th August 2023 for adherence to international law and peaceful resolution of disputes.⁹ In contrast to the expression of support by the US, Japan, Australia, and the EU to the Philippines, India stressed its long-standing position that the issues need to be resolved peacefully and for a rule- based order.

India also extended support to the 2016 Award by the International Arbitral Tribunal invalidating China's claims and standing by the Philippines' position. India asked the parties to abide by the award. In a joint statement issued by India and the Philippines after the fifth Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation during the visit of Enrique Manalo, Filipino Foreign Minister, to New Delhi on 29th June 2023, both sides underlined the need for a peaceful settlement of disputes and for an adherence to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea. From the analysis of the issue, it thus transpires that diplomacy must not be abandoned and all stakeholders must be kept engaged to help the contending parties to find a solution through dialogue and discussion so that peace and stability in the region is maintained for the prosperity of the peoples in the region. For this to happen, China is best advised to shed its aggressive positions and cooperate for the creation of a congenial environment for dialogue and discussion to take place and solution found.

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⁹ "Amid Tensions Over South China Sea, India Tells China, Philippines to Adhere to Global Law", *The Wire*, 11 August 2023, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/amid-tensions-over-south-china-sea-india-tells-china-philippines-to-adhere-to-global-law>

India and ASEAN: Vision and Perspective of Indo-Pacific

*Manoj Bharti

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a dynamic geopolitical landscape that will shape the future of the world. It has become the latest arena to showcase the complex power play between nations. This vast maritime expanse encompasses a myriad of nations, each contributing to the evolving narrative of the Indo-Pacific. Within this context, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) hold strategic importance as the largest economic powers in the region and share a vision for a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific. I will touch upon some of the key aspects of India-ASEAN cooperation based on my experience of serving in Jakarta, highlighting our shared vision and perspectives in the evolving Indo-Pacific narrative.

India's engagement with ASEAN has deep historical roots, marked by centuries-old cultural and trade ties. However, it was only in the 1990s that a more formal and comprehensive engagement began, leading to India becoming a full dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1995. This historical foundation set the stage for a multifaceted collaboration between India and ASEAN member states.

Indonesia has an unstated status as the spokesperson of ASEAN based on its large population and rapidly growing economy. It has been vocal and insistent about influencing policy formulations for ASEAN including those regarding the Indo-Pacific. Indonesia tends to follow its proclaimed "Independent and Active" foreign policy in formulating foreign and regional engagements of ASEAN.

Geographically, the Indian peninsula is situated strategically in the Indian Ocean from where the Indo-Pacific region begins and therefore it plays a

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pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific landscape. India has a well-known maritime history in this entire region since early history. From the Kalinga empire in the 3rd century BC to the Chola dominance on the waters of the Indo-Pacific region in the 9th Century AD, historical facts are available on record. After a gap of a few centuries, India has reemerged, once again, as a rapidly growing large economy. To sustain this growth, India envisions a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific that promotes economic development and upholds the principles of international law. Recognizing the need to build on its traditional links with ASEAN countries, India upgraded the “Look East” policy to the “Act East” policy in 2015 which seeks to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian nations, including Indonesia, fostering connectivity and cooperation.

As the largest archipelagic nation in the world, Indonesia holds a justifiable interest in, and a unique and influential perspective on, the Indo-Pacific region. Since 2011, and particularly during the reign of President Jokowi, ‘protecting Indonesia’s sovereign waters or archipelagic waters’ has been one of the main aspects of its foreign policy. Its vision for the Indo-Pacific is enshrined in the concept of the “Global Maritime Fulcrum”, a strategic framework that underscores Indonesia’s commitment to leveraging its maritime geography for security, economic prosperity, and regional cooperation. In each of these areas, India’s own domestic as well as global interests align pretty closely.

Maritime Security and Cooperation

Indonesia’s strategic location at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans places it in a focal position within the Indo-Pacific. The nation’s vast archipelago, with over 17,000 islands, gives Indonesia control over key maritime routes, making it a crucial player in shaping regional dynamics. Both India and Indonesia face common security challenges, including maritime piracy, transnational crime and territorial disputes. Indonesia faces the challenge of China’s expansionist policies in the “South China Sea” regularly. Given the maritime nature of the Indo-Pacific, maritime security is a shared concern for India and ASEAN. Collaborative efforts within regional fora, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), underscore their commitment to maintaining peace and stability at sea. Navies of India and ASEAN nations regularly engage in joint exercises, enhancing

interoperability and maritime domain awareness. India and Indonesia have engaged in various joint military exercises such as “Garuda Shakti” and “Samudra Shakti” in the recent past to strengthen the strategic partnership and maritime security collaboration between the two nations. India has similar engagements with other countries of ASEAN.

It must be highlighted here that Indonesia takes its geographical position in this region extremely seriously and strongly criticizes any international initiative, including the QUAD if it does not include Indonesia. At the same time, Chinese posturing in the South China Sea disturbs Indonesia, even if it has shown its resolve to handle any such incursion from China, for example in the Natuna island.

Economic Integration and Trade

Economic collaboration stands as a cornerstone in the relationship between India and ASEAN. The ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA), established in 2010, reflects their commitment to enhancing trade and investment. Both sides recognize the need for a robust economic framework that fosters connectivity, facilitates trade and unlocks the vast potential of the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific region has become the main shipping route that connects the major economies of the world today. Major sea lanes, such as the Strait of Malacca, provide critical passages for the transportation of goods, raw materials, and energy resources. These sea routes facilitate the seamless flow of trade between countries, connecting manufacturers, producers, and consumers across the region and beyond. The manufacturing hubs of China, Japan and India, as well as ASEAN countries and the consumer markets of Africa, Asia and beyond, get their sustenance from these shipping routes. This concentration of economic power has transformed the region into a key player in the global economic landscape.

The economic dominance of the Indo-Pacific also stems from the fact that this region is endowed with abundant natural resources, both on land and beneath the ocean. Rich fisheries, minerals, and energy resources contribute to the economic prosperity of the nations in the region. It is also at the forefront of technological innovation and the digital economy. Countries like India and Singapore have become global technology hubs, driving advancements in information technology, artificial intelligence and digital

services. Indonesia has invested in, and now developed into, a new center for technology and innovation. This technological prowess not only boosts economic productivity but also opens new avenues for trade and business collaborations.

Connectivity Initiatives

Connectivity is a key focus in the India-ASEAN vision for the Indo-Pacific. Historically, since the time of the Kalinga Empire in the 3rd century BC, as well as the Chola Empire's Naval ship's dominance on the Indo-Pacific waters in the 9th century AD, India has had a very close and active connection with ASEAN countries. In modern times, Projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project aim to enhance physical connectivity, linking India with Southeast Asia. However, lacunae exist. It is surprising that till recently, India and Indonesia, with the 1st and 4st largest populations in the world and a combined population of nearly 1.7 billion, did not have direct air connectivity. Apart from trade connections through the sea, short-distance commercial shipping for transporting people and goods needs to be developed. One such example could be between the Andaman Islands in India and Aceh in Indonesia, merely 190 km apart. These initiatives and possibilities contribute to the broader vision of a seamlessly connected Indo-Pacific, promoting economic growth and people-to-people ties.

Shared Values and People-to-People Ties

Beyond economic and security dimensions, India and ASEAN share common values such as democracy, pluralism, and cultural diversity. The spread of Buddhism since the time of King Ashoka in the 3rd century BC has left indubitable marks in many Southeast Asian countries. Images of the impact of Indian philosophy, thought, and culture are evident in many of these countries including Indonesia, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos. In modern times, since the 1960s, India has been active in re-invigorating the ethos of Indian culture and thinking through numerous initiatives under the programs of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). Such educational and cultural exchanges play a crucial role in strengthening people-to-people ties, fostering a deeper understanding between the diverse societies of India and ASEAN member states.

Similarly, there is a large Indian diaspora present in many ASEAN countries that contributes to the cultural diversity and economic development of these nations. Many South Indians were taken to Southeast Asia as labor by colonial powers. Post-independence, the spread of businessmen, for example, the Sindhi community in Indonesia and Singapore, became extremely wide and influential. In many cases, the Indian community in this region are employment providers rather than employment seekers which has changed the public perception of Indians in these countries. Because of this, they are respected not only for their harmonious cultural mixing with the local populations but also for their business ethics and generosity. In Indonesia, the local population prefers to work in factories run by the Indian community rather than those run by the Chinese or another owner.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Despite a shared vision, India and ASEAN face challenges such as geopolitical complexities and territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Navigating these challenges requires diplomatic finesse and sustained dialogue. However, the commitment to cooperation, economic integration and cultural exchange offers a robust foundation for overcoming obstacles. India needs to project herself more effectively as a benevolent companion on the path of collective economic growth with the ASEAN countries rather than a competing power. In matters of trade and commerce, intellectual property, or innovative technology, we already give a lot of benefits to our Southeast Asian brotherly nations. These initiatives will get wider and deeper once India boosts its own economy. Our path to economic growth needs to aim at achieving a per capita income of nearly US\$10000 rather than just being the third largest economy in the world.

Despite India's historical closeness with Southeast Asia, the 19th and early 20th centuries drastically changed their relationship. Indians were largely brought over as indentured labor and faced challenges in assimilating with local populations. The perception of India as a poor and dirty country is still strong in the minds of many Southeast Asians. This attitude has changed slowly over the past few decades thanks to more affluent Indians immigrating and working in these countries, but public perception still needs to evolve. India is

ASEAN's 8th largest trade partner with a total trade of 92 billion dollars in 2021, but it imports more than it exports to its biggest ASEAN trade partners (trade deficit of 16 billion). Companies are somewhat hesitant to invest in India despite a massive consumer market and the overall perception of doing business in India is still largely negative. It is slow and challenging to change the minds of nations, but India must make an effort to showcase how it has developed over the past decades. A love for Indian culture, including Bollywood, food, festivals, weddings and philosophies should be leveraged to change the public perception of India.

At the annual ASEAN-India summit and the 18th East Asia summit held in Jakarta, Indonesia on September 7, 2023 Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined a 12-point proposal for expanding collaboration between India and ASEAN. These included enhancing connectivity, sharing digital transformation technology, a digital future fund, shared research support, advocating for the global south, traditional medicine centers, Mission LiFE collaboration, providing affordable medicine, counterterrorism cooperation, disaster resilience, disaster management and maritime security.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Indo-Pacific vision of India and ASEAN is grounded in historical ties, economic collaboration, connectivity initiatives and a shared commitment to maritime security. As the region continues to evolve, the relationship between India and ASEAN will play a pivotal role in shaping the narrative of a stable, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, reflecting their joint aspiration for a region that fosters peace, cooperation, and shared prosperity.

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Great Power Rivalry and India's ASEAN Diplomacy: Charting an 'India Way' in the Indo-Pacific Region

*Vibhanshu Shekhar

Introduction

The geostrategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region has undergone fundamental change during the last five years driven primarily by the growing salience of great power rivalries.¹ The all-pervasive nature of the great power rivalry is increasingly shaping almost every aspect of international politics and diplomacy in the region as is evident from the manifestation of its multiple forms, such as 'Trade War,' 'Tariff War,' 'Chip War,' 'Cold War 2.0', or Techno-geopolitics. It is giving more traction to historical rivalries (India-Japan and China-Japan) and producing a more polarized nature of regional relationships. As a result, strategic initiatives and diplomatic negotiations for cooperation are increasingly seen through the prism of great power rivalry as states' attempt to adjust to the new-evolving equations. India's ASEAN diplomacy is no exception as it is increasingly viewed from the lens of India-China or China-US great power rivalries.² Some have gone to the extent of viewing India's ASEAN engagement as creating new possibilities of India

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¹ The great power rivalries in the Indo-Pacific region include not just China-US rivalry but also India-China and Sino-Japanese rivalries.

² "With eye on China, India, ASEAN to deepen partnership," *The Statesman*, June 17, 2022, <https://asianews.network/with-eye-on-china-india-asean-to-deepen-partnership/> (accessed on January 5, 2024); Kiran Sharma, "India-Vietnam defense ties on upswing as both eye China," *Nikkei Asia*, July 4, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/India-Vietnam-defense-ties-on-upswing-as-both-eye-China> (accessed on January 5, 2024)

complementing the US Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China.³

A closer look at India's ASEAN diplomacy during the last five years indicates while engaging the ASEAN countries, New Delhi has followed, what can be best characterized as an 'India Way.'⁴ Building on the Indian Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar's idea of 'India Way,' the paper argues that India's ASEAN diplomacy during the last five years reflects continuity of pace, purpose and process that it has laid out since the onset of the Look East policy in 1992. New Delhi has followed its own logic and interests, defined primarily in terms of building strong political, military, economic and cultural ties with the countries of Southeast Asia. Similarly, instead of giving in to the urgency of dealing with the great power rivalry, Indian initiatives or pushbacks reflect the country's trademark footprint of bureaucratic incrementalism and conservatism. More importantly, Indian leadership has leveraged the non-ASEAN platforms to support ASEAN's developmental agendas and signal that its great power alignments do not undermine ASEAN interests or centrality.

Multiple Framings of India's ASEAN Diplomacy

India's ASEAN diplomacy has come a long way during the last three decades with the two sides cooperating in almost every aspect of human lives, such as political, economic, security, digital, developmental, social, cultural and connectivity.

The two sides celebrated a commemorative partnership in 2018 after completing 25 years of engagement and 30th anniversary of ASEAN-India relations in 2022. They have elevated their strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2022.

India's ASEAN diplomacy has gone through various iterations during the last three decades, such as – Look East policy, Act East policy, the Extended Neighbourhood approach, Project *Mausam* and the policy of Security and Growth for All (SAGAR). Each of these framings have sought to promote India's engagement with the ASEAN countries in various ways. Though the Act East policy replaced the original framing of Look East policy after the

³ Derek Grossman, "India is Becoming a Power in Southeast Asia," *Foreign Policy*, July 7, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/07/india-southeast-asia-china-security-strategy-military-geopolitics-vietnam-philippines-indonesia/> (accessed on January 2, 2024)

⁴ S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2022)

Modi government came to power in 2014, India's Ministry of External Affairs has defined it as an approach to 'focus on India's extended neighbourhood in the Indo-Pacific region with ASEAN as its core.'⁵ In other words, ASEAN has occupied a key place both in India's Act East policy and its extended neighbourhood worldview. While the ASEAN countries have figured as the principal target in the Look/Act East policies, they have also figured prominently in other foreign policy initiatives as well. For example, eight of the ten ASEAN countries are a part of India's Project Mausam initiative. Similarly, various Indian Ocean littoral countries of Southeast Asia have figured in India's maritime initiatives, such as SAGAR and Project Mausam.⁶

These policy iterations have produced a plethora of initiatives of engagement at bilateral, minilateral, sub-regional and multilateral levels. At the bilateral level, India has forged strategic partnerships with various ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. As a part of its ASEAN outreach, India has set up various minilateral and sub-regional initiatives, such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Initiative and India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Connectivity Project. Their main goals are connecting India's landlocked Northeastern states with the ASEAN countries that would bring greater economic benefit to the sub-region. At the multilateral level, India has set up strategic partnership with ASEAN and become a member of various ASEAN-led and supra-ASEAN cooperative initiatives, such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Plus Defense Ministerial Meeting (ADMM+). These supra-regional initiatives have facilitated India's participation in various important security deliberations in the Indo-Pacific region.

