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## **Is India an East Asian Power? Explaining New Delhi's Security Politics in the Western Pacific<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Executive Summary**

New Delhi's relationship with East Asia has come a long way from the early 1990s, when India launched its 'Look East' policy. While it continues to see the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the core of East Asia, India's interests have broadened to include the Western Pacific as a whole. Although India's economic ties with East Asia have yet to acquire the depth of China, the expectations of India's superior economic performance and the prospect that it will emerge as one of the world's four largest economies has created a sound basis for India's relations with Pacific Asia. With faster economic growth, India's military and strategic capabilities are becoming more consequential for East Asia. By embarking on a purposeful 'big power' diplomacy with the United States, China and Japan, building security partnerships with key regional actors and pursuing a vigorous maritime diplomacy, India is emerging as an important factor in the balance of power in Pacific Asia.

The important question is not whether India belongs to the Pacific; nor is it a question of East Asia seeing India as a "counterweight" to China. So long as Indian economic growth continues at a fast pace, 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. A rising India generates options that did not exist before in the Western Pacific. The United States, Japan and a number of other key regional actors have begun to view India "as a net security provider" in the Western Pacific and, aware of its new responsibility, New Delhi has begun to promote a more visible and sustained presence of its navy in the region.

Rising India's emphasis on pragmatic cooperation rather than ideological posturing and its cooperative maritime strategy make New Delhi a new strategic factor in Pacific Asia.

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## Introduction

Any suggestion that India might influence the balance of power in the Western Pacific is met with surprise and scepticism from the community of diplomatic practitioners as well as regional experts in East Asia. Nearly two decades after the launch of its 'Look East' policy, India is widely seen as marginal to the security of Pacific Asia. Yet some of the recent work on India's international relations is beginning to explore the implications of India's growing economic, political and military engagement with East Asia.<sup>3</sup> As the weakest of the major powers in Asia, India is understandably the least consequential for the ordering of Asia-Pacific security. Nevertheless, India's importance in the security politics of East Asia is beginning to grow, if only slowly. The debate on India's rise and its implications for Asian and global balance of power centres around the new expectations and residual scepticism about the sustainability of India's recent impressive economic performance – of around eight percent annual growth rates during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If India can maintain this performance, India's political and military weight in East Asia will undoubtedly improve. The last few years have also seen the maturation of India's 'Look East' policy launched in the mid-1990s. New Delhi has begun to expand the geographic scope as well as the substance of its 'Look East' policy to cover the Western Pacific as an important area of strategic engagement. The expectations of India's rise have also begun to inject a new dynamism into India's relations with the great powers of Asia – the United States, China and Japan. As a result, India may no longer be marginal to either the regional politics of East Asia or the great power system that shapes the Asia Pacific theatre. That does not necessarily mean India has become either central or pivotal to Asia-Pacific security. The following analysis suggests that India is poised to affect the distribution of power in East Asia and the Pacific.

## Reclaiming the East Asian Tradition

Most Indian writers will be tempted to justify an Indian interest and role in the Pacific in terms of the grand sweep of civilisational links. Many of them would happily concur with the assessment that “in relationship to the Mongolian peoples and nations of Indo-China, Malaysia, Tibet, China and Japan, India stands as the sacred and revered source of some of their highest cultural attainments. Her fertile mind, through a thousand years of Brahmanical and Buddhist expansion, furnished archetypes and gave inspiration to literature, art, philosophy, religion and institutions in Mongolian Asia”.<sup>4</sup> This assessment, from the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the Indian influence in East Asia is now a hugely contested terrain and there is no reason for us to venture into it.<sup>5</sup> I would argue instead that even a cursory examination of the recent history would point to the strategic bonds that endure between India and East Asia. I would also suggest that if regions are imagined communities, the perception that South and East Asia are two very different geopolitical entities too is of

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<sup>3</sup> Walter C. Ladwig III, “Delhi's Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, 'Look East', and India's Emerging Influence in the Asia Pacific”, *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2009, pp. 87-113; Iskander Rehman, “Keeping the Dragon at Bay: India's Counter-Containment of China in Asia”, *Ibid.*, pp. 114-43. David Scott, “Strategic Imperatives of India as an Emerging Player in Pacific Asia”, *International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2007, pp. 123-40; see also Harsh V. Pant, “India in the Asia-Pacific: Rising Ambitions with an Eye on China”, *Asia Pacific Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2007; see also See Lakhvinder Singh and Changsu Kim, “India's Recent Foreign Policy Initiatives and Implications for East Asian Security”, *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2005, pp. 128-50.

<sup>4</sup> E. S. Craighill Handy, “The Renaissance of East Indian Culture: It's Significance for the Pacific and the World”, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 4, April 1930, pp. 362-69.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Susan Bayly, “Imagining 'Greater India': French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, 2004, pp. 703-44.

recent origin. It is quite easy to see how India's inward-looking policies from the 1950s and its deliberate de-globalisation marginalised New Delhi from East Asia and the Pacific. As India turned outward and reintegrated itself into the global economy at the turn of the 1990s, it has been logical to believe that its large size and immense economic potential would make it, eventually, an important factor in the structuring of the Asian economic and security order.

After its early disappointments in trying to build Asian unity and lead the old continent on the world stage during the 1950s, India's political emphasis decisively turned global and multilateral. The presumed leadership of the non-aligned movement (NAM) gave India a stage to articulate its larger aspirations. But the obsession with the NAM inevitably prevented India from sustaining its primacy in Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral achieved under the British Raj.<sup>6</sup> As Asia rediscovered itself, powerful voices in the region were pointing to the enduring linkages between different sub-regions of Asia. Although there was never an accepted geographic definition of Asia, India was very much part of the early expression and popularisation of Asian identity.<sup>7</sup> The very first ideas of "Asian unity" and the attempt to define a new Asian identity came out of the dialogue between the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore and Japanese intellectual Okakura Tenshin, at the two geographic extremes of Asia.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the Indian national movement in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a strong sentiment in favour of the idea of independent India working for an "Eastern Federation" in Asia.<sup>9</sup> It is also important to remember that it was the troops from undivided India that pushed the Japanese troops out of Burma and took their surrender throughout Southeast Asia to bring the Second World War to a close (The term 'Southeast Asia' first appeared in the description of Admiral Mountbatten's military command).

One of the early diplomatic acts of Jawaharlal Nehru was to host the Asian Relations Conference, the first conclave of modern Asian leaders, a few months before India's independence in 1947. In pursuit of Asian solidarity, Nehru also led the effort by the so-called Colombo Powers in organising the Bandung Conference of Asian leaders in 1955. The 'Colombo Powers' were the first to speak in the name of Asia and included three South Asian nations – India, Pakistan, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and two Southeast Asian nations – Indonesia and Burma.<sup>10</sup> The illogic of the presumed tight separation between South and Southeast Asia is also underlined by the major cold war alliance of the region, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, formed in 1954. Its members were Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines, besides the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia and New Zealand. Convenient political differentiation between regions at one moment becomes irrelevant or gets overtaken by new political imperatives that emerge at another point of time.

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<sup>6</sup> For a summary of India's crucial role as the fulcrum of regional security role in the Eastern and Western parts of Asia, see John Peter Brobst, *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, Indian Independence and the Defence of Asia* (Akron: University of Ohio Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> For a review of the historic debate on the changing concept of Asia, see, Anthony Milner and Deborah Johnson, "The Idea of Asia", in Johan Ingleton, ed., *Regionalism, Sub-regionalism and APEC* (Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, 1997), pp. 1-19.

<sup>8</sup> See Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); see also Stephen Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in China and Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> T. A. Keenlyside, "Nationalistic Indian Attitudes Towards Asia: A Troublesome Legacy for Post-independence Indian Foreign Policy", *Pacific Affairs* (Vancouver), vol. 55, no. 2, Summer 1982, pp. 210-30.

<sup>10</sup> See William Henderson, "The Development of Regionalism in Southeast Asia", *International Organization*, Vol. 9, No. 4, November 1955, pp. 463-76. See also Russell H. Fifield, *The Diplomacy of Southeast Asia: 1945-1958* (New York: Harper, 1958).

