

India's 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy: Emerging Sino-Indian Maritime Competition

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Abstract

India is rapidly modernising its naval capabilities and expanding its maritime interests in Asia-Pacific region. The recent surge in its maritime domain is associated with two factors: Firstly, the rise of China as an 'Asian power' with growing influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR); secondly, India's aspirations to become a leading player in the IOR while expanding its sway in the Pacific ocean. This paper argues that India's increased regional engagements and its strategic partnership with the US will strengthen Indian footprints in the Indo-Pacific region which will increase security concerns for China. This paper explores the evolution of Indian strategic thinking over the years on 'sea power,' examines the emerging contours of India's 'Indo-Pacific' strategy as well as fulfilling its aspirations of becoming a global power, and discusses the implications of 'India's Extended Neighbourhood' policy for China's economic and strategic interests in East Asia and the South China Sea.

Keywords: China-India Rivalry, Indo-Pacific Strategy, India's Naval Modernisation, Major Power Competition, Extended Neighbourhood Policy, Act East, Look West.

Introduction

Over the past few years, India has embarked on massive military modernisation and expanded its naval engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. The rationale for the Indian maritime interests in Asia-Pacific is attributed to two major factors. Firstly, the rise of China as an 'Asian Power' and its increasing influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

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New Delhi has always considered the Indian Ocean as India's ocean and China as an extra regional power in the IOR. Secondly, the growing economic and strategic interests of India in Asia-Pacific region are contingent upon its naval modernisation.

India's maritime economic activities include "energy security, seaborne trade, shipping and fishing with substantial Indian investment and diaspora."¹ It aims to generate US\$250 billion by 2024 from the maritime sector.² These interests make Indo-Pacific very important in India's strategic thinking. India interprets 'sea' in a rather different manner. In Sanskrit, the sea is described as "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" (the world is but one family, implying that world is connected with the seas in terms of resources, trade and maritime security.)³ This reflects the geographical importance of sea for India's security and socio-economic development.

For India as a peninsular country with 7,500 km long coastline and 1180 islands — the IOR is a strategically 'primary area' of interest which spans from "Southern Cape of Africa in the West, continue to the eastern African seaboard to the Strait of Malacca and Singapore and the southern Indonesian archipelagic sea lanes."⁴ The Indian Ocean is also important for global trade and commerce. It is evident from the fact that "out of the total trade conducted over the Indian Ocean, only 20 per cent of it is counted between the littoral countries of the region, whilst 80 per cent of extra-regional maritime traffic with some 120,000 ships traversing the Indian Ocean every year."⁵

As Alfred T. Mahan predicted, "when for any reason sea trade is found to pay, a large enough shipping interest will reappear to compel the revival

¹ Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015*, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf

² "India Aiming at US\$250 Billion Maritime Economy by 2024, Says Defence Secretary," *Times of India*, January 12, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-aiming-at-250-billion-maritime-economy-by-2024-defence-secretary/articleshow/73213311.cms>

³ Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015*, 148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵ Katarzyna Kaszubska, "Indian Ocean," *Observer Research Foundation ORF*, January 6, 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indian-ocean/>

of the war fleet.”⁶ India seems to following Mahan’s vision of building naval power to increase its national prosperity and dominance in the region. It has increased its naval modernisation efforts and reoriented its naval strategy keeping in view the changing regional dynamics. Its expanded naval engagement in the region not only aims at protecting the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) but also at increasing its presence as a regional power and a ‘net security provider’ in the region.⁷ For India, the dominance of the IOR is a part of its ‘manifest destiny.’⁸ The presence of extra-regional power in the IOR is inimical to the Indian interest and the expansion of Indian sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean with an outreach to Asia-Pacific is necessary for its emergence as a global power.

The significance of India in the Asia-Pacific region has been increased further with the Washington’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ which aims at the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific.’ The strategy considers India as America’s strategic partner in the region.⁹ This has also reinforced the Indian strategic thinking about becoming a leading power in the IOR and the Asia-Pacific. India is rigorously building and modernising its naval capabilities to become a strong naval power in the region and extend its outreaches a ‘Blue Water’ Navy. India’s partnership with the US and its role as a ‘net security provider’ has further justified its regional ambitions. This will consequently increase the major power competition in the IOR.

