

# THE NAUTICAL DIMENSION OF INDIA'S "ACT EAST" POLICY

Policy Report  
April 2018

Abhijit Singh



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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, India's Look East Policy (LEP) has served as New Delhi's principal foreign policy instrument in the Asia Pacific region. Originally conceived as a strategy for closer economic relations with Southeast Asia, the policy has deepened India's political and institutional linkages in the Asia Pacific, burnishing its credentials as a dominant engine of regional growth. In November 2014, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi rechristened the LEP as the Act East Policy (AEP), many saw it as a defining moment in India's Asia policy.<sup>1</sup>

As a political strategy, the AEP attempts to inject vigour into India's regional diplomacy, emphasising New Delhi's desire for closer economic and security relations with its Asian neighbours. While the Modi government continues to prioritise political ties within the South Asian neighbourhood, the AEP signals a more action-oriented policy towards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>2</sup> In seeking closer political interaction with its eastern partners, New Delhi has expanded the scope of its economic, security, and connectivity endeavours across a wide arc in the Pacific littorals, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Pacific Island states.<sup>3</sup>

A key component of the AEP has been India's maritime engagement in the Asia Pacific. Through regular ship visits, naval exercises, and maritime capacity building programmes with partner navies, the Indian Navy has striven to lift New Delhi's geopolitical profile in Southeast and East Asia. Regular warship deployments in the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea have stressed the nautical dimension of Prime Minister Modi's "neighbourhood-first" policy, even as high-end bilateral and multilateral naval exercises in the East Asian littorals have exemplified India's maritime outreach in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Danielle Rajendram, "India's New Asia-Pacific Strategy: Modi Acts East", *The Lowy Institute*, December 2014, at <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/indias-new-asia-pacific-strategy-modi-acts-east.pdf>

2 Hemant Krishna Singh, "India's Act East Imperative", *Seminar Magazine*, June 2015, at [http://www.india-seminar.com/2015/670/670\\_hemant\\_krishan\\_singh.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2015/670/670_hemant_krishan_singh.htm)

3 Ashok Sajjanhar, "2 Years On, Has Modi's 'Act East' Policy Made a Difference for India?", *The Diplomat*, June 3, 2016 <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/2-years-on-has-modis-act-east-policy-made-a-difference-for-india/>

4 Scott Cheney Peters, "India's Maritime Acts in the East", *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, June 18, 2015, at <https://amti.csis.org/indias-maritime-acts-in-the-east/>

## A Maritime Pivot to the East

The Navy's growing forays in Southeast Asia are driven by three essential imperatives. One, Indian trade and economic linkages in the Pacific are becoming stronger and deeper. Over the past decade, bilateral trade increased more than threefold from US\$21 billion (2005-2006) to US\$65 billion (2015-2016), with an ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement generating expectations for a further expansion of trade and investment.<sup>5</sup> Indian policymakers regard ASEAN and the Southern Pacific as key target regions for New Delhi's Act East endeavours, and Maritime Southeast Asia as a vital facilitator in India's ongoing economic transformation.

Second, India's policymakers view strategic security in the Southeast Asian littorals as a test case for international maritime law, an area where India feels a greater obligation to take a principled stand. Critical among nautical norms enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is the right to access common maritime spaces, which New Delhi is keen to defend robustly.<sup>6</sup>

Lastly, India's decision makers have come to better appreciate the importance of strategic equilibrium in Asia. Not only is China's assertive manoeuvring in the South China Sea destabilising the region, it has exacerbated the power asymmetry between India and China in maritime Asia. Indian analysts say Beijing's tightening grip over the Spratly islands provides the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) with a platform for active power projection in maritime South Asia, where China has already established dual-use commercial military facilities.<sup>7</sup> By calling for a peaceful and fair resolution to the territorial disputes in the South