To be sure, newly independent India nursed the ambitions of sustaining the Raj legacy on regional security. Its early political activism in Southern Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, its large army, and the plans to build an ambitious navy all pointed to a strong Indian role in Asia. The notion that “Aden to Malacca” was India’s sphere of influence was deeply rooted among post-independence foreign policy makers in New Delhi. In fact, the foreign policy assertiveness of India in the early Cold War years generated deep suspicion in some Western quarters that India might emerge as the “successor of Japan’s Asiatic imperialism”.<sup>11</sup> These fears, as it turned out, were exaggerated. The enduring consequences of the subcontinent’s partition of India and the conflict with China over Tibet and the boundary tied India down with conflicts within its own neighbourhood. India’s insular socialist policies resulted not just in its relative economic decline, but also in the erosion of historic trade links with the neighbouring regions in Asia. With no economic basis, India’s relations with all the major powers, including the United States, Europe, Japan and China remained under-developed. As India drew closer to the Soviet Union, in order to manage the regional balance of power within the subcontinent, association with Moscow increasingly became disconcerting to even those countries which valued their traditional links with India. The Indian military, which had a long record of participating in wars beyond the subcontinent, was now bogged down in territorial defence. The foreign policy of non-alignment also meant the Indian military shunned contact and cooperation with the outside world, including the Soviet Union. Although India’s third world activism meant taking positions on all global issues, these degenerated into mere posturing against one or both superpowers and the inability to come to the aid of friendly nations in conflict with their neighbours. Where it did take bold positions, as in Indochina in support of the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia, it put New Delhi at odds with all the major powers, other than the Soviet Union and ASEAN.<sup>12</sup>

It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, that India was compelled to take a more national interest-based approach to different regions. India’s new economic policies demanded a more focused outreach that emphasised trade and commercial cooperation. It also demanded a direct political approach to different regions of Asia, rather than the multilateral mechanisms of G-77 and the NAM. As India began to reorient its foreign policy after the Cold War, the idea that much of Asia and the Indian Ocean formed its “extended neighbourhood” began to take root.<sup>13</sup> As India’s relations with Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East began to acquire a new dynamism the old notion of reclaiming a security and political role from Aden to Malacca, so emblematic of Lord Curzon’s British India, began to resurface.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, the first regional initiative was towards Southeast Asia, and was called the ‘Look East’ policy. A voluminous literature outlining the origins and ideological underpinnings of India’s ‘Look East’ policy has already been published.<sup>15</sup> The urgent imperative was to be a part of the region’s new

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<sup>11</sup> A United States State Department assessment in 1950 quoted in Baldev Raj Nayar and T.V. Paul, *India in the World Order: Searching for Major- Power Status* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of India’s policy towards Southeast Asia until the late 1980s, see, Mohammad Ayoob, *India and South-East Asia* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> David Scott, “India’s ‘Extended Neighbourhood’ Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power”, *India Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2009, pp. 107-43.

<sup>14</sup> See C. Raja Mohan “Rediscovering Lord Curzon”, in *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India’s New Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Viking, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Two of the most illuminating works are Kripa Sridharan, *The ASEAN Region in India’s Foreign Policy* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1996); and Christophe Jaffrelot, “India’s Look East Policy: An Asianist Strategy in Perspective”, *India Review*, Vol.2, No.2. 2003, pp. 35-68.

economic dynamism and rebuild frayed political relations with the rest of Asia. Among all the sub-regions of Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, Southeast Asia promised to be the most attractive in terms of political and diplomatic opportunities. In Central Asia, India was quick to reach out to the newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union. Yet its ability to influence developments there was constrained by the lack of direct geographic access. The oil-rich Persian Gulf was now right at the top of India's foreign policy agenda. However, the overwhelming dominance of the United States in the Gulf and its extended conflicts with Iran and Iraq left little room for any major initiative by India. This was also true of the Middle East, where India now sought to generate a greater balance between its ties with the Arabs and Israel, but hardly expected to play a major role in the region. India's significant interest in Africa (and eventually Latin America) had to wait until its economic growth accelerated and provided new options in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In contrast to all these regions, the greater coherence of ASEAN and the goodwill of countries such as Singapore provided the opening for sustained Indian diplomacy in the region. While the steady expansion of economic links provided a new basis for India's cooperation with the region, it was the admission of India as an institutional partner of ASEAN that allowed India to develop an all-encompassing engagement with the region.<sup>16</sup> From the tentative sectoral dialogue partnership in the mid-1990s to a more affirmative nod of the membership of the East Asia Summit (EAS) process in 2005, India's 'Look East' policy advanced steadily and became one of the most organised components of its external relations. Besides a new degree of political comfort at the highest levels, ASEAN offered a model for globalisation just when India was wrestling with the many demons in its mind about economic reform. This debt of gratitude was freely acknowledged by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who was present at the creation of India's 'Look East' policy as India's Finance Minister and later had the opportunity to elevate it to a higher level. Speaking in 2006, he said:

I must pay tribute to our East and Southeast Asian neighbours for shaping our own thinking on globalisation and the means to deal with it...in 1992 our Government launched India's 'Look East' policy. This was not merely an external economic policy; it was also a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy. Most of all, it was about reaching out to our civilisational Asian neighbours.<sup>17</sup>

While ASEAN held India's hand at a moment when the big ship of the Indian state was turning, there was considerable scepticism, even at the turn of the millennium, about New Delhi's ability to make a difference in the region, especially in security affairs. While the ASEAN leaders were prepared to experiment with the prospects for a deeper economic relationship with India, they were wary of a security entanglement with New Delhi. As they prepared to launch the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the early 1990s, the ASEAN leaders explicitly told India not to press its case for membership and when New Delhi did push for it, it was rejected.<sup>18</sup> ASEAN was concerned that India would bring the whole

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<sup>16</sup> For a recent comprehensive review of India's Look East policy and Southeast Asian response, see Tan Tai Yong and See Chak Mun, "The Evolution of India-ASEAN Relations", *India Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2009, pp. 20-42.

<sup>17</sup> Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's address to Asia Society Corporate Conference, Mumbai, 18 March 2006. available at < <http://www.pmindia.nic.in/speeches.htm> >

<sup>18</sup> For the initial difficult period of the Look East policy, see J.N. Dixit, *My South Block Years: Memoirs of a Foreign Secretary* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1996), pp. 264-71.

baggage of its difficult problems with Pakistan and China into the organisation. While India was eventually admitted into the ARF in 1997, there was an explicit understanding that India would play a low-key role for the moment and as its economic interaction with the region expanded it would be possible to eventually consider a wider political and security relationship. As a Southeast Asian of analysis the region's reservations about India underlined:

India remains effectively contained geopolitically in South Asia by Pakistan and China. As long as this is so, its geopolitical impact on Southeast Asia will continue to be limited. To break out of this geopolitical impasse, the emergence of an open, outward-looking and dynamic economy is an essential condition, but not a sufficient one. Other important requirements may include diplomatic ingenuity and political will to resolve disputes with Pakistan at an appropriate time and the continued maintenance of domestic political stability under secular conditions.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the doubts about India's internal stability, its capacity to emerge as an economic force and its geopolitical bind with Pakistan and China were deeply entrenched in Southeast Asia. Therefore security partnership with India could only be considered as a distant prospect. By 2005, however, this perception had eased considerably and was reflected in ASEAN's decision to invite India, against the known reservations of China, into the EAS process. A whole host of factors, including India's superior performance, New Delhi's improved ties with Islamabad and Beijing, the warming of India's relations with the United States under the Bush Administration, and the larger perception of a more purposeful Indian diplomacy helped change the attitudes of the region towards security cooperation with India. Even before India was invited to join the EAS in 2005, and giving legitimacy to the notion that New Delhi could be part of the region's security politics, New Delhi was beginning to integrate the Pacific into its conception of an extended neighbourhood. As New Delhi began to recognise the new strategic opportunities coming its way amidst the changing international perceptions of its economic performance, Vajpayee also began to signal that India's 'Look East' policy was not limited to Southeast Asia. In his Singapore Lecture during 2002, Vajpayee declared that geography and politics make India an important part of the Asia-Pacific community and that "it does not require formal membership of any regional organisation for its recognition or sustenance".<sup>20</sup>

Shortly after, Vajpayee's Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha was talking about a 'second phase' in India's 'Look East' policy. If the first phase focused on trade, commerce and the membership of ASEAN institutions, the second phase would have a substantive emphasis on security and political cooperation. Sinha suggested that "the first phase of India's 'Look East' policy was ASEAN-centred and focused primarily on trade and investment linkages. The new phase of this policy is characterised by an expanded definition of 'East', to include Northeast Asia, Australia, and South Pacific. The new phase also marks a shift from trade to wider economic and security issues, including joint efforts to protect the sea-lanes and coordinate counter-terrorism activities. "Away from exclusive focus on economic issues in phase one to