New Delhi's 'India Way' in Southeast Asia

India's ASEAN diplomacy has evolved largely in response to its own strategic logic and interests. Its initial drive to engage with ASEAN came from the

⁵ "Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No-1456 India's Act-East Policy," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, July 28, 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/36927/QUESTION+NO1456+INDIAS+ACTEAST+POLICY> (accessed on December 30, 2023)

⁶ The Indian-Ocean littoral countries in Southeast Asia are Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

economic logic of engagement with the tiger economies of Southeast Asia, an internal security logic of engagement with the military-ruled Myanmar and an overall desire to get out of moribund SAARC regionalism. India's decision to become ASEAN's dialogue partner, a member of ARF and its interest, though unsuccessful, in joining the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) during the 1990s highlight New Delhi's willingness to be a part of economic dynamism in the Asia-Pacific. Amar Nath Ram, one of India's former Ambassadors to Thailand, argued in 2012 that the Look East policy 'must at all times reflect domestic compulsions and concerns' and that 'it [was] integral to addressing the country's domestic, economic and security challenges.'⁷ Salman Haider, India's former Foreign Secretary, has laid emphasis on similar domestically-driven and India-oriented genesis of India's ASEAN engagement.⁸

As India's economic situation improved, it sought to forger deeper economic ties with the ASEAN countries. It has signed a multilateral Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with ASEAN along with bilateral CECA's with Malaysia and Singapore and a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with a limited mandate with Thailand. However, its policy of protectionism has continued to dictate the range of economic engagement with the ASEAN countries.⁹ Instead of trying to outcompete China in the RCEP, India has decided not to join the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), pushed largely by India's own protectionist sentiment. More importantly, India's economic protectionism is not country-specific, rather symptomatic of bureaucratic conservatism and electoral politics. Interestingly, when India started negotiating the India-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, its negative list was so big and it offered so limited market access that the ASEAN interlocutor threatened to close down the entire FTA negotiation process.

⁷ Amar Nath Ram (ed.), *Two Decades of India's Look East Policy: Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity*, (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs, 2012), p. 19.

⁸ Salman Haider, "Look East," in Amar Nath Ram (ed.), *Two Decades of India's Look East Policy*, pp. 57-61.

⁹ The share of India's international trade via FTA process as a percentage of its total trade is very low due to high compliance costs, complex rules of origin criteria, administrative delays and limited information on its FTAs see Natasha Jha Bhaskar, "India's RCEP Reticence," *The Interpreter*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-s-rcep-reticence#:~:text=India's%20trade%20deficit%20with%20RCEP,the%20 signing%20 of%20these%20deals.> (accessed on January 4, 2024).

In the field of defence diplomacy, India has sought to project its benign maritime image in Southeast Asia through politico-diplomatic assurance, providing assistance in upgrading naval capabilities and using its naval positioning for non-military presence. One might argue that India's recent maritime policy shift from the 'net security provider' approach to a 'preferred security partnership' approach highlights the country's desire to adopt a more conciliatory and cooperative approach to maritime security in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ India's naval engagement with the ASEAN countries has occurred primarily through joint exercises, goodwill visits, naval escorts and quick relief operations.¹¹ The quick relief operations, conducted by the Indian navy in the aftermath of the Tsunami in Indonesia in 2005 and the Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, aimed at India's benign posturing. These activities can be, at best, called expressions of soft balancing.

In its bid to give off a pro-ASEAN image, New Delhi has reiterated its support for ASEAN centrality in almost every ASEAN-India deliberation. The last three important India-ASEAN statements – the Delhi Declaration of 2018, the 2021 Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook in the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the 2022 Joint Statement on ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership have reinforced ASEAN Centrality in the evolving regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. While meeting with the ASEAN Secretary General, Kao Kim Hourn, India's Minister for External Affairs, S. Jaishankar declared that since India-ASEAN relations 'paved the way for the Indo-Pacific Vision, India [was] deeply committed to the principle of ASEAN Centrality.'¹²

Though it has joined the US-led Quad, India has sought to allay the ASEAN misgivings by presenting its Quad membership as a force that will not undermine the interests of ASEAN countries. An important signaling in this regard came

¹⁰Rahul Roy Choudhary, "From 'net security provider' to 'preferred security partnerships': the rhetoric, reality and result of India's maritime security cooperation," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2022, p. 96; "President Kovind: India has become preferred security partner and first responder in region," *The Indian Express*, February 21, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/president-kovind-india-security-partner-7783957/> (accessed on January 4, 2024).

¹¹For details, G V C Naidu, *Indian Navy and Southeast Asia*, (New Delhi: Lancer, 2000).

¹²Dr. S. Jaishankar, Twitter Post, July 12, 2023, <https://twitter.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1679043183651729408> (accessed on January 4, 2024).

in March 2021 when India convinced the Quad members to produce COVID-19 vaccine in India for the ASEAN market. The idea of Quad vaccine production in India came from India's own program of the Vaccine Maitri initiative that aimed at providing COVID-19 vaccines to the developing world. The grouping launched a Quad Vaccine Partnership in March 2021 and declared that they would be supplying a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the Indo-Pacific region by the end of 2022. These doses would be supplied by an Indian company Biological E. At the summit, the US agreed to expand the production capacity of the firm, Japan agreed to provide the financial assistance and Australia promised to assist with the supplies.¹³ Following up on its commitments, the Japanese government provided a financial assistance of US\$100 million to support the vaccine production in India. By mid-2022, the Quad had supplied 200,000 COVID-19 vaccines, highlighting 'the Quad member's contributions to ensure equitable access to vaccines and to combat COVID-19 in the Indo-Pacific region and the world.'¹⁴ The May 2022 Joint Statement of the Quad claimed to have 'delivered more than 670 million doses, including at least 265 million doses' to the countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad Joint Statement of February 2022 had 'pledged to donate 1.3 billion vaccine doses globally.'¹⁵

It is argued that India's increasingly vocal opposition to Chinese actions in the South China Sea and its decision to sell BrahMos Cruise Missile to the Philippines are driven by India's desire to balance China in Southeast Asia.¹⁶ If these are, at all, expressions of balancing behaviour, they are half-hearted acts of balancing and driven equally by reasons other than balancing China.

¹³ Shreya Upadhyay, "Covid-19 and Quad's "Soft" Reorientation," *Research in Globalization*, vol. 3, no. 10069, 2021, pp. 1-6.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Vaccine Donation to Thailand by Japan-Australia-India-U.S. (Quad)," April 21, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000286.html

¹⁵ The Quad Joint Statement, "Quad Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," Foreign Ministers of Australia, India and Japan and the Secretary of State of the United States, February 11, 2022, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/quad-cooperation-indo-pacific> (accessed on January 3, 2024).

¹⁶ Rezaul H Laskar, "Eye on China, India signals a larger role for itself in Indo-Pacific," *The Hindustan Times*, August 08, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-asserts-larger-role-in-indo-pacific-with-warship-visits-gifting-corvettes-and-strengthening-alliances-101691499544069.html> (accessed on January 3, 2024).

For example, India's plan to become a defense exporter seems to be a far a more convincing explanation for India's sale of the BrahMos missiles to the Philippines. Similarly, notwithstanding the strong historical partnership with Vietnam and the latter's desire to procure the BrahMos missile, New Delhi has not yet sold it to Vietnam. More importantly, it took New Delhi nearly seven years after the arbitration of 2016 and three years after the India-China border altercation at Galwan of 2020 to articulate a normatively principled and UNCLOS-supported position on the South China Sea.

New Frontiers in India's ASEAN Diplomacy

New Delhi's India Way in its ASEAN diplomacy is also evident from the newer areas of cooperation which underline India's increasing confidence as a rising power rather than a desperate desire to balance China. The limited scale and scope of India-ASEAN engagement in these areas indicate incrementalism and still-limited ability of New Delhi in providing good. Two areas have come to acquire greater focus during the last five years.

Probably, the most important new frontier in India-ASEAN engagement is in the cyber sector. Keeping in pace with the large-scale digital transformation in the Indian and ASEAN societies, the two sides have begun to wake up to the need to address together what can probably be the most important technological shift since the end of the World War II. Both India and ASEAN are developing societies with the exception of Singapore and face various cyber-related challenges, such as digital inclusion, digital divide and the challenge of providing reliable and safe digital systems to all their citizens. As more and more people are latching on to the digital networks, governments in India and ASEAN countries are experiencing the difficult task of keeping the cyber systems running and safe amid increasing scale of cyber threats. Some of these issues have figured in the India-ASEAN Digital Work Plan that the two sides have put in place as a roadmap for facilitating cooperation in the cyber sector. The two sides have also set up a semi-official track 1.5 annual India-ASEAN Cyber Dialogue since 2018 that held its third meeting in 2022.¹⁷

¹⁷ Trisha Ray, *An ASEAN-India Cybersecurity Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity: Report of the third ASEAN-India Track 1.5 Dialogue on Cyber Issues*, (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2022), https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ORF_SpecialReport_ASEAN-India-Cyber.pdf (accessed on January 5, 2024).

The pursuit of a development-driven cooperation in science and technology is another important area that has gained traction during the last few years. Both India and ASEAN have sought to steer their science and tech cooperation clear of chip/semiconductor-related scramble partly because of their limited capacity for cooperation in the high-tech sector and partly because of their desire to focus on developmental agenda of the science and tech cooperation. The two sides have set up an ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund (AISTDF-8) with the funding endowment of US\$1 million. During its Governing Council meeting, Rajesh Gokhale, India's Secretary of the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and Chair of India-ASEAN Working Group, reiterated that India and ASEAN 'need[ed] to leverage more on science and technology to bridge disparities between urban and rural divide with focus on affordable technologies for inclusive development, economic growth and employment generation.'¹⁸

Limitations of the India Way

Though New Delhi's India Way has introduced a continuity and a benign outlook to India's ASEAN diplomacy, it has also produced a foreign policy that is filled with incomplete initiatives and missed opportunities. The most glaring among the incomplete initiatives are the connectivity projects as a part of connect Northeast with Southeast Asia and 'develop Northeast' agendas, which have largely remained non-starters. Notwithstanding the announcement of various ambitious projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Delhi-Hanoi rail link, the Kaladan Multi-modal project in Myanmar, the only tangible outcome during the last 25 years has been the India-Myanmar Friendship Road. The deadlines for these projects have been frequently renewed leading to cost escalation and project stagnation. With the current political dynamic of Myanmar, especially in the Chin State, it is unlikely that these projects will ever be completed. One can also assume that similar fate awaits the Aceh-Andaman connectivity project between India and Indonesia. These incomplete projects stand in sharp contrast with the completion of China-built Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail project. The Widodo government of

¹⁸ "ASEAN meeting highlights need to leverage science & tech to bridge urban-rural divide," *The Economic Times*, August 8, 2023, <https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/technology/asean-meeting-highlights-need-to-leverage-science-tech-to-bridge-urban-rural-divide/102518149> (accessed on December 28, 2023).

Indonesia is also contemplating to award China the contract of Jakarta-Surabaya High Speed Rail project.

Conclusion

India's strategic overtures toward the ASEAN states is not a result of either intensifying Sino-US rivalry or India's alignment with the United States. It is rather an expression of India's own compulsions and convictions as it rises and projects its role as a major power. India will engage with other major players in the situations like that of the post-2004 Tsunami operations as long as it reinforces India's role conceptualization as a benign benefactor and neighbour. However, it will tone down roles where its autonomous ASEAN diplomacy may be seen as too linked or aligned with the US or too overt in its anti-China outlook.



India and ASEAN: Perspective and Vision on the Indo-Pacific

*Pankaj Jha

India- ASEAN relationship has completed more than a decade of strategic partnership¹, signed in 2012². It was elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2022. Over the one decade there have been developments related to enhancement of trade, cultural ties, investment, legislative and scientific interactions between the two sides. Upgradation of ties with the signing of the comprehensive strategic partnership might help in realising the potential of science and technology funds, undertaking climate change-related initiatives, maritime security dialogues, enhancing defence cooperation and working on coordinated patrols along the designated areas. It has been observed that the two sides can work on modern technologies which can help India in promoting its 'Make in India' initiative.

ASEAN nations are also working on areas such as 4th Industrial Revolution, automation, digitisation, digital public infrastructure and physical connectivity. These issues have also been highlighted in India-ASEAN Action Plan 2021-2025³. There has been enhanced defence cooperation through weapons and equipment sales (sale of Brahmos to Philippines), better understanding on maritime security, promotion of trade and investment in

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¹ Vision Statement, ASEAN India Commemorative Summit, 21 December 2012, <http://www.asean.org/news/asean-statement-communicues/item/vision-statement-asean-india-commemorative-summit>(Accessed June 7,2020).

² Sixth Sapru House Lecture by H.E Mr. Pham Binh Minh, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on "India-Vietnam Relations and Regional Issues" at Sapru House, New Delhi 12 July, 2013.

³ Plan Of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress And Shared Prosperity (2021-2025) <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ASEAN-India-POA-2021-2025-Final.pdf>

new sectors and enhanced connectivity in aviation sector. One of the major reasons for comprehensive strategic partnership is to enhance relationship particularly in areas where not much attention has been paid. This includes technology cooperation, building synergies within the Security and Growth for All in The Region (SAGAR) project and collaboration with ASEAN countries in areas such as medicine, healthcare⁴, counter terrorism, services and dialogue on harnessing of marine resources. India has been a participant in the extended ASEAN Maritime Forum⁵ and has actively participated in Indo- Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative, Indo – Pacific Economic Framework and has proposed participation of ASEAN nations in Indo- Pacific Oceans Initiative which has been one of the major focus areas of Prime Minister Modi.

India also wants to develop better cultural ties with the Southeast Asian nations and for that, it is looking forward for establishing Indian cultural centres, educational hubs and better management of inbound tourism from the Southeast Asian countries. There has also been concern that India has not signed strategic partnership with all the ASEAN countries and therefore upgrading the relationship to comprehensive strategic partnership with ASEAN would help these countries to understand that India gives equal status to all the Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, India has upgraded the strategic partnerships with Vietnam⁶ and Australia which were signed much later than ASEAN India strategic partnership. India now has strategic partnership agreements with Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam.

There has been debate within academic circles that India has not proactively managed its relationship with Southeast Asian countries because of lukewarm attendance in Shangri-la⁷ dialogue and ASEAN Regional Forum. Even Delhi Dialogue initiative which was started with much fanfare lost steam and the participation from ASEAN nations in it has decreased over a period.

⁴ Press Release on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) by the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), May 1, 2020, at <https://asean.org/press-release-on-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-by-the-asean-intergovernmental-commission-on-human-rights-aichr-2/>.

⁵ India, ASEAN cooperation will be key facilitator for growth of Indo-Pacific region, July 19, 2018 at <http://ddnews.gov.in/national/india-asean-cooperation-will-be-key-facilitator-growth-indo-pacific-region> (Accessed 20.7.2021).

⁶ Jha, P.K., & Vinh, V.X. (2020). *India, Vietnam and the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Horizons* (1st ed.). Routledge India. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429281877>.

⁷ Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018), at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018> (Accessed 20.7.2018).

As a result of this, all the initiatives related to Southeast Asian countries particularly regarding crisis in Myanmar, Chinese BRI projects, refusal to join regional comprehensive economic partnership and taking a restrained stance on South China Sea issues have not been very congenial for India's approach to the Southeast Asian region. However, India has taken very calculated move about its responses to the Russia-Ukraine crisis when it was debated in ASEAN, military rule in Myanmar and the increasing influence of China in the region through BRI, Maritime Silk Road and digital BRI. Countries/organisations such as US, European Union nations, Japan and Australia⁸ have been better managing their relationship particularly by taking active part and engaging the Southeast Asian countries in several programs which included climate change finance, health assistance, providing medical support during the COVID - 19 and helping the health professionals across Southeast Asian countries. India's approach has been nuanced as it considers the impact and viability of the projects.

In comparison to other countries, India has been inactive in its approach towards Southeast Asian countries and there has been slight tardiness as there are only few visits undertaken by the top leadership of India to the Southeast Asian countries on an individual basis. One of the major reasons has been India's proactive approach towards Indo-Pacific construct and more interaction with the Quad plus countries which includes South Korea, Vietnam⁹ and New Zealand¹⁰. Therefore, India will have to take a comprehensive approach about other Southeast Asia nations. Nevertheless, India always supported Treaty of Amity and cooperation as well as buttressed ASEAN centrality in its meetings with ASEAN nations.

Many of the Southeast Asian nations are very keen that India should revisit its decision not to join the regional comprehensive economic partnership. India opted to provide better trade and investment relationship with the ASEAN countries on a bilateral basis. India has always professed the centrality of ASEAN but is slow in adopting to the larger blueprint of ASEAN communities

⁸ Ravenhill, John(1998) 'Adjusting to the ASEAN way: Thirty years of Australia's relations with ASEAN', *The Pacific Review*, 11: 2, p. 270.