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5 "India Asean Trade and Investment Relations: Opportunities and Challenges", ASSOCHAM India Report, July 2016, at <http://www.assochem.org/upload/docs/ASEAN-STUDY.pdf>

6 Abhijit Singh (ed) "Arbitration on the South China Sea", in *Line in the Waters – The Strategic Implications of the South China Sea Disputes in Asia*, ORF Special Report, January 2017, at <http://www.orfonline.org/expert-speaks/arbitration-on-the-south-china-sea-implications-for-maritime-asia/>

7 Prem Mahadevan, "China in the Indian Ocean: Part of a Larger PLAN", *CSS Analyses* No. 156, June 2014, at <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse156-EN.pdf>; also see "Nirmala Flags Indian Ocean Issues", *The Hindu*, November 1, 2017, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nirmala-flags-indian-ocean-issues/article19963135.ece>

China Sea, India hopes to contribute to the restoration of strategic balance in the maritime neighbourhood.

Consequently, India's nautical interactions in the Pacific are characterised by an increasing emphasis on naval exercises and capacity-building programs.<sup>8</sup> While New Delhi has moved to expand its strategic military links with littoral states like Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, its Navy-to-Navy interactions have also sought to generate greater operational synergy with Japan and Australia, bringing greater stability to the power balance in maritime Asia.

**Table 1: The Indian Navy's Growing Deployments in the Asia Pacific Region (2013-2017)**

Year	No. of Deployments	No. of Countries visited in Asia Pacific	No. of Ships
2013	1	4	4
2014	4	7	6
2015	4	9	7
2016	6	17	15
2017	6	17	17

*Source: Compiled by author using data from Ministry of Defence, Government of India Annual Reports (2013-2016), and the Indian Navy website ([www.indiannavy.nic.in/search/node/act%20east](http://www.indiannavy.nic.in/search/node/act%20east))*

## The Indian Navy's Act East Strategy

India's defence outreach to Vietnam best illustrates New Delhi's strategic approach in Southeast Asia. Since 2013, New Delhi has steadily expanded its maritime ties with Hanoi, offering a credit line of \$500 million to Hanoi

8 For a detailed look at India's maritime engagement in Southeast Asia see Andi Supriyanto, "A Sea of Opportunities – Southeast Asia's Growing Naval Cooperation with India, in Anit Mukherjee, Raja Mohan (eds), *Indian Naval Strategy and Asian Security*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015)

for the purchase of 10 patrol boats and a project for the modernisation of the Vietnam Navy's Petya class frigates.<sup>9</sup> Besides allowing the Indian Navy to train Vietnamese submarines crews (for six new Kilo-class submarines acquired from Russia), New Delhi is said to be considering the sale of the Akash "Surface to Air" missiles to the Southeast Asian state, with a deal for a transfer of the BrahMos cruise missile awaiting clearance.<sup>10</sup> In return, Hanoi has permitted Indian warships to utilise its port facilities and also granted the Indian oil firm ONGC Videsh a two-year extension to explore a Vietnamese oil block in an area of the South China Sea contested by China and Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

The India-Indonesia maritime relationship too has witnessed a significant upswing in the form of increased military delegation visits and training exchanges. The Indian Navy has upgraded its coordinated patrols outside the Strait of Malacca to a full-fledged naval exercise and it is now an expanded version of the original format.<sup>12</sup>

Singapore is India's closest maritime partner in the eastern neighbourhood. For long, the Singapore-India Maritime Exercise (SIMBEX) has been the Indian Navy's most productive maritime engagement in Southeast Asia. Besides upgrading the scope and complexity of individual exercises, India and Singapore have sought to enlarge the scope of SIMBEX beyond its traditional emphasis on anti-submarine operations.<sup>13</sup> The 2017 iteration of the exercise explored other areas of operational cooperation, including advanced naval warfare drills, air defence exercises, and gunnery live-firings, even witnessing the maiden participation of Singapore's F-15SG