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<sup>19</sup> Daljit Singh, "The Geopolitical Interconnection between South and Southeast Asia", in Frederic Grare and Amitabh Mattoo, eds., *India and ASEAN: The Politics of India's Look East Policy* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Atal Bihari Vajpayee, "India's Perspectives on ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific Region", 21<sup>st</sup> Singapore Lecture, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 9 April 2002, available at <<http://www.iseas.edu.sg/vajpayee.pdf>> accessed on 30 July 2009.

a broader agenda that involves security cooperation, including joint operations to protect sea lanes and pooling of resources in the war against terror, the military contacts and joint exercises that India launched with ASEAN states on a low-key basis in the early 1990s are now expanding into full-fledged cooperation”.<sup>21</sup> Sinha’s successor at the Foreign Office, Natwar Singh further developed the concept of India’s interests in East Asia and the Pacific: “Developments in East Asia are of direct consequence to India’s security and development. We are therefore actively engaged in creating...a paradigm of positive interconnectedness of security interests...we face the common threats of weapons of mass destruction proliferation, terrorism, energy shortage, and piracy to name a few”.<sup>22</sup> It was one thing for India to claim a security role in the Pacific, but entirely another for the region which already had a large number of institutions to accept New Delhi as relevant, let alone a partner to manage the security challenges in the region. That recognition and relevance came with the decision to offer India membership of the first East Asian Summit to be held at the end of 2005. The seeming incongruity of bringing India into an avowedly ‘East Asian’ forum was explained by Singapore’s Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong when he revealed some of the thinking that went into this decision in early 2005:

With India’s rise it will be increasingly less tenable to regard South Asia and East Asia as distinct strategic theatres interacting only at the margins. United States-China-Japan relations will still be important, but a new grand strategic triangle of United States-China-India relations will be superimposed upon it...Reconceptualising East Asia holistically is of strategic imperative...It would be shortsighted and self-defeating for ASEAN to choose a direction that cuts itself off from a dynamic India.<sup>23</sup>

### **Naval Diplomacy East of Malacca**

While the logic of the changing balance of power was beginning to create a new basis for East Asia’s engagement with India, it was the Indian navy that underlined the future possibilities for New Delhi in the Pacific. Through a series of maritime forays throughout the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Indian navy made it quite clear that it did not have to explain that the separation of different theatres was entirely an intellectual exercise. The navy after all has no problem recognising that the seas are connected to each and their separation is largely a political rather than geographical construct. The interconnectedness of the maritime universe meant the navy was well positioned to fly the Indian flag in the Pacific and lay the basis for a long-term strategic engagement with the East Asian littoral. Shedding decades of military isolationism, India now opened up to service-to-service exchanges with major powers as well as the regional actors in the Indian Ocean littoral.<sup>24</sup> Although India’s preliminary naval interaction with the United States got considerable international attention, India devoted special attention to military engagement with the Southeast Asian nations.

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<sup>21</sup> Yashwant Sinha’s speech at Harvard University, 29 September 2003, available at <<http://meaindia.nic.in/speech/2003/09/29ss09.htm>> accessed on 30 July 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Inaugural Address to the 7<sup>th</sup> Asian Security Conference, Institute of Defence Studies, New Delhi, 27 January 2005, available at <[http://www.idsa.in/speeches\\_at\\_idsa/7ASCInaugrural.htm](http://www.idsa.in/speeches_at_idsa/7ASCInaugrural.htm)> accessed on 30 July 2009.

<sup>23</sup> “Reconceptualising East Asia”, Keynote address by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong at the official launch of the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, 27 January 2005; available at <<http://www.isasnus.org/events/addresses/1.htm>>

<sup>24</sup> Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, “The Role of Naval Diplomacy in India’s Foreign Policy”, Foreign Service Institute, *Indian Foreign Policy*, vol. 2, (New Delhi: Konark, 1998), pp. 194-206; see also, Vijay Sakhuja, “Naval Diplomacy: Indian Initiatives”, *Bharat Rakshak Monitor*, Vol. 6, No. 1, July-August 2003; available at <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/MONITOR/ISSUE6-1/Sakhuja.html> accessed on 30 July 2009.

India's new naval outreach to Southeast Asia was not a mere consequence of its new interest in the United States, but part of an effort to develop its own independent security relationship with the region and demonstrate its capacity to project power.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the 1980s, India had confronted a growing suspicion of its maritime intentions as Southeast Asia reacted to its growing military, especially naval, capabilities.<sup>26</sup> India had the immediate need to remove the misperceptions, rooted in Southeast Asia's wariness of India's strategic partnership with the Soviet Union. It has been argued:

For New Delhi, getting in touch with Southeast Asian capitals directly, in order to establish contacts in defence matters, meant that it had cut itself off from the paradigm of derived relationships. The improvement in relations with Southeast Asia was not considered an upshot of the rapprochement with Washington. It thenceforth became a strategic objective in its own right, one that New Delhi intended to follow actively.<sup>27</sup>

The new outward orientation of the Indian navy steadily gathered momentum in the 1990s with wide-ranging contacts bilaterally and multilaterally. India began to expand its joint naval exercises with all the nations of Southeast Asia, stepped up its port calls in the region and receive ships from the region at its own ports.<sup>28</sup> The Indian navy also recognised the importance of contributing to the production and maintenance of 'collective goods' in the Malacca Straits and the Western Pacific Oceans especially after the events of 11 September 2001.<sup>29</sup>

It was the bold foray of the Indian navy into the South China Sea at the end of 2000 that drew the attention to India's strategic ambitions east of the Malacca Straits. Until then, it seemed that India was sticking to the claim that its maritime interests ranged from Aden to Malacca. It was widely presumed that this formulation meant that India might limit itself to the Indian Ocean and has no aspirations to play a larger role in the Western Pacific Ocean. That China's neighbours were eager to welcome India also highlighted the prospects for a new balance of power game in Asian waters. The mission also set the tone for frequent and wide-ranging naval exercises between India and the littoral states of the South China Sea.<sup>30</sup> Even as the Indian navy was seen as contesting China's influence in the region, New Delhi had no reason to give offence to Beijing and was quite eager to initiate simple joint exercises with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).<sup>31</sup> In 2002, the Indian navy undertook a high profile

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<sup>25</sup> See Walter C. Ladwig III, op. cit., n.1.

<sup>26</sup> G. V. C. Naidu, 'The Indian navy and Southeast Asia,' *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 13, No. 1, June 1991, pp. 74-80; Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, 'Indian naval buildup and Southeast Asian security', *Ibid.*, 87-95; Derek da Cunha, 'Major Asian powers and the development of the Singaporean and Malaysian armed forces', *Ibid.*, pp. 57-71; P. Lewis Young, 'India's nuclear submarine acquisition: a major step towards regional dominance?', *Asian Defence Journal*, November 1988, pp. 4-18.

<sup>27</sup> Isabelle Saint-Mezard, *Eastward Bound: India's New Positioning in Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), p. 293.

<sup>28</sup> Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "The Role of the Navy in India's Security Policy", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. No., 1993.

<sup>29</sup> G. S. Khurana, "Cooperation among Maritime Security Forces: Imperatives for India and Southeast Asia", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. No. , 2005.

<sup>30</sup> For an overview, see Scott, op. cit., n.1., pp. 126-28.