⁹ Sanghamitra Sarma, *The US Factor in India-Vietnam Relationship*, *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IOSR-JHSS)*, Volume 22, Issue 1, Ver.3, January 2017, p.27.

¹⁰ Pankaj Jha (2019) *India's policy towards South Pacific: Expanding horizons of the Indo-Pacific region*, *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, 15:2, 103-112, DOI: 10.1080/09733159.2020.1716516.

which are in different timelines for adoption and realization. Therefore, it has been proposed that India must undertake efforts to reinvigorate its relationship with the regional organisation and take active part in the deliberations. India's proactive engagement used to realise the potential of India -ASEAN Action Plan 2021 to 2025¹¹ which can bring India back into the larger dynamics of the region. Another aspect is that India is likely to upgrade its Andaman and Nicobar command (joint theatre command) and would, therefore, like Southeast Asian countries to be on the positive side. In terms of protecting its sea-based assets, there is a need to develop a better understanding with the Southeast Asian nations given much more Chinese aggressive moves in the Indian Ocean. India is also looking for harnessing the potential of its pharma industry in this region and therefore, a comprehensive agreement with ASEAN countries in terms of generic medicines and research in health would help India to gain data.

Few areas that can improve better relations with India and ASEAN would be related to development in energy efficiency, facilitating long term visa for businesspeople, working on sustainable development goals, undertaking extensive collaboration with ASEAN under health and medicine research and working on building synergies with Indian manufacturing sector. Further India should also consider the developments which are happening in India regarding 4th industrial revolution and how it can work with Southeast Asian countries on this.

India has also proposed way back in January 2018 the maritime security dialogue with ASEAN countries and enhancing capabilities and training among the Southeast Asian countries¹². India should aspire to build a consensus on emerging issues related to maritime security, cargo insurance and safety of the sea Lanes. India has already been working on renegotiating the trade deals with Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia and asking for completion of second review of India-ASEAN FTA, while at the same time, it has entered into a bilateral trade agreement with Australia and therefore, expanding its export destinations across Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, ASEAN can harness the education and knowledge potential of India through initiatives such as

¹¹ Plan of Action to Implement The ASEAN-India Partnership For Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021-2025), pp. 2-3 <https://asean.org/storage/2020/09/ASEAN-India-POA-2021-2025-Final.pdf>(Accessed January 8, 2021).

¹² India, ASEAN cooperation will be key facilitator for growth of Indo-Pacific region, July 19,2018 at <http://ddnews.gov.in/national/india-asean-cooperation-will-be-key-facilitator-growth-indo-pacific-region>(Accessed 20.7.2018).

developmental dialogue, scientific and technology conferences and working on the scenarios related to food and water security. Another aspect, which needs consultations, is to promote religious tourism between the two sides in a comprehensive way so that the two-way traffic should increase given the fact that there are multiple direct flights between the cities of ASEAN and India.

For India, there are basic aspects which need to be looked at from all angles. India needs to work on developing defence and strategic ties with most of the Southeast Asian countries and, rather than looking into HADR operations only, it should also investigate better capability building, sale and supplies of critical platforms, arms exports and providing necessary support for developing defence industries across Southeast Asia.

One of the areas where India needs to really work with Southeast Asian countries is primarily located in cyberspace and undertaking serious dialogue about a counter argument related to Budapest convention which is cued and is much in favour of the developed countries. Another aspect which India needs to undertake is to provide cheap launch facilities to the new experimental satellites developed by the countries of South East Asia, particularly those countries which are underdeveloped and do not have the launch facilities. India has proposed to launch a satellite for the shark to harness the satellite data for geospatial mapping and for agricultural purposes as well. India should also propose a similar kind of ASEAN satellite which can help the ASEAN countries to harness data and work for their rural and urban planning as well as developing their agricultural land and improving their crop and turns through better weather management and information. India has also worked on its own GIS system which is known as NAVIC and, therefore, it can also work with the Southeast Asian nations in developing a serious GIS mapping software supported by it on terrestrial network switch which can help these countries in getting their own data without dependency on many European and Chinese GIS mapping companies. The Indo-Pacific has been much debated following the calls for ASEAN centrality and, therefore as an organisation, it was compelled to outline its priorities.

ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific

In the document 'ASEAN outlook on Indo-Pacific' the organization discusses its approach towards the Indo-Pacific construct. It clearly outlines ASEAN region juxtaposed between Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific which have been the center of economic growth. It also highlights the fact that this outlook on

Indo-Pacific would enhance ASEAN's community-building while, at the same time, it would amplify the role undertaken by various Asian-centred mechanisms which might be fine for the future regional and global order. ASEAN outlook on Indo-Pacific clearly outlines the role played by the ASEAN centrality, along with other mechanisms such as East Asia Summit, can help in initiating dialogue and outlining the format for Indo-Pacific cooperation. Interestingly, this outlook on Indo-Pacific is very particular about ASEAN norms and principles, ASEAN Charter and other related documents. It acknowledges the fact that Indo-Pacific brings the two regions, Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, together and therefore, it should be construed as a region of dialogue bringing about development and prosperity. It is particularly important in maritime domain and can be helpful in developing regional architecture. This approach signifies the role for Indo-Pacific in terms of promoting rules-based regional architecture and strengthening of confidence and trust. It also highlights that this construct can be used for maritime cooperation, promoting connectivity, meeting sustainable development goals and other areas of cooperation. However, it places Indo-Pacific as an extension of the existing mechanisms which are working under the ASEAN rubric. This document also talks about areas of cooperation which includes maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation, protection and management of marine resources, marine pollution, green shipping and promoting connectivity as per the master plan on ASEAN connectivity 2025. This document also discusses digital economy, small and medium enterprises, addressing challenges related to climate change, trade facilitation, South-South cooperation and Disaster Risk Reduction. It also talks about promotion of trade as well as strategic discussions, which can be deliberated upon under the ASEAN led mechanisms. Interestingly, the quad countries have also outlined the need for working together on several issues which includes Disaster Risk Reduction, developing economic framework, promoting infrastructure and connectivity, and building greater consensus on maritime security. One of the important aspects has been the promotion of Indo-Pacific economic framework and engaging several countries from the region.

Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)

The Indo-Pacific economic framework is seen as a work in progress which can integrate different regions together and bring about more cohesiveness in areas such as education, knowledge creation, skill building and development of trade networks which are not susceptible to supply chain disruptions and other geopolitical events. Under the proposal which was first envisaged by

USAID¹³, it was envisaged that the three regions of Southeast Asia, Oceania and South Asia can be integrated under one economic framework. However, looking into the deficiencies in this region related to power, connectivity, market integration, limited purchasing power and disjointed regional value chains, it was seen that it would be pertinent to develop the economic framework looking into the requirements of the region such as physical and digital connectivity, developing complementarities in services sector, capital convertibility, labour mobility and structural changes in trade and investment frameworks.

Most of the countries in this region are primarily exporting raw materials and semi-finished products which, in a way, find their way to China which capitalizes on it and further processes these to send it to markets in Europe and United States¹⁴. In fact, it has been clearly stated in the document that the multiple agreements that are seen in Asia particularly with reference to CPTPP, RCEP and Digital Trade and Economic Agreement, which integrate ASEAN in a much better way, would be detrimental to the interest of US. US has been leading in developing a comprehensive data and information hub through the Indo-Pacific maritime domain awareness.

Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative

ASEAN centrality and its relevance in the international security as well as addressing regional security concerns has been much highlighted. ASEAN has accepted that if the Indo-Pacific is a new formation, it needs to be given due attention in the coming days. The Quad meeting which was held in Tokyo in November 2022 informed that the Quad members have buttressed the ASEAN centrality and have committed to the cause that ASEAN will remain central to the objectives that Quad has enshrined for itself while maintaining freedom of navigation and operations and in the Indo-Pacific region.

Taking a cue from the need for greater cooperation and trust in the maritime domain, the Quad countries proposed Indo-Pacific partnership for maritime domain awareness which is primarily to enhance the use of technology and to undertake training in areas such as commercial satellite radio frequency data

¹³ Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC) Phase I: Coordinated Regional Trade Analysis, Assessment Report Asia and the Middle East Economic Growth Best Practices (AMEG) Project Chemonics International, Inc. Task Order No. AID-OAA—12-00008, April 2015, at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00KZQ1.pdf.

¹⁴ Chuck Hagel, *The United States' Contribution to Regional Security*, Singapore: The Shangri-La Dialogue, 2014.

sharing and providing information related to real time activities in the maritime zones. While it has not clearly outlined the strategic and defence aspects of this initiative, it is meant to rapidly detect and respond to a wide-ranging illicit maritime activities and collaboration during humanitarian crisis. This helps him better sharing of information and pooling of resources which helps in timely support for the countries which need such a valuable data.

Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative

India, on its part, has also floated the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative which is a precursor to the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative and is primarily meant to take forward the initiative of security and growth for all in the region (SAGAR) initiated by Prime Minister Modi in 2015. IPOI looks into various aspects of practical cooperation in the maritime domain which includes the seven pillars encompassing maritime security, maritime resources, ecology capacity building, disaster risk reduction, science, technology, and academic cooperation and promoting trade and connectivity as well as maritime transport. This, in a way, compliments the larger objective of India's engagement with the Southeast Asian countries through diplomatic, economic, defence and strategic engagements. With the development of technology in harnessing marine resources, it has become important to address challenges related to pollution, macro and micro plastics, marine environment and disaster management, and developing a framework to address challenges related to illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing as well as building guidelines for underwater domain awareness. If one looks into the initiatives such as Indo-Pacific maritime domain awareness, Indo-Pacific oceans initiative and also at the ASEAN outlook on Indo-Pacific, it is pertinent to note that there are possible synergies which exist in terms of checking illegal fishing, promoting secure seelines and maritime safety, meeting the larger objective of sustainable development goals, promoting trade connectivity and maritime transport. This has again has been reflected in the Indo Pacific economic framework and larger ASEAN objective of trade and investment across regions.

Conclusion

If one looks into the discourse related to Indo-Pacific and ASEAN priorities, there are few synergies which already exist in areas including practical cooperation in maritime security, addressing challenges related to maritime ecology such as pollution and illegal fishing, working together for meeting sustainable development goals, promoting trade, connectivity and maritime transport, capacity building and Disaster Risk Reduction and

management. The challenge for ASEAN is to maintain its centrality despite the headwinds related to Indo-Pacific architecture and the division of the geopolitical order along certain power configuration. ASEAN has repeatedly and clearly articulated that it would not like to take sides in case of a US-China tension. The South China Sea is one of the issues which is a challenge to the unity of the regional organisation and, given the fact that there is no resolution in sight related to code of conduct on South China Sea, therefore the challenge of maintaining law and good order at sea while maintaining freedom of navigation and commerce through the strategic sea lanes of communication remains there. Many documents released by both, ASEAN and India, have clearly articulated their priorities in terms of free and open Indo-Pacific and have acknowledged the need of cooperation in areas such as maritime safety and security, inclusiveness in promoting regional order and security, trade and investment as well as promoting connectivity both physical and digital.

Under its Indo-Pacific vision, India has been working on health and medicine sector and it would be better for many ASEAN countries to develop joint venture partnership with Indian companies so that affordable and better medicines could be provided to the citizens of these countries. Further, there is a need for greater exchange among the scientific community because much of the requirements for the future generation will be related to artificial intelligence, machine learning, 3D printing, better communication and undertaking regular defence exercises with the ASEAN nations (similar like to one which was conducted in 2023) with the sole purpose of developing comprehensive understanding on the issues.

The Arctic Sea Routes and the Indian Ocean

*Anil Kumar Chawla

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade or so, global warming has opened up the frozen waters of the Arctic Ocean in the summer months, prompting speculation that it would provide a shorter and faster sea route between Europe and Asia, thereby reducing the importance of the Indian Ocean as the 'key to the seven seas'. This article fact checks the reality of this assumption.

Introduction



The Arctic Shipping Routes¹

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¹ Malte Humpert, "The Future of the Northern Sea Route – A "Golden Waterway" or a Niche Trade Route", The Arctic Institute, September 15, 2011, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/future-northern-sea-route-golden-waterway-niche/>

The Arctic Sear Routes (ASR) comprises the Northern Sea Route (NSR), the Northwest Passage (NWP), the Transpolar Sea Route (TSR) and the Arctic Bridge Route (ABR) as depicted on the map above.

The Northwest Passage (NWP) consists of a series of deep channels through Canada's Arctic Archipelago, extending about 900 nautical miles from Baffin Island in the east, to the Beaufort Sea, north of the US state of Alaska. The NWP connects the North Atlantic (on Canada's north-eastern coast) to the North Pacific and is a hazardous passage, not only because it passes through a series of narrow channels between ice-bound islands, but also because of a number of icebergs that drift between Greenland and Baffin Island, as also extensive fog along the route, which can be catastrophic for shipping. While the NWP has fascinated the imagination of ancient explorers, it has never developed into a viable waterway because of its natural hazards, environment concerns and concerns related to the well-being of the local indigenous communities. Moreover, most of the NWP passes through Canada's internal waters. However, as the ice in the region melts due to global warming, it is being used for a limited amount of shipping, mainly for internal purposes of Canada, as also for niche tourism.

The Transpolar Sea Route (TSR) would use the central part of the Arctic to directly link the Bering Strait with the Russian port of Murmansk. The TSR is the shortest route across the Arctic as its entire length is about 2,100 nautical miles. The other advantage of the TSR is that, unlike the NWP and the NSR, it is a mid-ocean route and does not pass through the territorial waters or the EEZ of any state. Currently only navigable by heavy ice-breakers, it could open up in the future as Arctic ice melts. The other major disadvantage of the TSR is that it will never be a fixed route and would keep shifting depending on the formation of ice, which will require constant monitoring and promulgation of routeing details by a dedicated agency, such as Raytheon's Arctic Monitoring and Prediction (RAMP) programme. Apart from the traditional presence and exploration activities by the US, Russia and the Scandinavian countries, in recent years China has also evinced great interest in this route, and the Chinese ice-breaker, *Xue Long*, undertook a transit through the ASR in 2012.

The Asian Bridge Route (ABR) connects the port of Churchill in Canada to Murmansk in Russia, thereby providing a direct connection between Asia

(via Murmansk) and central North America. Promoted actively by the Canadian government to benefit the province of Manitoba, it is navigable for only four months of the year due to heavy ice. The other disadvantage of the ABR is that one end of the route has a dead end in Port Churchill, thereby limiting both the quantity and types of cargo that can be carried. Thus far, Churchill's connection by road and rail with the rest of North America is also inadequate, making movement of cargo to the hinterland difficult.

The Northern Sea Route (NSR), also known as the Northeast Passage, is the maritime route along the northern Eurasian landmass, principally running off the coast of northern Siberia, connecting the North Atlantic and North



The Northern Sea Route²

² "Northern Sea Route", Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, <https://www.barentsinfo.org/barents-region/Transport/Northern-Sea-Route>.

Pacific oceans. Starting eastwards from the Atlantic, the NSR passes first through the ice-free Norwegian and Barents Seas around the Scandinavian peninsula; then through the Kara Strait off north-western Russia, which separates the Barents and Kara seas; onwards east through the Kara, Laptev, East Siberian and Chukchi seas; finally turning southwards to exit through the Bering Strait between north-eastern Siberia and western Alaska in the US. The part of the passage between the Kara and Bering straits remains ice-bound for most of the year and is the most difficult part to transit. The NSR being the most usable Arctic sea route is examined in detail in this article.

The biggest advantage of the NSR is the shorter distance between East Asia and Europe (2,100-2900 nautical miles), as compared to traditional shipping routes, thereby resulting in significant time and cost savings to shipping companies³. While a voyage from Japan to Europe takes roughly 29 days around the Cape of Good Hope and 22 days via the Suez Canal, the time taken using the NSR is only 10-14 days. With the Indo-Pacific becoming the locus of global economic growth, it seems logical that the NSR would offer a very attractive alternative to traditional sea routes. The other advantage cited for the NSR is that it avoids the various choke-points in the Indian Ocean, which could be blocked due to crises, wars or accidents. The six-day blockage of the Suez Canal due to MV *Ever Given* running aground in the canal in March 2021, which caused the stranding of global trade worth US\$9.6 billion, is often cited as an example of the hazards of existing sea routes through the Indian Ocean. Another often cited possibility is the possible blockage of the Strait of Malacca, which would hinder 90% of overall Chinese trade and 80% of its crude oil imports. It is, therefore, not surprising that China in particular, being heavily dependent on the Indian Ocean for imports of oil and gas and the export of finished goods, has emerged as a major investor and active player in the NSR.