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9 Sandeep Unnithan, "Why India Needs to Ramp up Its Token Training of Vietnamese Submariners", *The DailyO*, <http://www.dailyo.in/politics/modi-vietnam-submarines-indian-navy-vietnames-peoples-navy/story/1/12726.html>

10 Helen Clark, "Why Is India Risking Chinese Anger by Trying to Sell Missiles to Vietnam?" *South China Morning Post*, January 13, 2017, at <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2061550/why-india-risking-chinese-anger-trying-sell-missiles-vietnam>

11 "OVL Gets 2-year Extension for Exploring Vietnamese Oil Block", *The Times of India*, June 9, 2017, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/ovl-gets-2-year-extension-for-exploring-vietnamese-oil-block/articleshow/59512646.cms>

12 "India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol Graduates into Joint Exercise," *The Hindu*, February 6, 2014, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indiaindonesia-coordinated-patrol-graduates-into-joint-exercise/article5661161.ece> (Accessed November 20, 2014)

13 Koh Swee Lean Colin, "Looking East in Defence Perspectives on India-Southeast Asia Relations", *India Review*, Volume 12 (3), 2013, 186-2006



fighter.<sup>14</sup> Indian warships also joined in the Singapore Navy's Golden Jubilee celebrations, participating in both the inaugural International Maritime Review at Changi Naval Base and the International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference.<sup>15</sup>



*Corvette INS Kirch (left) and fleet tanker INS Jyoti (centre) of the Indian Navy with a frigate of the Singaporean Navy during SIMBEX 2011 in the South China Sea (Source: Wikimedia Commons)*

With Philippines, the improvement in maritime relations has been more gradual. While Indian warships have visited Philippines every year since 2006, naval ties have not quite gained momentum. Despite supporting the Arbitral Tribunal's decision in July 2016, New Delhi was surprised by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's active courting of Beijing, a move many say has emboldened China to continue with its assertive posturing

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14 "India-Singapore Joint Naval Exercise SIMBEX 2017 Concludes", *India Today*, May 25, 2017, at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-singapore-joint-naval-exercise-simbex-2017-concludes/1/962685.html>

15 Ibid

in the South China Sea.<sup>16</sup> In another setback, India's state-owned Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers failed to secure a contract to supply two light frigates to the Philippines despite emerging as the lowest bidder<sup>17</sup>, following which maritime outreach to Manila has been confined to maintaining regular interaction. A goodwill visit by two Indian warships to Manila in October 2017 commemorating 25 years of the India-ASEAN dialogue partnership illustrates New Delhi's desire to remain engaged with this important Southeast Asian power.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, India's maritime ties with Malaysia have made halting progress. In July 2016, when the Chief of Royal Malaysian Navy visited India, the two sides decided to work constructively towards expanding their maritime engagement.<sup>19</sup> A year later, during Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's visit to New Delhi, Adani Ports made a proposal to develop Carey Island near Kuala Lumpur with Malaysian partners.<sup>20</sup> While Indian naval ships have been regularly visiting Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur has been balancing maritime relations between India and China (made evident by the docking of a Chinese submarine in Sabah in January 2017).<sup>21</sup>

Lest its naval engagements in the Western Pacific be perceived as tacit alliance building against China, the Indian Navy has stressed the benign

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16 "India Supports South China Sea Ruling, Calls for 'Peace' in Disputed Area", *Indian Express*, July 13, 2016, at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/india-supports-south-china-sea-ruling-calls-for-peace-in-disputed-area-2909822/>; "Philippines backs down in South China Sea after Beijing protest", *The Tribune*, November 8, 2017 at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/philippines-backs-down-in-s-china-sea-after-beijing-protest/494449.html>

17 "HHI To Build Two 2,600 Ton Frigates For The Philippine Navy", *Marine Insight*, Dec 28, 2016 at <https://www.marineinsight.com/shipping-news/hhi-build-two-2600-ton-frigates-philippine-navy/>

