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India-Singapore Defence Agreement: A New Phase in Partnership

The new agreement for naval cooperation between India and Singapore, signed at the end of November 2017 in New Delhi, India, marks an important milestone in the evolution of strategic partnership between the two countries. It also heralds more expansive defence cooperation between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a whole, and would help contribute to the maintenance of peace and security at the heart of the Indo-Pacific.

C Raja Mohan¹

The visit of Singapore's Defence Minister Dr Ng Eng Hen to India at the end of November 2017 has unveiled a more intensive phase in the bilateral security cooperation between the two countries that began a quarter century ago. The agreement on naval cooperation that Dr Ng signed with India's Defence Minister, Mrs Nirmala Sitharaman, strengthens mutual logistics support and facilitates operations of the two navies on both sides of the Malacca Straits that connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

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When India launched on the path of economic globalisation at the turn of the 1990s, it also took first steps out of its prolonged self-imposed military isolation. Singapore was among the first countries to welcome India's new readiness to embark on defence and security cooperation with major powers and neighbours. Singapore and India began their annual naval exercises – the Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercises – in 1994.

Since then, there has been a steady expansion of bilateral defence engagement that included exchanges between the two armies and their air forces. India also offered facilities in India to train the Singapore Armed Forces. India and Singapore have talked of joint research and production of weapons systems. In joining a flight of India's indigenous *Tejas*² fighter during his recent visit, Dr Ng was highlighting the importance of turning the talk of defence industrial cooperation into reality.

At the multilateral level, Singapore extended strong support for India's 'Look East' policy and helped its economic integration with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As ASEAN turned to regional security architecture, Singapore backed India's entry into the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting with other regional partners (ADMM Plus).

As Asian security began to acquire a more complex character at the beginning of this decade with the intensification of regional maritime disputes and renewed great power rivalry, India's defence engagement with the region became more important. India signed a strategic partnership agreement with ASEAN in 2012 and a bilateral agreement with Singapore in 2015. Maritime security was at the core of both the strategic partnerships.

The new naval agreement between Singapore and India completes the triad of service-to-service agreements, helps deepen bilateral defence partnership and paves the way for multilateral maritime security cooperation with ASEAN as a whole.

The joint statement issued after the meeting between Dr Ng and Mrs Sitharaman said the conclusion of the India-Singapore Bilateral Agreement for Navy Cooperation will lead "to

² The *Tejas* is an Indian single-seat, single-jet engine, multirole light fighter. The word *Tejas* means "illumination".

increased cooperation in maritime security, joint exercises, and temporary deployments from each other's naval facilities and mutual logistics support.”³

Mutual logistical support and personnel visits to each other's naval facilities on a reciprocal basis, will benefit both India and Singapore. They will help extend the reach of the Indian Navy beyond the Malacca Strait into the Western Pacific. For the Singapore Navy, they will open up the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal for live-fire drills and training. As Dr Ng told a press conference in New Delhi after his meeting with Mrs. Sitharaman, “We will exercise and patrol in your waters as you do in ours. We try to economise and support each other.”⁴

Underlining their shared interests in regional security, the two ministers “reaffirmed the importance of maintaining maritime freedom of navigation and trade consistent with international law.” Dr Ng explained by adding that, “Both Singapore and India sit astride key Sea Lines of Communication as well as overland that connects Asia and Europe. We recognise that regional stability and the international rule of law is essential for trade and commerce to flourish, and we have a vested interest in upkeeping that system.”⁵

The joint statement also referred to the importance of cooperation with other friends and partners in the region. “Appreciating India's leading role in the Indian Ocean Region”, the statement said that Dr Ng “agreed to India's proposal for continuous and institutionalised naval engagements in their shared maritime space, including establishing maritime exercises with like-minded regional/ASEAN partners.”⁶

As the incoming chair of ASEAN, Singapore hopes to facilitate this deeper naval engagement between India and the Southeast Asian nations. Initial results might be expected when all the

³ “Joint Statement by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister of Defence of the Republic of Singapore, and SMT Nirmala Sitharaman, Minister of Defence of the Republic of India”, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 29 November 2017. https://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/press_room/details.html?name=29nov17_js&date=2017-11-29#.Wh-edDco-hA>. Accessed on 30 November 2017.

⁴ “Singapore for more cooperation with India in Strait of Malacca, Andaman Sea”, Dinakar Peri, *The Hindu*, 29 November 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-singapore-for-increased-activity-in-strait-of-malacca/article21073391.ece>. Accessed on 30 November 2017.

⁵ “India and Singapore deepen defence ties with naval agreement”, Nirmala Ganapathy, *The Straits Times*, 29 November 2017. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/india-and-singapore-deepen-defence-ties-with-naval-agreement>. Accessed on 30 November 2017.

⁶ “Joint Statement by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister of Defence of the Republic of Singapore, and SMT Nirmala Sitharaman, Minister of Defence of the Republic of India”, op. cit.

10 leaders of ASEAN join as honoured guests at India's Republic Day celebrations at the end of January 2018.

That the initiative for greater naval cooperation with ASEAN has come from India is noteworthy. In the past, there was deep frustration within ASEAN at the reluctance of the Indian defence establishment to walk through the open door for expanded security cooperation with the region.⁷ India's ambivalence was quite visible in New Delhi's lack of interest in sustained and effective participation in the premier security forum of the region – the Shangri-La Dialogue. On his part India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought to reinvigorate India's defence diplomacy with ASEAN and has agreed to be the lead speaker at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue.

In an address to a New Delhi think-tank a day before his talks with Mrs Sitharaman, Dr Ng laid out the political context in which Singapore is seeking deeper security cooperation with India. "Singapore believes that India's inclusion strengthens the regional security architecture, as a stabilising force within the region. India adds a wider perspective and more robust balance beyond the US-China strategic rivalry at play."⁸ Quite clearly, the diversification of security partnerships has become a critical consideration amidst the current flux in Asian security environment marked by China's rise and questions over the future direction of United States (US) role in the region.

Equally important was Singapore's assessment of India's special role in the region. Dr Ng insisted that India will remain an independent player in the region, notwithstanding Delhi's recent tensions with Beijing, growing closeness to Washington and India's recent decision to renew the quadrilateral security dialogue with Japan, Australia and the US.

Dr Ng argued that "India's history shapes its own world view in international affairs. As a pioneering member of the Non-Aligned Movement, India is also culturally distinct from the other ADMM-Plus countries (like China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand).

⁷ See C Raja Mohan, 'An Uncertain Trumpet?: India's role in Southeast Asian Security', *India Review*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2013, pp. 134-150.

⁸ "Speech by Minister for Defence, Dr Ng Eng Hen, at the Brookings India Institution Centre", 28 November 2017. https://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/press_room/details.html?name=28nov17_speech&date=2017-11-28#.Wh-iqDco-hA >. Accessed on 29 November 2017.

India is neither dominantly Western nor Eastern-orientated. India is India, its past as well as its future inextricably linked to the fortunes of Asia. It crafts its own trajectory for its interests and 1.3 billion people.”⁹

From New Delhi’s perspective, the defence partnership with ASEAN in general, and Singapore, in particular, lends substance to India’s new aspiration to emerge as a leading power in its own right and contribute to the shaping of the Asian balance of power. It is up to New Delhi now to build on the new possibilities opened by the deepening defence engagement with Singapore.

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⁹ Ibid.