Development of the Northern Sea Route

There are broadly three types of ship voyages undertaken through the NSR. The first, category is a 'transit voyage', which is defined as a voyage crossing the eastern and western borders of the NSR without calling at

³ Ibid, Malte Humpert, "The Future of the Northern Sea Route – A "Golden Waterway" or a Niche Trade Route."

intermediate ports/ locations along the route. These voyages are the ones that are likely to replace those undertaken through traditional shipping routes through the Indian Ocean. The second category is ‘destination voyage’, which involves ship movements between ports in Russia’s Arctic coast and those in Asia or Europe. These voyages are largely for export of commodities (mainly iron ore and CNG) from Russia to other countries, apart from a few voyages for import of machinery or equipment to Russian ports on the Arctic Sea. The third category is ‘domestic voyage’, which is a ship movement between Russian ports along their Arctic coast, largely undertaken for logistics supply of population centres or other outposts in Russia’s remote Arctic region⁴.

While the NSR has been used for several decades during the summer thaw to transport supplies and raw materials to and from ports on Russia’s Arctic coast, it was first opened for international shipping on 1st January 1991 by President Mikhail Gorbachev. A research project under the International Northern Sea Programme (INSROP) was initiated by Russia from 1993-99 to explore conditions for extended use of the NSR and a few exploratory voyages were also made between Asia and Europe as part of the programme. However, INSROP concluded that the route was not feasible for use by commercial shipping due to severe weather and sea-ice conditions. The situation changed when the Arctic Council published its finding on the reduction in the extent and thickness of Arctic ice caused by global warming in 2005⁵. The NSR started opening up 2007 onwards due to drastic reduction in Arctic ice. In fact, in 2021, the northern passage became navigable without entering the sea ice zone on 2nd August 2021 and remained open for 88 days, which is the longest-ever recorded ice free period in the passage.

In 2010, the 40,000 ton Danish ship, MV *Nordic Barents*, was the first non-Russian bulk carrier to use the NSR for transit. The 160,000 ton Suezmax-class super-tanker, the *Vladimir Tihkonov*, was the first such ship to use the NSR in 2011. Since then, there has been strong growth in destination shipping

⁴ “Recent ship traffic and developing shipping trends on the Northern Sea Route – Policy implications for future Arctic shipping”, *Centre for High North Logistics*, 30 December 2022, <https://chnl.no/research/research-articles/recent-ship-traffic-and-developing-shipping-trends-on-the-northern-sea-route-policy-implications-for-future-arctic-shipping/>

⁵ “Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA)”, Overview Report, *Arctic Council*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, www.amap.no/documents/doc/arctic-arctic-climate-impact-assessment/796

between the Arctic and ports outside the region, principally using Russian ships to transport oil and gas out of production wells along Russia's Arctic coast. However, transit shipping between the Pacific and Atlantic has not experienced the anticipated growth. Data indicates that between 2010-2019, a total of only 89 international transit and 68 destination voyages carrying cargo totalling 2.2 million tons took place through the NSR. While this traffic has increased substantially, with 314 ships undertaking 2994 voyages in 2022, the total transported cargo volume of 34.032 million tons⁶ still comprises only 0.3% of global maritime trade (the total quantum of global maritime trade was estimated at 11 billion tons in 2021⁷). It was also notable, that of the 314 merchant ships that operated on the NSR, the vast majority (278), were under Russian flag, with only 36 ships under a non-Russian flag. The majority of voyages were 'destination voyages' mainly carrying LNG exports from Sabetta Port in Russia, of which 249 shipments were to Europe and only 32 shipments were to Asia, mainly to China⁸. Notably, 'transit voyages' remained very low – only 85 in total, 48 west-to-east and 37 east-to west – with a total volume of only 2,027 thousand tons in 2021. In 2023, there was a very sharp decline in the transit traffic, probably due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with *no* international transits at all during the year.

Limitations of the Northern Sea Route

Various studies have estimated that merchant traffic along the NSR will continue to grow and could wean away 2% of global traffic from traditional sea routes by 2030, reaching 5% by 2050. It is also estimated that the NSR could be ice-free around the year by 2100. However, as current traffic figures indicate, usage of the NSR might remain limited due to reasons enumerated in subsequent paragraphs.

Lack of Guaranteed Movement of Ships: The vast majority of cargo ships operate on regular schedules termed as 'liner service.' Container ships in particular have to call at a number of ports along their route, loading and unloading containers at each port, to make their operation profitable. The

⁶ "Shipping Traffic at the NSR in 2022", *Centre for High North Logistics, NORD University*, 09 June 2023, <https://arctic-lho.com/nsr-2022-short-report/>

⁷ "Review of Maritime Transport 2022: Navigating Stormy Waters", *UNCTAD*, 2022, <https://unctad.org/rmt2022>

⁸ *Ibid*, "Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA)."

requirements of just-in-time deliveries need advance scheduling of ship movements at various ports, without any disruption which affects delivery times, and hence, profitability. The uncertainty associated with the opening and closing of ASRs, whose time period ranges between June-November, prevents the advance scheduling of voyages, and is a huge disincentive for shipping companies. Weather uncertainties, mainly dense fog and storms can delay transits through Arctic waters, and are also a major negative factor for the Arctic routes.

Lack of Hinterland along the Arctic Coast: The lack of a hinterland along Russia's Arctic coast between Murmansk to the Bering Strait, a stretch of almost 2,500 miles, implies that ships plying the NSR will largely be moving 'point-to-point', which limits the variety of cargo that can be carried. Container ships in particular, which constitute a large percentage of global ship movements today, operate like a 'shuttle' service across the world, picking up and dropping off containers at various ports along their route, which is not possible on the NSR. Moreover, container ships are designed to operate at high speeds and the ice-ridden and foggy Arctic waters are not an ideal environment for such ships. It is understood that container carriers operating at slow speeds could save considerable amount of fuel, but then the time taken by them for their transit would be almost similar to traditional sea routes, thereby negating the advantage of the shorter route. This would also require modifying the current high speed engines of container ships to operate at slower speeds for long durations. Another category of ships, cruise liners, could find the NSR attractive for niche tourism. However, similar to container ships, cruise ships too plan stops at various ports along their route to enable passengers to step ashore and experience various cultures and countries. On the NSR, this attractiveness is again considerably reduced by the lack of ports along the route. With the development of large ports being extremely unlikely even in the long term, the NSR will remain suitable mainly for destination shipping largely originating from Russian ports.

Ship Construction Requirements: Ships operating in the harsh polar environment require adherence to the IMO's 'International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters' (Polar Code)⁹. The Polar Code, entered into force

⁹ "International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters", *IMO*, <https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/safety/pages/polar-code.aspx>

on 1st January 2017, covers the full range of design, construction, equipment, operational, training, search and rescue and environment protection measures, which are required to be followed by the ships planning to operate in polar waters. These measures include additional requirements under the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and International Convention on Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL). Ships operating in Arctic waters are also required to apply to the IMO for a Polar Ship Certificate. The IMO classifies such ships in Category A, B or C. Category A ships are designed for operating in polar waters at least in medium first-year ice; Category B ships for operating in polar waters with at least thin first-year ice; and Category C ships designed to operate in open water or ice conditions less severe than those for Category A and B ships. It is, therefore, evident that merchant ships have to be specially designed and constructed for operating in polar waters, which automatically excludes the vast majority of ships in service today. Crews of the ships operating in polar waters also require specialised additional training and certification. Besides, insurance costs for vessels operating in Polar Regions are 150-300% higher than those operating in ice-free waters. All these factors entail additional costs for shipping companies, thereby offsetting the fuel costs and time saved by transiting through a shorter sea route.

Geopolitical Factors: Another factor that will restrict the growth of traffic through the NSR is the fact that the majority of the route passes through Russia's EEZ/ territorial sea/ internal waters. Similar to sea routes through the Indian Ocean, the NSR also passes through a few choke points – most notably the Kara and Bering Straits – of which the Kara Strait lies totally within Russia's jurisdiction. Russian law defines the NSR as the water area along the northern coast of Russia¹⁰ and administers it in consonance with UNCLOS Article 234. In addition, Russia maintains rights derived from developing the route, which is disputed by some countries, but generally accepted by most shipping companies¹¹. Ice-breaker and navigational assistance along the sea route is also provided by Russian companies. In essence, the

¹⁰“Federal Law of July 28, 2012, N 132-FZ “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Concerning State Regulation of Merchant Shipping on the Water Area of the Northern Sea Route”, https://www.nsra.ru/en/ofitsialnaya_informatsiya/zakon_o_smp.html

¹¹Arild Moe, “Ten Years of International Shipping on the Northern Sea Route: Trends and Challenges”, February 2021, *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, <https://arcticreview.no/index.php/arctic/article/view/2614/5113>

NSR is governed by Russia under the Northern Sea Route Administration, which could become a negative factor for using the route in times of heightened geopolitical tension, as is the case currently due to the Ukraine War. Indeed, the NSR was closed for other countries during the Soviet era. It is estimated that China could become a major user of the NSR for Northern Europe bound traffic, given its strong bilateral ties with Russia. In fact, during the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in April 2019, President Putin expressed Russia's interest in conjoining the NSR with China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) to connect East Asia with Europe. However, it is interesting to note that after the commencement of the Ukraine War in 2022, not a single Chinese-flagged ship has used the NSR.

Geo-economic Factors: A major factor that will limit traffic through the ASRs is the fact that the benefits of a shorter sea route are largely applicable only to trade between East Asia (mainly China, Japan and South Korea) and Western Europe. As per UNCTAD data, container trade between Northern Europe (including the Mediterranean) and East Asia comprised only 24.2% of global container traffic¹², of which only a small percentage could possibly be moved through the NSR. Similarly, over 84% of global crude oil production and its transportation take place outside the Arctic region¹³. With China's economic growth slowing down, global efforts to diversify supply chains after Covid 19, and a sharp drop in working age population in East Asia, Russia and Europe, it also does not seem likely that trade volumes between these geographical regions will see a major rise.

Conclusion

Global warming, caused by climate change, is leading to significant changes in the world's oceans. The melting of the polar ice caps, while a potential disaster with far reaching climatic and geographic changes across the globe, has enabled the opening up of new sea routes through the Arctic. However, the hype created about the potential of the ASRs does not quite match up to the reality of their actual utility, due to a number of geographical, climatic, technical, geo-political and geo-economic factors brought out above.

¹² "UNCTAD Annual Maritime Trade Report 2023", UNCTAD, 2023, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2023ch1_en.pdf

¹³ Ibid, "UNCTAD Annual Maritime Trade Report 2023."

There is no doubt that while the usage of ASRs will continue to grow as Arctic ice melts, the growth in traffic will be mainly in terms of destination voyages, with transit voyages being limited to direct traffic between specific East Asian and West European ports. It is also clearly evident that the criticality of the Indian Ocean as a connection between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans will not reduce, as future economic trends indicate that South-South and trans-Pacific trade has the greatest potential for growth in the decades ahead. Besides, global efforts to combat global warming, if successful, could hopefully roll back the melting of the Arctic (and Antarctic), thereby averting a potential climatic catastrophe for Planet Earth. The Indian Ocean will continue to hold the 'keys to the seven seas.'

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India and ASEAN: Perspectives and Opportunities

*Anshu Joshi

ABSTRACT

Despite strengthened multilateral efforts to ensure global peace and security in past few years, Russia and Ukraine war could not be stopped. On the other hand, another warfront opened in the Levant region where Israel and Hamas are affianced in a violent conflict. Amid various such global challenges and reinforced lobby politics, the strategic importance of Indian Ocean Region and Indo-Pacific remains cumulative from a global as well as regional security's point of view. Apart from various bilateral efforts, nations are also strengthening multilateral platforms to ensure security, stability and neutrality of IOR as well as Indo-Pacific. Re-boosted partnership between India and ASEAN can be quoted as an example here. Keeping the present geo-politics in focus, the article analyses the re-strengthened partnership between India and ASEAN.

Global politics is an interesting yet complex maze where various players keep playing to attain, maintain and grow their power. In this power game, the players collaborate with each other or compete depending on the geo-political situations around. These players also act inversely at different levels, like two nations may have hostility at bilateral level but they choose to collaborate at multilateral level, and vice versa. Their behaviour depends on the larger picture of global affairs, geo-politics as well as their ambitions and objectives. This keeps global politics dynamic.¹

Present geo-political dynamics in and around Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

Despite strengthened multilateral efforts to ensure global peace and security in past few years, Russia and Ukraine war could not be stopped. On the other hand, another warfront opened in the Levant region where Israel and Hamas

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¹ Joshi Anshu, "World Recap", *The Daily Guardian*, 19 August 2023, p.12.

are affianced in a violent conflict. Amid various such global challenges, and reinforced lobby politics, the strategic importance of IOR remains cumulative from global as well as regional security's point of view.

Covering diversified sub-regions such as Australia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Horn of Africa and the Southern and Eastern Africa, IOR comprises more than one-third of world's population and more than half of the global maritime trade and commerce, out of which, almost 70 per cent goes to countries external to the region. The key choke points in this region are the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and Bab el Mandeb, which hold great strategic importance due to their location in the region. IOR also holds a prodigious significance for global politics, trade and energy security due to the oil imports through its routes. With an extensive maritime borderline, India is located at the centre of the IOR.

It provides a geo-strategic advantage to India but also makes it vulnerable to potential IOR-centric challenges. It is often said that whosoever controls the IOR, governs the economy in the world as IOR provides the most strategic sea-trade route from Red Sea, Persian Gulf region via Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca to China, Korea, Japan and Australia prominently. It can be called the tailback of South Asian economy as important arms, oil and other significant products are transported via Suez Canal to South West, South East and East Asia through the IOR.²

Needless to say, IOR is a hub of competition among various nations holding different national, regional and global interests. In past few years, Chinese manoeuvrings in the IOR increased changing the dynamics of the region every day. For example, India and the US strengthened their strategic partnership in past few years keeping common concerns and objectives in focus. The US also now considers India as its regional representative in the IOR. This has changed the bilateral as well as multilateral equations among Russia and China on one hand and China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka on the other hand. India's successful presidency of the mighty G-20, which was considered as a face of the powerful Western bloc nations, is also perceived as a challenge for China. India not only democratized G-20 by adding African Union to G-20 as a permanent member, it also spoke for Global South and tried to work as a bridge

² Significance of IOR, Cassindia Website, <https://www.cassindia.com/significance-of-ior>

between the developed North and developing South. This opened a new chapter in the global politics where nations started collaborating with each other keeping sustainable development as a major aim.

While rest of the world became busy in building up positive connects to boost dynamism in global politics, China initiated its expansive strategy in the IOR, following what it has been already doing in Indo-Pacific. China recently held the second IOR Forum to assert its presence and deepen its role in the IOR. China's development aid agency, China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) hosted the first Indian Ocean Region Forum in Kunming on 21st November, 2022. The objective of the forum was stated to be promoting economic and infrastructural growth in the region. But when Luo Zhaohui, the chairperson of CIDCA referred to China's Maritime Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in his address, Chinese intentions behind starting this initiative became clear.³

It is evident that China wishes to establish its control at the strategic points in the IOR. It has already established its bases at few strategic points like in Gwadar, Pakistan, which is significant considering the oil transit through strait of Malacca in the IOR. China has already established its bases at other significant points around IOR region to challenge security of India and neutrality of the region.

