INDIA, ASEAN AND INDO-PACIFIC GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract:
The term Indo-Pacific carries different significance for its participants. For USA, the term signifies the extension of Pentagon’s strategic focus from the Asia-Pacific to the Indian Ocean region amidst the ‘rise of China’ in this vast maritime domain. While for both India and ASEAN Indo-Pacific ‘geo-strategy’ is an opportunity to establish their centrality in the geopolitics of the region. US- sponsored Indo-Pacific naval strategy is China-centric in character looking for partnership with India and ASEAN to counter China ‘threat’. India invests in her naval potentials since lately with same objective. However, India cannot afford to engage in overt anti-China mission led by USA. Thus, she opts for her traditional strategic approach of ‘to engage to contain’ vis-à-vis the Asian giant through multilateral engagements led by ASEAN which is beneficial to ensure tranquil Indo-Pacific region, important for commercial interests of both, as against aggressive strategy of USA.

Key words: Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, India, ASEAN, China, Geopolitics

Título en Castellano: India, ASEAN y la geopolítica del Indo-Pacífico

Resumen:
El término Indo-Pacífico tiene diversa significación para sus Estados participantes. Para Estados Unidos, el término significa la extensión del enfoque estratégico del Pentágono desde el Asia-Pacífico a la región del Océano Índico en función del "ascenso de China" en este vasto dominio marítimo. Mientras que para la India como para ASEAN, la "Geo-estrategia" del Indo-Pacífico es una oportunidad para establecer su centralidad en la geopolítica de la región. La estrategia naval del Indo-Pacífico patrocinada por Estados Unidos está centrada en China centrada en busca de una asociación con la India y ASEAN para contrarrestar la "amenaza" de China. India invierte en su potencial naval desde hace tiempo con el mismo objetivo. Sin embargo, la India no puede permitirse el lujo de participar en una misión antichina dirigida por Estados Unidos. Por lo tanto, opta por su enfoque estratégico tradicional de "comprometerse a contener" frente al gigante asiático a través de compromisos multilaterales dirigidos por ASEAN, que se considera beneficioso para asegurar la tranquilidad en la región del Indo-Pacífico, importante para los intereses comerciales de ambos, frente a la estrategia agresiva de Estados Unidos.

Palabras Clave: Indo-Pacífico, Asia-Pacífico, India, ASEAN, China, Geopolítica

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1. Introduction

At the 32nd ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) Summit at Singapore in April (2018) Indonesian President Joko Widodo emphasized on a role for ASEAN in the ‘developing Indo-Pacific cooperation’ in order to maintain ‘relevance and centrality’ of the Southeast Asian Association. On the other hand, while in Jakarta in the following month of May, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated, “The partnership between India and Asean can guarantee peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.” The statements of the two neighbouring leaders of the two largest and most strategically located countries of South and Southeast Asian region is very significant amidst the growing Indo-Pacific strategic notion, expanding the scope of the erstwhile Asia-Pacific concept to the Indian Ocean domain, in the context of ‘rising China’. India recognizes the ‘central place’ of ASEAN in the security of the Asia-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific conception, although not a fresh one, can be considered as the successor of the Asia-Pacific maritime geostrategic notion. Traditionally led by the USA, the concept now expands its ambit beyond the East Asian periphery further west to integrate the larger Indian Ocean region with the geopolitics of the Pacific world. India is now considered an important constituent of the emerging ‘Indo-Pacific’ geostrategic concept. Also, the Indo-Pacific strategy boosts India’s decades old East Asia policy, termed originally as ‘Look East Policy’ unveiled in 1994, and rechristened as ‘Act East Policy’ in 2014. On the other hand, Indo-Pacific notion addresses the wish of the Southeast Asian countries like Singapore and Vietnam to involve India more in the geopolitics of their region.

ASEAN, since its inception and more in the post Cold War period, fought hard to keep the big power confrontation outside the region and for that it emphasized on involvement of all the contending powers in its expanded ambit in order to promote dialogue over duel. India’s foreign policy has traditionally maintained similar view and she actively promoted the ‘Asia for the Asians’ model with dialogue and negotiation as way to resolve crises. Today, when the US-sponsored Indo-Pacific concept underlines Cold War between emerging China and dominant USA in the region, India and ASEAN, with their assimilative approach towards world order, can offer an alternative to the impending conflict. The interest of both India and ASEAN converge in the region since both intend to keep Indo-Pacific region peaceful and ensure freedom of movement while at the same time guarantee their centrality in the regional geopolitics. India’s Indo-Pacific strategy is characteristically different from the US’ and fits in with that of ASEAN.

2. From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ is now widely used to identify the vast maritime world extending from the shore of Japan to the shore of eastern Africa. This geostrategic attempt to mingle the Indian Ocean geopolitics with that of the Pacific Ocean is the reflection of the emerging 21st century Asian geopolitical reality, which is maritime in character. In other sense it is an extension of the Asia-Pacific geopolitics. Indo-Pacific is a maritime geopolitical affair. Asia-Pacific world was limited to East Asia with active participation of USA. Asia-Pacific notion was promoted by the transformation of East Asia from ‘economic stagnation to a potential global economic

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4 ‘Asean central to region’s security architecture: India’, The Statesman, 7 August 2017
The rapid economic integration between Northeast and Southeast Asia under the leadership of Japan between 1960s and 1980s was a major economic development in East Asia. ASEAN countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand readily copied the Japanese economic development model and achieved rapid economic growth by inviting investment from abroad, mainly Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. USA also had her contribution in this economic prosperity of these East Asian economies in the form of export destination for these regional economies.

However, Asia-Pacific was never a platform of regional cohesion. On the contrary, the region was a major conflict zone since the advent of the European colonisers in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century but especially since rise of Imperial Japan in the early twentieth century followed by the conflicts over economic domination of China among the then major players there, namely US, UK and Japan. This was followed by the Japanese occupation of East Asian territories—from the Korean peninsula to the then Burma-ending with the fall of Japan in 1945 and the conclusion of the San Francisco peace treaty (1951) and introduction of the ‘hub and spokes’ system entangling the entire region with the US security web. Washington took every care to resist the re-rise of Japan by framing a pacifist constitution for her neutralizing the country’s future military potentials. At the same time, USA ensured physical security to Japan, and other countries of the region, still fearful of Japan and the new threat in the form of communist China, by concluding bilateral security treaties with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Thailand and also with Australia and New Zealand (Australia-New Zealand-US Security Treaty or ANZUS was concluded in 1951). This San Francisco System (SFS) was coordinated by the US Pacific Command (USPACOM) through basing operations, regular consultations (with the partners), joint command arrangements, extensive maritime patrolling coordination and logistical support. Through the Cold War period, the USPACOM was a major source of security guarantee (along with the presence of US forces in the allied countries) for the weak small and medium powers of the region, fearful of a resurgent Japan, aggressive China and expanding USSR. The Commander-in-Chief of the US Pacific Air Forces, Gen. W. Brazley once said, “Military presence has been a strong element of US Pacific Command (USPACOM) and its air, ground and naval components help provide the muscle to deter challenges to the ability of the free people in the Pacific to make decisions based on their national self interest.” The reference to the ‘free people’ here bears the Cold War connotation between US-led ‘free world’ and USSR-dominated ‘communist camp’. The Asia-Pacific thus was a US-dominated strategic world following the US-prescribed ‘free economic model’ under US security umbrella.

The end of the Cold War era, when diminished the threat perception vis-à-vis Soviet Union, naturally triggered questions regarding the usefulness of US security network throughout the region. This was reflected in the Philippines’ direction to US to wind up her naval base in the Subic Bay. However, there was a general inclination over the continuation of the US military presence in Asia. Even many Soviet academics and officials considered US as a ‘stabilizing force’ in the region in 1990. China was also in favour of US presence as a security

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guarantee against resurgent Japan.\footnote{8}{Bhattacharya, Subhadeep (2017): Understanding South China Sea Geopolitics, New Delhi, The Pentagon Press, p.119} At the turn of the twenty-first century this China emerged as a major economic power, replacing Japan both as number one trading and economic development partner of many East Asian countries, especially the ASEAN community. The gradual integration of the Chinese economy with the global one and the increasing hunger for resources made the only maritime route to China via the Pacific world very important for Beijing and thus there was rising demand to secure the sea lane, infested with territorial disputes and formidable challenge in the form of US. Thus, Chinese naval modernisation mission, assertiveness in South China Sea and naval expeditions transcending the East Asian maritime zone to Indian Ocean since the onset of new millennium, the geostrategic map of Asia-Pacific started undergoing a major make-over resulting to the current Indo-Pacific geopolitical form.