<sup>31</sup> Ashok Mehta, "The Strategic Reach of the Indian Navy". SAPRA Military Articles, 18 December 2000, available at <<http://www.subcontinent.com/sapra/research/military/military20001218a.html>> accessed on 28 July 2009. Stratfor, "India challenges China in South China Sea", 26 April 2000, available at <<http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/BD27Df01.html>> see also Josy Joseph, "Indian Navy hails Successful South China Seas Visit", 17 October 2000, available at <<http://www.rediff.com/news/2000/oct/17spec.htm>>



mission to escort American warships participating in *Operation Enduring Freedom* through the Malacca Straits. India was careful in responding to the Bush Administration request and embarked on the mission only after informing the three littoral states, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>32</sup> At the end of 2004, the Indian navy was quick to respond, on its own, to the Tsunami disaster and later joined the navies of the United States, Japan and Australia to provide relief in Southeast Asia. The Indian navy's impressive Tsunami relief involved 32 ships in five different operations on the Indian coast, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. This signalled both the operational readiness of the Indian navy and its immense potential to contribute to future humanitarian and other contingencies in Southeast Asia.<sup>33</sup>

In 2005, the Indian Aircraft carrier, *INS Viraat*, arrived for the first time in the ports of Southeast Asia – Klang in Malaysia, Singapore and Jakarta in Indonesia and transiting the Malacca Straits. Even as it flaunted its carrier group to much interest in the region, the Indian naval leadership was diplomatic enough to emphasise cooperation with the littoral states rather than announce its own arrival as a great power. As he set out to meet the carrier group in the Western Pacific, the Indian naval chief, Admiral Arun Prakash said, “We have no intention of patrolling the Malacca Straits. We believe in working with the Singapore, Malaysian and Indonesian navies with whom we have joint programmes”.<sup>34</sup> Since then coordinated patrolling with the littoral navies became the vehicle to express India's new commitments to the security of the Malacca Straits. After decades of acting as a “lone ranger”, the Indian navy steadily emerged as an important player in the construction of regional maritime security initiatives in the Malacca Straits.<sup>35</sup> However, the sustained expansion of India's naval engagement did not go unnoticed in China, which began to cast a wary eye on New Delhi's maritime ambitions east of the Malacca Straits.

It did not take long for India to push its naval forays beyond the South China Sea towards the upper regions of the Western Pacific. India conducted joint naval exercises with South Korea, which has had significant maritime capabilities from the late-1990s. In the spring/summer of 2007, the Indian navy sailed all the way up to Vladivostok and conducted a series of bilateral and multilateral exercises with a number of nations that included major powers like the United States, Japan, Russia and China. The decision to take the annual bilateral Malabar exercises with the United States to the Western Pacific was a bold one and the first affirmation of India's determination to register its presence in Northeast Asian waters. The move was made bolder by the first ever trilateral exercise with the United States and Japan in Tokyo Bay. On the way in and out of the Western Pacific, India also conducted joint exercises with the Southeast Asian nations Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines.<sup>36</sup> A high water mark of India's vigorous naval diplomacy in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the

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<sup>32</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “India Signs on as Southeast Asia Watchdog”, *Asia Times Online*, 5 April 2002, available at <<http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/DD05Df01.html>> accessed on 31 July 2009; see also Gurpreet S. Khurana, “Safeguarding the Malacca Straits”, *Strategic Comments* (New Delhi: Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses) 5 January 2005, available at <<http://www.idsa.in/publications/stratcomments/gurpreetkhurana50105.htm>> accessed on 31 July 2009.

<sup>33</sup> For an official account of the Indian Navy see, <<http://www.indiannavy.nic.in/tsunami.htm>> See also Vijay Sakhujia, “Indian Naval Diplomacy: Post-Tsunami”, 8 February 2005 (New Delhi: Institute for Peace & Conflict Studies) available at <[http://ipcs.org/Military\\_articles2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=1652&keyArticle=1019&status=article&mod=a](http://ipcs.org/Military_articles2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=1652&keyArticle=1019&status=article&mod=a)>

<sup>34</sup> Sujana Dutta, “Navy touches up friendly face”, *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), 23 July 2005, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> See Donald L. Berlin, “India in the Indian Ocean”, *United States Naval War College Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2, Spring 2006, pp. 58-89.

<sup>36</sup> See C. Raja Mohan, “East Asian Security: India's Rising Profile”, *RSIS Commentaries*, 81/2007 (Singapore: RSIS), 30 July 2007.

large-scale naval exercises with the United States, Japan, Australia and Singapore in the Bay of Bengal. These exercises featured three aircraft carriers, 28 surface vessels, 150 aircraft and over 20,000 personnel, and were conducted over five days.<sup>37</sup> If these exercises caught the eye of China and the world, they were bound to cause a political storm in India. Coming at a moment when the India-United States civil nuclear initiative had become a major political controversy, the exercises were a red rag to the Communist partners of the ruling coalition. While these exercises raised alarm about a potential ‘Asian NATO’,<sup>38</sup> India had no intention of forming such an alliance. The move was a professional initiative by the Indian navy which saw it as a way of demonstrating its potential on the international stage. The demonstrations against the exercise by the Communist parties put the Congress party on the defensive and the naval headquarters had to take a step back.<sup>39</sup> As a result Malabar 2008 became a low key affair that reverted back to a low key bilateral format with the United States. Despite the known reservations of the Defence Minister A. K. Antony against high profile naval exercises, the naval leadership was not going to give up on its outreach to the Pacific and the idea of trilateral exercises. In the summer of 2009, the Indian navy embarked on its second foray into the Pacific Ocean.<sup>40</sup> The Malabar 2009, according to official United States sources, was about enhancing ‘interoperability’ between the three navies and promoting regional stability in the Pacific. There was special focus on interdiction.<sup>41</sup> As Beijing noted the expanding scope and significance of the triangular maritime cooperation between Washington, Tokyo and New Delhi, the Indian navy made best of the opportunity to participate in China’s first fleet review in Qingdao during April 2009. The review was organised to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PLAN. The Indian Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Sureesh Mehta, who joined the celebrations, was keen to signal India’s readiness to engage its Chinese counterpart on a substantive dialogue and confidence-building.<sup>42</sup> India’s high level of participation in the birthday celebration of the PLAN comes on top of occasional port calls and simple naval exercises between the two nations throughout this decade. In a visit to Singapore shortly after that to attend the annual Shangri-La Dialogue, Admiral Mehta was enthusiastic about a wider engagement and mutual confidence building with the PLAN.<sup>43</sup>

India’s expanding maritime interest in this decade was not limited to the South China Sea and the upper reaches of the Pacific, but also included Australia and the South Pacific. After a period of tension that followed Canberra’s vigorous condemnation of New Delhi’s nuclear

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<sup>37</sup> “Malabar 2007: India, United States, Japan, Australia, Singapore Begin Massive 5-Day Naval Exercises”, *India Defence*, 3 September 2007, available at <<http://www.india-defence.com/reports-3519>> accessed on 31 July 2009; Gurmeet Kanwal, “Ex Malabar: The Great Game in the Indian Ocean”, *OpinionAsia*, 12 September 2007, available at <<http://opinionasia.com/ExMalabar2007TheGreatGameintheIndianOcean>> accessed on 31 July 2009; Commodore Gurpreet S. Khurana, “Joint Naval Exercises: A Post Malabar-2007 appraisal for India”, *IPCS Brief* (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies), No. 52, September 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Praful Bidwai, “Five Nation Drill Presages Asian Nato?”, 8 September 2007, *Antiwar.com*; available at <<http://www.antiwar.com/bidwai/?articleid=11574>>. NATO refers to ‘North Atlantic Treaty Organization’.

<sup>39</sup> P. S. Suryanarayana, “No evil design behind proactive naval exercises: Admiral Mehta”, *The Hindu*, 21 July 2007, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> P. S. Suryanarayana, “India and the East Asian maritime domain”, *The Hindu*, 1 April 2009, and “Rising Profile as a maritime power in East Asia”, *The Hindu*, 2 May 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew White, “United States, India, Japan increase interoperability during Malabar 2009”, 29 April 2009; available at <[http://www.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story\\_id=44843](http://www.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=44843)> accessed on 31 July 2009.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion on the prospects of such a dialogue, see C. Raja Mohan, “Sino-Indian Naval Engagement”, *ISAS Brief* (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies), No. 103, 16 April 2009, available at <<http://www.isasnus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/104.pdf>> accessed on 31 July 2009.