Another challenge for the neutrality of the IOR comes from Maldives. Maldives' strategic location in the IOR across the strategic sea lanes that connect East Asia with West Asia makes it a very special nation for the entire region despite its small size. So far, India and Maldives enjoyed good bilateral relationship, and the earlier government did not fall a trap to China's 'string of pearl' strategy, using which latter has already captured strategically located ports in different nations located between the Chinese mainland and Port of Sudan in the Horn of Africa. So far, India maintained its strong presence in Maldives but after the recent elections in the Maldives, it seems that, apart from the bilateral relations between India and Maldives, the regional integrity may also suffer heavily. The victory of the pro-China candidate Mohamed

³ Speech by Mr. Luo Zhaohui at the Opening Ceremony of the China-Indian Ocean Region c_833009.htm

Muizzou, who was previously the mayor of Male, has changed the geopolitics of the IOR region. Not only Muizzou ran his campaign on the anti-Indian lines, he also announced to remove all Indian troops stationed in Maldives. This has started disturbing the present balance of power in the region.⁴

Considering the increasing threat from China and its allies in IOR, India and other likeminded nations started strengthening their bilateral as well as multilateral partnerships. India is also focusing on strengthening Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which has a membership of 23 countries, including China itself. At bilateral level, the US is working on sharing technology with India for fighter jet engines and armed drones, which is a pathbreaking sign in the defence partnership between the two nations. Both the nations have already been working to share technology and other real-time sensitive information under the agreements Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which was signed in 2016, COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) signed in 2018, and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) signed in 2020. These agreements enable sharing of sophisticated military technology, logistics and geospatial maps between the two nations. Both the nations are concerned about the stability and security of the IOR and Indo-Pacific region predominantly as the neutrality in these regions remain critical for the world trade as well as security. Internationalization of the conflict between China and Taiwan and China's increasingly aggressive behaviour in both the regions have put nations and various platforms on alert; and new bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation pacts can be seen.

Considering the major security challenge posed by China in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan has also approved a major plan to focus on its maritime security and its national interests. Earlier also, Japan announced its remilitarization considering the threat posed by China. Now, Japan has revised its Development Cooperation Charter, which has been approved by its PM Fumio Kishida's Cabinet to address broadening China concern and the impact of Russia-Ukraine war. Under the revised charter, Japan will now give priority to the triggered situation in Indo-Pacific region due to the aggression of China and the crises generated due to Russia-Ukraine war in the domains of food

⁴ Joshi Anshu, "World Recap", *The Daily Guardian*, 7 October 2023, p.12.

and energy security. Japan has now announced Official Security Assistance (OSA) for the developing nations in the Indo-Pacific region to provide Japan-made equipment such as radars, antennas, as well as development of infrastructure such as ports in the region. This majorly involves military cooperation to strengthen the national security of the nations in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵ Japan is also working quadrilaterally at the platform of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with India, Australia and the US to ensure safe, secure, stable and neutral Indo-Pacific region.

Basically, multilateral platforms provide a good environment to the leaders from different nations to meet and work on various bilateral as well as multilateral issues. These platforms also take up various global objectives like promoting global peace and security, sustainable development and climate change containment. India understands the significance of collaborative efforts to ensure regional and global security and hence it is also strengthening its ties with Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to ensure stability and neutrality of the IOR as well as Indo-Pacific its ties with Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to ensure stability and neutrality of the IOR as well as Indo-Pacific.

Re-boosted India-ASEAN Connects

Considering the manoeuvrings of China in the IOR as well as Indo-Pacific region, India is working on strengthening its ties with ASEAN to counter Chinese aggression effectively on one hand while keep working on the development of the region on the other.

“The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, was established on 8th August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the Founding Fathers of ASEAN: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined ASEAN on 7th January 1984, followed by Viet Nam on 28th July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23rd July 1997, and Cambodia on 30th April 1999, making up what is today the ten Member States of ASEAN.”⁶

India started its formal engagement with ASEAN in 1992 as a ‘Sectoral

⁵ Joshi Anshu, “World Recap”, *The Daily Guardian*, 10 June 2023, p.12.

⁶ About ASEAN, <https://asean.org/>

Dialogue Partner’, which comprised only secretary-level interactions. Gradually, it elevated its status as a ‘Dialogue Partner’ with ASEAN in 1995, which involved interactions at the Foreign Minister level. This was further upgraded to the Summit level partnership in 2002. India’s engagement with ASEAN is determined by the three significant goals: (i) enhancing connectivity between India and ASEAN in the broadest sense of the term (physical, digital, people-to-people, business etc.); (ii) strengthening the ASEAN organization; (iii) expanding practical cooperation in the maritime domain. The year 2022 marked 30 years of ASEAN-India relations and a series of events were organised to celebrate the occasion including the special ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, visit of ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) delegation to India, the ASEAN-India High Level Conference on Renewable Energy, ASEAN-India Start-up Festival, inauguration of the ASEAN-India Network of Universities (AINU), the 7th Roundtable edition of ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks, ASEAN-India Media Exchange, ASEAN-India Artist Camp, ASEAN-India Music Festival and the scheduled activities like first ASEAN India Maritime Exercise and ASEAN-India Youth Summit. With this, India and ASEAN embarked on a new journey of trusted strategic partnership.⁷

Basically, despite having good cultural connects with the Southeast Asian nations since ages, and also despite the fact that ASEAN was established in 1967, it took many years for both ASEAN and India to develop collaborative and focused relations. When the globalization and liberalization knocked the doors of the world after the end of the cold war in the era of early 90s, India realised its significance and came up with ‘Look East Policy.’ ASEAN and India strengthened relations with each other and started working to fortify their political, social, economic, infrastructural, cultural and security connects predominantly. India then elevated its ‘Look East Policy’ to ‘Act East Policy.’ However, the dynamism of this ‘Act East’ could be seen in last nine years clearly. ASEAN and India have more than 30 dialogue mechanisms today and both are collaborating in various domains with joint funds. This is what India is focusing on both bilaterally and multilaterally; co-investment, co-production and co-development.⁸

⁷ ASEAN-India Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-ASEAN-_Relations_2022.pdf

⁸ Joshi Anshu, “World Recap”, *The Daily Guardian*, 8 September 2023, p.12.

Apart from strengthening core India-ASEAN framework, India also enthusiastically participates in various ASEAN-led frameworks such as East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting+ (ADMM+) and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). All these platforms open ample opportunities for India and ASEAN to engage, especially considering Indo-Pacific in the focus. For example, Indian Prime Minister announced the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at the 14th EAS in 2019, which aims at endorsing partnerships to create secure, stable, influence-free, prosperous and sustainable maritime area with reinforced maritime security; marine resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology and academic cooperation; and trade, connectivity and maritime transport; as its key pillars.⁹

Indian Prime Minister also attended the significant ASEAN-India summit held in the month of September 2023 in Jakarta with a special focus on economic development and influence-free Indo-Pacific region. He also attended 18th East Asia summit to boost India's relations with the East Asian nations. In his address, he emphasised on the collective mechanisms between India and the East Asian nations in security and defence domain to keep Indo-Pacific stable and neutral.¹⁰ This has opened a new chapter of hope and developments in India-ASEAN relations.

ASEAN and India are also engaged to develop infrastructure in the region to promote trade as well as security. Both are working on the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Project to increase the maritime and air connectivity between ASEAN and India. Both are also working on transforming the corridors of connectivity into economic corridors and extending India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam.¹¹

Boosted India-ASEAN connects definitely contribute to ensuring safe, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region; and an influence-free IOR. Both ASEAN and India can elevate their maritime partnership and can emerge as

⁹ Joshi Anshu, "World Recap", *The Daily Guardian*, 8 September 2023, p.12.

¹⁰ ASEAN-India Brief, May 2022, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/ASEAN_India_Brief_May_2022.pdf

¹¹ India-ASEAN Relations, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-ASEAN-Relations-August-2018.pdf>

trusted maritime partners in the region. Also, elevated land, air and sea connectivity among the ASEAN nations and India could be helpful in promoting tourism, trade and investments apart from security. Considering common cultural heritage between India and ASEAN boosting people-to-people connect also could be considered as a prioritised objective to elevate the present partnership. In the light of the present geo-political situation, challenges and objectives, ASEAN and India have tremendous prospects to unlock and grow.

India's Engagement with ASEAN

*Dinesh Kumar Pandey

ABSTRACT

India's relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a strategic alliance to foster peace, stability, and economic success in the Indo-Pacific area. This collaboration is driven by mutually agreed-upon principles and standards that have been in place since its establishment in 1992. The ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region adopted the 18th ASEAN-India Summit, reiterates the dedication to advancing the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership and upholding the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)' goals and principles. The AOIP and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) have common values in advocating peace and cooperation. The need of time is to explore measures to execute the AOIP using intensified collaboration with a particular emphasis on maritime cooperation, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and potential areas of economic cooperation. Indian initiatives aim to attain tranquilly and economic well-being in the area. The sustenance of efforts by all the players is vital for the desired productivity.

Keywords: ASEAN, AOIP, IPOI, India-ASEAN Relationship.

The inception of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) -India collaboration in the early 1990s has evolved into a substantial alliance with strategic and economic dimensions. India possesses strategic and commercial interests in the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific region due to the increasing demand for its exports, expanding markets, and the imperative need for energy and other vital resources. Its association with the ASEAN shapes India's

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political, economic and strategic aspirations in the region.¹

Indian Bonhomie in the Region

India has been one of ASEAN's dialogue partners since 1992 and is a founding member of the East Asia Summit (EAS), the premier leaders' platform for strategic dialogue and cooperation on political, security and economic challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. At the 14th EAS in 2019, India proposed the IPOI, a framework for practical cooperation in seven domains, including maritime security, economics, and human rights. 'The Security and Growth for All in the Region' (SAGAR) programme, the Act East Policy, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), and the Project Development Fund (PDF) for CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) are just some of the initiatives India has launched to increase its engagement with ASEAN and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.²

This includes the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Malabar naval exercise, the Milan multilateral maritime exercise, and the Indian Ocean Dialogue¹, all of which are examples of maritime cooperation between India and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

India has collaborated in a number of projects to support ASEAN's connectivity agenda, including the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).³

India's efforts in the International Solar Alliance (ISA), the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), the Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), and the Mekong Delta Plan have all contributed to the sustainable development of ASEAN and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

The ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation

¹ Sohail Ahmad, ASEAN within India's Indo-Pacific Vision, *The Diplomatic Insight*, June 29, 2022, <https://thediplomaticinsight.com/asean-within-indias-indo-pacific-vision/>. Accessed on September 05, 2023.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Agreement (CECA) with Singapore are just a few examples of the mechanisms India has been using to increase its economic cooperation with ASEAN and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.⁴

India and the ASEAN have engaged in various activities to celebrate their common heritage and diverse cultural backgrounds. These events include the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, the ASEAN-India Car Rally, the ASEAN-India Film Festival, the ASEAN-India Music Festival and the Delhi Dialogue.

Significance of India-ASEAN Relationship

India and the ASEAN have been actively involved for more than three decades in promoting peace and tranquillity within the Indo-Pacific region and of peace and tranquillity within the Indo-Pacific region, as well as in addressing the various challenges that arise from Chinese influence.⁵

India has officially affirmed within the United Nations Security Council that its conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific as an arena characterised by liberty, accessibility, and inclusivity is fundamentally rooted in the central role of the ASEAN and the shared endeavour to achieve widespread affluence. In doing so, India has advocated for synchronised and unified efforts transcending national boundaries to address the prevailing security predicaments of terrorism, radicalisation and organised criminal activities.⁶

EAM Dr Jaishankar has expressed his viewpoint in the United Nations Security Council that India's association with the ASEAN is a fundamental tenet of its diplomatic strategy and forms the bedrock of its Act East Policy. India's conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific as a domain characterised by freedom, openness and inclusivity is firmly grounded in the principles of international law and a system governed by established rules. This vision is fundamentally built upon the central role of the ASEAN and the shared

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sampa Kundu, "Thirty Years of ASEAN-India Relations: The Stock-taking of Outcomes for 1992-2022", AIC Working Paper, No. 10, April 2022, <https://aseanindiacentre.org.in/sites/default/files/publication/AIC%20WP%2010%202020%20May.pdf>. Accessed on September 5, 2023.

⁶ PTI, "India's vision of Indo-Pacific as free, open, inclusive region premised upon ASEAN centrality: EAM", The Economic Times, April 19, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/indias-vision-of-indo-pacific-as-free-open-inclusive-region-premised-upon-asean-centrality-eam/articleshow/82147731.cms>. Accessed on September 05, 2023.

commitment to achieve collective advancement and economic well-being.

Both in terms of physical connections and cultural and civilisational ties, India plays a pivotal role in the region surrounding the Indian Ocean. India maintains robust relationships with several vital nations on a global and sub-global scale, including those of the ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Besides its immediate neighbours, India maintains close ties with the island nations of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.⁷

India's military and strategic alliances with ASEAN nations have grown particularly important over the past few years due to the China factor, which has intensified security and military ties between India and the region's member states.⁸ Following a period of considerable apprehension spanning multiple years, India and the nations of ASEAN have commenced collaborative military exercises at the onset of the current year. Regular military drills are carried out by India, with numerous ASEAN nations consistently engaging as part of their routine operations. These alliances have assumed significance within the framework of the swiftly deteriorating geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹

India and the ASEAN are mutually inclined towards upholding a system of international governance based on established regulations, ensuring unhindered maritime passage and fostering regional stability. Various perspectives and visions about these challenges are presented below.

(a) Strategic Partnership: Establishing a strategic partnership between India and ASEAN seeks to bolster cooperation in of a strategic partnership between India and ASEAN. It seeks to strengthen cooperation in the realms of politics, security, economics and culture.¹⁰ The association's

⁷ Prabir De and Durairaj Kumarasamy, "Emerging Perspectives of Indo-Pacific Initiatives", RIS Air Commentary, No. 9, September 2020, https://aseanindiacentre.org.in/sites/default/files/2021-09/AICCommentary20No%209%20September_2020.pdf. Accessed on September 5, 2023.

⁸ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Balancing Act Viewed Through Recent Military Exercises", September 28, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/indias-balancing-act-viewed-through-recent-military-exercises/>. Accessed on September 5, 2023.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Book Reviews." *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492840906500108>.

primary objective is to cultivate peace, stability and development within the Indo-Pacific region. The routine high-level dialogues and meetings conducted between India and ASEAN member states serve as a crucial platform for deliberating regional security issues, developing regional security challenges and developing collaborative strategies.¹¹

- (b) **AOIP:** The ASEAN has formulated its perspective on the Indo-Pacific, known as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This outlook is aligned with India's vision for the region. It strongly places a strong emphasis on respect for international law, inclusivity and ASEAN's central position. The ASEAN Outlook acknowledges the significance of collaboration among regional actors, including India, to successfully address shared challenges and promote peace, stability and economic advancement.¹² The AOIP offers an ASEAN-centric viewpoint on the Indo-Pacific, characterised by its lack of physical contiguity but rather its high degree of integration and interconnectivity. The AOIP strongly emphasises on fostering communication and collaboration as opposed to fostering rivalry. Its core objectives include promoting progress and prosperity for all participants and upholding principles of respect for diversity and shared values. The AOIP also delineates four primary collaboration domains: maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic cooperation.
- (c) **Maritime Security Cooperation:** India and ASEAN have worked collaboratively on initiatives to improve maritime security. The Indian Navy frequently engages in collaborative exercises with member states of the ASEAN, primarily aiming to augment a primary objective of increasing interoperability and exchanging valuable insights about maritime domain awareness, search and rescue operations, and counteracting maritime challenges. These initiatives make a significant contribution towards the preservation of peace and security within the Indo-Pacific region.

¹¹ Dial-up Rohingya repatriation talks with 'weak' military junta: Experts | The Business Standard. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/dial-rohingya-repatriation-talks-weak-military-junta-experts-327445>

¹² Emphasis on Dialogue and Cooperation: ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific - WORLD INSIGHT. <https://worldinsight.com/news/politics/emphasis-on-dialogue-and-cooperation-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>

- (d) Infrastructure Development:** India has encouraged connectivity and infrastructure growth throughout the Indo-Pacific, including in ASEAN nations, through programmes like the “Act East Policy” and the “Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative.” The primary objective of these initiatives is to promote economic integration, sustainable development, and interpersonal connectivity, with the potential to enhance regional stability and counteract the influence exerted by China.
- (e) Teaming with Other Nations:** Multilateral cooperation is a significant aspect of India and ASEAN’s strategic approach, as they actively participate in diverse multilateral platforms to effectively address regional security challenges. India actively engages in various regional forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to enhance cooperation and confidence-building measures among stakeholders in the region.¹³ These platforms offer avenues for engaging in discussions and facilitating the coordination of responses to security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN and Indian Trade

The trade and investment relations between India and ASEAN have exhibited a consistent upward trajectory, with ASEAN occupying the position of India’s fourth most significant trading partner. India’s trade with the ASEAN amounts to approximately US\$ 81.33 billion, or about 10.6% of India’s total trade volume. The percentage of India’s exports to the ASEAN amounts to 11.28% of our exports.