The term Indo-Pacific connotes the involvement of India in the emerging twenty-first century geopolitics of maritime Asia. India is a strategic contender of China. Both are economic powerhouses of Asia, China being the first and India being the third largest Asian economy. Like China, India adopted liberal economic model but only at the end of the Cold War and gradually, like China, arose as an attractive market and an investment destination. With expanding trade the sea lanes around India became important for her. It is noteworthy here that unlike China, India does not have any maritime dispute with any country. Yet, India is perturbed by the gradual appearance of the Chinese fleet and submarines in the Indian Ocean region. Moreover, the development of bases in India’s neighbourhood with Chinese money adds to the discomfort of India. This discomfort has strategically connected India with the China-wary countries of the Asia Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific zone has emerged as the world’s busiest trade route with the vibrant economies like India, China and many ASEAN countries, apart from Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. China is emerging as a strategic challenge to the countries like India and Japan who bear the potentials to pose challenge to China’s growing naval ambitions in the Indo-Pacific zone. Thus, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe chose Indian Parliament in 2007 to float his idea of ‘Confluence of Two Seas’ identifying the Pacific and the Indian Ocean as the ‘seas of freedom and prosperity.’\footnote{9}{“Speech by H.E. Mr, Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at Parliament of Republic of India”, at https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html} He declared, “Our two countries have the ability -- and the responsibility -- to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparency (sic).”\footnote{10}{Ibidy}

However, the major boost to the concept of Indo-Pacific came from USA when she changed the name of USPACOM to US Indo-Pacific Command in May 2018. This initiative of USA was interpreted as the keenness of Washington to integrate India in its strategic planning. This was all the more evident from the statement of US Defence Secretary James Mattis who said that the Pacific Command is ‘intimately engaged with half of the earth’s surface….from Hollywood to Bollywood….’ and said that the Indo-Pacific Command is free of any ‘predatory economics’ and ‘threat of coercion’ (a clear reference to China).\footnote{11}{“U.S. Pacific Command renamed U.S. Indo-Pacific Command”, The Hindu, 31 May 2018 at https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-pacific-command-renamed-us-indo-pacific-command/article24043314.ece} It is mention worthy here that during the Cold War years America was in favour of China acquiring blue water navy and even considered Pakistani navy’s viability far superior to the Indian navy.\footnote{12}{Gupta, Rakesh, (1989), op cit, p.73} India at that time was a strategic ally of the Soviet. Time is vastly changed now. USA started considering India
as a major non-NATO ally since 2004. The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ gained emphasis after the US President Donald Trump extensively used the term during his debut trip to East Asian countries in November 2017. US administration has traditionally used the term ‘Asia-Pacific’ underlining its strategic alliance in East Asia with clear hint of US domination. The Trump administration in Washington seems to be inclined to expand the ambit of this alliance further west into the Indian Ocean zone amid the growing naval prowess of China. Thus, President Trump emphasized on ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ in Vietnam and repeatedly used the term in his speeches in the Philippines. The US administration interprets the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ as an emphasis on freedom of navigation at sea and an attempt by USA to address of the maritime concerns regarding two maritime trade routes connecting Middle East and Europe. However, it is mention worthy here that it was Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, who first used the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ officially in 2010 while touring Honolulu. Nevertheless, the significance of the Trump administration using the term lies in its emphasis to India’s potentials in contributing to the US’ interest in this vast maritime zone. USA wants India to play an ‘increasingly weighty role in the (Indo-Pacific) region.’ This is a clear shift from the previous US-dominated strategic structure of Asia-Pacific with gradual inclination for more cooperative approach to the expanded zone with emphasis on ‘sharing the burden’.

India’s inclusion in the Indo-Pacific geopolitical setup is purely strategic in character. She was not counted in the Asia Pacific group of liberal economies’ Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation or APEC, founded by USA in 1989. Nor was she included in Trans Pacific Economic Partnership or TPP, proposed in 2015, under same USA. If economically not seen profitable, India is considered as an indispensable component of Indo-Pacific geostrategy. With central geographical location in the Indian Ocean region and islands in possession as gifted strategic asset and an efficient navy, India has potentials to help counter growing Chinese challenge in the neighbouring waters. The Indian Navy is largest in South Asia and third largest in the Asia-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific notion also carries a political opportunity for India to resurrect herself as a key player in the geopolitical game in her neighbourhood, both near and extended. The Indo-Pacific brings maritime Asia at the core of this geopolitical game where Southeast Asia or the ASEAN zone remains at the centre. India had been active in this part of the world managing the big power politics centering the region at the dawn of the Cold War days while reframed her relations in economic lines in the post-Cold War days with unveiling of Look East Policy.

3. India’s traditional strategic aspirations in her neighbourhood

Before we delve into India’s potential to promote the Indo-Pacific geostrategy, which is mostly a naval strategy, it is pertinent to analyze first how Indo-Pacific commensurate with the long nurtured regional strategic aspirations of sovereign India since 1947.

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History plays a very important role in shaping a country’s internal and more importantly external policies. Scholars sometimes ponder into the extent of the influence of ‘Middle Kingdom’ notion of ancient Chinese empire on the current Chinese foreign policy. India is also considered by her leadership as not a mere sovereign territorial entity in the group of modern nations but a bearer of the legacy of an ancient civilization having major impact over her neighbourhood. India’s first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, regarded as the framer of independent India’s foreign policy, told the Constituent Assembly in New Delhi on 8th March, 1949, “India is a very ancient country with millennia of history behind her—a history in which she has played a vital part not only within her own vast territories, but in the world and in Asia in particular.”

Indian leadership traditionally considered India integral to the history and culture of her neighbourhood, from east to west. Thus, Nehru said at the Asian Relations Conference held in March 1947 in the Indian capital, “If you would know India, you have to go to Afghanistan and West Asia, to Central Asia, to China and Japan and the countries of South-East Asia. There you will find magnificent evidence of the vitality of India’s culture which spread out and influence vast numbers of people.”

Nehru considered the centrality of India in respect to the extended neighbourhood on the two fronts of India: “Look at the map. If you have to consider any question affecting the Middle East, India inevitably comes into the picture. If you have to consider any question covering South-East Asia, you cannot do so without India.”

This historical legacy can be considered as the source of the political and strategic aspirations of the political leadership of independent India. Definitely the extension of the ancient and medieval Indian empires (from the Mauryas to the Mughals) to present day Afghanistan and Pakistan in the west and the ‘cultural colonies’ of Southeast Asia integrated India with her vast neighbourhood. However, Indian leadership learned the strategic importance of the neighbourhood, especially the maritime neighbourhood, to the national interest and security of India from the British.

It was the British who considered the strategic defence of unified India to sustain their global imperial strategy. The British had their imperial presence all over the Indo-Pacific maritime zone, from Gulf of Aden in the west to Hong Kong port in the east and in Australia and New Zealand down south. The British had turned the Indian Ocean into a ‘British Lake’ with its formidable naval presence. This dominance continued till 1967 (with a temporary break when Singapore fell to the imperial Japanese forces in 1942 and the British were ousted from the Malayan Peninsula for the rest of the period of war) when London decided to pull out of the East of Suez. It was only with the gradual decline of the British naval might since World War II and subsequent withdrawal from east of Suez in 1967 that the Indian government woke up to the urgency of naval preparedness.

It is pertinent to mention here that since emerging as a sovereign entity in 1947, India was too engaged with defending her land borders against Pakistan and China to develop any naval strategy. Besides, it did not have any reason to do so since there was no threat from the maritime zone due to the presence of the British Royal Navy. Also, India never experienced major invasion from the sea and thus India’s defence strategy has traditionally been land oriented. Even the British rulers in India emphasized on defence of land and gave little attention to the ocean.