<sup>43</sup> P. S. Suryanarayana, “India, China discuss anti-piracy cooperation”, *The Hindu*, 31 May 2009, p. 1.

tests in May 1998, Australia was quick to readapt itself to the changing weight of India on the Asian and international stage.<sup>44</sup> And as India-United States naval engagement began to move at a rapid clip during the presidency of George W. Bush, Australia sought to keep pace. In 2006, the two sides concluded a pact on joint naval exercises in 2005 and a more comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on maritime security cooperation in 2006.<sup>45</sup> As it enhanced its cooperation with Australia, the Indian naval gaze also turned onto the South Pacific islands. Thanks to the presence of its diaspora in the island states, India has always had a political and cultural interest in the South Pacific Islands. This also meant potential conflicts with the local regimes as in the case of Fiji where the internal tension between the indigenous population and Indian communities constantly drew New Delhi into the South Pacific.<sup>46</sup> As India noticed the steady expansion of the Chinese presence and influence in the South Pacific,<sup>47</sup> it recognised the importance of taking a strategic view of the region and not letting concerns with diaspora become the main focus of its engagement with the region. Since the mid-1990s, India has expanded its diplomatic representation in the region. After 2002, when India was invited to associate itself with the Pacific Islands Forum, New Delhi has begun a new outreach that included occasional port calls and flag showing by the Indian navy.<sup>48</sup> India's involvement in the security politics of the South Pacific dates back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century under the East India Company.<sup>49</sup> As India develops its blue water capabilities, it is inevitable that its navy will be drawn more actively into the South Pacific.

### **Expanding Security Cooperation**

Since the early 1990s, it was quite clear that as India-ASEAN relations improved, there will be significant room for security cooperation in areas ranging from training to arms supplies. The absence of territorial disputes between India and the Southeast Asian nations and the perception in sections of ASEAN that New Delhi could help contribute to the regional balance were two factors that made it easy to conceive of security cooperation. Yet the construction of military partnerships has been slow and incremental rather than dramatic. A first-hand account of India's 'Look East' policy says that the "security consultations and defence cooperation between India and Southeast Asian countries at a bilateral level would require more intensive and focused interaction. The agendas are still not substantive enough".<sup>50</sup> As India began to devote greater attention to East Asia, its decision-makers were soon claiming that "whereas the initial engagement was primarily economic, military cooperation has now emerged as a growing area of cooperation between India and its eastern

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<sup>44</sup> For a recent comprehensive review of bilateral relations, see Sandy Gordon, *Widening Horizons: Australia's new relationship with India* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> David Scott, op. cit., No.1, p. 132-33.

<sup>46</sup> For a review, Carmen Voigt-Graf, "Transnationalism and the Indo-Fijian Diaspora: The Relationship of Indo-Fijians to India and its People", *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, February 2008, pp. 81-109.

<sup>47</sup> Terence Wesley-Smith, *China in Oceania: New Forces in Pacific Politics* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2007); Fergus Hanson, *The Dragon in the Pacific: More Opportunity than Threat* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, June 2008); Jian Yang, "China in the South Pacific: Hegemon on the Horizon", *Pacific Review*, Vol. 22, No. 22, May 2009, pp. 139-58.

<sup>48</sup> Shubha Singh, "Reaching out to the South Pacific", *Frontline*, Vol. 19, No. 20, 12-25 October 2002, available at <<http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/fline/fl1920/stories/20021011008305900.htm>> accessed on 1 August 2009.

<sup>49</sup> John M. Ward, *British Policy in the South Pacific, 1796-1893* (Sydney: Australasian Publishers, 1948).

<sup>50</sup> Sudhir Devare, *India and Southeast Asia: Towards Security Convergence* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 208.

neighbours. India is now generally perceived as a more serious and credible player in the regional and global balance of power”.<sup>51</sup>

Malaysia, despite having somewhat indifferent relations with India during the last two decades, had launched defence cooperation with India by signing an MOU in 1993. In retrospect, it looks like the agreement was driven less by a strategic convergence, but Malaysia’s turn to Russian fighter aircraft in the early 1990s. Since then, India has had a substantive military mission in Malaysia focused on training pilots and other air force personnel. India has assisted Malaysia in the maintenance and repair of equipment. In recent years there has been some talk of India selling *Brahmos* missiles to Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia is said to be keen on training to operate submarines. Both sides have recognised the possibilities for significantly upgrading defence collaborations.<sup>52</sup> Although Malaysia was the first to initiate defence cooperation with India, it was Singapore that has gone the farthest. The training of Singapore military personnel expanded steadily and culminated in a more comprehensive arrangement in 2003 when they signed a bilateral defence cooperation agreement. Since then India has given Singapore a more convenient and wider access to training facilities in India. Singapore was indeed the first country after the United States that New Delhi allowed the conduct of joint exercises on Indian territory.<sup>53</sup> The collaboration is no means a one-way street. Having acquired a niche position in global arms manufacturing, Singapore is well positioned to participate in the modernisation of India’s armed forces as well as take advantage of its complex restructuring underway.<sup>54</sup> Singapore has also developed some impressive capabilities in the production of systems such as advanced artillery guns and submersibles, items that are of enduring military value to India. Singapore’s critical location in the Malacca Straits at the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans has, of course, always been of strategic attraction to India and in recent times has emerged as the closest security partner of India in the East.

Meanwhile India itself is looking at the possibility of exporting arms, an area in which it has had little success in the past. New Delhi, however, has begun to explore the emerging opportunities in Southeast Asia which is emerging as a major market for weapons. As China builds up its own armed forces, many Southeast Asian countries have followed suit.<sup>55</sup> It is no surprise then that India and Indonesia are reportedly discussing the prospects of jointly producing weapons and military equipment. Ideas about equity tie-ups between companies on both sides in the defence sector have apparently been put on the table. These proposals have emerged out of the pursuit of security cooperation arising from the defence cooperation agreement signed in 2001. A joint declaration on strategic partnership issued in New Delhi in November 2005 said, “President Yudhoyono welcomed India’s offer of cooperation with the

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<sup>51</sup> Rajiv Sikri, “India’s Foreign Policy Priorities in the Coming Decade”, *ISAS Working Papers* (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies), No. 25, 24 September 2007.

<sup>52</sup> P. S. Suryanarayana, “India, Malaysia to step up defence ties”, *The Hindu*, 8 January 2008, available at <<http://www.hindu.com/2008/01/08/stories/2008010856131200.htm>> accessed on 31 July 2009. See also Vivek Raghuvanshi, “India, Malaysia Strengthen Defense Relations”, *Defense News*, 18 August 2008, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> For a first hand account of the defence agreement, see See Chak Mun, *India’s Strategic Interests in Southeast Asia and Singapore* (Singapore: Institute for South Asian Studies, 2009), p. 130. see also, GVC Naidu, “Whither the Look East Policy: India and Southeast Asia”, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 28, no.2, April-June 2004, pp. 331-46.

<sup>54</sup> Ron Mathews and Curie Maharani, “Singapore’s Arms Sale to UK: A Defence Export Breakthrough”, *RSIS Commentaries* (Singapore: RSIS), 2 January 2009, available at <<http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/Perspective/RSIS0012009.pdf>> accessed on 31 July 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Richard A. Bitzinger, “The China Syndrome: Chinese Military Modernization and the Rearming of Southeast Asia”, *RSIS Working Papers* (Singapore: RSIS) No. 126, 2 May 2007.

Department of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia in the procurement of defence supplies, defence technologies, joint production and joint projects”.<sup>56</sup> As Indonesia rises on the Asian and world stage, all the major powers including the United States and China are reaching out to Jakarta. While India might have a set of complementary interests with Indonesia, both countries are notorious for their inability to turn words into practical deeds.<sup>57</sup> Similarly the declaration on strategic partnership issued by the Indian and Vietnamese prime ministers in July 2007 says, “Recognising the important role that India and Vietnam are called upon to play in the promotion of regional security, the two leaders welcomed the steady development of bilateral defence and security ties between their countries and pledged themselves to *strengthen cooperation in defence supplies, joint projects, training cooperation and intelligence exchanges*” (emphasis added).<sup>58</sup>

India’s special relationship with Vietnam, of course, draws considerable international and regional attention given the record of their past security collaboration against China.<sup>59</sup> India’s strategic relationship with Vietnam was indeed part of the problem between New Delhi and ASEAN during the 1980s. Much has indeed changed since then. Vietnam is now part of ASEAN and has vastly improved relations with China. Meanwhile, Sino-Indian relations too are not what they were during the 1980s. Yet the idea of Hanoi playing a key role in India’s presumed efforts to balance China remains an alluring story in Asia; and at the centre of this speculation is Vietnam’s strategically-located Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>60</sup> Indian Sinophobes talk enthusiastically about gaining access to the facility. Many others in the region fear that it might set off a conflict between China and India in the South China Sea. As has been argued by an Australian sceptic, “An Indian naval presence at Cam Ranh at the beginning of this decade would no doubt have been seen as a confrontational by China and, perhaps more importantly, is unlikely to have been welcomed by the ASEAN states. It would have reflected an older Indian way of doing business with both China and ASEAN”.<sup>61</sup> The burden of our own argument here is that India sees no reason to do business in the old mode. New Delhi is fully aware of the strategic potential of its relationship with Vietnam, but is smart enough not to build it on the basis of hostility to China.<sup>62</sup> From all available indications, it is quite clear that the India-Vietnam relationship is work in progress.<sup>63</sup> Neither nation is under any pressure from China to adopt such a posture. India also fully respects Vietnam’s extremely sensitive relationship with China.