Investment flows in both directions are substantial, with ASEAN representing around 18.28% of the total investment inflows into India from 2000 onwards. Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) data illustrates that between April 2000 and March 2018, India received roughly US\$68.91 billion in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from ASEAN countries. Conversely, as recorded by the DEA, FDI outflows from India to ASEAN countries reached approximately US\$38.672 billion between April 2007 and March 2015. The

¹³ Ibid.

ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement was fully implemented following enforcing the ASEAN-India Agreements on Trade in Service and Investments on 1 July 2015.¹⁴

India is the sixth major trading partner of the ASEAN and the eighth greatest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) source among ASEAN Dialogue Partners.¹⁵

Indian Financial Support: The ASEAN Multilateral Division provides project-based financial assistance to member countries within the ASEAN region. 61 countries have received financial help from India under the Funds listed below:

The Cooperation Fund: India made a significant financial commitment to the ASEAN-India Fund for US\$ 50 million during the 7th ASEAN-India Summit in 2009. This contribution was intended to facilitate the execution of the ASEAN-India Plans of Action, encompassing various sectors and initiatives to enhance cooperation between ASEAN and India. These initiatives include capacity-building programmes in the political, economic and socio-cultural domains, aiming to strengthen and expand the objective of enhancing and expanding the ASEAN-India partnership. To further the initiatives for development and capacity building, the Prime Minister has suggested augmenting the ASEAN-India Fund with an extra allocation of US\$ 50 million during the 14th ASEAN India Summit held in Vientiane in September 2016.

Impetus to Science & Technology Development: The ASEAN-India Science & Technology Development Fund (AISTDF) was established during the 6th ASEAN-India Summit in November 2007, held in Singapore. India made a significant contribution of US\$ 1 million towards this fund to foster collaborative research and development projects in science and technology between ASEAN and India. The Fund was established and commenced operations in the fiscal year 2009-10, with spending initiated in the subsequent fiscal year of 2010-11. The subject fund has undergone an augmentation, increasing to US\$5 million, effective as of 2016-17.

¹⁴ "India- ASEAN Relation", MEA, August 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-ASEAN-Relations-August-2018.pdf>. Accessed on September 5, 2023.

¹⁵ "ASEAN India Economic Relations", ASEAN Secretariat, 2020, <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-india-economic-relations/>. Accessed on September 5, 2023.

Focussing on Green World: During the 6th ASEAN-India Summit held on 21 November 2007 in Singapore, the Indian Government declared its intention to establish the ASEAN-India Green Fund. This fund, initially endowed with a sum of US\$ 5 million from India, aims to facilitate cooperative initiatives about environmental conservation and climate change mitigation of climate change. Potential areas of collaboration under the Fund include work on climate change, energy efficiency, clean technologies, renewable energy, biodiversity protection and environmental education.

The Chinese Factor

The collaboration between India and ASEAN is a sophisticated and diverse matter that has implications for China across multiple dimensions. Several potential consequences can be observed:

India's collaboration with the ASEAN has the potential to serve as a strategic response to China's expanding influence and belligerent behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the realm of maritime affairs. India and the ASEAN exhibit shared interests and concerns regarding the actions undertaken by China in the South China Sea. These efforts involve territorial disputes with multiple ASEAN member states, as well as on the construction and militarisation of artificial islands in the region. India and the ASEAN have engaged in collaborative naval drills and strengthened their cooperation in maritime security to safeguard the unrestricted movement of vessels and aircraft within the area.

India's association with ASEAN could open new opportunities for trade, investment, and communication in the region. This is particularly significant as the region heavily relies on China for economic purposes. China serves as the primary financial partner for the ASEAN, constituting 17.2% of the region's overall trade in the year 2020. China is a significant investor and creditor in the area, mainly through its 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), which claims to develop infrastructure and enhance connectivity throughout Asia, Africa and Europe. In contrast, India has been actively implementing its policies to strengthen its strategy aimed at improving its economic relations with ASEAN. These efforts include establishing the 'ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement' (AIFTA), participating in the 'Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership' (RCEP) and negotiating and implementing other bilateral and subregional

accords. India has been actively endorsing ASEAN's connectivity goal using various initiatives, including the "India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway", "the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project", and "the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)."

India's collaboration with the ASEAN has the potential to facilitate increased cultural, social, and people-to-people interactions between the two entities, thereby bolstering their reciprocal comprehension and confidence. India and the ASEAN share a significant historical connection characterised by cultural and civilisational ties that can be traced back to ancient periods. During this time, the dissemination of Hinduism and Buddhism was pivotal in spreading Indian influence across Southeast Asia. India and the ASEAN have been engaging in activities to celebrate their common heritage and diversity. These events include the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, the ASEAN-India Car Rally, the ASEAN-India Film Festival, the ASEAN-India Music Festival and the Delhi Dialogue. India and the ASEAN have been actively enhancing their interpersonal connections through a range of endeavours, including the ASEAN-India Cultural Exchange Programme, the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Lecture Series, the ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks, the ASEAN-India Students Exchange Programme and the ASEAN-India Media Exchange Programme.

The potential ramifications of India's collaboration with the ASEAN on China are outlined in the succeeding paragraphs. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that India's collaboration with ASEAN is not oriented towards the containment or confrontation of China. Instead, its objective is to foster a liberated, accessible, comprehensive and rule-based Indo-Pacific region that upholds sovereignty and the principles of international law. India has consistently maintained its communication and involvement with China across a range of bilateral and multilateral fora, including, but not limited to, the BRICS, the SCO, the RIC (Russia-India-China) and the WMCC ("Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs"). India has made concerted efforts to address its border conflicts with China using diplomatic and military channels amicably. Hence, it is imperative to perceive India's collaboration with ASEAN not as a zero-sum game or a menace to China but as a prospect for reciprocal advantages and cooperation among all relevant regional actors. Thus, it is a prospect for mutual benefits and

collaboration among all appropriate regional actors.

Indian Initiatives

An integral part of India's foreign policy and the driving force behind our Act East Policy is the country's close ties with ASEAN. Given the progress made since India became a Sectoral Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, a Dialogue Partner in 1996 and a Summit Level Partner in 2002, the decision to upgrade the relationship to a Strategic Partnership in 2012 was a logical step forward. India and the ASEAN have established 30 dialogue mechanisms covering many different fields of study.¹⁶

India perceives the ASEAN as a pivotal and vital ally in the Indo-Pacific region, underlining its endorsement of the AOIP. This policy framework is a policy framework that was officially embraced by the leaders of the ASEAN in the year 2019.

India and the ASEAN have embarked upon numerous cooperation endeavours to augment regional marine security. The following are the salient initiatives:¹⁷

- (a) Maritime Transport Cooperation Between ASEAN and India:** ASEAN and India have collaborated to strengthen maritime transport cooperation. The primary areas of emphasis have been the promotion of connectivity, facilitation of trade and investment and the assurance of safety and security about maritime routes. Several initiatives are in place to strengthen coordination and collaboration in maritime transport between ASEAN and India. These initiatives include the ASEAN-India Maritime Transport Agreement and the ASEAN-India Maritime Transport Working Group.
- (b) Joint Naval Exercises:** The Indian Navy frequently engages in collaborative naval exercises with member governments of the ASEAN. The primary objective of these exercises is to strengthen interoperability,

¹⁶ Ibid MEA.

¹⁷ "ASEAN and ARF Maritime Security Dialogue and Cooperation", Information Paper ASEAN Sectt, October 4, 2007, https://www.un.org/depts/los/consultative_process/mar_sec_submissions/asean.pdf. Accessed on October 5, 2023.

foster mutual trust, and facilitate the exchange of best practices in maritime security. Illustrative instances encompass the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIMEX) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) exercises, wherein naval forces from ASEAN and India undertake collaborative drills and simulations undertaken by maritime forces from ASEAN and India.¹⁸

- (c) **Information Sharing and Maritime Domain Awareness:** The collaboration between India and ASEAN has been robust and dynamic in information sharing and maritime domain awareness. To combat maritime threats like piracy, smuggling and illegal fishing, they cooperate on patrols, share best practices and exchange intelligence. These initiatives help to maintain a maritime environment that is secure and safe.
- (d) **Capacity Building and Training:** India has supported ASEAN member nations in enhancing their marine security capabilities through initiatives focused on capacity building and training. These programmes focus on challenges like maritime law enforcement, search and rescue efforts, disaster management and the reduction of transnational naval crimes. India offers technical support, organises training programme, and shares its knowledge to bolster the marine security capacities of ASEAN nations.
- (e) **Cooperation in Maritime Research and Technology:** Promoting collaboration in maritime research and technology development is a shared objective between India and the ASEAN. The individuals collaborate in oceanography, marine ecology, remote sensing and maritime surveillance technology. These collaborative research endeavours enhance comprehension of the marine domain and facilitate the implementation of efficient maritime security measures.
- (f) **Norms for Information Exchange:** India and the ASEAN have implemented procedures to facilitate the regular exchange of information and engage in dialogue about maritime security. One notable example is the ASEAN-India Dialogue on Maritime Cooperation, which serves as a platform for engaging in discussions about maritime concerns, fostering confidence-building measures and exploring potential possibilities for enhanced cooperation.

¹⁸ Ibid Diplomat

Conclusion

The joint initiatives highlight the commitment of India and ASEAN to bolster marine security within the area, achieved through cooperation, the development of capabilities and the exchange of information. Their collaborative efforts are directed towards safeguarding and maintaining the security and stability of the maritime domain in the Indo-Pacific region.

The active engagement of the Indo-Pacific region plays a pivotal role in shaping the intricate framework of the region's economic and security dimensions. The preservation of marine resource's biodiversity and the mitigation of climate change; the advocacy for sustainable development; the ease of marine pollution; the management and provision of aid during disasters; the dissemination of knowledge; the development of skills and capabilities; the improvement of maritime domain awareness; the establishment of reliable infrastructure; the facilitation of maritime trade and transportation; the reinforcement of the digital economy. The promotion of energy cooperation, alongside the facilitation of marine tourism, represents a few points of concern of the myriad domains that hold potential for further exploration through collaborative efforts.



India and ASEAN: Visions and Perspectives

**Akhilesh Chandra Prabhakar*

Introduction

The size of the combined ASEAN GDP is about 2 trillion dollars. This region is the third largest economic and trading bloc just behind the EU and NAFTA. ASEAN has been continuously growing to a level where had it been a single country, it would have made it to the list of the top 10 economic powers of the world. The Malaysian GDP performed at 8.7 per cent in 2022, which was the highest performance rate in the ASEAN region, while, Vietnam's GDP was 8.02 per cent, Indonesian's GDP rose 5.3 per cent, Singapore's GDP ratio was 3.65 per cent growth, Thailand's GDP had increased by 2.59 per cent in the same year. With the potential of having the third-largest market and the ability to be the largest provider of cheap labour after India and China, some have predicted that by 2030 ASEAN might ranked as the fourth-largest economy in the world.

According to the report of ESCAP dated 30/09/2022, the intra-ASEAN investment was \$ 29.924 billion. ASEAN 10 plus 5 other regional comprehensive economic partnership countries (including Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, which was materialized on January 1, 2022), accounted for around 11 per cent of the world's FDI inflows in 2020, in which China represented 12 per cent of the global total FDI inflows in the same year. The ASEAN+5 (known as RCEP) nations have consistently maintained bilateral trade and economic partnerships with India and USA even though they are not a members of the RCEP and the United States. Their collective efforts aim to establish a free trade area by eliminating tariffs on 90 per cent of traded goods. Currently, the RCEP accounts for a population of 3.4 billion with a total GDP (which was based on Purchasing Power Parity

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(PPP) of US\$49.5 trillion, which is around 39 per cent of the world's GDP, and it's expected to increase the amount to nearly US\$250 trillion by 2050 with the combined GDP of China and India making up more than 75 per cent of the total amounts. The RCEP's share of the global economy could account for half of the estimated US\$ 0.5 quadrillion of global GDP (based on PPP) by 2050 (Prabhakar, 2020).

Thus, the ASEAN region has been facing a trade deficit problem because domestic currencies have continuously been depreciating, export sectors are declining, and falling in foreign direct investments, which had affected by the Western capitalist's systemic (economic and financial) crisis since 2008.

1.1 India-ASEAN Historical and Cultural Linkages

The historical relationship between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can be traced back to ancient maritime routes for trade and cultural exchanges. Over the years, the two entities have forged diplomatic ties, enhanced economic, trade, technology and financial cooperation, and fostered cultural exchanges. During the financial and economic crisis in the major Western capitalist countries including the USA and the EU, and India since 2008, have been focusing on the East (what it called: the "*Look East Policy*") for trade and investment (finance).

1.2 The ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Initiative

The 20th annual ASEAN-India Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit held in Jakarta on September 7, 2023, India and ASEAN have accepted a comprehensive 12-point proposal (Bhardwaj, 2023). Bhardwaj stated that:

"12 points agendas are the following:

- 1.2.1. Enhanced connectivity: The establishment of enhanced connectivity, including the creation of a multi-modal connectivity and economic corridor linking Southeast Asia, India, West Asia, and Europe, is expected to boost trade and investment opportunities for businesses in these regions. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project aim to improve physical connectivity, facilitating smoother movement of goods and people.

- 1.2.2. Digital transformation: India's digital public infrastructure initiative aims to facilitate digital transformation across sectors, promoting innovation and efficiency in businesses with ASEAN countries.
- 1.2.3. Digital Future Fund: India announced the ASEAN-India Fund for Digital Future. This fund will focus on fostering collaboration in digital transformation and financial connectivity, potentially opening up new avenues for businesses in the digital sector.
- 1.2.4. Research support: India pledged renewed support to the Economic and Research Institute of ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) as a knowledge partner. This move will enhance research and development opportunities for businesses and promote informed decision-making.
- 1.2.5. Advocating for the Global South: The proposal emphasized the need to collectively raise issues faced by the Global South in multilateral forums, signaling India's commitment to ensuring the interests of developing nations are heard.
- 1.2.6. Traditional medicine center: India invited ASEAN countries to join the Global Centre for Traditional Medicine, established by WHO in India. This offers opportunities for cooperation in healthcare, including traditional medicine, a potential growth area for businesses.
- 1.2.7. Mission LiFE: India offers Mission LiFE for businesses to contribute to health and environmental sustainability efforts.
- 1.2.8. Affordable medicines: India has offered to share its expertise in providing affordable and quality medicines through Jan-Aushadhi Kendras could benefit businesses in pharmaceutical manufacturing and distribution.
- 1.2.9. Counterterrorism cooperation: The proposal called for collective action against terrorism, terror financing, and cyber-disinformation, promoting a secure environment for businesses.
- 1.2.10. Disaster resilience: India invited ASEAN countries to join the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, enhancing disaster preparedness and response capabilities, which can be vital for business continuity.

1.2.11. Disaster management: Cooperation in disaster management can reduce business risks in the face of natural disasters, ensuring smoother operations.

1.2.12. Maritime security: Enhanced cooperation on maritime safety, security, and domain awareness is vital for businesses engaged in maritime trade and logistics.”