Written in this context, this article is divided into three parts. The first part traces the evolution of ‘sea power’ in India’s strategic thinking and highlights the role of its navy in defence of the country. The second part identifies the emerging contours of ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy and how it contributes in India’s aspiration of becoming a leading global power. This paper also discusses the ‘Extended Neighbourhood Policy’ in detail so as to

⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 15.

⁷ A net security provider is a term which is used to define a state which can address the security concerns of itself and other states in its surroundings. Also see, Anit Mukherjee, “India as a Net Security Provider: Concept and Impediments,” Policy Brief, *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)*, Nanyang Technological University, August 2014.

⁸ David Brewster, *India’s Ocean: The Story of India’s Bid for Regional Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 12.

⁹ US Department of Defence, “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region, June 1, 2019.”

understand the Indian engagement in the IOR. The last part analyses the implication of India's emerging 'Indo-Pacific strategy' for China and how it might challenge the economic and strategic interests of China in the Asia-Pacific region.

Evolution of Indian Naval Strategic Thought

At the time of independence, the Indian strategic community was fully conscious of the country's maritime position and its importance for security. The leading strategic thinkers K.M Panikkar, K. Vaidya and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, all shared the 'Pan-Oceanic Vision' for India in which naval power would play the most important role of 'power projection' and diplomacy.¹⁰ Panikkar considered the Indian Ocean as 'truly Indian' and argued that the Indian "freedom is dependent on the freedom of the coastal surface."¹¹ Similarly, Vaidya considered the Indian Ocean as 'Indian Lake' and advocated for a strong Indian Navy which would be capable of defending "not only her coast but her distant oceanic frontiers with her own Navy."¹² After independence, Nehru proposed a strong Navy for the defence of newly independent India,¹³ which was reflected in India's first Chief-of-Naval Staff's ten-year expansion plan to bring India's naval power at par with the Southeast Asian nations.

However, soon after independence, India got engaged in several wars with its neighbours — Pakistan in 1948, China in 1962 and with Pakistan again in 1965. As the conflicts revolved around the disputed land boundaries, the land dominated the sea in the strategic thinking of post-independence India. The absence of immediate threat from sea and presence of British and American forces in the eastern and western flanks of IOR for ensuring security of sea lanes allowed the Indian strategic thinkers to focus on building army and air force, leaving the Navy at the status of 'Cinderella

¹⁰ Iskander Rehman, "India's Aspirational Naval Doctrine," in *The Rise of the Indian Navy: Internal Vulnerabilities, External Challenges*, ed. Harsh V. Pant (London: Routledge, 2016), 55.

¹¹ Kavalam M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1945), 45.

¹² Keshav Vaidya, *The Naval Defence of India* (Bombay: Thacker, 1949), 9 quoted in Anita Mukerjee and C. Raja Mohan, ed., *India's Naval Strategy and Asian Security* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 327.

¹³ Harsh V. Pant, "India in the Indian Ocean: Growing Mismatch between Ambitions and Capabilities," *Pacific Affairs* (Summer 2009), 82.

Services.¹⁴ However, in the late 60s and early 70s, international and regional developments compelled India to reorient its policy towards sea. The point of realisation is often attributed to the India-Pakistan war of 1965 when Indonesia offered help to Pakistan¹⁵ and 1971 debacle of East Pakistan when the US seventh fleet, led by USS Enterprise entered Bay of Bengal in support of its Cold War ally,¹⁶ Pakistan. These two events brought back the relevance of Navy in the Indian strategic thinking. Thereafter, naval strategic thinking re-emerged in India's security discourse with special focus on articulating naval doctrine and building naval inventory.¹⁷

With the end of the Cold War in 1990s, the external threat of superpowers confrontation in the IOR subsided. Internally, India's economic reforms and opening to the world for trade and transportation increased the relevance of the India Ocean manifold. Thus, the Indian Navy emerged as a key to safeguard India's maritime interests by ensuring safety and protection of SLOCs. This has been reflected in the policy documents, doctrine and strategies since 1990s such as "India's Navy Vision 2020 (1997), Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004, 2009, 2015), Maritime Capability Perspective Plan (2005 and 2011), Indian Navy Vision Document (2006 and 2014), Indian Maritime Military Strategy (1988, 2007, 2015) Strategic Guidance for Transformation (2006, 2015), Indian Navy Space Vision (2014), Maritime Infrastructure Perspective Plan (2015) and the Indian Naval Indigenization Plan (2015)."¹⁸

These documents offer a comprehensive overview of the Indian strategic outlook, its role and parameters within larger regional and international environment. Another interesting point to note, in these policy documents is the transformation of the Indian Navy from merely defending the territorial waters as a 'Green-water Navy' operating in the IOR to

¹⁴ Rehman, "India's Aspirational Naval Doctrine," 55.

