

## India's Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

*Pankaj Kumar Jha\**

*With Southeast Asia, India has been enjoying the historical legacy of the strong influence of the Indic civilization and has been strengthening its linkages through strategic engagement, economic liberalization and Free Trade Agreement with the ASEAN countries. After 1992, India formulated its defence diplomacy in consonance with the 'Look East' policy to safeguard its eastern seaboard and secure its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region. India's defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia aims to accommodate concerns of its neighbours and wants to project its benign role in the region but, of late, the defence diplomacy has China containment strategy also. However, India needs a structured approach in its strategic planning and defence diplomacy while dealing with Southeast Asian countries.*

India has always been playing a benign role in its regional neighbourhood and therefore has always been open to any requests for bilateral activities from its neighbours. Surprisingly, it has never leveraged these for entering into any sort of alliance/relationship because of its policy, of not being a part of any alliance. Proactive defence alliances are projected through security training of military personnel from countries of Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia has been going on for quite some time but India has devised its current defence diplomacy after 1992 in consonance with the 'Look East' policy to safeguard its eastern seaboard and secure its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region. India has had long standing historical links with Southeast Asia and the influence of the Indic civilization has been used to strengthen these linkages further through strategic engagement, economic liberalisation and free trade agreements with the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. This paper addresses the purpose of India's defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia and whether it is aimed at containing China. The clear answer to this question is that India wants to accommodate the concerns of its neighbours but of late the defence diplomacy has a China containment component as well.

In the conceptual terms, defence diplomacy has received considerable attention, at home and abroad. It seeks to increase stability and security, by changing attitudes and perceptions. It is this "disarmament of the mind" that characterises defence

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\*Dr Pankaj Kumar Jha is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.

diplomacy. Defence diplomacy covers a broad range of activities, including:

- MOD training courses and education programmes, including opportunities for overseas students to attend courses at our military training establishments;
- Provision for loan service personnel, short term training teams, and civilian and military advisers being seconded to foreign governments for extended periods;
- Visits by ships, aircraft and other military units;
- Inward and outward visits by ministers and by military and civilian personnel at all levels;
- Staff talks, conferences and seminars to improve mutual understanding;
- Exercises<sup>1</sup>.

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Even though India has been undertaking the usual liaison visits with its neighbours as well as extended neighbourhood during the Cold War but defence diplomacy was received a boost with the end of Cold War when the Indian decision makers started taking active steps to dispel any notions relating to India's hegemonistic intentions with regard to intervention in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives. This projection also had an embedded China threat angle which became more prominent when India engaged with Myanmar where China was making inroads through economic and military ties. In a way, India adopted a rather pragmatic realist approach knowing very well that Pakistan has been used as a strategic ploy by China. So, rather than harping on idealistic and democratic notions, it went on to

improve its relations with Myanmar.

China's military modernisation in terms of anti satellite tests, stealth fighters, carrier killer missiles and ICBMs have multiplied concerns for India. China's increasing defence expenditure, which by some estimates is underestimated, shows that China has been providing latest weaponry to its armed forces and increasing its

underwater capabilities in terms of both kilo class and nuclear submarines. The fortified constructions along the border with India, not to mention the Tibetan railway and integrated highway networks in Southeast Asia have kept Indian military brass on its tenterhooks. Though, Indian strategic elite and military brass does not subscribe to the Chinese encirclement concept better articulated as 'strings of pearls' theory but the apprehensions are frequently voiced. So, in order to counter Chinese encroachment to Indian Ocean and its periphery, it is trying to build strategic ties with those nations which are wary of Chinese military modernisation and increasing assertiveness in their maritime neighbourhood. The prominent nations among Southeast Asian nations are Vietnam, Singapore, Philippines and Indonesia.