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<sup>56</sup> See Joint Declaration between the Republic of India and the Republic of Indonesia”, New Delhi, 23 November 2005; available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/> see also Vivek Raghuvanshi, “Defense Ties Warm Between New Delhi and Jakarta”, *Defense News*, 25 June 2007, available at <<http://www.defensenews.com/story..php?F=2846806&C=asiapac>> accessed on 31 July 2009.

<sup>57</sup> For a recent Indian assessment of the bilateral relationship, see Pankaj Jha, “India-Indonesia: Emerging Strategic Confluence in the Indian Ocean Region”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 3, May 2008, pp. 439-58.

<sup>58</sup> For the text of the declaration see, “Vietnam, India issue joint declaration on strategic partnership”, [http://english.vietnamnet.vn/service/printversion.vnn?article\\_id=954712](http://english.vietnamnet.vn/service/printversion.vnn?article_id=954712)> For an analysis, see, C. Raja Mohan, “The importance of being Vietnam”, *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), 10 July 2007.

<sup>59</sup> John W. Garver, “Chinese-Indian Rivalry in Indo-China”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 27, No. 11, November 1987, pp. 1205-19.

<sup>60</sup> Ian Storey and Carlyle Thayer, “Cam Ranh Bay: Past Imperfect, Future Conditional”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2001, pp. 452-73.

<sup>61</sup> David Brewster, “India’s Strategic Partnership with Vietnam: The Search for a Diamond on the South China Sea?”, *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2009, p. 41.

<sup>62</sup> C. Raja Mohan, “The Importance of Being Vietnam”, *The Indian Express*, 9 July 2007, p. 10.

<sup>63</sup> Pankaj k. Jha, “India-Vietnam Relations: Need for Enhanced Cooperation”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 6, November 2008, pp. 1085-99.

While India's defence relationships with all the regional actors are beginning to expand, it is New Delhi's security cooperation with the great powers that could be consequential to the balance of power in the Pacific. One of the more significant developments of our time has been the rapid and unprecedented expansion of India's military and security partnership with the United States during the eight years of the Bush Administration (2001-09). Although political controversy in India and the diplomatic attention around the world has been riveted to the civil nuclear initiative, it is the less-noticed but sustained progress on defence cooperation that promises to accelerate India's emergence as an influential factor in Pacific Asia. It might be recalled at the beginning of its second term, that the Bush Administration had explicitly declared one of its objectives was to "assist India become a major world power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century".<sup>64</sup> Although a sceptical India took its time examining the gift horse of the nuclear initiative (fearing it might be a Trojan horse), New Delhi opened up gradually to a stronger defence partnership with Washington. The 10-year framework of defence cooperation signed by India and the United States in June 2005 laid out an ambitious framework for engagement on bilateral, multilateral and global objectives.<sup>65</sup> This was the first agreement of its kind that defined political objectives for military cooperation that independent India ever signed. To be sure there was some resistance from the Indian left, key stakeholders in India, including its armed forces, recognised the value of India's military and defence industrial collaboration with the United States.<sup>66</sup>

Since 2005 the intensity and scope of Indo-US military exercises have rapidly expanded. During 2006-08, India bought two major United States weapons systems – the *USS Trenton* LPD ship to move troops and the C-130J military transport aircraft. While the size of the deals was small, there is no denying their importance. These were India's first ever acquisition of platforms of any kind from the United States. Interestingly, both of these had the potential to boost India's power projection capability. The successful implementation of these two deals would also create the basis for much larger Indian purchases of United States arms, for example the much talked about acquisition of 126 fighter aircraft. The Indian decision to sign an End-Use Monitoring Agreement with the United States during Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to New Delhi in July 2009 removed the last bureaucratic hurdle for expanded arms sales to India. It also underwrote the possibility that President Barack Obama might not choose to reverse the strategic bonhomie that his predecessor Bush had built up with India. In the wake of Obama's election, many in the Indian establishment had feared that the Democrats might privilege the relationship with China and Pakistan over that with India.<sup>67</sup> Clinton was determined to assuage Indian concerns and was pleased with New Delhi's readiness to deliver the End-Use Monitoring Agreement during her visit. This not only opens the door for American companies to the lucrative Indian arms bazaar, but also significantly improves New Delhi's negotiating leverage with its traditional suppliers in

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<sup>64</sup> "Background Briefing by Administration Officials on United States -South Asia relations", United States Department of State, 25 March 2005, available at <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ps/2005/43853.htm>>

<sup>65</sup> For the text of the agreement, see "New Framework for United States-India Defense Relationship", 28 June 2005, available at <[http://www.indianembassy.org/press\\_release/20 United States 05/June/31.htm](http://www.indianembassy.org/press_release/20%20United%20States%2005/June/31.htm)> accessed on 1 August 2009.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of the initial domestic resistance to Indo-US defence cooperation and government's management of it, see, C. Raja Mohan, *Impossible Allies: Nuclear India, United States, and the Global Order* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2006), pp. 99-130.

<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of these concerns, see C. Raja Mohan, "President Barack Obama, United States and the Sino-Indian Balance", *ISAS Insights* (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies), No. 26, 29 January 2009, available at <<http://www.isasnus.org/events/insights/47.pdf>> accessed on 1 August 2009.

Russia, France and Iran.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, the Indian private sector is eagerly looking forward to partnering United States firms in developing supply chains for the latter's military equipment in India. Put simply, access to the United States defence market has the potential to accelerate the transformation of Indian armed forces and defence industry. That in turn has long-term implications for the Pacific balance of power. That the United States was prepared to open its military stores to India while continuing to deny arms sales to China and preventing its European allies from doing so does not go unnoticed in Beijing.

China's concerns about expanding Indo-US defence cooperation acquired an extra edge as it saw Tokyo join Washington in the security outreach to New Delhi. Japan has been the last among the great powers of the world to sense India's rising power potential. However, during the final years of the premiership of Junichiro Koizumi and the brief tenure of Shinzo Abe, Japan has moved rapidly to define a new approach to India.<sup>69</sup> Unlike much of East Asia, India carries no baggage about Japan's history or a grudge against its nationalism. The implementation of the Indo-US nuclear agreement and likely change in Japan's policy on sensitive exports to India could open the doors for a very rewarding high technology partnership between Tokyo and New Delhi. India and Japan have also agreed to expand their current defence cooperation which is focused on securing the sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean, immensely vital for Japanese access to energy and raw materials.<sup>70</sup>

Traditionally, India was not part of Japan's conception of Asia. In expanding its geographic definition of Asia to beyond Myanmar in the west, and drawing India into a strategic partnership, Japan believes it has a better chance of coping with the unfolding redistribution of power in Asia and establish a stable balance of power in the region. India, in turn, sees huge strategic complementarities with Japan. To be sure, India's improved relations with the United States have made it easier for Tokyo to embark on a new relationship with New Delhi. Equally important is the fact that growing uncertainty in the Sino-Japanese relationship has had the same effect on Tokyo.<sup>71</sup> Sensing the new dynamic in Japan, India was quite happy to endorse Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's proposal for greater political coordination between Asia's four leading democracies.<sup>72</sup> India was, however, quite conscious of potential Japanese backsliding, given the internal divisions in Japan and depth of the Sino-Japanese relationship. India had no desire to present its emerging partnership with Japan as directed against China, but was signaling the prospect of a deeper relationship with Tokyo and political will to move at whatever speed the Japanese could muster. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Tokyo in December 2006 saw the unveiling of the commitment to build a strategic partnership. He followed up on it in October 2008 by signing a joint declaration on security cooperation.<sup>73</sup> Although the agreement merely listed the potential areas for security cooperation and identifies the mechanisms for their implementation, it has

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<sup>68</sup> James Lamont, "United States agrees weapons sales to India", *Financial Times*, 20 July 2009, available at <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/663e6e04-7507-11de-9ed5-00144feabdc0.html>> accessed on 1 August 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Chietigj Bajpae, "Strategic Interests Pull Japan and India Together", *Power and Interest News Report*, 16 February 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.31, No.1, January 2007.