18 Prashanth Parameswaran, "India Warships on Philippines Voyage amid ASEAN Anniversary", *The Diplomat*, October 2, 2017, at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/india-warships-on-philippines-voyage-amid-asean-anniversary/>

19 "Admiral Tan Sri Ahmad Kamarulzaman bin Haji Ahmad Badaruddin of Royal Malaysian Navy visits India", *PIB Press Release*, at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=147653>

20 "MMC Partners Adani Ports for Carey Island Port Project", *MMC Press Release*, April 2017, at <https://www.mmc.com.my/20170403%20Joint%20PR%20Adani%20MMC%20SDP%20MOU.pdf>

21 P Ramasamy, "Naval Visits by China and India about More than Goodwill", *Free Malaysia Today*, October 12, 2017, at <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2017/10/12/naval-visits-by-china-and-india-about-more-than-goodwill/>

nature of its operational interactions in the Asia Pacific. To highlight its “responsible stakeholder” credentials, New Delhi continually emphasises humanitarian assistance, search and rescue, and other forms of capacity-building and capability-enhancement activities.<sup>22</sup> In 2016, when India held Exercise Force-18 – a multi-nation field training exercise in India involving 10 ASEAN states and eight other ASEAN Defence Minister’s Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) members – it was themed around “humanitarian mine action” and “peacekeeping operations”.<sup>23</sup>

## A Potential Coalition of Democratic Powers

Despite consciously steering clear of contentious issues such as the South China Sea disputes, New Delhi’s frequent references to freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes in joint statements and vision documents have created misgivings in China, where political analysts believe India is being lured into a coalition of democratic powers against Chinese interests. China’s naval watchers have in particular been suspicious of naval exercises involving India, Japan, Australia and the US, ostensibly aimed at balancing Chinese maritime power in the Asian littorals.<sup>24</sup>

China’s principal objection has been to the expansion of India-US naval ties. An abiding symbol of warming strategic ties between New Delhi and Washington, the Malabar naval exercise is the most wide-ranging professional interaction the Indian Navy has with any of its partner navies. Since Japan’s inclusion as a permanent member in 2015, Malabar has grown in scope and complexity, with the 2017 edition witnessing the participation of two aircraft carriers, guided missile cruise ships, destroyers, submarines, Poseidon P-8A / P-8i aircraft, and Japan’s new helicopter

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22 David Brewster, *India as an Asia Pacific Power*, New York: Routledge, 2012)

23 “Exercise Force 18 Takes India’s ‘Act East Policy’ to the Next Level”, *Rediff.com*, March 6, 2016, at <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/exercise-force-18-takes-indias-act-east-policy-to-the-next-level/20160308.htm>

24 “Australia Woos India to Counter-balance China”, *The Global Times*, July 27, 2017, at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1058370.shtml>

carrier JS Izumo.<sup>25</sup> Increasingly, Exercise Malabar has focused on the higher end of the naval operational spectrum, with special emphasis on anti-submarine warfare, carrier strike group operations, maritime patrol and reconnaissance operations, surface warfare, explosive ordinance disposal, and helicopter operations.<sup>26</sup>



*Ships from the Indian navy, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and U.S. Navy during a group sail at Malabar 2016 (Source: Wikimedia Commons)*

Meanwhile, Indonesia-Japan bilateral Coast Guard interactions in the Indian Ocean have been on the upswing, with both sides making the effort to develop greater interoperability and operational integration. In January 2016, when ships and aircraft of the Indian Coast Guard and the Japan Coast Guard came together for the 15<sup>th</sup> “Sahyog-Kaijin” joint exercise in the Bay of Bengal, observers noted a high level of functional synergy and coordination.<sup>27</sup>

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25 “Warships, Subs of India, US, Japan Sail out to Bay of Bengal for Malabar”, *The Times of India*, July 13, 2017, at [http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/59583027.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/59583027.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