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### **Defence Diplomacy-Projecting Strategic Intentions**

During the mid-eighties, the Southeast Asian nations seemed worried about the potential threat to their security from India. India's role in Sri Lanka, the Maldives and even the stalemate with Nepal on trade, projected India as a bully in the region. Also, India's 'reported plan' for building major naval base in Andaman and Nicobar Islands in late 1980s perturbed Indonesia and other littoral neighbours about the ramifications of such a base closer to their territorial waters. India's naval modernisation programme was also seen in the light of India's power projection capabilities in Southeast Asia. Indian leaders had to justify their naval modernisation programme though there was no precedent of any untoward behaviour in the past. After the initial dithering, India decided to go on a damage control exercise. Adopting a more rational approach and sensing the necessity of convincingly articulating its aims in Indian Ocean Region, India offered to hold joint naval exercises with ASEAN states<sup>2</sup> such as Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. Training programmes and liaison visits led to further confidence building between India and Southeast Asia. It was these initiatives that led to the changed bilateral scenario. Acceptance of the benign stature of India would contribute to the long term stability of the region.

The enhanced Indian naval profile in Southeast Asia serves several objectives. One is to strengthen India's so-called "Look East" policy that is intended in part to balance China's influence in the eastern Indian Ocean region (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, etc.) and in western Southeast Asia. The second is to familiarise the navy with a potential theatre of operations – the South China Sea – that probably would be important in any contingency involving conflict with China. India's naval presence in this region also is intended to help stymie the apparent flow of arms across the

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Bay of Bengal to insurgents in India's Northeast and (previously) to the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. Finally, the deployment would also demonstrate the navy's ability to operate far from home. Taken together, liaison visits and goodwill initiatives like the one during tsunami, in conjunction with an October 2005 air exercise with Singapore in Central India, Defence Cooperation Agreement with Philippines in 2006 and newly strengthened security ties with Myanmar all underscore India's strategic emergence as a major player in the broad Asia-Pacific region<sup>3</sup>. Strategically speaking, ties with Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore have a Chinese containment strategy but with those with Malaysia and Myanmar is to keep Chinese influence to bare minimum.

### **Defence Cooperation with Singapore: Strategic Relevance for India**

India –Singapore relations date back to 1965 when Singapore after its formation sought India's assistance for training its troops. The relations have been cordial, barring the period when Cold War perceptions dominated foreign policies of the two countries. Singapore has been proactive in initiating strong defence relations with India while India has reciprocated through the joint anti-submarine warfare exercises in 1994. The relations have been enhanced by a two pronged strategy adopted by Singapore and India which materialised in the form of Defence Cooperation Agreement in 2003 and the subsequent Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA). The defence cooperation agreement was followed by secretary level dialogues. In October 2004, Singapore and India held their first bilateral air exercise codenamed SINDEX 04<sup>4</sup> at Gwalior<sup>5</sup> and again in January 2006, at Kalaikunda near Kolkata. In 2004, India granted Singapore's air force and army training facilities on its soil. This was a significant step for India, which has traditionally avoided foreign military presence of any kind on its soil. India also undertook bilateral exercises in the South China Sea in 2005 with the Singapore navy. Naval ships from Singapore have been regularly visiting Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as part of the Indian navy's "Milan" a biennial meeting of navies of the Indian Ocean region held biennially<sup>6</sup> since 1995. Likewise, Indian naval ships have been regularly visiting Singapore.

The navies of the two countries have traditionally exercised in the Indian Ocean region (including the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal) completed a bilateral exercise in the South China Sea in March 2005 as part of SIMBEX-05 exercises<sup>7</sup>. The two navies have also interacted in several multilateral exercises. In 2007, Singapore participated in Malabar exercises with US, Japan, India and Australia. Singapore and India have crucial stakes in protecting their common commercial sea-lanes, combating piracy, choking off narco trade, curbing gunrunning, and