¹⁵ Gulab Hiranandani, "The Indian End of the Telescope: India and Its Navy," *Naval War College Review* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 3, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol55/iss2/5>

¹⁶ G. M. Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph: History of the Indian Navy, 1965-1975* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2000), 18.

¹⁷ Thus, the share of Navy in defence expenditure was increased to 12 percent. For details, David Brewster, *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 34.

¹⁸ For further information please visit official website of the Indian Navy.

ambitious 'Blue-water Navy' possessing power projection capabilities in Asia-Pacific.

Emerging Contours of India's 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy

The contemporary Indian naval strategic thinking, promulgated in the Indian maritime security strategy and naval doctrine elaborates Indian maritime interests, aspirations and strategies. In these documents, the prominent point is the area of Indian interests which has been expanded from the Indian Ocean to East Asia, Far East and Oceania encompassing almost all Asia-Pacific region. Secondly, India's Asia-Pacific strategy widely draws support from 'America's Indo-Pacific' strategy and defines its role and missions under the US' assigned responsibility of the 'net security provider' in IOR.

In the US 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy report, India is regarded as a 'Major Defence Partner,' "based on the convergence of strategic interests" since "the United States (US) and India share a common outlook on the Indo-Pacific."¹⁹ The US President Donald Trump has frequently praised Modi on his policies called him a 'true friend,' 'partner,' 'great leader' and even as "the father of India."²⁰ Moreover, the Indo-US bilateral defence trade and technology cooperation has reached to approximately US\$16 billion in defence trade since 2008.²¹ "The United States Pacific Command has also been renamed as 'Indo-Pacific Command' in order to include India in its Pacific command."²² In a reciprocal gesture, India has also set up a new 'Indo-Pacific' division and placed Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) countries in the Indo-Pacific desk.

New Delhi's 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' is reflected by its rapid naval modernisation and the policy of 'extended neighbourhood.' The concept of

¹⁹ US Department of Defence, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region, June 1, 2019," 33.

²⁰ White House, "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Modi of India Before Bilateral Meeting: New York, NY," September 24, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-modi-india-bilateral-meeting-new-york-ny/>

²¹ US DoD, "Indo-Pacific," 34.

²² Vinay Kaura, "Securing India's Economic and Security Interests in the Indo-Pacific," *Indian Journal of Asia Affairs* 31 (June-December, 2018): 38.

'Indo-Pacific' has endorsed the vision of Indian Navy about IOR as its 'primary' sphere of influence and East Asia and South China sea as 'secondary' area of interests, significant to protect its 'Blue Water' Navy. To extend its outreach as a 'net security provider,' India is rigorously procuring and modernising its naval capabilities. The Indian Maritime Military Strategy 2015 and Indian Naval Doctrine 2015 clearly indicates India's naval ambitions in Asia-Pacific and articulates a framework for the Navy to surface as a well-equipped, modern and potent naval force in Asia-Pacific with the power projection capabilities in the extended regions. The emerging contours of India's 'Indo-Pacific' strategy can be analysed through recent naval development and Modi's policy of 'Extended Neighbourhood.'