1.3 Economic Cooperation

The economic relationship including trade and investment between India and the ASEAN region has reached the highest levels with the establishment of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area in 2010. This trade agreement aimed at reducing tariffs and eliminating barriers, fostering a conducive environment for increased bilateral trade and investment. The diverse economies of ASEAN member states and India offer complementary advantages, creating avenues for mutually beneficial partnerships. Investments in sectors such as technology, infrastructure, and manufacturing contribute to the economic vibrancy of the region. India is the fourth-largest trading partner, with a total trade value of US \$110.4 billion recorded in the financial year (FY) 2021-22. During this period, India’s exports to ASEAN accounted for US \$42.327 billion, while imports from ASEAN totalled US \$68.07 billion, marking a significant milestone as bilateral trade exceeded US \$100 billion for the first time. In FY 2022-23, India and ASEAN recorded a bilateral trade volume of US \$131.5 billion. This bilateral

Table 1.1. Value of India’s trade with ASEAN countries in financial year 2022 (in million US dollars)

Singapore	30,112.85
Indonesia	26,176.32
Malaysia	19,419.26
Vietnam	15,151.31
Thailand	15,083.88
Philippines	2,836.35
Myanmar	1,894.9
Brunei	437.6
Cambodia	293.25
Laos	15.45

Source: Statista 2023

Table 1.2. India's Trade with Individual ASEAN Countries in FY 2021-22 (US\$ Billion)

Country	Export	Import	Total Trade
Singapore	11.105	18.956	30.107
Indonesia	8.471	17.702	26.174
Malaysia	6.995	12.424	19.419
Vietnam	6.702	7.435	14.138
Thailand	5.751	9.332	15.083
Philippines	2.107	0.729	2.836
Myanmar	0.892	1.001	1.894
Brunei	0.043	0.394	0.437
Cambodia	0.198	0.094	0.293
Laos	0.014	0.0008	0.015

Source: Indian Ministry of Commerce 2023

trade accounted for 11.3 per cent of India's total global trade during the same period (Bhardwaj, 2023). The largest portion of this trade came from Singapore, valued at over 30 billion dollars that year. Of the trade between India and Singapore, imports into India had a higher value than its exports (Minhas, 2023).

1.4. Prospects and Opportunities of Investment in Physical and Digital Infrastructures in the ASEAN Countries

ASEAN's foreign direct investment in India from 2000 to 2021, has reached US \$117.88 billion. The majority of these investments, totalling US \$115 billion, came from Singaporean investors. India's foreign direct investments into ASEAN nations from April 2019 to March 2022 reached a total of US \$55.5 billion. Within this figure, a significant portion, specifically US \$51.5 billion, was invested in Singapore (Bhardwaj, 2023).

1.4.1. The Reasons for the Financial and Investment Flows from Singapore

Several reasons contribute to the financial flows and investments into India through Singapore, and analyzing these factors provides insights into the dynamics of this economic relationship. The key reasons for such financial flows:

- 1.4.1.1. **Tax Efficiency: Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA):** Singapore has a comprehensive DTAA with India, which helps in avoiding the imposition of taxes on the same income in both

countries. This encourages investors to route their investments through Singapore for tax efficiency.

- 1.4.1.2. **Ease of Doing Business: Business-Friendly Environment:** Singapore is known for its business-friendly environment, efficient regulatory framework, and transparent legal system. Investors find it easier to navigate regulations, facilitating smoother business operations.
- 1.4.1.3. **Gateway to Southeast Asia: Strategic Location:** Singapore's strategic geographical location makes it a gateway to not only India but also to the broader Southeast Asian region. Investors often use Singapore as a regional hub for their investments in India and neighbouring countries.
- 1.4.1.4. **Robust Financial Ecosystem: Financial Infrastructure:** Singapore boasts a well-developed and stable financial ecosystem, including a sophisticated banking system, capital markets, and a strong regulatory environment. This infrastructure attracts global investors seeking a secure platform for financial transactions.
- 1.4.1.5. **Political Stability and Legal Framework: Stability and Rule of Law:** Singapore is known for its political stability and adherence to the rule of law. This provides a level of certainty and security for investors, encouraging them to choose Singapore as a conduit for investments in India.
- 1.4.1.6. **Investment Protection: Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs):** Singapore has signed Bilateral Investment Treaties with numerous countries, including India. These treaties provide a framework for protecting investments, offering a sense of security to investors against political and economic risks.
- 1.4.1.7. **Financial Services Hub:** As a global financial services hub, Singapore offers a wide range of financial products and services. Investors looking for financial expertise and instruments find Singapore an attractive destination.
- 1.4.1.8. **Favorable Regulatory Environment:** The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) and other regulatory bodies in Singapore actively work to create an environment conducive to financial activities, including foreign investments.

- 1.4.1.9. Flexible Holding Structures: Singapore offers various entity structures that facilitate investment planning, such as the use of holding companies, which can be advantageous for investors with diverse portfolios.
- 1.4.1.10. Access to Global Markets: Singapore's well-connected capital markets provide access to global investors and funding sources, allowing Indian businesses to tap into international capital.

In short, the flow of financial investments from India through Singapore is driven by a combination of tax benefits, a favourable business environment, strategic positioning, and the robust financial infrastructure that Singapore offers.

A total of 770 infrastructure deals have been made between 1990 and 2019 in Southeast Asia. These deals were able to garner a total investment of USD 231 billion (according to a joint study of India Infrastructure Research & South-East Asia Infrastructure magazine, and Asian Development Bank). ADB suggested that around USD 1.7 trillion would have to be invested annually in infrastructure across Asia until 2030 to revive the economy and achieve the goals of sustainable economic growth and development. Global Data states that The Indian government has allocated IDR 392 trillion (US \$25.8 billion) for infrastructure development in 2023.

1.5. ASEAN-India Diplomatic Cooperation

This multi-faceted collaboration underscores the comprehensive nature of India's engagements with ASEAN, encompassing diplomatic, economic, and scientific dimensions for mutual benefit and global stability.

1.5.1. Diplomatic Engagements

Diplomatic ties between India and ASEAN are formally structured through periodic ASEAN-India Summits. The summits underscore the commitment of both sides to strengthening diplomatic ties and collaboratively addressing shared challenges. In 1991, India announced the Look East policy towards the geo-strategic, geo-economic, and geo-political contexts to serve the interests of the Indian economy and security. Some scholars believe that India's vision was influenced by the United States, and joined together and followed by the proactive Act East Policy in 2014 to counter Chinese influence

in the ASEAN region throughout the Indo-Pacific to Asia Pacific regions, including Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. These initiatives are designed to cooperate with Southeast Asian partners who also seek to maintain the rules-based Western imperialist-dominated global order and norms of behaviour in the face of rising China. India's 'Look East Policy' emphasizes deeper engagement with ASEAN nations to play a more significant role in regional and global affairs and promote an "anti-China" balancing of global power in favour of Indian perspectives. India and ASEAN nations collaborate on issues related to maritime security and freedom of navigation (Grossman, 2023). To maintain the free movement of international trade routes (which covers around 70 per cent of global trade), regional peace and stability, the South China Sea is the global strategic importance focal point for the debate.

1.6. Major Challenges

Foreign Direct Investment flows in Southeast Asia have declined in 2022 due to being affected by tighter global credit conditions, leading to a deceleration and, in certain instances, a temporary departure of capital from the region. However, the war in Ukraine and Palestine led to higher food and energy prices, causing persistent inflationary pressure, and the global economic recession (combined) elements/forces are major reasons for the further decline in FDI in 2023.

1.6.1. Infrastructure Gaps

Despite progress in connectivity initiatives, infrastructure gaps remain a challenge in fully realising the economic potential between India and ASEAN. Addressing these gaps requires sustained efforts and investments to ensure seamless connectivity and efficient transportation of goods and services. The Trilateral Highway, connecting India, Myanmar, and Thailand, has faced several challenges, contributing to delays in its completion. These challenges include:

- 1.6.1.1. **Topographical Challenges:** The diverse and challenging terrains, especially in the border regions, have slowed down the construction process.
- 1.6.1.2. **Land Acquisition Issues:** Delays in acquiring land for the highway's alignment have been a significant hurdle, involving negotiations with

local communities and addressing concerns.

- 1.6.1.3. **Regulatory and Administrative Hurdles:** Navigating regulatory frameworks and administrative procedures across the three countries has proven complex, causing delays in approvals and project execution.

1.6.2 New Initiatives:

Direct Flights between the North-Eastern States of India and Bangkok need to address connectivity challenges and enhance economic ties. There have been initiatives to establish direct flights between the North-Eastern states of India and Bangkok. This initiative aims to following:

- 1.6.2.1. **Facilitate People-to-People Connectivity:**

Direct flights offer a more accessible and efficient means of travel, fostering cultural exchanges and economic collaboration.

- 1.6.2.2. **Boost Tourism and Trade:**

Improved air connectivity enhances tourism prospects and facilitates trade between the Northeastern states and Bangkok.

- 1.6.2.3. **Strengthen Diplomatic and Economic Ties:**

Direct flights contribute to strengthening diplomatic and economic relations by promoting regular interactions.

- 1.6.2.4. **India's Line of Credit of \$1 Billion for Connectivity Projects (2015):**

India's offer of a Line of Credit of \$1 billion in 2015 aimed to support connectivity projects, including those in the ASEAN region. However, the underutilization can be attributed to several factors:

- 1.6.2.4.1. **Project Viability Concerns:**

Some proposed projects may face challenges in terms of economic viability, deterring their implementation.

- 1.6.2.4.2. **Bureaucratic Hurdles:**

Cumbersome bureaucratic procedures in project approval and execution across countries may hinder the efficient utilization of the Line of Credit.

1.6.2.4.3. Changing Priorities: Shifting geopolitical dynamics and changing national priorities in the recipient countries could influence project preferences.

1.6.2.4.4. Security Concerns: Security issues, especially in border regions, may lead to hesitancy in undertaking certain connectivity projects.

1.6.3. Foreseeable Future of the Trilateral Highway

The completion of the Trilateral Highway is still seen as a strategic priority for India and its ASEAN partners. Collaborative measures to streamline regulatory processes, overcome land acquisition issues, and enhance regional cooperation are crucial for realizing the highway's potential.

1.7 India's Mission Towards Indo-Pacific

India's vision and perspective towards the Indo-Pacific region can be highlighted by the following key points:

1.7.1. Inclusive and Open Indo-Pacific

India advocates for an inclusive and open Indo-Pacific that ensures the freedom of navigation, overflight, and unimpeded commerce. It emphasizes the importance of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in maintaining order and promoting peaceful cooperation in the region.

1.7.2. Security and Economic Connectivity

India recognizes the interconnectedness of security and economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. It has been actively involved in promoting economic connectivity through infrastructure development, trade, and investment in the region. The security of sea lanes of communication is of particular concern to India, given its dependence on maritime trade.

1.7.3. Multilateral Approach

India prefers a multilateral approach to address regional issues and challenges in the Indo-Pacific. It participates in various regional forums and organizations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) to foster cooperation and dialogue among regional countries.

1.7.4. Strategic Partnerships

India seeks to build strategic partnerships with capitalist like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific to address common challenges, including maritime security, terrorism, and climate change. The Quad (a new imperialist club against the emerging Communist China), comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, is one such forum where India has engaged in discussions on regional and global issues.

1.8. An Assessment

India and ASEAN share a multifaceted relationship characterized by diplomatic, economic, and strategic cooperation. The visions and perspectives of these entities have evolved over the years, reflecting a commitment to regional stability, economic growth, and mutual collaboration. Here is an assessment of the key aspects:

1.8.1. Diplomatic Engagement

Strengths: The regular convening of ASEAN-India Summits demonstrates a commitment to high-level diplomatic engagement. These summits provide a platform for leaders to address regional and global issues, fostering understanding and collaboration.

Challenges: Despite diplomatic efforts, challenges such as bureaucratic hurdles and regulatory complexities have slowed down the progress of initiatives like the Trilateral Highway.

1.8.2. Economic Integration

Strengths: Efforts to harmonize trade policies and reduce non-tariff barriers indicate a commitment to economic integration. Collaborative ventures, including the Look East Policy and Act East Policy, showcase a strategic approach to regional economic partnerships.

Challenges: Economic integration faces challenges related to diverse economic structures, disparities in development, and the need for streamlined policies for smoother trade relations.

1.8.3. Cultural and Educational Exchanges

Strengths: Initiatives promoting student exchange programs and cultural

festivals contribute to enhanced people-to-people connectivity. These exchanges foster a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity.

Challenges: The extent of cultural and educational exchanges may be limited by resource constraints and variations in education systems.

1.8.4. Infrastructure Development

Strengths: The Trilateral Highway and initiatives for direct flights between the Northeastern states of India and Bangkok showcase a commitment to enhancing physical connectivity. Investments in infrastructure are crucial for trade facilitation and economic growth.

Challenges: Topographical challenges, land acquisition issues, and regulatory complexities have led to delays in completing infrastructure projects.

1.8.5. Security and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

Strengths: Efforts to enhance intelligence sharing and collaborate on maritime security demonstrate a shared commitment to addressing common security challenges.

Challenges: Geopolitical tensions and security concerns in the South China Sea present ongoing challenges that require careful diplomatic navigation.

1.8.6. Digital Connectivity and Innovation

Strengths: Emphasis on digital connectivity and innovation partnerships reflects an understanding of the importance of technology in modern collaborations.

Challenges: Varied levels of technological advancement among ASEAN nations may pose challenges in achieving a uniform approach to digital connectivity.

1.8.7. Public Diplomacy and Awareness

Strengths: Public diplomacy initiatives contribute to positive public opinion and awareness about the benefits of the ASEAN-India partnership.

Challenges: Effectively disseminating information and fostering public awareness may require increased communication efforts and targeted campaigns.

1.8.8. Flexibility and Adaptability

Strengths: Flexibility in strategies and a willingness to adapt to changing geopolitical dynamics reflect a pragmatic approach to collaboration.

Challenges: Maintaining adaptability amid geopolitical shifts and diverse national interests requires constant reassessment and diplomatic agility.

In summing up, the visions and perspectives of India and ASEAN underscore a commitment to regional stability, economic growth, and diplomatic collaboration. While progress has been made in various areas, challenges persist and necessitate ongoing diplomatic efforts, adaptability, and strategic planning to realize the full potential of this crucial partnership. The commitment to overcoming challenges and building on strengths is essential for a robust and enduring relationship.

India and the ASEAN countries need to continue their efforts to enhance physical and digital connectivity, which can unlock new avenues for trade and collaboration. Investment in infrastructure projects, coupled with advancements in technology, can create a more integrated and resilient economic ecosystem. Strengthening people-to-people ties through tourism, educational exchanges, and cultural initiatives is essential for building lasting relationships. Engaging citizens in the cultural, social, and economic aspects of the relationship fosters a sense of shared identity and mutual respect. India and ASEAN nations recognize the importance of this strategic partnership in addressing regional and global challenges. While challenges persist, the commitment to dialogue and collaboration remains strong. The future holds immense potential for deeper integration, enhanced connectivity, and the realization of shared visions for a prosperous and harmonious Indo-Pacific region.

1.9. Recommendations

1. **Enhance Infrastructure Connectivity: Investment in Trilateral Highway:** Prioritize and expedite the completion of the Trilateral Highway, addressing bureaucratic hurdles, land acquisition issues, and regulatory challenges for seamless connectivity.
2. **Multi-Modal Connectivity:** Develop multi-modal transportation networks to enhance connectivity, including railways, roads, and waterways, promoting efficient trade and people-to-people exchanges.
3. **Strengthen Economic Integration: Harmonize Trade Policies:** Work towards harmonizing trade policies and reducing non-tariff barriers to facilitate smoother economic integration.

4. **Promote SME Collaboration:** Foster collaboration among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in India and ASEAN nations, encouraging innovation and shared economic growth.
5. **Educational and Technological Exchanges** must be promoted on a complementary basis.
6. **Promote Student Exchange Programs:** Facilitate student exchange programs between India and ASEAN countries to enhance mutual understanding and strengthen educational ties.
7. **Cultural Festivals and Events:** Organize cultural festivals and events to celebrate diversity, promoting a deeper appreciation of each other's heritage.
8. **Sustainable Development Cooperation** such as green technology, green energy, and green finance should be promoted to achieve the goals of SDGs.
9. **Collaborate on Renewable Energy:** Foster cooperation in the development and implementation of renewable energy projects, aligning with sustainable development goals.
10. **Environmental Conservation Initiatives:** Jointly address environmental challenges, including transboundary pollution and climate change, through collaborative initiatives.
11. **Mutual security and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation** should be initiated.
12. **Enhance Intelligence Sharing:** Strengthen intelligence-sharing mechanisms to address shared security concerns, including counter-terrorism efforts and cybersecurity.
13. **Collaborate on Maritime Security:** Boost cooperation on maritime security to ensure the safety of sea routes and address common challenges in the South China Sea.
14. **Investment in Digital Infrastructure Connectivity and Innovation** should be promoted. Encourage the development of digital infrastructure to enhance connectivity in the digital space, facilitating e-commerce and technological collaboration.