preventing maritime terrorism. SIMBEX 2008, was conducted on India's eastern seaboard in the middle of March. Singapore fielded Endurance class LPD landing platform dock *RSS Persistence*, stealth frigate *RSS Formidable*, two 'Victory Class' guided-missile corvettes *RSS Vigilance* and *Valour*, and one 'Fokker-50' maritime patrol aircraft, that operated from Indian shores. The Indian Navy fielded the Brahmos fitted guided missile destroyer *INS Rajput*, guided-missile frigate *INS Gomati*, two guided-missile corvettes *Kirch* and *Kuthar*, two missile vessels *Vinash* and *Vibhut*, one fast attack craft *INS Trinkat*, one old Foxtrot submarine *INS Vagli* and shore-based fighter aircraft (IN Kiran IAF MIG-27s) medium-range maritime patrol aircraft (Dornier) and ship borne helicopters. The harbour phase focused on sharing experiences through professional interaction including sharing data on common equipment like the Barak and Sonars. The sea phase concentrated on surface firings, anti aircraft engagements with shore based MiG-27s and anti submarine warfare exercises<sup>8</sup>. SIMBEX-10 was conducted in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal from April 3 to

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16. Apart from two ships of Singapore navy, namely, *Intrepid* and *Victory*, seven Indian navy ships and a submarine participated in the exercise. In addition, a Fokker-50 aircraft of the RSN along with the TU 142M, Kamov, Chetak and Dornier aircraft of the Indian navy participated in the exercise. The bilateral interaction took place at sea as well as in harbour. The sea phase concentrated upon the conduct of a plethora of exercises ranging from surface firings and anti-aircraft engagements to anti-submarine warfare exercises and evolutions involving the deployment and coordination of maritime patrol aircraft as well as shore based fighters<sup>9</sup>. These engagements show that the defence relations between the two countries have moved from liaison visits to the second tier of strategic engagement. Apart from the naval and air exercises, India also opened its territory to Singapore for joint army exercises.

The first bilateral army exercise – involving armoured and artillery units from both sides were held between February 11-April 5, 2005 in Deolali and Babina firing ranges.<sup>10</sup> The army exercises continued again in January 2006 at these places. In February 2006, Singapore posted their first ever defence adviser in Delhi. The third

sets of exercises were held in Babina codenamed “Exercise Bold Kurukshetra” in March 2007. These exercises were multi-tiered and employed new generation equipment like unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), thermal imaging sights and joint execution of mission under a unified command structure<sup>11</sup>. These exercises were aimed at enhancing mutual understanding and interoperability between the two armies. The defence cooperation agreement with Singapore has given India the opportunity to get acclimatised to new theatres of conflict and also enhance its expeditionary capabilities. The joint exercises have given new understanding of the interoperability of systems and also greater engagement of the two countries in defence sphere. The two countries inked a unique five-year defence cooperation pact to allow the city-state’s armed forces to exercise regularly on Indian territory

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and airspace. The comprehensive agreement, along with a detailed logistical pact, was signed in October 2007. Under this agreement, Singapore will keep some of its military equipment in India on a permanent basis now<sup>12</sup>. Under this pact, Singapore would use Indian military facilities on payment basis for five years. Singapore would station few of its aircrafts at Kalaikunda for logistical support and also using this based on a payment basis. For Singapore, which is strapped for space, this is not a unique arrangement. It already has similar pacts with the United States, Australia, Taiwan and New Zealand.<sup>13</sup> As India is one of the foremost importers of defence equipment so it is likely to raise interest in Singapore as Singapore is one of the largest exporters on defence equipment in Southeast Asia? But more than anything, India has also been seeking to have joint ventures in the field of defence R&D and product development. Singapore has created niche markets for its products as well as produced military hardware of international standards.