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18 Nehru, Jawaharlal (1961): India’s Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946-April 1961, New Delhi, The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, p.21
19 Ibid, p.250
20 Ibid, p.22
4. From apathy to attachment: Evolution of India’s maritime viewpoint

There is a general perception prevailing that the Indian strategic thought has traditionally suffered from ‘continental mindset’ focusing on the defence of the land borders since the major invasions of the Indian subcontinent historically originated via the land route in the west of the continent. Even the British, a formidable naval power, concentrated on securing the land borders in the west of the subcontinent against the Russians and in the east against the French. Their Indian successors, in the post 1947, could not contemplate any naval strategy since they were busy handling Pakistan and China. Thus, the vast maritime zone lying at the feet of India remained almost unattended by the ruling elite in continental Delhi for long. Another reason behind this apparent ignorance of the naval defence can be traced in the reliance on the protection of British Royal Navy patrolling the Indian maritime zone. Large part of the Indo-Pacific zone was still under British military dominance with friendly countries around. India could rely on this arrangement. Besides, there was no immediate threat to Indian interests in the region from the sea. However, the two incidents during the Cold War period could be considered as sea-borne threat to India’s maritime strategic interests, although not comparable to the formidable threat at the land frontiers. One was Indonesia dispatching a flotilla to deter India during the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 and the second one was the sailing of American aircraft carrier, USS Enterprise, to the Bay of Bengal during the Indo-Pak war of 1971, both efforts to support Pakistan.

The sea started featuring exclusively in the Indian strategic minds not before the end of the Cold War and the onset of the economic liberalization process in India. The improved economic growth resulting from the economic reforms of 1990s enhanced the importance of the sea lanes, security of the maritime infrastructure, protection of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and other maritime political, economic and strategic interests to the Indian political establishment. As India integrated more and more with the global economic set up, the sea lanes around India, extending throughout the Indo-Pacific zone, became important to her. The sea lanes from Gulf region and the east coast of Africa to East Asia became the lifeline of Indian economy. The Indian Ocean in the middle serves as the ‘umbilical cord of the economies several Asia-Pacific and European countries.’ Given her geographical location India was destined to be a sea power. Admiral Arun Prakash, the former Chief of the Indian Navy, opines that, ‘The fact is that India is a maritime nation, not just by historical tradition but also because its geographical configuration and geopolitical circumstances make it as dependent on the seas as any island nation. Located astride vital shipping lanes, India occupies a dominant maritime position.’ The Navy Chief was insistent on India shedding diffidence and finding ways and means to project power overseas in order to ‘don the mantle of even a regional entity.’ The very practice of viewing India as a maritime nation is itself a major shift in India’s defence perception since the late 1990s. India has been late in investing in her maritime potentials. This effort got a boost after the unveiling of India’s ‘Look East Policy’, a mostly economic mission to integrate the Indian economy with the ASEAN economies.

The unveiling of the Look East Policy was step towards the Indo-Pacific geo-economic integration in the post Cold War era. Maritime potentials are a major factor in the strategic aspect of the Look East Policy. India started concentrating on upgrading her naval potentials since the 1970s. Indian naval budget envisaged Rs.525 crores in the 1969-74 plan with a

22 Sakhuja (2011), op cit, p.92
23 Bhattacharya (2017), op cit, p.211
modernisation scheme and a decision to develop facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. However, it was not before the end of the Cold War that India initiated a clear naval diplomacy with the South and Southeast Asian maritime countries. The Indian Navy conducted the Milan naval exercises with the navies of Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Sri Lanka in 1995 in Bay of Bengal. Since 1991 India is conducting naval exercises with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia in the Indian Ocean and with Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines in the later years. However, India’s expanding role in the Indo-Pacific waters was not limited to the naval diplomacy only.

5. India integrates with post-Cold War Asia Pacific geopolitics via ASEAN

India’s strategic importance to ASEAN was recognized with her inclusion in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996. This association in one hand integrated India with the emerging post-Cold War geopolitics of Asia-Pacific and on the other hand laid the foundation of the Indo-Pacific geopolitics as well. The ARF was an ASEAN initiative to tackle the ASEAN challenges in an ‘ASEAN Way’, with participation of the external powers. The Southeast Asian Association was incapable to handle the local affairs, which traditionally involved external powers, single handed given the political and military weakness of its members. Most of its members depend on external big powers like US and UK for physical protection. However, the ASEAN has always aspired to be prime arbiter in the Asia-Pacific geopolitics. ARF was founded in order to involve external powers interested in the region to ensure the centrality of the Association in the East Asian region. The ARF agenda prescribes three stage process, confidence building measures, preventive diplomacy mechanism and conflict regulation mechanism (the term changed to ‘elaboration of approaches to conflicts’ on Chinese insistence), to help ARF maintain security and prosperity of the East Asian region. India was invited to join in order to handle the challenge of ‘China’s rise’, a point of convergence with India. After the US withdrawal from the Philippines in 1992 following the Soviet unravelling in the region, some in ASEAN smelled danger. This was the time when China renewed her assertion over the disputed South China Sea islands by enacting the maritime territorial law, The Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, in 1992. No country in ASEAN had the capacity to counter China on its own. Thus, ARF was to help ASEAN handle the China factor with the help of external actors. Besides, India also feared that China’s growing influence in Southeast Asia would isolate her in the region, both economically and strategically. It is noteworthy here that post 1962 war with China, India has been consistent in countering the Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. The Indian junior minister of foreign affairs, Lakshmi Menon, while travelling to Thailand in 1963, had warned Southeast Asia saying, “Chinese problem is a common problem. One day it may be your problem in Southeast Asia.”

The urge to involve India in the Southeast Asian security framework is also an old mission. Singapore had traditionally seen India as a major player in the regional geopolitics of Southeast Asia. Singapore’s founder and revered political leader Lee Kuan Yew believed that ‘South-east Asia needs India to cope with China’. However, India and ASEAN could not see eye to eye during the Cold War days over strategic issues due to India’s partnership with the Soviet who was feared by ASEAN, then anti-communist Association. End of Cold War

26 Bhattacharya, Subhadeep, (2016): Looking East Since 1947: India’s Southeast Asia Policy, New Delhi, Kw Publishers, p.74
28 Bhattacharya, (2016), op cit, p.86
29 Ibid, p.41, emphasis added
removed the hurdle while China emerged as a new challenge to both. Post-Cold War Asia saw the rising assertiveness of China after the withdrawal and the eventual disintegration of USSR in one hand and growing American unravelling (following shutting down of bases in the Philippines) in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, many in East Asia saw the continuation of US presence in the geostrategic theatre there useful. When South Korea wanted US presence to handle her belligerent northern communist neighbour, many ASEAN countries wanted USA to help them counter Vietnam (still not a member of ASEAN), China and even Japan (being fearful of resurgent Japan, reminiscent of Imperial Japan who occupied all of Southeast Asia during the World War II). But it was China who eventually became a cause of concern for many in ASEAN, especially after Beijing launched naval modernisation programme and assertive stance in the disputed South China Sea. This was the time when ASEAN focused on India as a partner to balance the growing Chinese influence. This was evident from the opinions of the ASEAN leaders like Lee Kuan Yew who described India as “a useful balance to China heft” and Malaysian Foreign Minister who opined that India “was strategically located to provide (Southeast Asian nations) the necessary umbrella as big country.”

But it was China who eventually became a cause of concern for many in ASEAN, especially after Beijing launched naval modernisation programme and assertive stance in the disputed South China Sea. This was the time when ASEAN focused on India as a partner to balance the growing Chinese influence. This was evident from the opinions of the ASEAN leaders like Lee Kuan Yew who described India as “a useful balance to China heft” and Malaysian Foreign Minister who opined that India “was strategically located to provide (Southeast Asian nations) the necessary umbrella as big country.”

The Singaporean diplomat K. Kesavapany said that ASEAN countries “envisage India as counter-balance to a possible overdominant China in the future” while Meidyatma Suriyodiningrat, the editor of Jakarta Post, called India a “psychological deterrent to China’s increasing influence and gradual domination of the region.” China, by then, was gradually emerging in the Asia-Pacific theatre.