<sup>71</sup> See, Teresita Schaffer and Vibhuti Hate, "India, China and Japan", *South Asia Monitor*, 3 January 2007; available at <[http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/january2007\\_india-china-japan.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/january2007_india-china-japan.pdf)>

<sup>72</sup> See C. Raja Mohan, "Japan and India: The Making of a New Alliance?", *RSIS Commentaries*, 28 August 2007; see also C. Raja Mohan, "Asia's New 'Democratic Quad'", *ISN Security Watch*, 19 March 2007, available at <<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=17383>>

<sup>73</sup> "Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between India and Japan", Tokyo, 22 October 2008, available at <<http://pib.nic.in/release/release.asp?relid=44047>> accessed on 1 August 2009.

been considered a big step for Japan to take. It has signed only one similar declaration, with Australia. What is important to note, however, is the fact that Tokyo and New Delhi are steadily inching towards the construction of a security relationship, bringing their armed forces closer to each other and cautiously undertaking joint military missions such as securing the sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific.<sup>74</sup> This expanded cooperation takes place in a context where there are few conflicts of interest between New Delhi and Tokyo. Even as they proceed slowly, both sides know that every incremental advance in their security partnership will run into stronger Chinese suspicion. That in turn takes us to the larger issues of the balance of power in Pacific Asia amidst the rise of China and India.

### **India and the Pacific Balance**

That the steady growth of the Indian economy and its expanding military resources are beginning to affect the distribution of power in Pacific Asia is no longer in doubt. What is in contention is the pace of India's rise and the impact it might have on the security politics of East Asia and Western Pacific. The importance drawing India into the balance of power arrangements in a multipolar Asia was underlined in the middle of this decade by Singapore's then Prime Minister Goh:

As they grow and take on new roles, it is inevitable that China, India and Japan will all loom larger on each other's radar screens. And since East Asian integration will be loosely multipolar, the jostling between New Delhi, Beijing and Tokyo that will certainly ensue must be squarely confronted and cannot be wished away...However, competition need not lead to conflict if it can be managed within an agreed framework. This, for example, was the original and remains the essential *raison d'être* of ASEAN.<sup>75</sup>

Prime Minister Goh, of course, was not merely seeing the regional balance in terms of China, Japan and India. For him, the question of the future United States role was even more important. He argued:

The United States will remain a key, indeed the dominant, player well into the 21st Century. American power will provide the overarching strategic unity within which the interactions of Chinese, Indian and Japanese interests with American interests will be an increasingly important factor...An East Asian architecture that does not have the United States as one of its pillars would be an unstable structure.<sup>76</sup>

As the region copes with the new complexities of Asian security, the focus here is on how India will relate to other great powers in Asia and how its potential rivalries and partnerships might play out in the Pacific. As we assess this complexity and India's role in it, we must be careful and precise in assessing the nature of the new dynamic between Beijing and New

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<sup>74</sup> For a discussion of some of the possibilities, see Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 1, January 2007, pp. 139-53; see also, G. V. C. Naidu, "Ballistic Missile Defence: Perspectives on India-Japan Cooperation", *Ibid.*, pp. 155-77;

<sup>75</sup> "Constructing East Asia", Speech by Goh Chok Tong, Asia Society, 15<sup>th</sup> Asian Corporate Conference, Bangkok, 9 June 2005; available at <<http://www.asiasociety.org/conference05/goh.html>> accessed on 1 August 2009.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*



Delhi. That hedging against the rise of China was one of the important considerations for the United States outreach to India during the Bush years has been obvious. Robert Blackwill, who was George Bush's first envoy to India during 2001-03 and had an important role in shaping the new partnership, explained how Bush saw China and India:

President George W. Bush based his transformation of United States-India relations on the core strategic principle of democratic India as a key factor in balancing the rise of Chinese power. To be clear, this was not based on the concept of containing China. As you know, there is no better way to clear a room of Indian strategists than to advocate containing China. Rather, it centered on the idea that the United States and India in the decades ahead both had enormous equities in promoting responsible international policies on the part of China and that deep United States-India bilateral cooperation in that respect was in the vital national interests of both countries. It was with this strategic paradigm in mind that the Bush Administration treated India with at least as much importance as China.<sup>77</sup>

If Blackwill's clarification helps us better understand the United States approach to India, there is a continued misreading of what New Delhi is trying to do with Beijing. Many analysts in Asia and the West suggest that India's recent forays in the Pacific have been driven by a strong strategic attempt at a 'counter-containment' of China.<sup>78</sup> Such an argument completely misrepresents the strategic nuance that envelops its engagement with China. To be sure, the rise of China's power and its expanding influence in India's own immediate neighbourhood, as well as Asia and beyond, draws sustained attention in New Delhi, both governmental and non-governmental. It will be a big mistake, however, to conflate the public argumentation on China in the media and sections of the strategic community with the actual state policy that remains carefully calibrated.

Unlike in the previous decades, India and China now have an expansive relationship. Despite much accumulated baggage, they have carefully steered the bilateral relationship around many crises and challenges. While new elements of competition are indeed visible, and some of them have become more manifest at the end of this decade, it is entirely premature to suggest they have acquired an antagonistic dimension. The official establishments in New Delhi and Beijing reject the thesis of rivalry in East Asia and beyond. For its part, for all its desire for strategic parity with Beijing, New Delhi is acutely conscious of its many limitations in East Asia and the Pacific. The Indian objective is to expand India's strategic weight in the region and not to set up a rivalry with China. Indian leaders at the highest levels and quite consistently have argued that Asia is large enough to let both China and India meet their aspirations. Beneath that rhetoric is the realism that any attempt to construct its security ties with Southeast Asia in the matrix of an ineluctable rivalry with China will be counter-productive. While China acknowledges India's increased activism in Southeast Asia, Beijing's own influence in the region has risen more rapidly. As a Chinese scholar notes, "India has a long way to go in competing with China in Southeast Asia where economic and political relations are hugely tilted in Beijing's favour". Without ruling out future geopolitical competition, he suggests that "with greater transparency and a clearer identification of shared

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<sup>77</sup> "Transcript: Senior Ex-Diplomat on India-United States Relations", *Financial Times Online*, 6 May 2009, available at <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1ec735fe-3a12-11de-8a2d-00144feabdc0.html>> accessed on 1 August 2009.

<sup>78</sup> See for example, Iskander Rehman, "Keeping the Dragon at Bay: India's Counter-Containment of China in Asia", *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2009, pp. 114-143.

interests in Southeast Asia, there is scope for even better relations and constructive engagement among China, India and ASEAN”.<sup>79</sup>

On the much speculation on New Delhi’s possible alignment with Washington, even the extreme opinion in Beijing does not seem to argue that India wants to join the American and Japanese containment ring against China. An editorial in China’s *Global Times* in June 2009 amidst the reports of India’s deployment of additional troops on the long Sino-Indian border was angry and condescending but quite nuanced in its assessment of India’s relationship with America and Japan and its implications for Sino-Indian ties:

India has long held contradictory views on China. Another big Asian country, India is frustrated that China’s rise has captured much of the world’s attention. Proud of its ‘advanced political system’, India feels superior to China. However, it faces a disappointing domestic situation which is unstable compared with China’s. India likes to brag about its sustainable development, but worries that it is being left behind by China. China is seen in India as both a potential threat and a competitor to surpass. But India can’t actually compete with China in a number of areas, like international influence, overall national power and economic scale. India has apparently not realised this. Indian politicians these days seem to think their country would be doing China a huge favour simply by not joining the ‘ring around China’ established by the United States and Japan. India’s growing power would have a significant impact on the balance in this equation, which has led India to think that fear and gratitude for its restraint will cause China to defer to it on territorial disputes. But this is wishful thinking, as China won’t make any compromises in its border dispute with India. And while China wishes to coexist peacefully with India, this desire isn’t born out of fear.<sup>80</sup>

Whether it reflects official opinion or not, the editorial underlines the full range of complexities in the Sino-Indian relationship that cannot be reduced to a simple containment and counter-containment. To be sure, China has kept a close eye on the rapid movement in Indo-US relations in the Bush years. Sensing the real, if unstated, Chinese concerns about India’s relationship with the United States, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh went out of the way to reassure his Chinese hosts in January 2008 that there is no question of India abandoning its independent foreign policy. In an address to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, Singh declared that “the primary task of our foreign policy is to create an external environment that is conducive for our rapid development. Our policy seeks to widen our development choices and give us strategic autonomy in the world. The independence of our foreign policy enables us to pursue mutually beneficial cooperation with all major countries of the world”.<sup>81</sup>

As the world speculates about the prospect of India joining the United States against China, the reality is that Sino-US relations remain broader and deeper than those between New Delhi and Washington. Nor has Washington made up its mind to go beyond a hedging strategy

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<sup>79</sup> Zhao Hong, “India and China: Rivals or Partners in Southeast Asia?”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 29, no.1, 2007, p. 139.

