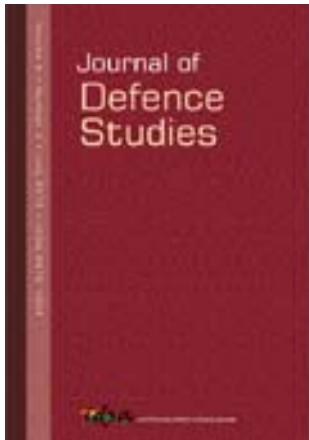


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# India, to the South China Sea and Beyond

*Saloni Salil\**

## INTRODUCTION

This commentary attempts to map out some of the salient options for India in the region east of the Indian Ocean, that is, from the South China Sea (SCS) extending to the South Pacific. A maritime debate, the role and function of the Indian Navy is thus central. Located at the gateway between the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Pacific, the SCS 'is not only a strategic maritime link between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, but also a vital gateway for shipping in East Asia.'<sup>1</sup> Attention needs to be paid to these vital links as they are the sinews that support the trade and exchange which has propelled the Asian economic boom. India's interests in this region run up against China's assertive political claims over the same. Here, I attempt to draw out some possibilities that can facilitate smoother, successful options for the pursuit and achievement of Indian interests in the future.

## ASIA-PACIFIC: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The twenty-first century dawned with huge geo-political shifts—both economic- and security-oriented—from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. The 'Asia-Pacific' region is the new geo-political 'pivot'

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accounting for approximately 56 per cent of the world's population, 33 per cent of the world's gross product, and an increase in oil demand of over 7 million barrels per day over the last decade.<sup>2</sup> It consists of the most unexploited oceans—the Indian and the Pacific—with regard to the vast potential hydrocarbon reserves of submarine crude and natural gas, high-grade mineral deposits, and huge fishing resources. Strategically, the region holds importance in terms of its huge market dividends as well as the fact that it constitutes one of the most militarized regions in the world. Furthermore, there is the ever-present threat of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation in the littoral countries (China, Pakistan, North Korea and Iran), not to mention the presence of nuclear extra-regional powers that maintain a naval presence in the IOR<sup>3</sup>, and the seeming race to achieve true blue water naval modernization programmes by littoral countries. Similarly, the SCS too is witnessing militarization as its littoral states—for example, Philippines and Vietnam—move to acquire Kilo-class submarines from Russia in hedging against China. A related issue is the United States' shift to deploy 60 per cent of its fleet in the region, again hedging against China.

Over a decade ago, then Indian Defence Minister, George Fernandes, defined India's area of interests as spanning from the 'north of the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea'.<sup>4</sup> The Indian Navy has subsequently adopted this view, even extending its reach to the East Pacific region.<sup>5</sup> For India, however, the SCS, though an important part of the broader Asia-Pacific region which contains critical economic links to its 'extended neighbourhood', should not be seen as a 'limiter' restricting India's participation in the Asia-Pacific. Rather, it should serve as strategic sinew linking its influence to the eastern periphery of the IOR, to the centres of the East Asian littoral, and into the wider Pacific and beyond.

#### WHAT THIS MEANS FOR INDIA

The region is increasingly gaining strategic value drawn by its increasing economic value, made more attractive by its growing economic weight, enhanced resilience in crisis, and consistent impressive growth by its behemoths, India and China. As these two countries gain more stakes in the international system, there are natural re-balancing efforts to capitalize on this growth as also entail military efforts to control it by and for extra-regional interests. Also coming to the fore are the increasing proliferation of trans-national criminal activity such as smuggling illicit substances, piracy and terrorism.

India considers the Asia-Pacific part of its 'extended neighborhood',<sup>6</sup> holding geo-strategic, geo-political, and geo-economic value. India's interest in this region is, thus, a component of its 'Look East Policy' in particular, driven by its need to secure resources, protect Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) vital for trade, and engage with nations with which it has cultural and historical strategic ties. Further, strategically, 'the Asia-Pacific is increasingly crucial to India and the world, be it for defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, constantly checking proliferation efforts of North Korea, or ensuring transparency in the military activities of the region's key players.'<sup>7</sup>

#### THE SINO-INDIAN COMPLEX

The two Asian giants, India and China, are wary of each other's developments and growth with caution. This subtle anxiety is heightened by what both countries' perceive as unwarranted inroads into each other's zones of immediate control. For India, underpinning this anxiety is China's dedicated sponsorship of commercial ports and other infrastructures (with convertibility into naval operability) in India's immediate neighbourhood, thus virtually encircling India.<sup>8</sup> The zone of contention has now extended into the SCS, where India's presence is being viewed by China as political interference.<sup>9</sup>

China has blatantly expressed its claims over the whole of SCS<sup>10</sup> as a 'core interest' on par with Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, possibly warranting 'war'.<sup>11</sup> With territorial disputes viewed as a zero-sum situation, China's growing assertiveness entertains insecurities to Indian interests also. With India more active in the SCS in pursuit of purely economic and commercial interests, China's displeasure over Indian activities in the SCS has been historic. In 1958, the Chinese authorities had objected to an Indian naval vessel transiting about 12 miles from the Chinese coastline that, at the time, was well outside the then internationally accepted three-mile territorial water limit.<sup>12</sup> The recent incident involving the INS *Airavat* has shown that the Chinese sensitivities remain as fraught as in the past. The amphibious assault vessel paid a friendly visit to Vietnam between 19–28 July 2011. It sailed from the Vietnamese port of Nha Trang towards Haiphong, where it was to make a port call, and was intercepted on the radio by an unidentified Chinese naval vessel warning the Indian vessel that it had entered Chinese waters and should, therefore, move out of there.<sup>13</sup>

India's growing international stature gives it strategic relevance in the area ranging from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca.<sup>14</sup> It is vital for India to have access to the region. 'The South China Sea, important for Indian interests provides a pathway to greater economic integration with almost, 55 per cent of India's trade with the Asia Pacific transits through the SCS. Apart from helping secure energy supplies for countries, India has the unique distinction of shipping oil from Sakhalin to Mangalore through sea routes of the region.'<sup>15</sup> If China continues to assert dominance over these waters, it will be difficult for India to continue with its activities through this channel. Thus, India would doubtless look to establish itself in the region in order to advance its economic and strategic interests.

#### INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE ASIA-PACIFIC

Due to the importance of the region, India has adopted a policy initiative aimed at forging closer ties with the region. India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries share an evolving economic relationship today with a trade volume of US\$ 57.88 billion in 2010–11, a growth of 31.82 per cent from 2009–2010.<sup>16</sup> India's defence ties with ASEAN members and other Asia-Pacific countries, almost negligible at the start of its Look East Policy, has seen quanta leaps in the past one decade. At the bilateral level, military to military exchanges have been extensive with a large focus on naval cooperation. The increasing participation of countries in joint naval exercises such as the Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX), MILAN—a biennial multinational exercise, and Singapore-India Bilateral Air Exercise, etc., reinforces the fact. 'India has also been conducting search and rescue operations—*Indopura SAREX*—with Indonesia. India's multilateral security engagements with South-east Asia were accommodated by engaging under the ASEAN Regional Forum and unilateral Indian initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in February 2008.'<sup>17</sup>

India's evolving bilateral ties with Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, and Australia point to its undertaking a concerted effort to direct its foreign, economic and military policies eastward with the scope of engagement from economic cooperation expanding into a full-spectrum engagement with the major powers of East Asia. This would also be facilitated by Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia 'that look at India as a hedge against Beijing's growing regional influence.'<sup>18</sup> India's growing capacity in the military and economic sphere

has brought even the US to vouch for India as a stabilizer in the region and has, thus, facilitated India's relations with its traditional allies in the region. India's efforts to ensure a safe and secure environment vis-à-vis a variety of issues have been acknowledged and commended the world over. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice portrayed India as 'a rising global power that can be a pillar of stability in a rapidly changing Asia'<sup>19</sup>, and at the 2009 Shangri-La Dialogue then US Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced that the US would be looking to India as a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean and beyond. It is in this region that the US is witnessing a 'genuine convergence of national interests' with India, according to Admiral Thomas Keating, former Commander of USPACOM.<sup>20</sup>

India's growing stature as an important player in the global arena, regional power, sustained healthy rate of economic growth, cultural influence, and growing military capabilities have led the world's attention shift focus towards it and seek a closer relationship with it. The world is watching and will sense 'the prospects of a fundamental change in India's defen[c]e orientation and its potential to contribute significantly to international security politics in the [twenty-first] century. A rising India, which runs one of the world's major economies and fields a large armed force, will eventually bear some of the military burdens of maintaining the global order.'<sup>21</sup>

#### **INDIA: ASIA'S COUNTERBALANCE**

Most major powers consider the twenty-first century to be the 'Asian Century'. With the regional balance of power and security complexes evolving, '[a]n expanding economy and increasing security ties with Japan, Australia, and the United States as well as key South Asian Nations, are positioning India to have an impact on the distribution of power in Asia.'<sup>22</sup> Although India with its visionary power, democratic credentials and rising economic might has been able to consolidate its ties with the bigger nations—on the platform of a common understanding on securing the regional environment, achieving stable and developing economic growth, and energy security—there is potential for much more. India does not have any strategic ambitions in the region, nor does it support any struggle for supremacy; in fact, by supporting strong cooperative ties a possible win-win situation can be achieved.

Therefore, India needs to consolidate the existing ties in the region and build relations on new parameters. India should continue to engage

nations even in the face of Chinese opposition and rhetoric. Further commitments in military to military engagements, energy exploration and development initiatives in the SCS would enlarge the scope of economic benefits. The huge Indian diaspora in this region, presently estimated to be over 6 million, and representing 20 per cent of the total global Indian diaspora, can play a huge role in channeling India's engagement in this region.<sup>23</sup> Also, India needs to establish stronger economic ties in the region by engaging with the Pacific Island countries, with special reference to the South Pacific Islands, and look for greater opportunities through various diplomatic initiatives. It has been observed that due to unregulated foreign aid and business investments, though attractive to many Pacific states, China's Pacific Policy in the longer run may lead to political, social and economic under-currents impacting region's peace and stability.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the coming together of India and the Pacific under this paradigm provides the former a gateway to pave its interests in the region. On that note, apart from Australia and New Zealand, India is looking to enhance relations with the South Pacific Island countries in the spirit of South–South Cooperation.<sup>25</sup> The level of engagement between India and Tonga, and some other South Pacific countries has seen escalation in recent years. India has been providing a platform for diplomatic and military training programmes to these countries (only four Pacific countries have militaries) as well as fronting development aid to these nations.

#### CONCLUSION

A steadily expanding economy, paired with a growing partnership with key regional actors and a capable navy positions India to have an impact on the emerging security architecture of the Asia-Pacific.<sup>26</sup> The current shift of attention towards the Asia-Pacific is now not just limited to economic engagements but also to increasing militaristic and strategic influence. India's rise as a regional power continues to contribute through its economic partnerships and naval diplomacy in shaping the Asia-Pacific security architecture.

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