Since the economic liberalisation of 1979, China gradually integrated herself with the global economy and bypassed Japan as the second largest economy in the world in 2011. Deng Xiaoping’s economic policy turned Chinese economy ‘from an island of stagnation to burgeoning dragon feeding its first products into global markets.” Eventually, China emerged as a major ocean trading nation ‘making freedom of the seas a fundamental national interest.” And in this way, the maritime neighbourhood became important for China since 90 per cent of the global trade is maritime in character. And for this security of the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) are important and China’s nearby sea lanes in East Asia (China’s only maritime opening to the world) are infested with territorial disputes and challenges, starting from the East China Sea, Taiwan, down to the South China Sea. Besides, there is formidable presence of USA in the entire Indo-Pacific zone, from Korean peninsula and Japan in the north to Australia in the south of the Pacific Ocean (apart from bases in the US territory of Guam) and the one in Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, rising China has to handle multiple challenges in her maritime neighbourhood. For this, China has been investing in her naval modernisation programme with objective to militaril y unify Taiwan with the mainland, securing disputed maritime territorial claims in the eastern seaboard, protecting the SLOCs in the region passing through the Pacific and the Indian Ocean to secure her economy and in this way ‘underwriting China’s emerging role as a great power, and promoting Beijing’s influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.’ China’s assertive role in the South China Sea, much to the displeasure of ASEAN countries with counter claims, and port development in the Indian Ocean region like in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh, branded as ‘string of pearls’ unnerving India corroborate the inference of the strategic analysts about the growing maritime

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31 Bhattacharya, (2017), op cit, p.119
33 Cited in ibid
35 Ibid, p.57
ambition of China. Apart from the economic necessity to secure the SLOCs of the Indo-Pacific world for China, the growing assertiveness of China has another explanation.

China is a rising ‘dissatisfied power’ nurturing the grudge for not achieving the ‘rightful place’ in the international hierarchy of states yet. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, history plays a very important role in the framing of the Chinese foreign policy. Chinese Communist Party emphasizes on the 100 years of humiliation (*bainian gouchi*) at the hands of the western powers and this ‘victim mentality’ is an expression of the frustration of the Chinese leaders regarding their country’s position in the international society. The pre-eminence of the Middle Kingdom memory of glorious past of China in the pre-colonial period when China was at the helm of East Asian world contributed heavily in framing the modern perception of China’s place in the international field.  Eminent Southeast Asian scholar Wang Gungwu said, “to most Chinese leaders, it is a measure of a world disequilibrium if China does not have a place of respect commensurate with its size and history.” For this the notion of ‘to rule the world, rule thy neighbours first’ is the key condition and China’s Indo-Pacific strategy complies with it. The communist leadership in Beijing has been prioritizing China’s naval defence since 1980s. Their initial focus was on coastal defence or the ‘near coast defence’ (*jiann fangyu*) till the mid 1980s which further expanded to ‘near seas active defence’ (*jinhai jiji fangyu*) after 1980s and it was in the mid 2000s that China looked ‘far seas operations’ (*yuanchai zuozhan*). This shift from near waters to the deep blue sea far away commensurate with the expanding global trade of China and thus urge to secure the SLOCs in China’s national interest in one hand and expanding its zone of influence in the vast Indo-Pacific world reviving the past glory of China.

India is also a dissatisfied power who has for long aspired to be a major international player. India’s major player aspiration is factored by her geographical location, hegemonic presence in the South Asian subcontinent with the largest economic and military might in the region and a prestigious civilizational entity. There is a general wish among the Indian (political) elites that their country should play a leadership role in the international arena. This aspiration was widely visible in India’s foreign policy, immediately after independence, under Premier Nehru. There was a stress on India serving as the ‘moral exemplar in world politics’ emphasizing on the aspects of India’s religious and cultural heritage that recommend peaceful coexistence and cosmopolitanism. Nehru wanted India to guide the world to peaceful and cooperative behaviour. However, the alleged moralistic approach of Nehru’s international policy, which was anything but mere ideological and moralist in character, in the context of India’s neighbourhood policy at least, was thoroughly scrutinized and criticized following India’s inability to thwart and counter Chinese invasion in 1962. Eventually, a new generation of strategic thinkers and political elites, already existent, gained significance in India who negated the peaceful and cooperative foreign policy promoted by Nehru and emphasized on the policy serving India’s national interest in the international arena. They were the modern nationalists who referred to the glorious past of India. They are sometimes termed as ‘Hindu nationalists’ (like the current Bhartiya Janata Party or BJP in power in India under Prime Minister Modi) who in one hand take pride in India’s civilizational glory and on the other hand feel ashamed of their motherland being subjugated by Muslim and British invaders. They are also disappointed of India still not capable to respond to security threats. It is opined that these

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37 Bhattacharya, (2017), *op cit*, pp.121, 122
38 *Ibid*, p.122
39 *Ibid*, p.161
41 Sagar, Rahul: ‘State of mind: what kind of power will India become?’. *International Affairs*, vol.85, nº 4 (2009), pp.802- 803
political forces emphasize on cultivating national strength and pursuing independent foreign policy involving engagement with any state which advances India’s national interests.\textsuperscript{42} In a way they are the dissatisfied faction of the Indian political elite with ‘victim mentality’ who, like the Chinese, also aspire to gain India her ‘rightful place’ in the world. The desire to gain India international recognition of her regional and global status has been pivotal to the Indian strategic thought. There is a grudge (until recently) among the Indian (strategists and political elites) that the world ignores India’s unquestionable domination of the Indian Ocean region.\textsuperscript{43} India’s looking at the sea around her at the dawn of the new century had the connotation of this urge to gain herself ‘rightful place’ in her maritime neighbourhood.

### 6. India’s turns to the sea

Although India looked to the sea belatedly India’s attention to her maritime neighbourhood was first drawn long ago, before India’s independence, by an eminent Indian strategic thinker, K.M. Panikkar, who was later appointed the first Indian ambassador to China, both nationalist and communist. Panikkar, in his highly acclaimed book, \textit{India and the Indian Ocean}, published in 1945, concluded that India’s security lies with the Indian Ocean and that “India’s future therefore is closely bound up with the strength she is able to develop gradually as a naval power.”\textsuperscript{44} Referring to American naval strategist Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, whose late nineteenth century theory on naval prowess as mean to be major global power was a source of inspiration for many aspiring powers, Panikkar concluded that ‘India has ideal geographical position for a naval power.’\textsuperscript{45} With islands in possessions on both sides of the peninsula, India certainly is gifted with strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean region. Moreover, the Andaman and Nicobar islands are located at the mouth of the Malacca Strait, gateway to ASEAN and the Pacific Ocean world, an important SLOC of the Chinese. Panikkar, referring to India’s possession of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, said, “The possession the Andaman and Nicobars gives to India strategic bases which if fully utilised in co-ordination of air power can covert the Bay of Bengal into a secure area.”\textsuperscript{46} But, as already mentioned, India did not emphasize on her naval potentials for long time and it was not until the dawn of the new millennium that one could get to hear about the extension of India’s strategic naval domain. India’s defence minister George Fernandes declared in 2000 that India’s “area of interest…extends from north of the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea.”\textsuperscript{47} This was first articulation from an Indian government about the extension of India’s naval dominion encompassing the Indo-Pacific maritime area. And this was the beginning of expression of India’s naval strategic boundaries. The Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said in 2003, “…Our security environment ranges from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca across Indian Ocean, includes Central Asia and Afghanistan in the North West, China in the North East and Southeast Asia. Our strategic thinking has also to extend to these horizons.”\textsuperscript{48} His successor, Dr. Manmohan Singh identified India’s strategic relevance from Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca. Dr. Singh noted that India’s strategic footprint covers Southeast Asia and beyond while Indian Navy Chief Admiral Arun Prakash insisted that India should maintain maritime power in the Indian Ocean as well as larger Asia Pacific Ocean with strong maritime

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, pp.806,807
\textsuperscript{43} Tanham, George K, (1992), \textit{op cit}, p.60
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, p.92
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, p.96
\textsuperscript{47} Cited in Bhattacharya (2017), \textit{op cit}, p.136, emphasis added
\textsuperscript{48} Cited in Bhattacharya (2017), \textit{op cit}, p.215
capability. His successor Admiral Suresh Mehta said that Indian Navy’s area of interest is not restricted to the Indian Ocean.49

The strategic rhetoric of the Indian establishment, both naval and political, in the new millennium reflects the geo-economic and geopolitical maritime compulsion of India. With the unveiling of the Look East Policy in 1994, India embraced Southeast Asia to salvage her economy from dire consequences following the chronic economic crisis of the early 1990s. It was mostly an economic mission launched with the ‘Singapore Lecture’ by Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao about which the India Today wrote, “Now the wheel’s come full circle. With the Cold War over and the needs for hungry-for-growth economies prompting dialogue, India and the East need each other once again.”50 Since then India consistently attempted to integrate with the larger Asia Pacific stage via Southeast Asia. To fulfil the mission of “India’s desire for greater integration with the Asia Pacific”, Southeast Asia remained the ‘area of prime focus’ in the 1990s.51 This integration was mainly economically motivated no doubt with India’s trade with ASEAN rising from less than 10 per cent of her global trade in 199552 to more than 10 per cent in 2017.53 Besides trade, another issue which enhanced ASEAN’s importance to India and vice versa since the turn of the new century has been energy resources in the disputed South China Sea.