26 Ibid

27 “India, Japan Conduct Joint Exercise ‘Sahyog-Kaijin’ off Chennai Coast”, *The Hindu*, January 16, 2016, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/India-Japan-conduct-joint-exercise-%E2%80%98Sahyog-Kaijin%E2%80%99-off-Chennai-coast/article14001430.ece>

With Australia too, the trajectory of nautical ties has risen sharply. While Canberra has been strengthening its nautical posture in the Indian Ocean for over a decade, it has now found a credible partner in New Delhi. With the institutionalisation of the India-Australia naval exercise, the two most powerful Indian Ocean navies are cooperating to secure vulnerable spaces of the Indo-Pacific region. While New Delhi has been hesitant to include Australia in the Malabar naval exercises with Japan and the US (for both operational and political reasons)<sup>28</sup>, Indian leaders acknowledge Canberra's support of India's geopolitical aspirations, as also their vastly converging interests in dealing with China's growing assertiveness in maritime Asia.<sup>29</sup>

Countering China's expanding footprint in its neighbourhood, however, has been challenging for New Delhi.<sup>30</sup> The growing scope of PLAN missions in South Asia, particularly submarine operations in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea, has pushed the Indian Navy into defence mode, challenging their regional pre-eminence in a way that has left little resource to operationalise a Pacific strategy. In New Delhi, Beijing's plan for the construction of the China-Pakistan economic corridor and a network of ports and replenishment facilities in maritime South Asia – including in Gwadar and Hambantota – has fuelled speculation of the Chinese encirclement of India.<sup>31</sup>

The People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) establishment of its first logistics base in Djibouti has further raised Indian anxiety about the possibility of more Chinese military bases in the Indian Ocean.<sup>32</sup> Indian analysts believe such facilities would be dual-use in nature; serving commercial ends but also upgradable into naval centres in times of geopolitical crises.

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28 "Why India Remains Cautious about the Quad", *The Lowy Interpreter*, April 26, 2017, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-remains-cautious-about-quad>

29 Vishal Ranjan, "Australia and India in Asia: When 'Look West' Meets Act East", *Strategic Analysis*, IDSA, Vol 40, 2016 – Issue, August 7, 2016 at <http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/HNhyMFC3GT7ftNttbKsg/full>

30 Collin Koh, "A New Normal in the Indo-Pacific – Sino-Indian Maritime Security Dilemma" in Anit Mukherjee, C Raja Mohan (eds), *Indian Naval Strategy and Asian Security*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015)

31 Arun Prakash, "A Strategic Encirclement", *The Indian Express*, April 25, 2017 at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/indias-political-and-security-establishment-needs-a-strategy-in-light-of-chinas-naval-expansion-4626796/>

32 "China Sends Troops to Its First Overseas Base in Djibouti, Africa", *NDTV*, July 12, 2017, at <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/china-sends-troops-to-its-first-overseas-base-in-djibouti-1723814>

## Strengthening of the Andaman and Nicobar Command

A key element of India's maritime AEP is the development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI).<sup>33</sup> Located at the intersection of the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, the ANI is home to India's only tri-services formation: the Andaman and Nicobar Command – a “staging base” for India's Bay of Bengal security initiatives. To enable the Indian Navy to keep an eye on traffic flowing through the regional sea lanes, New Delhi has moved to create maritime infrastructure on the strategically located islands. In 2012, the Indian Navy commissioned the Indian Navy Ship (INS) Baaz – the naval aviation base on Campbell Bay on the Great Nicobar Island – and extended its airstrip from 3,050 feet to 10,000 feet.<sup>34</sup>

Upon completion in 2018, the new facilities at INS Baaz will allow the Navy to operate P-8I surveillance aircraft, presently positioned at INS Rajali, the naval airbase at Aarkonam, Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, the Floating Dry Dock Navy near Port Blair launched in December 2017 ensures the servicing and maintenance of warships stationed at the ANI. Plans are also in place to construct three forward operating bases at Diglipur, Kamorta and Campbell Bay to allow its Khukri class corvettes to be distributed across various locations in the archipelago.<sup>35</sup>