### **India-Malaysia Defence Convergence: Fruitful Interactions**

The areas of convergence in strategic terms became more pronounced between India and Malaysia because of the disintegration of Soviet Union. In the words of the foreign minister of Malaysia Syed Hamid Albar:

The end of Cold War provides an opportunity for ASEAN and India to focus on promoting a strategic environment in Asia that is free of those thorny issues that have complicated relations between the two sides. India has long standing political, economic and cultural linkages with several countries of Southeast Asia. It is thus timely that we work on developing a convergence of interest within the concept of cooperative security than meets the interests within the concept of cooperative

security that meets the interests of both sides. Such concept should be underpinned by a firm commitment to the principle of mutual and equal security.<sup>14</sup>

The India –Malaysia defence cooperation started in 1994 when Malaysia purchased 18 MiG-29N Fulcrum aircraft under a RM1.3 billion deal with Russia and sought Indian assistance in maintenance and repairs as well as training of pilots for the aircraft<sup>15</sup>. Under the MoU on defence cooperation a provision made to establish a Malaysia-India Defence Cooperation Meeting (MIDCOM) at the senior officer level. So far four MIDCOM meetings have been held in 1993, 1997, 2001 and 2002.<sup>16</sup> The fourth meeting held in New Delhi from September 12-13, 2002, discussed the possibilities of cooperation in defence production and maintenance, training and sharing of information on common defence equipment amongst other things<sup>17</sup>. The primary area of cooperation has been the training of Malaysian defence personnel at various levels, including at the National Defence College and Staff College. Malaysia also sought type-specific training for submarine warfare and air combat tactics was sought. India has been a regular participant in the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace (LIMA) exhibition held in Malaysia and Malaysia has also participated in the Defexpo in New Delhi. Malaysia also looked to work with India on type-specific training of its Scorpene submarine crew and through-life maintenance of the Scorpene submarines, which were delivered in late 2008. He wanted to explore the possibility of joint training on (submarine warfare) tactics, since India is also going to acquire six such submarines.<sup>18</sup>

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The Indian defence production network, which has become highly sophisticated in recent times, is geared up to play a greater role in Malaysia's requirements for its defence modernisation programs<sup>19</sup>. Greater engagement was sought from Malaysian side with regard to the training of the Sukhoi pilots in India<sup>20</sup> as well as industrial cooperation with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL)<sup>21</sup>. The joint communiqué signed during the visit of Prime Minister Najib Tun Rajak to India in January 2010, reiterated the "Strengthening (of) defence and security dialogue and cooperation through ongoing annual Malaysia-India Defence Cooperation Meetings (MIDCOM), high level military exchanges and the enhancement of cooperation between the air forces and navies of the two countries"<sup>22</sup>. As of now, more than 100 technical maintenance crew from Malaysia, have visited India for training at HAL for maintenance of Sukhoi 30 MKM aircrafts<sup>23</sup>. India had send a team of four instructor pilots, one weapons systems officer, two engineers, 22 technicians and two administrative servicemen for pilot training of Malaysian air force officers at Gong Kedak airbase in Malaysia for two and half years ending July 2010<sup>24</sup>. India could look towards enhancing relations with Malaysia especially because Malaysia

has been trying to enhance its defence production capability. Owing to India's experience in licenced production and better indigenous capability in missiles and communication systems, India could be a viable partner in a number of areas of mutual interest, as Malaysia has considerable Russian hardware in its stores. Malaysia is important player in the region and also a player regard to Malacca Strait security, which is of great interest to India.

### **India-Myanmar Defence Cooperation: Countering Chinese Strategy**

Although India, has not initiated any arms sales in the aftermath of its independence, Myanmar has been an exception. India provided arms and

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ammunition to the government when the U Nu regime was surrounded by Karen rebels in 1949. In April 1950, India sold six Dakota planes to Myanmar, which helped the government to maintain some sort of liaison with the towns remaining under its control during the crisis. Apart from these there have been no arms transfers from India to Myanmar.<sup>25</sup> Defence cooperation between the two countries was limited to the sharing of intelligence and occasional joint operations against the insurgents on both sides of the border.

