

# INDIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY

A MARITIME SECURITY  
PERSPECTIVE

*EDITOR*

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8. Air Power To Counter Maritime Terrorism	107
<i>Gp Capt A V Chandrasekaran (Retd.)</i>	
9. India's Maritime Policy in the context of Changing Asian Security Architecture	124
<i>Aaradhana Singh</i>	
10. Maritime Security: Global Repercussions of Emerging Terror Threats in Indian Ocean Region	134
<i>Aswani R.S.</i>	
11. Features of Indian Coastal Area in the backdrop of Coastal Security	142
<i>Dr P.S. Swathi Lekshmi</i>	
12. The Role of Coastal Community in Coastal Security: A Descriptive Study	150
<i>Rakhee Viswambharan</i>	
<i>Index</i>	167

## India's Maritime Policy in the context of Changing Asian Security Architecture

Aaradhana Singh

India has emerged as an important Asian power with the advent of 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the global level also, it has become an important player and sharing all important global and Asian multilateral platforms. Since the end of cold war, the locus of global system has started to tilt towards Asia and according to global economic pundits, Asia will be representing more than half of the global GDP. It has further changed the dynamics of bilateral and multilateral relations in Asia.

We are aware of the fact that a wide array of opinions was expressed since the end of the cold war on the idea that Asia will be an important player in the coming decades. At the end of the cold war, debates started on new lines by the formulators of foreign policy that both World system and Asian system must be multi-polar. This is one of the most significant issue where India and China diverge as China's underlying problem lies. China does not have a problem with world being multi-polar but it wants Asian balance of power to be unipolar super headed by China. Japan also thinks similar to Indian line and thus bilateral relationship between India and Japan has been deepening since the end of the cold war. India-Japan relationship has grown rapidly since last one decade. Due to inherent geo-political, economic and strategic dimensions this bilateral relationship is all set to reformulate new Asian balance of power based on multiplicity.

China, Japan, India and Vietnam are indulged in reformulating the balance of power within Asia. Other Asian countries also do not China's supremacy and thus their bonhomie with the competitors of China is deepening in an excellent manner since last one decade and all set to grow in the foreseeable future. In recent years, China has exposed its intention to use force to capture Islands under Japanese rule since many decades.

In various regions of China, protests had been organized against Japan including Hong Kong protests, which demanded capture of Japan ruled Islands in East China Sea. Including United States, India had also insisted amicable resolution of disputes and adherence to international law by all concerned parties. Due to border disputes with China, India has also been apprehensive about Chinese steps and that also has strengthened its bilateral relationship with Japan in a massive manner. These events vindicate that balance of power theory is working well in Asian theater and all set to sustain the process due to Chinese reluctance to accommodate the aspirations of other countries.

The new balance of power in Asia is all set to reshape existing power architecture. However, the theory of balance of power according to its proponents has come into being with the theory of Prisoner's Dilemma. Balance of power has been one of the most debated concepts of the international relations. The balance of power is a form of compromise among states that find its order preferable to absolute chaos, even though it is a system that favors the stronger and more prosperous states at the expenses of the weaker. Great powers play the dominant role in balance of power system because of their preponderant military force and their control of key technologies.<sup>1</sup> The cold war era just after the end of the Second World War is a classic example of balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the post-cold war era even the prevalence of the anarchic international environment has created a fear psychosis. Military build-ups and its competition by rival powers have left every harbinger of the international system insecure therefore all countries are trapped in a dilemma. This phenomenon is called the Security Dilemma.<sup>2</sup>

Right from Keshore Madhubani to several other pundits of international relations, everyone is discussing the emergence of an all-powerful Asia but the weighty question is why Asian powers are not cooperating and thus negating utopian idea of cooperation among Asian countries if we compare them with the European countries. China, India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Iran and Vietnam are some of the important Asian powers. The changing power configuration in Asia has altered Nehru's hypothesis and Asia seems to follow European model of conflict, however the post second world war Europe has emerged as a beacon of cooperation and must be emulated by other regional groupings. Major Asian countries are not cooperating because of underlying divergence in interests among them. China wants its unipolar dominance over Asia but at the global level wants multi-polarity. India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Iran and

Vietnam wanted both Asia and the globe to be multi-polar. Kautilya, one of the earliest strategic thinkers had stated that convergences of interests are the base which determine a state's foreign policy. There are some common interests between India and Japan. This bilateral relationship could be one of the most deepening relationships of 21<sup>st</sup> century Asia. It is also relevant to be noted that they had an average relationship during the cold war. Even after cold war, 1998 Pokhran-II nuclear testings by India took the world by surprise. Many countries including Japan reacted sharply. It suspended all political exchanges and even economic assistance was frozen for nearly three years.