In order to expedite the many developmental projects underway at the ANI, the Modi government recently appointed retired Navy chief and Island Development Agency chairman, Admiral D. K. Joshi, as the Lieutenant Governor of the Union Territory; a move suggestive of an intention to

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33 “More Muscle for India's Andaman and Nicobar Defence Posts to Counter Hawkish China”, *The Hindustan Times*, August 26, 2016, at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/more-muscle-for-india-s-andaman-and-nicobar-defence-posts-to-counter-hawkish-china/story-8YkEo28c3WZM9Lq2iiJnK.html>

34 Ibid; for a detailed look at India's Andaman and Nicobar Command, see Anit Mukherjee, “The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier – the Andaman and Nicobar Command”, Anit Mukherjee and C Raja Mohan (eds), *Indian Naval Strategy and Asian Security*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015)

35 Shishir Gupta, “More Muscle for India's Andaman and Nicobar Defence Posts to Counter Hawkish China”, *The Hindustan Times*, August 27, 2017, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/more-muscle-for-india-s-andaman-and-nicobar-defence-posts-to-counter-hawkish-china/story-8YkEo28c3WZM9Lq2iiJnK.html>

bolster the islands' capacity to play a military-strategic role.<sup>36</sup> While New Delhi has given no indication of turning the archipelago into a strategic garrison, the utility of the ANI for the Indian Navy's long-range eastern deployments is more than clear.

## Beyond the South China Sea

An important facet of India's Act East dynamism is the outreach to the Southern Pacific. While India's political interest in the Pacific Islands has been largely limited to an ethnic Indian population in Fiji, the aspiration for closer diplomatic ties has grown lately. After Prime Minister Modi's visit to Fiji in 2014 and the creation of the India-Pacific Islands Cooperation Forum, New Delhi has sought to raise its economic and security engagement in the region.<sup>37</sup> New Delhi underlined its stakes in the Southern Pacific by signing a defence pact with Fiji last year, identifying maritime security and naval cooperation as a key area of promise.<sup>38</sup>

To demonstrate India's deep commitment to peace and security in the Southern Pacific, INS Satpura was sent to Port Majeuro in May 2016 for an operational turnaround.<sup>39</sup> Notably, the Indian Navy's Pacific deployments now consist of a detour for at least one warship to the southern Pacific, displaying maritime reach and operational prowess.

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36 "To Counter China, India Eyes Military Expansion in Andaman and Nicobar Islands", *The Financial Times*, October 19, 2017, at <http://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/to-counter-china-india-eyes-military-expansion-in-andaman-and-nicobar-islands-key-things-to-know/899390/>

37 Nilanjan Oak, "South Pacific: Gaining Prominence in Indian Foreign Policy Calculations", *IDSA Issue Brief*, May 10, 2016, at [https://idsa.in/backgrounders/south-pacific-and-indian-foreign-policy\\_noak\\_100516](https://idsa.in/backgrounders/south-pacific-and-indian-foreign-policy_noak_100516)

38 "India Ensures Greater Naval Presence In Pacific with Fiji Defense Pact", *Indian Defence News*, June 1, 2017 at <http://www.indiandefensenews.in/2017/06/india-ensures-greater-naval-presence-in.html>

39 "Visit of Indian Warship to Port Majeuro, Marshall Islands", *Indian Navy Press Release*, August 13, 2016, at <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/visit-indian-warship-port-majeuro-marshall-islands>



## Institutional Frameworks

India's political approach in Southeast Asia is characterised by a growing convergence with ASEAN, which New Delhi regards as a natural ally. India's Pacific strategy has been to display political solidarity with Southeast Asian states in their efforts to create a liberal and inclusive regional order.<sup>40</sup> With an active participation in the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ADMM-Plus, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, India has sought to highlight the importance of security in Asia's vulnerable littorals.