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The cooperation for countering insurgents - detrimental to the national security of both countries - has proved productive. There has also been an increase in the number of visits by the members of armed forces to each others countries after India changed its stance towards the ruling junta. Apart from the operation "Golden Bird" in May 1995, the Indian army had conducted "Operation Leech" against gunrunners in February 1998 seizing huge amounts of arms and ammunition<sup>26</sup>. In 1999, the Myanmar army entered 300 metres inside Indian territory while pursuing an Arakan Muslim group in India-Myanmar-Bangladesh triangle. In 2000, a 16 member defence delegation led by General V.P Malik, the then army chief visited Myanmar<sup>27</sup>. India has also been accommodative to the hot pursuit of Myanmarese soldiers while chasing Myanmarese insurgent groups. The Myanmar army has repeatedly assured Indian authorities that it would take action against Indian insurgents in its territory. Many times it has coordinated with Indian agencies for searching and tracking down Indian insurgents.



The cooperation between the two countries has also been enhanced in the sphere of defence and supply of arms and equipment. In fact, India's air chief endorsed the sale of military hardware to Myanmar and this included helicopters and radar manufactured by Bharat Heavy Electricals (BHEL). Indian army chief offered counter-insurgency training. Most importantly, India conducted the training for Myanmar's air force officers at Kochi Naval air base<sup>28</sup> for operating sophisticated defence equipment and aircraft. Also, India has offered to sell maritime patrol aircraft of British origin at friendly prices to Myanmar, which though was resisted by from Britain. India has offered to provide the country low calibre artillery, ammunition and pyrotechnic signalling devices –all geared to enhance the Myanmar army's (Tatmadaw) ability to mount counter-insurgency operations<sup>29</sup>.

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India's relations with Myanmar have become a truly multi-faceted with cooperation in a range of developmental and other projects as in roads, power, hydro-carbon, oil refinery, transmission lines, telecommunications, IT etc. The trade and economic cooperation includes upgradation of border trade to normal trade at the border points Moreh-Tamu and Zowkatha-Rhi and the opening of a new border trade point at Avangkhang in Nagaland. These constructive initiatives taken in right earnest have increased India's influence in the country and will go a long way in countering Chinese influence.

### **India-Indonesia Defence Relations: Looking for Strategic Convergence**

India- Indonesia tried to revive their defence relations after the end of Cold War when Indonesia sought India's help in servicing, supplying spare parts and training its pilots for the MIG-29 fighters<sup>30</sup>. India started giving defence related assistance, especially in terms of training its officers in India and also launched a charm offensive of port calls and liaison visits between the two countries. Indonesia reciprocated in the same way and asked for the supply of a radar system from India, which due to certain circumstances, did not materialise. India had proposed a draft Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation in 1995 with the focus on supplies, technologies, joint production and joint projects. India and Indonesia signed a Bilateral Agreement on Cooperative Activities in the Field of Defence in 2001. India has been supplying defence equipment, especially for the Indonesian navy

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and the two countries have been exploring other areas for defence cooperation. Indonesia has shown its keen interest in importing items such as batteries for torpedoes, engines for Parchim-class corvettes, repair facilities for Type 209 submarines and so on. The Indonesian President in 2004 desired sought the institutionalising of the arrangement pertaining to joint patrolling of the Malacca Straits and the adjoining seas<sup>31</sup>.

During the visit of the Indonesian President, Mr. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in November 2005, the two countries agreed to hold an annual “strategic dialogue” at the level of senior officials. Cooperation was also sought in development of rockets by Indonesian side<sup>32</sup>. The Indonesian academia and strategic elite, is more interested in enhancing their naval capabilities in the region and India is a perfect partner for empowering the navy. Yudhoyono had also asked for radar and communication systems for controlling the Malacca Strait as Indonesia and Malaysia had stressed on the need for sharing costs, it would be in India’s interest to offer assistance.