The South China Sea territorial dispute is fast emerging as the most strategically complex security issue in the Asia Pacific region which has its implication in the Indian Ocean zone as well. Apparently, a maritime sovereignty dispute between China and some ASEAN member countries, it involves the interests of the vast Indo-Pacific littorals to safeguard their sea lanes of communication. South China Sea is a prime commercial highway of the Indo-Pacific world currently drawing global attention because of the rising tension between China and her ASEAN neighbours with overlapping territorial claims over the maritime territory. With China asserting her claims over the disputed islets and reefs under its possession by developing airstrips, deploying underwater surveillance system to monitor movement of foreign ships and high frequency radar array, the strategic ambience of the maritime zone is getting tensed with ASEAN disputants nervous with the latest Chinese belligerence. The situation turned critical with USA undertaking Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the disputed maritime area in the recent years, since 2013, an open defiance to China. The US Department of Defence’s Asia Pacific Maritime Security Strategy (2015), in its introduction, has clearly mentioned America’s ‘enduring economic and security interests in the Asia Pacific region…stretching from the Indian Ocean through South and East China Seas and out to the Pacific Ocean.’54 It says that USA has ‘throughout its history advocated for the freedom of seas for economic and security reasons.’55 Although USA does not take side in the territorial conflict and advocates peaceful solution of the dispute through peaceful means, China is perturbed by the FONOP and considers it ‘provocative’ act against its sovereignty and vows to take

49 Ibid, pp.215, 216, 217
52 Ibid
55 Ibid.
‘necessary measures’ to protect its sovereignty in the disputed sea. This growing naval conflict between the rising and the dominant powers of the twenty-first century are sending ripples of uneasiness in the entire Indo-Pacific maritime zone.

As the eastern gateway of the Indian Ocean the South China Sea maritime zone is India’s strategic left frank. Although not a littoral of the maritime zone and also not a disputant, India takes interest in the South China Sea to safeguard her freedom of navigation and thus strongly advocates for the stability in the region. The sea lane is vital for India’s commercial link with East Asia. According the Indian Government, as intimated to the Parliament on February 9, 2017, 55 per cent of India’s trade passes through South China Sea.

South China Sea is economic lifeline of India. In 2015-16 period, India’s trade with Northeast Asia comprising China, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan accounted for US$124.95 billion which was about 19.42 per cent of India’s total trade. In 2016-17 period, India’s volume of trade with Northeast Asia was US$18311.27 million accounting for 12.93 per cent of total share. With ASEAN the total trade during the period 2016-17 was US$15597.96 million which was 11.33 per cent of the total share. Apart from trade, the resources underneath the sea like oil and gas also attract energy hungry India aspiring to diversify her sources minimizing dependence on supplies from troubled West Asia and the Gulf. According to US Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimate, South China Sea possesses 11 billion proved or probable barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. India thus takes interest in cooperative resources exploration in the disputed Sea with littoral disputants, mainly Vietnam. India signed agreement with Vietnam in 2011 to explore oil from South China Sea. The two countries signed fresh oil exploration deal in 2014 during Indian President Pranab Mukherjee’s visit to Vietnam. India’s state-owned oil company ONGC (Videsh) concluded Letter of Intent with Vietnam’s PetroVietnam (Vietnam Oil and Gas Group) for the purpose during the President’s visit to Vietnam. This India-Vietnam oil exploration project has both economic as well as strategic connotation since this is done causing immense displeasure to China which never misses opportunity to express anger over the exploration when done. But both India and Vietnam choose to display their apparent ignorance to Chinese wrath establishing their respective rights of exploration (in case of India) and sovereignty (in case of Vietnam) in the disputed maritime zone. Vietnam is keen to involve India, a strategic contender of China, more in the region. Thus, Vietnamese President Tran Tai Quang welcomed Indian businesses to expand their oil and gas exploration in the continental shelf and EEZ of Vietnam during his

57 “Question No.808 Trade Through South China Sea”, at https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/28041/QUESTION+NO808+TRADE+THROUGH+SOUTH+CHINA+SEA
60 Ibid.
61 “Contested areas of South China Sea likely have few conventional oil and gas resources”, US Energy Information Administration, 3 April 2013, at https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=10651
62 Bhattacharya (2017), op cit, p.219
63 “Agreements/MoUs signed during State Visit of Hon’ble President to Vietnam (15th September, 2014)”, Minister of External Affairs, at http://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?id=23996/AgreementsMoUs+signed+during+the+State+Visit+of+Honble+President+to+Vietnam+15+September+2014

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visit to India in March 2018. Thus, both for economic as well as strategic reasons, South China Sea is important for India.

Both Indian Ocean and South China Sea are increasingly occupying central position in India’s maritime policy with the growing trade relations between India and East Asia. The growing importance of the maritime neighbourhood to India was evident from the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s proposal for the regional cooperative developmental project titled SAGAR (Hindi name for Sea), which stands for ‘Security and Growth for All in the Region’, in March 2015. This project primarily focuses on the Indian Ocean region. However, Indian government is keen to expand the ambit of the SAGAR to the east and this was manifest from the speech of India’s Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj at the inauguration of the 5th Round Table of ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks at Jakarta, Indonesia in January, 2018. Talking about India’s foreign policy interest on evolving regional architecture based on twin principles of security and shared prosperity, the Indian minister referred to the SAGAR project which, she said, “recognizes the central role played by the seas and oceans around us in promoting sustainable economic progress in a secure and stable environment.” It is mention worthy here that strategic aspect of India’s Southeast Asia policy carries 3 Cs-connectivity, commerce and culture and India’s commerce and connectivity with Southeast Asia has historically been maritime in character which is the prime focus of the SAGAR project. The Foreign Minister referred to the Indo-Pacific region as a emerging connectivity pathway and said that, “These waters must not only get connected but remain free from traditional and non-traditional threats, that impede free movement of people, goods and ideas.” Her indication to the South China Sea dispute in this connection was apparent from her reference to the respect to the international law, especially UNCLOS as ‘imperative’. India wants to make SAGAR a regional cooperative architecture of the Indo-Pacific maritime region. And here ASEAN stands central to the scheme.

7. India, ASEAN and Indo-Pacific geopolitics

Although Indo-Pacific is an American geostrategic mission, it is not a US-dominated show of strength and deterrence, unlike the Cold War-era SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) or ANZUS. On the contrary, Washington is projecting the current Indo-Pacific strategy as an inclusive endeavour working with local powers who do not necessarily agree to function under the ‘leadership’ of USA, unlike during the Cold War time. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo thus rejected the notion of US dominance and emphasized on partnership in the Indo-Pacific region. This position of USA commensurate with India and ASEAN who share the view of keeping the Indo-Pacific region free of any big power domination in the twenty-first century. A stable and tranquil Indo-Pacific region is beneficial and vital for both. Thus, India and ASEAN mentioned the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, stability, maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and overflight in the region in the Delhi Declaration issued after the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit held on 25th January, 2018. This was, however, more to do with China. The growing Chinese dominance in the South China Sea region is a strategic threat to India since it is India’s sole maritime trade route

65 ‘Swaraj for deeper ties with ASEAN’, The Statesman, 7 January 2018, p.9
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 ‘US looking for partnership, not dominance in Indo-Pacific’, The Statesman, 1 August 2018, p.9
to the East. China’s formidable presence in the South China Sea maritime zone will pave her way to the Indian Ocean region. The strategic importance of Indian Ocean ought to increase to India following the Chinese military’s caution against considering Indian Ocean region as backyard of India. However, the Indian strategists have historically considered Indian Ocean as India’s backyard and emphasized on India performing major role in ensuring stability and security of the maritime zone. To the Indian foreign policy establishment India, as the successor of the British, bear the responsibility to provide security and stability in the Indian Ocean region. But the growing Chinese presence in the region is threatening this importance of India in the maritime zone. Although China claims her ‘rise’ as peaceful, if we take lesson from history, Imperial Japan’s occupation of East Asia during the last world war stopped the commercial activities between Southeast Asia and her colonisers triggering severe to blow to their economic prowess. Japan had also occupied Andaman Nicobar Islands which expanded her naval domination over a larger portion of the Indo-Pacific world neutralizing the Allied Powers’ threat. The growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea through development of the islets and in the Indian Ocean through port developments in the littoral states are reminiscent of Imperial Japan’s activities and thus send ripples of uneasiness among the China wary countries of the entire region. New Delhi wants to neutralize this strategic challenge of China by promoting India’s presence in the eastern waters, in South China Sea and beyond. The re-christening of decades old Look East Policy as ‘Act East Policy’ by the Narendra Modi government in 2014 was an attempt to make India’s Asia-Pacific policy more proactive. According to the Government of India, “The Objective of "Act East Policy” is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region ...” This is a strategic challenge to the growing assertiveness of China in the Asia-Pacific region as counter to the Dragon’s growing presence in the Indian Ocean region and also to safeguard the sea lanes of the east, vital to India’s commercial link with the region. And here ASEAN zone comes in the picture.