According to two leading foreign policy experts from China Institute of International Studies "India's border dispute with China have yet to be resolved and therefore it views a stronger relationship with Japan as a way to counter balance China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region."<sup>3</sup> As China's dispute with Japan escalates over Islands in East China Sea, China seems worried that India will throw its weight in favor of Tokyo. Chinese experts believe that India and Japan share much strategic common ground on China. First time probably in recent history, Chinese experts have accepted that India is working on the reciprocation of Chinese policy of encircling India within South Asia and therefore deepening its relationships with all estrange neighbour of China.<sup>4</sup>

India-United States relations have also deepened phenomenally since last two decades. Both were estranged allies during cold war era but today they have converted their relationship into that of being engaged allies. In June 2019, G-20 summit has taken place in Japan and besides normal business; sub group summit has taken place in the sidelines of G-20 summit. It is known as JAI (Japan, America and India). Growing India- United States relations have further propelled India-Japan and India-ASEAN relations as well. These strengthening alignments have further complicated the security architecture of Asia.

India is well settled in the midst of the Indian Ocean. It is the natural custodian of Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean has become extremely significant because more than half of the global trade commutes through it. It also connects South China Sea near Malacca Strait which is extended to Andaman Sea. South China Sea connects Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. The growing economic activities have kept the entire sea route of communication extremely congested and it has given birth to new unwanted activities like piracy and others in the region.

Just after the end of the cold war, India's trade was hardly 30 billion dollar, which has reached above 800 billion dollar by the end of 2018. That also makes maritime policy of India quite important not only for India's comprehensive security but also for justice-based sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean and adjoining seas. This paper is, therefore, intending to dwell upon maritime issues in the context of changing security architecture of Asia and how India can cope up with the emerging challenges is moot research point of this paper.

The arrival of Modi government in 2014 has been a new hallmark in Indian politics because after 30 years, people of India gave single party majority to Modi led NDA. In November 2014, PM Modi declared the up gradation of Look East Policy into Act East Policy in India-ASEAN summit held in Myanmar. According to Daniel Rajendran, many saw it as a defining moment of India's Asia policy.<sup>5</sup>

Look East Policy was mooted by PM P. V. Narasimha Rao to consolidate Indian imprint in Southeast and East Asia given the enormous goodwill and soft power India possess in the region. Act East Policy is just an accelerated version of that process. First of all, it has upgraded the ambit from Myanmar to Australia; secondly, it insisted proactive mode instead of reactive and thirdly it has strategic components besides economic aspects.

At this juncture, security architecture in Asia has remained unstable. China is willing to dominate the narrative of sole supreme authority in Asia. India along with like-minded countries are opposing that idea. Interestingly United States, which had not been very cooperative with India during cold war era, has also been standing with India to keep Asia multipolar. It vindicates Kautilyan notion which proclaims that synergy of ideology cannot be cementing factor of international relations only synergy of national interests.

India has developed better than average trade relations with the countries of ASEAN and East Asia. ASEAN and East Asian countries have developed excellent trade relations with China but they have simultaneously been confronting with China because of trust deficit. South China Sea and East China Sea have emerged as flashpoint between China and the countries of its neighborhood. The countries of ASEAN and East Asia want India to act as a counterbalance to China in this region as China has both actively and passively challenged international norms and sovereignty claims in its neighbourhood. Traditionally, India has been considered a weak strategic power due to its slow decision-making process. Arrival of Modi in 2014 for

the first term and its historic repeat in 2019 has infused a new momentum in the contours of India's foreign policy. Dokhlam (2017) and Balakot (2019) has emboldened Indian strategic imprints particularly in Asia. Modi government has adopted proactive foreign policy which is based on the ideals of realism instead of idealism. Post Dokhlam, PM Modi had met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan for an informal summit. Both leaders met 11 times in last five years and President Xi Jinping is coming to India for another summit level talk with PM Modi in later part of 2019. At the same time India remains only country perhaps to oppose Chinese OBOR and other connectivity inter-continental projects.

Maritime policy remains at the core of India's newly calibrated proactive foreign policy being a natural guardian of the Indian Ocean. More than half of the international trade commutes through it. It also connects all important global sea lanes of communication. In recent years, India has upgraded its defense budget and substantial allocation have been made for the naval forces also. Although it is not enough given the fact that major fleets are ageing and need urgent replacements but even with less than required budget, Indian navy is known for its quality and competence and has shown its swiftness to ASEAN countries in the backdrop of 2004 Tsunami.