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India agreed to enhance its military-to-military engagement with Indonesia, as they concluded their first-ever Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC) meeting in Jakarta on June 14, 2007. Even the option of service-to-service talks is being explored. The two sides identified procurement and “co-production” of defence equipment as promising areas for cooperation based on feasibility and the principle of “maximising comparative advantages.” The Indonesian defence minister Juwono Sudarsono’s in an interview to *The Hindu*, expressed Jakarta’s interest in accessing New Delhi’s know-how in “network centric warfare”.<sup>33</sup>

India should keep long term strategic perspectives in view while dealing with Indonesia because economic prosperity and growth will strengthen democracy in the country. Indonesia has military and naval capability and reinforcing such capabilities would surely serve regional security interests in the long run. Also, with China trying to seek bases in Timor Leste and increasing defence ties with Indonesia, India must not be complacent with its maritime neighbour, which is so vital for its strategic interests.

### **India-Vietnam: Reinforcing Defence Partnership**

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with Vietnam in November 2009, India has listed Vietnam as one of the important priority countries for its strategic calculations. Even though the contours of the MoU have been a well guarded secret but it according to some strategic experts that it has a very high naval component. The defence cooperation with Vietnam in fact pre-dates India's "Look East" strategy in the region. The major turnaround in relations came about due to bitter experience of the two countries with regard to China in 1962 and 1979 respectively. In 1980, India posted its military attaché to Vietnam while Vietnam did so in 1985. In April 1994, during a visit to Vietnam by Minister for Power N.K.P Salve, India was reported to have offered defence technology to Hanoi<sup>34</sup>. Vietnam accepted the offer and thereafter during the then prime minister P.V Narsimha Rao's visit to Vietnam in 1994, a protocol on defence cooperation was signed. Subsequently, Vietnam reached an agreement with Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. to overhaul the engines on MiG-21 aircrafts belonging to Vietnamese air force. In May 1995, a Vietnamese military delegation led by deputy defence minister Lieutenant General Dao Dinh Luyen paid a return visit to India. The delegation toured military installations at Hyderabad, Chennai, Bangalore, Goa, Nasik and Pune<sup>35</sup>.

In the year 2000, Indian defence minister signed a Protocol on Defence Cooperation for sharing of strategic perceptions and naval cooperation between the two countries, coordinated patrols by the Vietnamese sea-police and the Indian coast guard, repair programmes for Vietnam Air force fighter planes and training of Vietnamese air force pilots<sup>36</sup>. New Delhi also agreed to help refurbish the Vietnamese air force, providing MiG -21s with new avionics and radar to support Russia's latest missiles, including the R-77 AMRAAMSKI and the R-27 dogfight, and to help Vietnam set up a domestic arms industry to manufacture small and medium weapons and certain kinds of ordnance<sup>37</sup>. The liaison between the two countries included guerrilla warfare training of the Indian armed forces by Vietnamese counterparts in 2003. In May 2003, India signed a "Joint Declaration on Framework of Comprehensive Cooperation" between the two countries.

Even though the agreements were there but the substance came when in June 2005, Indian Navy gave 150 tonnes of warship components and other accessories worth \$ 10 million to Vietnamese Navy. The same year Ordnance Factory Board also offered material for turret and negotiations were initiated with regard to TNT explosives. These were shelved from the Vietnamese side because of delay from Indian side. India and Vietnamese Navy are also cooperating on establishing a satellite imagery station in Vietnam worth \$0.5 million. More than 100 Vietnamese officers have received training in Indian defence colleges and establishments till date. Vietnamese defence industry have signed multimillion dollar contract with Indian defence industry for supply of small range missiles, large number of batteries, aerial photography films and aircraft tyres<sup>38</sup>. Vietnam has been interested in procuring maritime surveillance capabilities from India. These show that more than rhetoric the two nations are now proactively engaging each other in defence and strategic domain. India and Vietnam have also agreed to raise bilateral relations to the