Naval Development under Modi Government

a) *Command of the Sea*

The Indian maritime doctrine and strategy reoriented its approach towards 'Command of the Sea.' Traditionally, it implies achieving the command through 'Sea Control' and 'Sea Denial.' In the Indian maritime strategy, 'Sea Control' is regarded as a central element and a pre-requisite for securing maritime interests. These are defined as a means of "power projection, SLOC protection and interdiction as well as amphibious operations."²³ For power projection in Asia-Pacific, India has increased its capability and developed a potent sea force based on "Carrier Task Force (CTF), consisting of Carrier Battle Group (CBGs) with integral Anti-Air Warfare (AAW), Anti-surface Warfare (ASuW) and Anti-Submarine warfare (ASW) capability, Surface Action Groups (SAG) and Underway Replenishment Groups (URG)," supported by land-based aircrafts deployed to secure the maritime domain of India.²⁴ India's first Indian aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya* (R33) is a Russian origin CBG which moves around 500 nautical miles (900 km) and can carry out multi-dimensional operations such as presence, surveillance, deterrence, coercion, intimidation or war-fighting.

²³ Indian Navy, *Indian Naval Doctrine, Naval Strategic Publication 1.1, 2009* (Updated Online version 2015), 77.

²⁴ Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas*, 72.

As documented, “India’s security strategies rely on both deterrence by denial and punishment.”²⁵ Sea denial as an offensive measure has also been included in the maritime doctrine which deals with the threats from the sea. The Indian Navy can launch “an offensive measure, to reduce the adversary’s freedom of action and to degrade his operations.”²⁶ It can exercise force projection through attack submarines, maritime strike forces and mines. To this end, India is procuring as well as indigenously building submarines to upgrade its submarine fleet.

Sea denial is dependent upon a number of elements including Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) that is “accurate targeting information, rapid projection of force and high mobility to reposition assets in the designed area.”²⁷ In the Indian Ocean, the existing land-based sensors supplemented with airborne and underwater sensors fully cater to the naval needs of India. However, with the extension of interests in Asia-Pacific, the region defined in Indian maritime doctrine as “South and East China Sea, Western Pacific Ocean and the littoral region,”²⁸ the range of MDA has also been increased. For this, India has also signed agreements of defence cooperation with Japan and the US on ‘white shipping’ data.²⁹ Through this agreement, the Indian navy will be able to get information about the identity and movement of commercial and non-military vessels in the region. Moreover, India has also signed military logistic support agreements with the US, France, Singapore and Japan and one with Russia is expected to be signed soon. These logistic support agreements are facilitating Indian Navy to carry out their missions in the far seas by taking fuel from naval fleet tankers of the partner countries deployed in the area or on their ports. It has enhanced the ability of Indian Navy to maintain presence in Asia-Pacific and further strengthen India’s ‘command of the sea’ in Asia-Pacific Region.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.,73.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ India Navy, *Indian Naval Doctrine*, 68.

²⁹ White House, Fact Sheet, “United States and India: Prosperity Through Partnership,” June 26, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-india-prosperity-partnership/>

b) Sea-Based Nuclear Deterrence

The completion of nuclear triad by India has increased its sea-based deterrence. The nuclear capability at sea is very important for deterrence since it not only completes the triad (land, air and sea) but also indicates that, in case of war, a nuclear attack is possible from the sea. The element of surprise is present in the case of sea: the ships carrying nuclear warheads are all the time ready to launch.

Moreover, it is pertinent to mention that India has been following the nuclear policy of 'No First Use' (NFU) and 'massive retaliation.' India will not use its nuclear weapons first and, if attacked by nuclear weapons, the retaliatory nuclear strike by India would be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage and ensure the decisive victory. In the context of recent tension with Pakistan, Indian Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh has even indicated to revise the policy of NFU which will be a major shift in India's national security doctrine. He stated, "India has strictly adhered to this doctrine...what happens in future depends on the circumstances."³⁰

c) Naval Modernisation

India has been focusing extensively on the indigenisation of naval capabilities as part of its 'Make in India' plan. The unprecedented growth in Indian Navy's force structure and maritime capabilities is to exercise deterrence, power projecting, ensuring maritime security and protecting India's maritime interests. Under the US Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), India is procuring defence technology, building industry-to-industry ties and most importantly working on co-development and co-production with the US.