Since last few years, Indian navy has been extremely active in ASEAN, East Asia and larger plank of the Indo-Pacific. It has been one of the hallmarks of Act East Policy. Port calls, joint naval exercises and maritime capacity building programmes with friendly navies has uplifted India's geopolitical status in ASEAN and East Asia. Regular warships deploy in Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea has underlined India's nautical dimensions of India's Act East Policy. Regular and intense joint bilateral and multilateral naval exercises have underlined India's maritime interests in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>6</sup>

Indian trade has also gone up rapidly since the end of the cold war. Before cold war, India's overall trade was almost negligible but now it is roughly touching 1 trillion dollar. India needs justice based free sea lanes of communication for this purpose and needless to say that it is in larger interests of all important countries who have stakes in global trade. India has also shown enough courage to stand with the disputant countries of ASEAN on South China Sea and also stood with Japan on East China Sea issues. In both disputes China has negated the legitimate rights of the disputants and declared that South China Sea as its own territory and also refused to obey international tribunal order in 2016 in favour

of Philippines. United States and many like-minded countries also stood with India on both disputes. It is not for curving out any territory in the region but for the compliance of relevant international laws. South China Sea has emerged as new bone of contention between China and disputant countries of ASEAN. "Never let a good crisis go to waste," the late British Prime Minister Winston Churchill advised. The Reed Bank crisis, which saw a suspected Chinese militia vessel sink a Philippine fishing boat in June 2019, has energised those who advocate upgrading the Philippine-US alliance.

Latest surveys show a growing number of Filipinos now favouring a tougher stance in the South China Sea and advocating for more cooperation with traditional allies against China.<sup>7</sup> Present Philippines President is a Chinese ally but due to changing public opinion he is under immense pressure to change his South China Sea policies. It will gravitate Philippines towards the United States which is proactive to ensure relevant international laws in South China Sea.

New Delhi has moved forward to strengthen strategic maritime relations with the littoral countries of ASEAN and East Asia and sought exclusive greater stability in power balance in maritime Asia. Indian navy has upgraded its ship deployment. In 2013, 4 ships were present in 4 countries but by 2017 the number has gone up to the presence of 17 ships in 17 countries.<sup>8</sup> Vietnam has emerged as the fulcrum of India's maritime policy in the ASEAN and India has invested much in the region and particularly enriched Vietnamese navy and has equipped Vietnamese navy with missiles. In return, Hanoi has permitted Indian warships to utilize its port services and also granted Indian oil company ONGC Videsh Limited to sustain extension to explore Vietnamese oil blocks in the disputed South China Sea waters within its territory which has been objected by the Chinese.<sup>9</sup> Likewise India has developed excellent relations with other maritime powers of ASEAN. Singapore has remained closest Indian maritime partner in the region and bilateral naval exercise with Singapore navy has been extremely successful particularly in the disputed South China Sea. India has also participated in bilateral naval exercises with Indonesia and Japan. In January 2016, Indian coast guard along with Japanese counterpart had a marathon joint naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal and observed a high level of functional synergy and coordination.<sup>10</sup> With Australia also, New Delhi has been involved sustainably particularly in trilateral naval exercises along with the United States and Japan. India had been hesitant to include Australia in the process initially but

that hesitation has started to disappear. Indian leaders have recognised Canberra's acceptance of India's strategic ascendance and also their vastly converging interests in dealing with China's growing assertiveness in maritime Asia has been an important factor behind the deepening of their relationship.<sup>11</sup>

The moot challenge has been China's expanding maritime footprints. China has developed ports in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Pakistan. President Xi Jinping has commissioned 40 billion dollar maritime silk route and China has been working tirelessly on it. The accelerated speed of Chinese military expenditure has further complicated India's maneuver in the region because the Chinese navy PLAN has been allocated much higher resources in comparison with the Indian navy. The growing imprint of PLAN particularly in South Asia has thrown a series of serious challenges for the Indian navy. Hambantota to Gwadar, China has installed its navy bases across South Asia and it has been perceived by the observers as an effort of China to encircle India within the ambit of maritime in South Asia.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to reformulate maritime policies. Modi government has carried out various exercises and taken many comprehensive steps. We have huge sea coast of over 7400 KM and many islands. Andaman is strategically located and has the potential to contain PLAN moves.