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level of a broad-based “strategic partnership” that would better enable them to deal with the evolving economic and security environment in the region. Their partnership includes greater cooperation in defence matters and use of civilian nuclear technology, in addition to furthering economic ties and cooperation at regional and multilateral forums. A joint declaration on establishing a strategic partnership was signed by Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and Vietnam’s Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in July 2007. India and Vietnam have the potential for more enhanced cooperation in the field of defence because of the preponderance of the Soviet military hardware and the experience of India’s armed forces. But from the Vietnamese

perspective the ‘friendly prices’ offered by India are not as competitive as those of Ukraine and Poland. With many successful visits from both sides there has been progress in terms of cooperation in training, joint exercises and the visit of high level delegations. Also India, which is seeking markets for its defence hardware might find new markets in Asia-Pacific through the Vietnam especially in the case of light helicopters, radars and surveillance equipment and communication sets. India needs Vietnamese cooperation in countering China in South China Sea and Indian Ocean region. India must build surveillance and communication network to assist Vietnam and the two countries can share intelligence.

### **Engaging Peripheral Players- Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Philippines**

India’s defence diplomacy has not engaged these countries primarily due to their lack of military capabilities - with regard to Laos and Cambodia - as well as the fact that these countries were within the Chinese sphere of influence. An agreement on defence cooperation between India and Laos was signed during the visit of the then prime minister A B Vajpayee to Laos in November 2002. The agreement provides the institutional framework for future bilateral defence cooperation. The Lao minister of national defence visited India in January 2003 to enhance defence ties between India and Laos primarily in the area of military training for the Lao defence services<sup>39</sup>. India offered Laos military assistance in the form of supply of parachutes and military trucks. This clearly addressed the issue of lack of attention to these countries. Strangely enough the Philippines figured quite late in India’s strategic thinking. This could be attributed to three major factors. Firstly, India’s relations with Vietnam - perceived as

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aggressor by the Philippines during the Cold War years. Secondly, India's lack of enterprise and policy on the contentious South China Sea, kept Philippines out of strategic planning. Thirdly, the Indo-US nuclear deal has reformatted the relations between the two countries. The signing of the defence cooperation agreement with the Philippines in 2006 during the visit of the then President Abdul Kalam showed that Philippines cannot be ignored. The changing contours of relations with Korea and Japan necessitated the change of stance with regard to the Philippines. With joint exercises with Singapore in South China Sea, India is willing to formalise its South China Sea policy and in that context intensifying bilateral defence ties with Philippines, Japan and Korea becomes necessary. Among all these countries Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea occupy a prominent place in India's strategic thinking due to the fact that these nations either have antagonistic relations with China or have an uneasy history with China. These two issue act to India's advantage but India's approach has been either too cautious or lacks conviction. Even Southeast Asian nations are not very sure of India's commitment to its strategic interests.

**The changing contours of relations with Korea and Japan necessitated the change of stance with regard to the Philippines.**

### **Multilateral Defence Diplomacy-Taking the Initiative**

India initiated 'Milan' a biennial meet of the navies of the Indian Ocean so as to create bonhomie between navies of Indian Ocean region. "The number of participants has been increasing since early 1995 when only four navies participated in 'Milan'. The total number of navies that participated in the latest meet were 13, out of which three were from Southeast Asia. This was a rather soft approach to defence diplomacy but it has created favourable constituency for taking up joint efforts in the case of maritime disasters, search and rescue or even anti-piracy operations. This has created effective platform for Indian Navy for projecting its benign role and also dispel any notion of Indian navy's hegemonistic designs in its periphery. In fact, 'Milan' was the platform which led to the conceptualisation of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008.