<sup>80</sup> “India’s unwise military moves”, editorial in *Global Times*, 11 June 2009, available at <<http://opinion.globaltimes.cn/editor-picks/2009-06/436167.html>> accessed on 15 June 2009.

<sup>81</sup> “India and China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, PM Manmohan Singh’s address to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 15 January 2008; available at <<http://www.mea.gov.in/>>

towards China. In that sense, there is no American invitation to a containment party to which India is obliged to respond. Meanwhile, since the advent of the Obama Administration and the talk in Washington of forming a 'Group of Two' to manage the world's problems, many in New Delhi are deeply concerned about the dangers of potential Sino-American condominium. The Indian Prime Minister's Special Envoy and an old China hand, Shyam Saran pointed in February 2009 to "an apparent willingness on the part of the United States to accommodate China's regional and global interests as a price to be paid for China refraining from tipping the United States into a full blown economic and financial crisis through its own policy interventions and, hopefully, supporting United States economic recovery. China is being invited to participate in the fashioning of new global governance structures and have a major voice in the management, if not resolution, of major regional conflicts". While adding that Beijing had not yet shown its hand, Saran speculated on the possible options for India in the new international context:

It should be our objective to encourage the trend towards a more diffused and diversified international order. This fits in well with our own instinctive preference for a multipolar world, which includes a multipolar Asia. We will need to work with other powers who share this objective. Our effort should be to build coalitions on different issues of shared concern and not primarily rely on a more limited range of strategic relationships.<sup>82</sup>

Saran's simultaneous emphasis on a 'multipolar world' and a 'multipolar Asia' is indeed the essence of India's policy towards the great powers. India will not play second fiddle to either of the United States or China, but will seek to improve its own relative position in the Asian order and the international system.

As we assess the complex triangular dynamic between the United States, China and India, three propositions must be kept in mind. First, India's main objective is to emerge as an indispensable element in Asian balance of power. Second, India's emphasis will be on the simultaneous expansion of political and economic relations with all the great powers and avoid choosing sides between them. India is quite pleased that it is under no compulsion at the moment from either Washington or Beijing to choose either one of them. Thirdly, it is reasonable to expect that there will be greater military and strategic content to Indo-US relationship than the Sino-Indian ties. For example the United States decision to help modernise India's armed forces while maintaining an arms embargo against Beijing clearly works in India's favour. This does not necessarily mean India has to become a junior partner for the United States in Asia. The United States is aware that a stronger India, even outside the United States alliance system, will inevitably contribute to regional stability. India's principal objective, in turn, was to ensure an enduring balance of power in Asia.<sup>83</sup>

India's new ability to engage all the great powers has reinforced its potential role in East Asian security. Unlike in the past, when India's difficulties with the United States and China inevitably diminished its role in the region, deepening ties with both Washington and Beijing made New Delhi a much more acceptable partner for Southeast Asia. While there are prospects for future tensions between India and China in East Asia amidst the growing

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<sup>82</sup> Shyam Saran, "Geopolitical Consequences of Current Financial and Economic Crisis: Implications for India", Speech at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, 28 February 2009, available at <<http://www.mea.gov.in/speech/2009/02/28ss02.htm>> accessed on 3 August 2009.

<sup>83</sup> See the address by Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Fifth IISS-Asia Security Summit, 3 June 2006; available at <<http://www.iiss.org/programmes/south-asia/ministerial-addresses/pranab-mukherjee/>>

convergence of Indian and American interests in the region, the two trend lines are not about to crash into each other in the foreseeable future. India's determination to retain its independent strategic identity might also help to limit the potential costs of the country being identified too closely with the United States in Southeast Asia. New Delhi's broad support to Washington at the United Nations on initiatives to promote democracy and its readiness to join a Japanese-sponsored forum of four democracies in Asia – the United States, Japan, India and Australia – might have raised some concerns in Asia on whether India would follow the United States in trying to promote political values in Asia. India, however, has its own views on being a democracy and exporting it to others.<sup>84</sup> India was utterly reluctant to extend it to Burma during the political crisis there at the end of 2007, despite considerable pressures from the West to isolate Rangoon.<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, on the question of international intervention in Burma to promote democracy, India found itself on the same side as China.

From the early 1990s, when India launched its 'Look East' policy, its relationship with East Asia has come a long way. While it continues to see ASEAN as the core of East Asia, India's interests have broadened to include the Western Pacific as a whole. Although India's economic ties with East Asia have yet to acquire the depth of China's, the expectations of India's superior economic performance and the prospect that it will emerge as one of the world's four largest economies has created a sound basis for India's relations with Pacific Asia. With faster economic growth, it is inevitable that India's military and strategic capabilities will become consequential. By embarking on a purposeful 'big power' diplomacy with the United States, China and Japan, building security partnerships with key regional actors and pursuing a vigorous maritime diplomacy, India has positioned itself to influence the structure of the balance of power in the Asia Pacific theatre. As they recognised the rise of India as a reality, the ASEAN nations had little difficulty in inducting India into the EAS. The important question is not whether India will ever match the power potential of China, nor is it a question of East Asia seeing India as a "counterweight" to China. So long as Indian economic growth continues at a fast pace and New Delhi modernises its military capabilities and builds a blue-water navy, it will remain a valuable partner for maritime Asia. A rising India generates options that did not exist before for the littoral states of the Western Pacific. As the United States Defence Secretary Robert Gates told the Shangri-La dialogue in May 2009, Washington is looking to India "as a net security provider" in the Indian Ocean and beyond.<sup>86</sup> That India is aware of its new responsibilities was underlined by the Chief of Indian Naval Staff at the same conference. He emphasised India's commitment to contribute to the collective maritime goods in the region and assist the smaller states in building their capabilities. "We see the Indian navy as a significant stabilising force in the Indian Ocean region, which safeguards traffic bound not only for our own ports, but also the flow of hydrocarbons and strategically important cargo to and from the rest of the world across the strategic waterways close to our shores...as India grows in economic and military stature, it would have to take upon itself the role of further equipping its neighbours in ways that would

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<sup>84</sup> C. Raja Mohan, "Balancing Interests and Values: India's Struggle with Democracy Promotion", *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Summer 2007, pp. 99-116.

<sup>85</sup> Jo Johnson and Amy Kazmin, "India pressed to take lead on democracy", *Financial Times* (London), 30 September 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Robert M. Gates, "America's Security Role in the Asia-Pacific", speech at the Shangri La Dialogue: The 8<sup>th</sup> IISS Asia Security Summit, 30 May 2009, available at <<http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2009/plenary-session-speeches-2009/first-plenary-session/dr-robert-gates/>> accessed on 2 August 2009.

not only enhance their own security but contribute positively to regional stability as well”.<sup>87</sup> So long as this transformation of India continues to unfold, New Delhi’s influence in the Pacific theatre can only expand. Rising India’s willingness to abandon its past unrealistic ambition about leading Asia, its deliberate choice to adopt a low-key role, its emphasis on pragmatic cooperation rather than ideological posturing and its cooperative maritime strategy make it a valuable security partner for many nations in Pacific Asia.

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<sup>87</sup> Admiral Sureesh Mehta, “The Major Powers and Asian Security: Cooperation or Conflict”, *Ibid*, available at <<http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2009/plenarysessionspeeches-2009/second-plenary-session/admiral-sureesh-mehta/>> accessed on 2 August 2009.