#### Strengthening of Andaman Command

Modi government has taken many structural steps to contain Chinese navy game plan in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere as well. Strengthening of the Andaman bases has been executed primarily to meet this challenge. Importance of Indian Ocean can be understood from the statement of Admiral A. T. Mahan in 1890 that "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the destiny of the world would be decided on its waters". Former Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee also clearly stated India's strategic priorities in November 2003 "the strategic frontiers of today's India, grown in international stature, have expanded well beyond confines of South Asia. Our security environment, ranging from Persian Gulf to Straits of Malacca across the Indian Ocean, includes Central Asia and Afghanistan, China, and South-East Asia. Our strategic thinking has also to extend to these horizons." Hence, Andaman Sea has become a strategic important place to play a major role in maritime security for India. Human civilisations have used Sea extensively for trade and commerce. Due to geographical location of India with the presence

of a long coast line provides a huge opportunity in trade and security for its main land. On the other hand presence of ANIs also provide a secure strategy to monitoring the world's most strategic and overcrowded trafficked Malacca Strait, through which approximately 95,000 merchants, oil and gas cargos, pass through.<sup>13</sup> It makes the strait an energy lifeline for Southeast and East Asian countries.

Strait of Malacca is one of the busiest and longest navigation routes which connects the Indian Ocean via Andaman Sea and the Strait is 900 km in length. Besides, this Strait is shortest, safest and economical for ships to travel through East Asia to Europe. Though the Strait is very narrow and with navigational restrictions nevertheless the Strait is still an attractive and preferred navigational route for international shippers compared to other alternative routes like Sunda or Lombok-Makassar Straits in the Indonesian archipelago.<sup>14</sup> Malacca Straits annually provides safe transit to over 60,000 tankers, cargo vessels, passenger vessels, tug and pilot and it is likely to increase in near future. However, Chinese goods and oil transportation took place in large volume through Malacca Straits and due to India's territory of Andaman and Nicobar, India is having advantage in the region and any disruptions in the Straits will affect its trade and transit. China is not in a position to deal with such disruption in the Malacca Straits and therefore, China is establishing its bases in different neighbouring countries of India to avoid such scenario.

However, India is a growing economy and its national interest is to promote Act East Policy to counter China in the region as well as initiate development in Northeast region of India. India's long pending development initiative in Northeast region has been initiated by taking up the projects such as the Asian highway project in South Asia to link Singapore with New Delhi via Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Vientiane, Chiang Mai, Yangon, Mandalay, Kalembo, Tamu, Dhaka and Kolkata. India also has taken initiative to upgrade and resurfacing 160 km long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalembo road. Besides Kaladan, Multi-modal Transit Transport will connect Indian ports and Sittwe port in Myanmar through Mizoram.<sup>15</sup> It will provide a greater opportunity for the region to develop in every aspect and will provide a huge market for peoples of India and ASEAN as well.

#### Concluding Remarks

To promote maritime component of "Act East Policy" and strengthen India's strategic interests and regional cooperation with ASEAN, Malacca Strait has to play a dominant role. India has developed the tri-command

in Andaman and Nicobar Islands to strengthen its surveillance and monitoring the Malacca Strait as it provides a gateway to the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Majority of Chinese oil supply ships from the Middle East still passes through this narrow way, which is a nightmare for the Chinese due to its proximity with the Andaman. India has already upgraded maritime relations with the Indo-Pacific countries and pledged to further accelerate the process. Maritime power is extremely important to sustain the dominance of a country. ASEAN countries wish India to play a counter balancing role against China in the region. Following comment of Jakarta Times vindicates this point:

"The evolving geo-strategic framework inexorably impels countries in South East Asia to accept China and India as major regional powers. In the first case, it is necessary consequence of the former. ... Beijing has also shown an unequalled zest in its economic diplomacy with the association of South East Asian nations, ASEAN. Delhi on the other hand has been a late bloomer. ... ASEAN wants India's presence as much as India needs to be active in the region. ... ASEAN makes available a strategic framework and regulated forum which India can bluntly interact with economic powers Japan and South Korea along with fellow regional power China. This is an opportunity in which Delhi must not be hesitant. It cannot afford to miss the boat again."<sup>16</sup>

Australia-India relations have also improved particularly in the backdrop of November 2014. It was maiden Indian PM visit after three decades which has accelerated the pace of deepening of bilateral relationship. Australia is India's maritime neighbour and our deepening bonhomie has saddened China. India has been engaged in joint maritime exercises with coincidentally democratic countries (Japan, United States, Australia and many ASEAN countries). This has created apprehensions in Chinese strategist thinkers. China's naval watchers have in particular been suspicious of naval exercises involving India, Japan, Australia and the United States, ostensibly aimed at balancing Chinese maritime power in the Asian littorals.<sup>17</sup>

The return of PM Modi for the second term in May 2019 has further given new momentum to India's maritime policy. It remains bedrock of India's Act East Policy. It requires gamut of changes and more resources are required to meet with the swelling expenditure of our navy. Modi government has taken many positive steps in this direction and realignment with the like-minded countries has further consolidated our status in larger context of the Indo-Pacific region.

## Notes

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