India-ASEAN strategic cooperation assumes salience against the backdrop of China's aggressive strategy to subvert the political consensus in Southeast Asia. Following the Arbitral Tribunal's judgement in July 2016 that ruled Chinese historical claims within the nine-dash line to be invalid, Beijing has undermined efforts towards a legally enforceable code of maritime conduct in the Western Pacific.<sup>41</sup> The PLAN continues to assert territorial claims in the resource-rich South China Sea, a vital international maritime trade route, thereby generating considerable anxiety among its neighbours. China's rise as an economic giant and its robust economic ties with the ASEAN countries give India enough reasons to step up its collaborative efforts, which is why New Delhi uses each of the ASEAN-backed forums to support peaceful resolutions to regional conflicts.

## The Doctrinal Transformation

An important subtheme in India's Indo-Pacific debates is the Indian Navy's doctrinal transformation. India's new maritime strategy document underscores the navy's status as a prominent strategic player in the Asian littorals, in securing sea lanes, Indian overseas investment, and even the

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40 "ASEAN is Central Pillar of India's Act East Policy: Sitharaman", *The Statesman*, October 24, 2017 at <http://www.thestatesman.com/india/asean-central-pillar-indias-act-east-policy-sitharaman-1502516599.html>; Also see "Act East: India's ASEAN Journey", *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, November 10, 2014, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?24216/Act+East+Indias+ASEAN+Journey>

41 Shannon Tiezzi, "Why China Isn't Interested in a Code of Conduct", *The Diplomat*, February 26, 2014 at <https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/why-china-isnt-interested-in-a-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/>



Indian diaspora.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, the Indian Navy has moved to improve its strategic mobility, creating alternative avenues for the application of hard and soft maritime power in the Pacific littorals. This has entailed an expansion of the benign and diplomatic missions in the Southeast Asian waters, and a broadening of bilateral and multilateral naval engagements in the Indo-Pacific Region.

A key dimension of the navy's growing mission portfolio in the Asian littorals has been humanitarian assistance. In recent years, the Indian Navy's benign role in its maritime neighbourhood has expanded significantly. Building on its 2004 tsunami relief experience, Indian naval ships have undertaken a wide range of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in the regional seas. These have ranged from major evacuation efforts in Yemen and alleviating a drinking water crisis in the Maldives to providing relief supplies to Fiji, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Even the navy's biennial MILAN exercises at Port Blair have given special attention to humanitarian relief and non-combatant evacuation drills, with greater participation from Southeast Asian states.<sup>43</sup>

To perform the role of a genuine "security provider", India has sought an increase in force levels to combat traditional and non-traditional threats. Even so, the navy has been pushing for combined and cooperative operations in the regional littorals, calling for the creation of a "positive and favourable" maritime environment and an integration of maritime assets and agencies.<sup>44</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

While India's Act East endeavours have been growing, its Southeast Asian forays have yet to attain a critical mass of standing naval presence. With New Delhi unwilling to be seen as interfering in the conflicts in the South China Sea, India's maritime managers have been modest with their warship deployments in the Western Pacific.

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42 "Ensuring Secure Seas - India's Maritime Security Strategy", *Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence*, January 2016, p. 30, at [https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_Document\\_25Jan16.pdf](https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf)

43 "The Indian Navy's Humanitarian Impulse", *The Mint*, June 14, 2017, at <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/5yMHleapeZianzdanLf9JN/The-Indian-Navys-humanitarian-impulse.html>

44 "Ensuring Secure Seas - India's Maritime Security Strategy", *Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence*, January 2016, n-44, p. 78.