15. **Innovation Partnerships:** Foster partnerships in research and development, encouraging innovation in key sectors such as technology, healthcare, and agriculture.
16. **People-to-people interconnectivity** should be intensified.
17. **Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives:** Launch cultural diplomacy initiatives, including art exhibitions, music festivals, and sports events, to strengthen people-to-people ties.
18. **Tourism Collaboration:** Collaborate on joint tourism initiatives to promote travel between India and ASEAN countries, showcasing diverse cultural and natural attractions.
19. **Regular ASEAN-India Summits** should be conducted.
20. **Regularize High-Level Dialogues:** Continue the tradition of regular ASEAN-India Summits, providing a platform for leaders to discuss pressing regional and global issues.
21. **Track Progress:** Establish mechanisms to track the progress of joint initiatives and projects, ensuring accountability and addressing challenges promptly.
22. **Publicize Achievements:** Actively publicize successful collaborations and achievements, fostering positive public opinion and awareness about the benefits of the ASEAN-India partnership.
23. **Educational Campaigns:** Launch educational campaigns to inform citizens about the cultural, economic, and strategic importance of the relationship.
24. **Adapt to Changing Dynamics:** Remain flexible in strategies and policies, adapting to changing geopolitical and economic dynamics to maximize the effectiveness of cooperation.
25. **Diversify Collaboration Areas:** Explore new areas of collaboration beyond traditional sectors, ensuring a comprehensive and evolving partnership.

By prioritizing these recommendations, India and ASEAN can work towards a more integrated, resilient, and prosperous future, fostering a strategic partnership that aligns with the shared visions and perspectives of

both entities. To boost the economy ASEAN countries should join the BRICS-SCO-EAC-18 member countries of the South Pacific, and 44 members of the Global South.

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Book Review

Shiraishi Takashi– “Maritime Asia Vs Continental Asia, National Strategies in a Region of Change”, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London 2021, page: 216, Price: ₹ 2,999.00/-

**Neeta M. Khandpekar*

A very interesting book has come to my table for review of what exactly accounts for the divide between the maritime states and the countries of mainland Asia. The Japanese Scholar brings before us the internal politics influences regional politics within maritime and continental Asia. The work is conveniently divided into four sections. It begins with the discussion on long-term trends that are rooted in Asia with the use of a tabular format. It is focused on the rise of emerging Nations and the changes brought about by it in the Global Governance. The GDP tabular format depicts the Asia-Pacific chart from 1990-2018 where China is shown at the top followed by India. Takashi mentions that in 2010, China’s economy would have been overtaken by Japan’s. And that India’s economy had grown to one-quarter of its size. The terms Bipolarity, Unipolarity & Multipolarity in international relations are mentioned in this section. A variety of approaches of John Ikenberry and Ian Bremmer in this connection are highlighted. The rise of China is appropriately covered with an apt subtitle ‘China as a New Gulliver.’ Out of several books on Asia, Takashi’s yet another interesting account on ‘Empire of the Seas: Thinking about Asia’ is laudable.

The second section highlights the Geopolitical Framework thus covering the rise of China which had changed the balance of power in the East Asia/ Asia and Pacific regions. US policy in Asia-Pacific region has been discussed here. To make the discussion more appealing a map of economic corridors in the Greater Mekong sub-region has been appropriately placed. China’s “String of Pearls” finds a mention in this discussion. How the strategic thinking differs considerably from country to country is beautifully highlighted. One can see mention about Myanmar and Sri Lanka where China was said to initially

**Dr. Neeta M Khandpekar, D. Litt., Professor, Department of History, University of Mumbai, Mumbai-400 098.*

invest considerably in economic cooperation (p.85). It is mentioned that in 2011, President Thein Sein of Myanmar steered his administration in the direction of openness and liberalization. One of the biggest decision was to cancel construction of the Myitsone Dam hydroelectric project that was being built with Chinese aid at a total cost of some \$3.6 billion. In October of the same year, Thein Sein, during his visit to India, was said to have reached an agreement with then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to speed up progress on the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP). This project was to facilitate new major trade route to India by building port facilities, transportation and infrastructure along the Kaladan River which vertically transects Myanmar region.

The third section is devoted to the domestic structures, international environments and strategic thinking in the Asian region. Further, answering questions like How different is Southeast Asia? How ethnic and religious diversity of Southeast Asia mean challenge to national unity? etc., The relevant statistical data to support the discussion at hand have been included. The focus of the discussion is clearly on the mainland Southeast Asian countries namely Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam followed by the maritime states of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. There is a mention of Vietnam Government granting access to India at the military port of Nha Trang lying at north of Cam Ranh Bay for its ships. And in fact, in National Security, it works closely with Russia and India, and uses the United States and Japan as levers.

The final section interestingly tries to locate Japan's place in the Asian region. This section brings out Japan's strategic and global partnership with India, citing relations in a broad range of areas, including maritime security. It covers Prime Minister Late Shinzo Abe's views on engaging in summit diplomacy and subsequently his visit to India in January 2014 (p.178). The author talks of two axes forming a 'T' between the horizontal axis and vertical axis but the map showing these two axes is somehow missing in the book. In Asia, Japan was like Gulliver among the Lilliputians. It is interesting to see how Japan responded to phenomena like internationalization and globalization in 2005 (p.190). Further Keneth Payle's book describing Japan circa 1990 as having two faces like the Roman god Janus has been aptly covered (p.181). There is a mention that, in the vast Indo-Pacific region, the key players were Japan, the United States, China, South Korea, ASEAN, India and Australia. Moreover, the network of Alliances like Japan and Australia, Australia and

India, India and Japan, Japan and Indonesia, finds its mention here owing to the rapidly shifting balance of power in the region.

Notes have been used at end of all chapters with use of two relevant maps are seen on p.7 and p.83. The book aptly has a brief preface and introduction in the beginning. Interestingly, the cover page shows a map in yellow illustrating and highlighting maritime regions of Asia. In a nutshell, this book sheds light on current affairs in the region from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and beyond. Overall this is a wonderful book that is organizationally articulate, theoretically lucid and empirically rigorous.

★ ★ ★

Regional News and Views

India

World media hails India's successful organisation of G-20 Summit, describes outcome as diplomatic victory for India

The world media has hailed India's successful organisation of the G-20 Summit, describing its outcome as a diplomatic victory for Prime Minister Narendra Modi who is pushing to increase the country's influence on the world stage and pressing for reforms in global institutions, including the United Nations. India managed to hammer out the unexpected consensus among the G20 countries on the contentious Ukraine conflict through a series of hectic negotiations with emerging economies such as Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia playing a leading role in reaching the agreement on the declaration on the first day of the summit.

The New Delhi Summit Declaration also called for reforming of international financial institutions, managing debt vulnerabilities of low and middle-income countries and the start of the exchange of tax-relevant information on crypto assets by 2027.

“Some experts saw the agreement as a win for Russia, while others read it as an achievement for the West. But most concurred it was a foreign policy triumph for Modi as he pushes to increase India's influence on the world stage,” Associated Press wrote in an article titled 'India forges compromise among divided world powers at the G20 summit in a diplomatic win for Modi'.

Bloomberg said that the G-20 has consolidated the rise of India's prime minister to world leader status in its article 'And the Winner of This Year's G-20 is...'. “I think this was an unadulterated win, both for India and for Modi personally,”

“What the G20 presidency for India has underlined is the country's growing role in multilateral diplomacy and emerging as a voice which must be heard,” said an article in the Gulf News.

The Newsweek article 'China Blindsided by Historic Challenge to Belt and Road Project at G20' said the India-Middle East-Europe Economic

Corridor is a historic initiative. It poses a direct challenge to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by providing countries in the region with an alternative for infrastructure development and economic cooperation, the article analysed.

(The Economic Times, 11th September, 2023)

China

China announces removal of Defence Minister missing for almost two months with little explanation.

Gen. Li Shangfu is the second senior Chinese official to disappear this year, following former Foreign Minister Qin Gang, who was removed from office in July with no explanation offered.

Mr. Li is the second senior Chinese official to disappear this year, following former Foreign Minister Qin Gang, who was removed from office in July with no explanation offered and former Foreign Minister Wang Yi was brought back in Gang's place. Mr. Li, who became Defence Minister during a Cabinet reshuffle in March, hasn't been seen since giving a speech on August 29. China, on December 29, named naval commander General Dong Jun as the new defence minister, two months after the summary dismissal of General Li Shangfu without any explanation.

(The Hindu, December 29, 2023)

Bangladesh

'Any conflict in region can deviate Bangladesh from achieving its dev goals', B'Desh Foreign Secretary

Reiterating Bangladesh's position against any kind of war in the world, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen on Thursday said any kind of conflict or war in the region might deviate Bangladesh from achieving its goal of further development.

“Obviously, we do not want any war, be it real war or proxy war. We are against war,” he said, adding that Bangladesh will not allow anyone to use its land to serve others' interests or that might go against the interest of its neighbours.

The foreign secretary made the remarks while responding to a question during a year-ending interaction with the members of the Diplomatic Correspondents Association, Bangladesh (DCAB) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. MoFA spokesperson Seheli Sabrin was also present.

He said Bangladesh is always against any kind of war as common people, women and children suffer from conflicts.

Describing India and Myanmar as Bangladesh's neighbours, he said Bangladesh's focus remains on more development and Bangladesh will get deviated from achieving its target if there is any kind of conflict, proxy or otherwise.

(The Daily Sun, 28th December, 2023)

Pakistan

Pakistan Supreme Court returns appeal against conviction of former PM Imran Khan

Pakistan's Supreme Court office has returned an appeal seeking to set aside the three-year conviction of former prime minister Imran Khan in the Toshakhana corruption case, according to a media report on December 24. The Registrar's office on December 23 returned the appeal moved by 71-year-old Khan through his counsel Latif Khosa under Article 185 of the Constitution, challenging December 11, 2023, Islamabad High Court (IHC) decision of rejecting a similar plea for lacking requirements, including the absence of actual controversies or chronology of the past litigation.

(The Hindu, 24th December, 2023)

Major blow to Imran Khan as Pakistan's top poll body rejects his nomination papers from two seats.

In a major blow to the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) ahead of the February 8 general elections, Pakistan's top poll body on December 30 rejected nomination papers of party founder and former Prime Minister Imran Khan and several of his stalwart colleagues on what they described as “flimsy grounds.” “The returning officers of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) have rejected Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) founder

Imran Khan's nomination papers for two national assembly seats - Lahore (NA 122) and Mianwali (NA-89)," the office of the Returning Officer, Lahore, said here.

(The Hindu, 31st December, 2023)

Maldives

Maldives opposition candidate Mohamed Muizzu wins the presidential runoff, local media say

Maldives opposition candidate Mohamed Muizzu, who supports closer ties between the Indian Ocean archipelago and China, won the presidential runoff on Saturday with more than 53% of the vote, local media reported.

The election has turned into a virtual referendum on which regional power - India or China - will have the biggest influence in the small nation. Muizzu promised he would remove Indian troops from the Maldives and balance the country's trade relations, which he said were heavily in India's favour.

Mihaaru News reported that incumbent President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, seen as pro-India, had received 46% of the vote and that Muizzu had won by more than 18,000 votes.

"With today's results we have got the opportunity to build the country's future. The strength to ensure the freedom of Maldives," Muizzu said in a statement after his victory. "It's time we put our differences aside and come together. We need to be a peaceful society."

"Today's result is a reflection of the patriotism of our people. A call on all our neighbours and bilateral partners to fully respect our independence and sovereignty," said Mohamed Shareef, a top official of Muizzu's party. He told The Associated Press that it was also a mandate for Muizzu to resurrect the economy and for Yameen's release.

Ahmed Shaheed, a former foreign minister of Maldives, termed the election verdict as a public revolt against the government's failure to meet economic and governance expectations rather than concerns over Indian influence.

"I don't think India was at all in the people's minds," Saheed said.

(Associated Press, 1st October, 2023)

After asking New Delhi to withdraw its troops from Maldives, Prez Muizzu stops India from conducting hydrographic surveys

The government headed by President Mohamed Muizzu in Malé has now decided to stop India from conducting hydrographic surveys in the territorial waters of the Indian Ocean archipelago.

New Delhi has not yet officially reacted to Malé's move to stop India from conducting hydrographic surveys around the Maldives. But, according to the sources, it suspects that the Muizzu Government's latest initiative to scale down India-Maldives cooperation in hydrography was also intended to placate China, just as its move to make India withdraw its troops from Maldives was.

India has 77 military personnel in the Maldives. They were deployed to operate and fly two Dornier aircraft and a helicopter gifted by India to the Maldives for emergency evacuation of people from the islands. The Muizzu Government already formally requested New Delhi to withdraw the military personnel.

(The Deccan Herald, 16th December, 2023)

Indonesia

President Jokowi Invites India to Optimize the Indian Ocean's Great Potential

Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) invited India to optimize cooperation in utilizing the great potential in the Indian Ocean in a sustainable manner. This was conveyed by President Jokowi when opening the 20th ASEAN-India Summit held at the Jakarta Convention Centre (JCC), Jakarta, Thursday (07/09) morning.

“ASEAN and India cooperation so far has indeed provided real benefits for the people. However, we still need to optimize this collaboration, especially seeing the great potential of the Indian Ocean which connects 33 countries with 2.9 billion people and one-fifth of world GDP in 2025,” said the President.

The great potential of the Indian Ocean, said the President, can be utilized to encourage the development of the blue economy, food security,

maritime connectivity, and sustainable marine energy resources. In line with that, he continued, ASEAN and India need to increase cooperation in tackling various maritime crimes.

“We must also tackle maritime crimes, such as piracy, people smuggling, narcotics, as well as illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing,” the President said.

“We must be able to make the ocean a sea of cooperation, not a sea of confrontation, which must continue to be maintained, which must continue to be peaceful, by respecting international law, encouraging habits of cooperation, and building an inclusive regional architecture. This is the key to creating an area that is able to become the epicentrum of growth,” he said.

On this occasion, President Joko Widodo also appreciated the presence of Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi in the midst of his busy preparation for the G20 Summit on September 9-10.

“I really appreciate PM Modi's presence in the midst of preparations for the G20 summit. Thank you, once again, PM Modi,” the President said.

On the same occasion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). “India fully supports ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN also has an important role to play in India's Indo-Pacific initiatives,” the PM said.

(Press release from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7th September, 2023)

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Society for Indian Ocean Studies

Following a decision of Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi in 1981 to send an expedition to Antarctica and to set up the Department of Ocean Development, Shri P. N. Haksar, Prof. S. Nurul Hasan and Prof. Satish Chandra took the initiative to set up the Society for Indian Ocean Studies (SIOS), as a non-profit initiative stimulating India's profile in ocean affairs.

The aims and objectives of the Society are to initiate, coordinate and promote the various aspects of Indian Ocean Region connected with its history, geography, living and non-living resources, legal regimes as well as those connected with strategic, scientific, technical, social and economic factors.

In its endeavour to promote awareness of ocean affairs, the Society has held a number of national and international seminars such as "Climate Change"; Culture, Trade and Development in South East Asia"; "India's Look East Asia Policy"; India and South Africa-An Emerging Partnership"; Indian Ocean and Central Asian Land-locked States"; "Arc of Peace and Prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region"; "Emerging Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean"; "Strategic Outlook of the Countries in the Bay of Bengal Region" and "Marine Spatial Planning & Regional Cooperation".

The Society also publishes the Journal of Indian Ocean Studies, three issues a year, which has completed 30 years of publication with printed copies of each issue for parliamentarians, Indian Navy and Coast Guard, Foreign Attaches, universities and libraries, both in India and abroad.