The Indian Navy (IN) has always fancied itself as a trail blazer in the limited context of maritime diplomacy. The far-reaching impact of its commendable 2004 tsunami relief effort led to the creation, in Naval HQ, of a full-fledged Directorate of Foreign Cooperation. China's farsighted maritime agenda has lent urgency to this directorate's plans for strengthening ties with our Indian Ocean neighbourhood. However, this effort is not always matched by the ministry of external affairs, or even supported by the ministry of defence. In a laudable step in early 2008, navy launched a biennial Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) initiative in New Delhi, essentially aimed at enhancing maritime cooperation among the navies of the littoral states of the IOR. The maiden gathering attracted 31 chiefs of regional

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navies, and was addressed by the prime minister as well as the president. Significantly, neither the external affairs minister nor the foreign secretary attended. Over the past two years, the IN has been engaged in steadily strengthening the IONS and implementing diverse aspects of its charter. On May 10, 2010, at a ceremony in Abu Dhabi, attended by the chiefs of 27 navies, Admiral Nirmal Verma, the chief of naval staff, handed over the chairmanship of IONS to the UAE's navy chief, Brigadier Ibrahim al-Musharrakh. The 27 navies represented at IONS-II ranged from tiny IOR navies like Seychelles, Comoros and the Maldives, to the UK and the US; the latter, perhaps, claiming émigré status<sup>40</sup>. The IONS must prioritise the creation of an "Indian Ocean identity" or brand name. Bearing in mind that most members of the IONS are small navies with limited capabilities, there is a strong temptation to seek extra-regional solutions to in-house problems. This has the potential to derail it, because some may see an inherent conflict between regional cohesion and extra-regional approaches. China has ominously

declared its readiness "to share responsibility for the Indian Ocean with the US", and Robert Kaplan, in his article, makes an intriguing forecast that, "...precisely because India and China are emphasising their sea power, the job of managing their peaceful rise will fall on the US Navy." India's endeavours to bind the region together as a geostrategic entity in order to keep it free of tension and conflict are bound to encounter centrifugal forces.<sup>41</sup>

In the overall perspective defence and strategic relations have taken a high speed route after the year 2003 which shows intensification of multilateral defence dialogue and the bilateral defence ties. This can be attributed to India's approach towards building cooperative security structures and taking active interests in enagign the littoral neighbours as wellas courtesy of its extended neighbourhood.

### **Conclusion**

India has been under leveraging its defence diplomacy potential to a large extent. The problem is that while it has participated in training programmes and defence and military exchanges it has not yet identified its strategic allies and the countries which

**T**he problem is that while it has participated in training programmes and defence and military exchanges it has not yet identified its strategic allies and the countries which are important to its strategic interests.

are important to its strategic interests. It has been courting Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia for securing its participation in the Malacca Strait Security Initiative but in real terms the its immediate neighbours like Myanmar has been too crucial for India and India recognised the fact only in mid 1990s. Chinese engagement of the country showcased the realist approach of China while India was engaged in idealistic notions. In strategic discourse, apart from outlining strategic planning and priority areas, there is need for proactive engagement with potential partners and immediate neighbours. On the strategic projection aspect two countries figure very prominently in its scheme of things and these are Vietnam and Indonesia. Vietnam, for the very fact, that it is located in the soft under belly of China and its strategic location with regard to the Hainan submarine base makes it a feasible strategic destination to counter China. On the other hand, Indonesia's historical animosity towards China acts to India's advantage. Also, Indonesia's location in relation to the two vital alternate sea lanes of Sunda and Lombok make it the strategic partner that India would like to court. It still depends on how the two nations respond to India's overtures but India in the meanwhile needs to take on board important strategic partners like Korea and Japan so as to counter Chinese ambitions in Indian Ocean. Though, India does not consider the Indian Ocean to be exclusive to it but it still must formulate a proactive South China Sea policy to safeguard its strategic interests. India has not yet devised an arms export policy which would help in expanding its strategic frontiers by making few favoured clients which would add to its diplomatic clout. India needs a structured approach on strategic planning and defence diplomacy. In the end, what matters is national security and strategic interest, not the morality rhetoric.



**India needs a structured approach on strategic planning and defence diplomacy. In the end, what matters is national security and strategic interest, not the morality rhetoric.**

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Notes:

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