Maritime ASEAN is the vital bridge of the Indo-Pacific world. Its location in between the Indian and the Pacific Ocean makes it a vital connecting point. It is to be remembered that the Japanese strategic strength was boosted after maritime Southeast Asia came under Japan’s occupation during the war. The Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia established the immense strategic importance of the region. The extent of the impact of this development on the British officers of the Indian Army can be traced from the opinion of an ex-officer of the Indian Army, Major Anthony Strachey, who in 1947 compared Southeast Asia with Nepal and Tibet (considered by British rulers in India as buffer between India and China) and cautioned that Burma (Myanmar), Siam (Thailand), French Indochina (present day Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) and East Indies (Indonesia) falling to influence of power adverse to India will have equal perilous effect like Nepal and Tibet falling prey to such hostile power. Tibet fell to communist China in 1950 and China’s border got extended to India triggering the border dispute with ramifications including everlasting misgivings between the two neighbours. China’s possible naval dominance of the South China Sea and Indian Ocean region naturally perturbs ASEAN and India. Southeast Asia falls within the intermediate maritime Mandala of Indian strategic

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70 “Indian Ocean is not your backyard: China military tells India”, Hindustan Times, 1 July 2015, at https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/indian-ocean-not-your-backyard-china-military-tells-india/story-GSdouNKnUYhCnUprg6zckJWOWJ.html
71 Pant, Harsh V.: ‘India’s growing naval power’ in Geoffrey et al, Sea Power and the Asia-Pacific, op cit, p.113
74 Mandala concept was derived from an ancient Indian political and strategic thinker Kautilya’s foreign policy theory which narrates the expansionist strategy of a king. For details see Shanbhag, D.N.: ‘Foreign Policy of
thinking. India gradually integrated with the region via ASEAN through ARF (as dialogue partner), East Asia Summit, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus and also through Track II initiatives like Council of Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Project, apart from other bilateral and multilateral initiatives. The CSCAP was a vital Track II step to address the security and strategic ambience of the Asia-Pacific region through dialogue and confidence building measures. Founded in 1992 by 10 Asia-Pacific countries, including USA, following the Seoul meeting the CSCAP inducted India as Associated Member in 1994 and elevated her to full membership in 2000. If CSCAP expanded India’s presence in the Asia-Pacific theatre, BIMSTEC brought in ASEAN in the Indian Ocean stage. Founded in 1997 via Bangkok Declaration, the sub-regional organization, which is dominated by South Asian nations, includes two ASEAN countries, Myanmar and Thailand, who are littorals of Bay of Bengal. BIMSTEC acts as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. BIMSTEC is both economic as well as diplomatic manoeuvre to bolster Indian presence in the region.

In the last two decades, India integrated fast with the Asia-Pacific world via ASEAN. The Association happily offered space to the largest South Asian country in its expanded East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus which were ASEAN initiatives to tackle the geopolitics of Asia Pacific region in ‘ASEAN Way’. Today, ASEAN is thus can be considered as the major pillar of Indo-Pacific strategy. From Shangri La Dialogue to East Asia Summit meetings, ASEAN is exercising its assimilative policy to bring in the interested and contending parties offering them dialogue over duel impacting the regional geopolitics. There are two issues which converge the interest of India and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region-containing Chinese dominance and ensuring tranquillity and freedom of navigation in this maritime world. ASEAN is important for India in this mission. As already mentioned ASEAN is the gateway of India to larger Asia-Pacific world and the recent identification of India as a maritime nation by the government as well as strategic circles of the country can be seen as the expression of the desire of the Indian decision makers to keep India relevant in the Asia-Pacific geopolitical scene. This is an obligation as well for India since the country is seen as a major counterweight to rising China in East Asia. The inclusion of India in the ASEAN –sponsored Asia-Pacific multilateral forums is self-explanatory. As C. Raja Mohan puts it, “So long as Indian economic growth continues at a fast space, and New Delhi modernises its military capabilities and builds blue water navy, it will remain a valuable partner for many states of the Asian littoral.” The maritime ASEAN partners understood the value of India well and thus Walter Ladwig III says, “India’s expanding role in the Asia-Pacific has been facilitated by countries such as Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia that look to the South Asian giant to help hedge against Beijing’s growing regional influence.”

India also attempts to prove her usefulness by exercising naval diplomacy with these littoral states. India started this naval diplomacy in the new century with naval exercises and deployments. In 2000 India sent warships, tankers and submarines to Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam for bilateral exercises. India was initially seen most active in the South

73 Sakhuja (2011), op cit, p.281
75 “About BIMSTEC”, at https://bimstec.org/?page_id=189
77 Walter C. Ladwig III, op cit, p.87
78 Bhattacharya (2017), op cit, p.219
China Sea region. The Eastern Fleet of the Indian Navy comprising Indian Naval Ships (INS) *Rana*, *Khukri*, *Ranvir*, *Kora* and *Udaygiri* were deployed in were deployed in South China Sea and in May 2003 as part of presence-cum-surveillance mission while between 1st October and 20th November, 2003, INS *Ranvijay*, *Ranjeet*, *Godavari*, *Kirch*, *Sukanya* and *Jyoti* visited Pusan (South Korea), Tokyo (Japan), Jakarta (Indonesia), Manila (the Philippines) and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam). INS *Karwar* was deployed in Singapore between April 21st and May 7, 2004 as part of Western Pacific Mine Counter Measure Exercise. Latest, Indian Navy took part in the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+) Maritime Security and Counter-terrorism Exercise in Singapore in May this year (2018). In 2016, INS *Airavat* participated in this exercise held in Brunei and Singapore in May. As part of the ‘Act East Policy’, Indian Navy has been taking part in the ADMM Plus exercise since 2014. India organised International Fleet Review (IFR) 2016 in the Indian port city of Vishakhapatnam. This was a grand naval exercise which was attended by 50 countries including those across the Indo-Pacific region, from Argentina, Chile, Canada, USA to Fiji, Japan, South Korea, China and ASEAN countries. The Indian Navy described the endeavour as an opportunity for the ‘leading nations of the world to enhance mutual trust and confidence with their maritime neighbours and partners.’ India conducted the previous and first IFR off Mumbai coast in 2001. All these efforts are naval diplomatic manoeuvre of India to upgrade her naval credentials and potentials as well. The growing importance of ‘Blue Economy’ that is maritime economy to India’s prosperity was referred to by the Indian Prime Minister Modi at the inaugural address to the IFR. He said, “An important part of India’s transformation is my vision of “Blue Economy” in its widest sense.” It denotes the growing importance of India’s maritime neighbourhood to her economic growth and prosperity which forces the country to entangle more and more with the maritime world to ensure hurdle-free maritime activities. Thus the Prime Minister said, “A peaceful and stable maritime environment is, therefore, critical for the regional and global security.” At the same time he emphasized on the centrality of Indian Ocean to India’s national interest with 2.4 million sq. kilometres of Exclusive Economic Zone which according to the Prime Minister “serves as a strategic bridge with the nations in our immediate and extended maritime neighbourhood.” And ASEAN is vital to safeguard India’s economic interest in the ‘extended neighbourhood’ in the East Asia.