India, however, cannot be oblivious to the threats posed by Beijing's military on regional stability. With China's energy-hungry and export-driven economy demanding more raw materials and fuel imports, the PLAN aggressiveness in East Asia is on the rise. Beijing's bid to create and militarise islands in the South China Sea; the establishment of a major surface fleet and nuclear-submarine base on Hainan Island; and the PLA's deployment of precision cruise and advanced ballistic missiles, seem to be part of a larger Chinese design to exert control over the seas within the first island chain, extending the PLAN's blue-water presence.

China's Indo-Pacific strategy, in fact, may hold some useful pointers for New Delhi. In recent years, Beijing has sought to leverage its Indian Ocean naval presence for political purposes. By deploying naval assets in greater numbers in the Indian Ocean Region littorals, Beijing has signalled its unwillingness to accept maritime South Asia as an Indian sphere of influence. India must now emulate the Chinese by adopting a strategy of counter-projection in the Pacific.<sup>45</sup>



*INS Kalvari is the first of six scorpene-class submarines that was commissioned into the Indian Navy in December 2017 (Source: Wikimedia Commons)*

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45 Abhijit Singh, "Malabar Naval Exercise: Power-play in the Indo-Pacific Region", *The Mint*, July 20, 2017, at <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/YLTJRierevnhWvDNsDsLJM/Malabar-naval-exercise-Powerplay-in-the-IndoPacific-region.html>

In strictly operational terms, a counter-projection strategy translates into greater 'presence operations' in the Southeast Asian littorals, and bilateral and multilateral exercises with partner navies. Besides raising the scope and quality of its maritime engagement, the Indian Navy will need to ensure secure and institutionalised access to refuel and resupply facilities in the Pacific. Logistical arrangements with friendly Southeast Asian states and new littoral warfare assets will provide the Navy with the vital tools it needs to undertake strategic missions overseas. This must be supported by a new doctrinal framework that emphasises the military-security function, for credible distant-seas presence.

To be sure, the Indian Navy would have to calibrate its Pacific operations to avoid any direct confrontation with China. By expanding operational presence along the critical Southeast Asian sea lanes, the Indian Navy will need to subtly project strategic maritime power in the Eastern Seas. More importantly, India's naval planners will need to plan operations in waters where Beijing cannot prove a territorial infringement, and yet feel the pinch of a perceived violation of its political sphere of influence.

As Indian maritime managers seek a bigger role for the navy in capacity-building programs, the agenda for cooperation will need to go well beyond ADMM-Plus exercises. One suggestion is to seek observer status in the Southeast Asia Cooperation Against Terrorism (SEACAT) and Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) – two US-led naval exercises in the South China Sea. New Delhi must offer defence equipment and tactical weapons to Southeast Asian navies, if it helps them in building capability and strength. From Vietnam and Indonesia to Thailand and Philippines, there is a clamour for superior naval weaponry and combat capability. New Delhi should be willing to offer suitable technology without fearing a backlash from Beijing.

In essence, every element of India's maritime engagement with ASEAN and Southern Pacific states must serve to cement the Indian Navy's position as a strategic actor in the Asia Pacific. Only then will India's Act East Policy gain real credibility.

## About the Author

**Abhijit Singh** is a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, where he heads the Maritime Policy Programme. As a maritime professional with specialist and command experience in front-line Indian naval ships, he has been involved in the writing of India's maritime strategy (2007). He is a keen commentator on maritime matters and has written extensively on security and governance issues in the Indian Ocean and Pacific littorals. His articles and commentaries have been published in the Asian Bureau for Asian Research (NBR), the Lowy Interpreter, the World Politics Review, the Diplomat, and CSIS Pacific Forum.

He is also the editor of two books on maritime security – *Indian Ocean Challenges: A Quest for Cooperative Solutions* (2013) and *Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific* (2014). Abhijit has published papers on India's growing maritime reach, security of sea-lines of communication in the Indo-Pacific region, Indian Ocean governance issues, and maritime infrastructure in the Asian littorals.

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