India’s gradual focus on Indo-Pacific region is both strategic as well as economic in character since this vast maritime zone is a vital economic life-line of twenty-first century emerging India. Besides, the region, in India’s view, is emerging as the framer of the destiny of 21st century world. This was articulated by Prime Minister Modi, in his keynote address to the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue, where he said, “The human-kind now looks to the Rising East, with the hope to see the promise that this 21st century beholds for the whole world, because the destiny of the world will be deeply influenced by the course of developments in the Indo-Pacific

84 “International Fleet Review, 2016”. at https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/international-fleet-review-2016-1
86 Ibid
87 Ibid
region.”88 And India sees ASEAN as central to this Indo-Pacific geopolitics. The Prime Minister thus mentioned the special ‘land-mark year (of 2018) of India’s relationship with ASEAN’ in the beginning of his speech. It was further articulate with his remark, ‘The ten countries of South East Asia connect the two great oceans in both the geographical and civilizational sense. Inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality and unity, therefore, lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific.’ 89 ASEAN is central to not only India, but also other major Asia-Pacific countries forging strong contacts with India. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono called ASEAN ‘at the heart of Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’.90 Japan’s viewpoint about ASEAN is important for India since both the countries are mulling an ‘Africa-Asia Growth Corridor’ linking Africa with countries of India and South and Southeast Asia. This grand Indo-Pacific economic design is considered by many as a strategic game to counter China’s Belt and Road initiative which plans to bind the entire Asian continent with both continental as well as maritime connectivity mechanism with Chinese money. The part of this roadmap is the Maritime Silk Road connecting the maritime neighbours of China that is maritime Southeast Asia including Indonesia where the Chinese President first floated the idea in 2013. Besides, the deteriorating situation in the South China Sea dispute also concerns India and Japan. The dispute figured prominently in the security dialogue between the two countries since their economies are highly maritime based. When 60 per cent of Japan’s energy supplies pass through the South China Sea, more than half of India’s global trade flows through this sea lane.91 The South China Sea tension was mentioned in the joint statement issued on 14th July 2016 following the Defence Ministerial Meeting between the two countries. It read, ‘The Ministers recognized that the security and stability of the Seas connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans are indispensable for the peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region. The Ministers expressed concern over recent developments in this regard. They reaffirmed the importance of respecting international law, as reflected notably in the UNCLOS, of the peaceful settlement of the disputes without any threat or use of force, and of ensuring freedom and safety of navigation and over-flight as well as unimpeded lawful commerce in international waters. In this context, they noted the Award of the Arbitral Tribunal on the South China Sea under the UNCLOS on 12 July 2016, and urged all parties to show utmost respect for the UNCLOS.’92 In the same statement the two sides ‘acknowledged the importance of ASEAN-centered dialogue mechanisms including the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus).’93 Thus both India and Japan accept the centrality of ASEAN in the emerging geopolitics of Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN’s growing centrality in the Indo-Pacific geopolitics is recognized by Australia which is attempting to pursue an ‘independent’ external policy, at least in the neighbourhood. Overcoming the traditional dependence on US for security of Australia’s national interests in her neighbourhood, government in Canberra wants to transcend the ‘US-centric’ security arrangement in the ‘hub and spokes’ form and forge ‘closed knit structure’ in the region of like-minded countries working ‘directly with each other rather than through Washington’, as was stated by the Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at the Shangri La Dialogue this

88 “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)”, Ministry of External Affairs, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address++at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018
89 Ibid
93 Ibid
And Canberra realises the centrality of ASEAN in this mission. Thus, Australia held the first ever summit with ASEAN on Australian soil, in Sydney, in March 2018. The centrality of the Southeast Asian Association to Australia in the Indo-Pacific region was well articulated by the Prime Minister Turnbull at the joint press conference with his Singaporean counterpart Lee Hsien Loong when he said, “ASEAN’s leadership is very important to the development and maintenance of a prosperous region based on rules and norms that support peace and stability.”

In her 2013 Defence White Paper Australia identified Southeast Asia occupying ‘geostategically (sic) central position between Pacific and Indian Oceans’ and said that ‘It is also a key region where cooperative strategic arrangements are essential.’ It is noteworthy here that Australia had identified her neighbourhood in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, as source of threat in the 1970s. The 1976 White Paper had identified Australia’s neighbourhood, including Southeast Asia, as strategic concern for Australia. This change in attitude in Australia towards Southeast Asia is interpreted as the result of rise of China and her increasing weight in the East Asian region. Here, we see the convergence of strategic interest of both ASEAN and India with that of Australia vis-à-vis China’s rise in East Asia. Both India and Australia recognize ASEAN’s importance in the Indo-Pacific region. The joint statement issued during the visit of Australian Prime Minister to India in April 2017 identified India and Australia as ‘fellow Indian Ocean nations’ as well as ‘partners in Indo-Pacific’. At the same time the two countries committed to strengthen East Asia Summit (EAS) and emphasized on maritime partnership as priority area for EAS engagement. Thus, both the countries incline to handle the ‘China menace’ through multilateral forum offered by ASEAN and in ASEAN Way.

India’s inclination for an ASEAN Way to handle the Chinese challenge in the Indo-Pacific region is an obvious affair. India has traditionally pursed a ‘to engage to contain’ strategy vis-à-vis China. The Panchsheel principle pursued and propagated by the Nehru government through its foreign policy was a strategy (unlike commonly perceived as a mere ideological manoeuvre) to engage with communist China through agreement for peaceful coexistence following five principles in order to contain Chinese aggression (which unfortunately failed to thwart Chinese invasion on India in 1962 which made Nehru comment, “There is no non-alignment vis-à-vis China. There is no Panchsheel vis-à-vis China.”) Not

99 “India-Australia Joint Statement during State visit of the Prime Minister of Australia to India”, Minister of External Affairs, 10 April 2017, at [http://www.meaweb.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dt/28367/IndiaAustralia+Joint+Statement+during+the+State+visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+Australia+to+India](http://www.meaweb.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dt/28367/IndiaAustralia+Joint+Statement+during+the+State+visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+Australia+to+India)
100 Ibid.
101 The term Panchsheel derived from the text of Buddhism laying down five ethical precepts. Nehru’s Panchsheel, first mentioned in the Sino-India treaty on Tibet signed in 1954, lays down the five principles, including non-aggression condition that will govern the bilateral relations between the two neighbours. For details see ‘Panchsheel’ at [http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/191_panchsheel.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/191_panchsheel.pdf)
102 Cited in Bhattacharya (2017), op cit, p.41
only India herself followed the policy but even made many China-wary non-communist countries of Southeast Asia aspiring to pursue independent foreign policy to do the same. This strategy was reflected later in ASEAN’s relations with China after the country had to conclude Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) before establishing contact with the Association. India and ASEAN know their incapacity to militarily counter China. Thus, ASEAN has derived the “omni-enmenshment” strategy to handle the big powers, including China, interested in the region involving the actors ‘deeply’ into the regional society ‘enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with a long term aim of integration.’103 Thus we find China, along with other powers including India, in the ASEAN-sponsored Asia-Pacific multilateral forums like EAS, ARF and ADMM+. This is also another form of Panchsheel strategy. India has traditionally rested her faith in dialogue over duel to resolve disputes. One of the reasons behind this strategy has been the military weakness of India. As already mentioned, India has neglected her naval potentials for a long time. Even today, Indian Navy lags far behind the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in war potentials. The growing superiority of the Chinese Navy to the Indian Navy is a fact. Besides, with the acquisition of an aircraft carrier, Liaoning, and with the second one already on sea trial, the PLAN is fast cornering Indian naval potentials in the Indo-Pacific region and moving in the direction of becoming blue water navy. India has one aircraft carrier (INS Vikramaditya) and her home-made carrier INS Vikrant has already sustained several delays since 2009.104 Even Indian Navy official also admit that the Chinese naval activity ‘has touched a new high in recent months’.105 In 2018 China’s defence budget was $175 billion while India’s was only $45 billion.106 The Indian Navy, in this year’s budget, was allocated Rs. 7,985.06 crore for modernization when the Navy demanded Rs.11,329.30 crore. The Indian Parliament panel, after consulting the Navy, commented that it requires more fund.107 In this situation, a collaborative and assimilative approach to handle ‘Chinese menace’ is a more prudent step on India’s part. ASEAN is thus a very helpful mechanism in this direct direction which also opts for ‘containment through engagement’ strategy. Like India, ASEAN navies also lack potentials to handle China. Thus, India and ASEAN join hands to collaborate in the context of Chinese assertiveness in South China Sea with ASEAN’s call for freedom of navigation. The 10th Delhi Dialogue, held in July this year had the theme on ‘India-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation’. The Delhi Declaration issued after the 25th India-ASEAN Dialogue held in the Indian capital in January 2018 vows to “Strengthen maritime cooperation through existing relevant mechanisms including the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) to address common challenges on maritime issues.”108 India chooses to maintain this cooperation through regular port visits to ASEAN region and conducting naval exercises with individual ASEAN countries, like

105 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
SIMBEX with Singapore and CORPAT with Indonesia. This is also another way to sending message about India’s presence and relevance in the Chinese neighbourhood.

Both, India and ASEAN prefer not to enrage China too much. This is their individual as well as joint strategy to maintain peace and tranquillity in the Indo-Pacific region. This is the reason India is not much interested in India-Japan-US-Australia Quad (Quadrilateral Naval Exercise). India is not in favour of any alliance of containment. While addressing the Shangri La Dialogue Forum this year, Prime Minister Modi said, “It is normal to have partnerships on the basis of shared values and interests. India, too, has many in the region and beyond. We will work with them, individually or in formats of three or more, for a stable and peaceful region. But our friendships are not alliances of containment…..We choose the side of principles and values, of peace and progress, not one side of a divide or the other.”

India does not want to give any apparent anti-China look to her Indo-Pacific strategy. It is pertinent to mention in this context that India in post-1962 period was in favour of an overt anti-China alliance with Japan and Australia in the Asia-Pacific region. While visiting Japan in 1967, the then Indian Deputy Prime Minister Morarji Desai insisted on Indo-Japan collaboration to handle Chinese menace and even said that China may change its present attitude if the democratic countries like India, Japan and Australia strengthen ties. But time is vastly changed today. In fact, no country today wants an overt anti-China forum in the Indo-Pacific region. This is commensurate with the ASEAN’s policy which does not want an anti-China forum either. This goes against its ‘omni-enmeshment’ strategy. India is in favour of a secured and tranquil multilateral Indo-Pacific region involving all the interested parties, without domination of any, especially China. This was clear from the speech of Indian Ambassador to Washington, Nirupama Rao, delivered on 5th February, 2013 at the Brown-India Initiative where she said, “India’s vision is to create a web of interlinkages for our shared prosperity and security. We want the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions to develop into a zone of cooperation rather than one of competition and domination. We would like to work for an open, inclusive and transparent architecture of regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, where all major powers in Asia and beyond work together to address the traditional and non-traditional challenges and to create a basis for stable and prosperous Asia…”

Such a view was reflected in the key note speech of Prime Minister Modi at Shangri La Dialogue this June where he identified the Indo-Pacific region as something that “stands for a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces us all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity. It includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it.” And that India sees ASEAN as centre of this emerging regional design is also evident when he said, “Southeast Asia is at its centre. And, ASEAN has been and will be central to its future. That is the vision that will always guide India, as we seek to cooperate for an architecture for peace and security in this region.”

8. Conclusion

Both India and ASEAN are main pillars of the Indo-Pacific regional dynamics. Neither can be bypassed in the twenty-first century regional geopolitics of maritime Asia. The geographical location of India and (maritime) ASEAN countries at the centre of the two vital sea lanes of Indian and the Pacific Ocean shapes their strategic significance. The territorial possession of

110 Cited in Bhattacharya (2017), op cit, p.66
111 Ibid, p.176
112 “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)”. Ministry of External Affairs, at https://www.mea.gov.in/SpeechesStatements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018
113 Ibid.
These two landmasses helped the colonial powers to dominate the entire Indo-Pacific region until ousted by Imperial Japan in the Pacific during the last world war. This incident had huge strategic implication for the region and a lesson for the would-be dominant powers. Today’s ‘rise of China’ in the vast Indo-Pacific maritime domain can be seen as a reminder of Imperial Japan, shaping the twenty-first century Indo-Pacific geopolitics. The revisionist character of China, her ‘mission Taiwan’ and South China Sea policy are indicators of the Chinese regional aspiration. This is also important given the economic vitality of the sea lanes here which are life-line of the local economies. The feared Chinese domination of the sea-lanes is a grim reminder of the Japanese occupation which severely affected the economy of the European colonial powers. Thus USA wants India and ASEAN to contribute in safeguarding the freedom of navigation of the region. India’s geographical advantage cannot be overlooked which, if utilized effectively, will be of immense military help in the Indian Ocean region. It should be remembered that the British dominance over the South and Southeast Asian region, was possible due to possession of the Indian subcontinent. The effective usage of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located at the mouth of the Malacca Strait, can be helpful in countering any naval challenge emanating from the east. Similarly, ASEAN ports are equally helpful in the mission.

However, India and ASEAN want a tranquil Indo-Pacific region, inclusive of all the regional as well as extra-regional powers and are averse to any militarization mission. Both India and ASEAN are well integrated with the Chinese trade as well as bilateral trade with each other. China’s trade volume with ASEAN was $514.8 billion in 2017 when India’s trade volume with the Association in 2016-17 financial year was $71.6 billion. Thus, there is a huge gap in trade relations between India and China vis-à-vis ASEAN which India wants to overcome. Besides, India chooses to counter growing Chinese influence in the Pacific region by promoting connectivity, trade and aid diplomacy. India is emphasizing on connectivity with both mainland and maritime ASEAN. India eyes even beyond ASEAN region into the wider Pacific Ocean. Indian External Affairs Ministry organized Sustainable Development Conference for the Pacific Islands in Fijian capital Suva in May 2017. The Forum of India-Pacific Island Countries (FIPIC) was founded in November 2014 whose first summit meeting was held in Suva in 2014 and the second meeting in the Indian city of Jaipur in 2015. In this situation a peaceful Pacific region is vital for India and this can be well assured with the help of ASEAN. The multilateral fora, cropped up under ASEAN for the two decades are proving useful for India to firstly, manage the changing geopolitics of the region and secondly, retaining India’s presence and significance in the region. The main purpose of India’s growing engagement with the Asia Pacific region is economic. This was clear from the speech delivered in 2007 by the then Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee at a function in Jakarta where he said, “We have also taken note of the shift in the economic centre of gravity of the global economy towards Asia Pacific region…..In this context, East and South-East Asia have assumed important place in our policy priorities.” And to ensure prosperous trade relations, tranquil ambience is essential which India is prioritizing the most in the region. Thus the joint statement issued during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Modi to Jakarta this May emphasized


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on strengthening security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region which it mentioned is ‘ASEAN-led mechanism.’ 118 This was an indirect endorsement of the omni-enmeshment strategy of ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time the Indian Prime Minister mentioned the role of the Indian Navy in strengthening and expanding partnerships in the strategically vital Indo-Pacific region in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue this year. He said that India will start trilateral exercise with Singapore and will expand to other ASEAN countries. 119

However, both India and ASEAN need US help to manage the China-affair. Thus, when ASEAN countries individually maintain defence relations with the super power, India is promoting strategic relations with Washington in the Indo-Pacific region. By holding annual Malabar naval exercise (apart from port visits), initially with USA and now a trilateral one with inclusion of Japan in 2015, in the Indo-Pacific region, (the exercise was held off the Guam islands this year and in Bay of Bengal last year, in 2017) India is ensuring her naval presence in the region. It is noteworthy here that India was initially reluctant to involve Japan, a strategic rival of China and an important US ally, in the Malabar exercise. But as New and Tokyo develops joint strategies in the Indo-Pacific region, the latter’s importance to India grows. But India endorses the ‘omni-enmeshment’ strategy of ASEAN to handle the Asia-Pacific geopolitics which matches with her traditional ‘engage to contain’ policy vis-à-vis China. The ASEAN strategy is most beneficial for India to handle the Indo-Pacific geopolitics amidst the ‘rise of China’.

Both India and ASEAN have traditionally avoided aggressive policies to handle the rival. Panchsheel and NAM policies propounded by India during Nehru period was strategies to handle strong rivals like China through dialogue and to minimize possibility of war endangering the tranquil ambience in neighbourhood needed for her economic prosperity. ASEAN was founded with objective to resolve disputes in ‘ASEAN Away’, skipping the military solution. Today, when the Chinese ‘threat’ looms in the horizon, both sides are embracing their traditional tactic to handle the crisis. The tranquil Indo-Pacific is essential for both India and ASEAN, as well as others. However, aggressive military solution to any threat (more characterized with the major Western powers like USA) is not an option for the small and medium powers of the region. In this case, India and ASEAN emphasizing on cooperative resolution of disputes through dialogue, through ASEAN multilateral fora, without compromising with their vested geopolitical interest minimizes the chance of outburst of major conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, at least in the near future. This is an attempt to defer the conflict which seems inevitable in a power transition phase between rising but dissatisfied power and the dominant one.

119 “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)”. op cit

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