In the naval domain, one of the most notable indigenous developments is India's first indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC) which will be installed with the indigenous Combat Management System (CMS) for Threat Evaluation

³⁰ "India Hints at Changing 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy," *Pakistan Today*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2019/08/16/indian-defence-minister-hints-at-changing-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

and Resource Allocation (TERA)³¹ integrated in the carrier borne MiG 29 k' mission planning in the offensive/defensive role. "A naval CMS is a computer system that connects a ship's sensors, weapons, data links and support measures to the staff performing the combat tasks."³² The aircraft carrier named as INS Vikrant (IAC-1) will be expected to be fully operational in 2022.³³ India has also planned to build its third aircraft carrier and second indigenous aircraft named as INS *Vishal* (IAC-2).³⁴

India is also indigenously developing Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) naval variant (N) TEJAS Mk-2, with twin-engine which will be expected to be "a carrier-borne fighter powered by two General Electric F414 engines."³⁵ On January 11, 2020, the Indian Navy conducted successful 'arrested landing' of LCA (N) Mk-1 from its aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya*. The take-off and landing has been regarded as a major milestone in the indigenous development of naval aircrafts. It is a step closer to its ambitions of becoming a major naval power in the world with the capability to design fighter aircraft which can operate from an aircraft carrier.

Another milestone for the Indian Navy which was achieved in 2016 is commissioning of nuclear submarine, INS *Arihant*. It is first indigenous nuclear-powered ballistic missile-carrying submarine (SSBN) which completed its first deterrent patrol armed with nuclear missile in November 2018. Modi described it as "a fitting response to those who indulge in

³¹ TERA is a tactical module. The module tells what type of weapon to be used to bring down the fighter or a missile in a war situation, Quora, "What is Radar Object Classification and What is its Future Scope?," <https://www.quora.com/What-is-radar-object-classification-and-what-is-its-future-scope>

³² "Indian Navy Gets Combat Management System for INS Vikrant," *Economic Times*, March 29, 2019, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68635755.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

³³ Kalyan Ray, "Navy's 2nd Operational Aircraft Ready by 2022," *Deccan Herald*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/navys-2nd-operational-aircraft-carrier-ready-by-2022-782195.html>

³⁴ Rajat Pandit, "Navy Builds Case for 3rd Aircraft Carrier," *Times of India*, October 1, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/navy-builds-case-for-3rd-aircraft-carrier/articleshow/71383514.cms>

³⁵ Rahul Bedi, "Indian Navy's Light Combat Aircraft Prototype Makes First Carrier Landing," *Janes*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.janes.com/article/93655/indian-navy-s-light-combat-aircraft-prototype-makes-first-carrier-landing>

nuclear blackmail.”³⁶ The second SSBN, *Arighat*, is expected to be commissioned from 2020 to 2022. This will be more lethal as it may carry “24K-15 *Sagarika* missiles, with a range of 750 km, or eight K-4 missiles with a range of 3,500 km.”³⁷ The SSBN has stealth characteristics which enable discrete and prolonged deployment and combat capabilities including weapon outfit. Also, it is more dangerous as it carries assembled nuclear weapon all the times ready to launch.³⁸

India is also indigenously building six conventional diesel-electric submarines under the project 75 (I). These submarines would have more firepower, lethal than scorpion class from Malacca Strait to IOR. The two submarines INS *Kalvari* and INS *Kandhari* have already been commissioned in the Indian Navy and INS *Karanj* and INS *Vela* is under trials and tests.³⁹ India has also renewed its vintage frigates project 17 (P17) with the project 17A, programme of acquiring seven stealth frigates, of which INS *Nilgiri* is the first one that was launched in September 2019.⁴⁰ It will also enhance ‘sea denial’ capabilities of the Indian Navy to deter an aggression and perform better in naval combat.

³⁶ “Ballistic Missile Submarine Fitting Response to Nuclear Blackmailing: Modi,” *Pakistan Today*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/11/05/ballistic-missile-submarine-fitting-response-to-nuclear-blackmailing-modi/>

³⁷ Rakesh Krishnan Smiha, “Why INS Arihant Gives India An Edge Against its Neighbours,” *Business Today*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.businesstoday.in/top-story/why-ins-arihant-gives-india-an-edge-against-its-neighbours/story/292710.html>

³⁸ Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, “India’s Development of Sea-based Nuclear Capabilities: Implications for Pakistan,” *Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2018): 43, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/3-SS_Ghazala_Yasmeen_Jalil_No-1_2018.pdf#page=10

³⁹ “Indian Navy’s Submarine ‘Vela’ of Project 75 Launched,” *Economic Times*, May 6, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indian-navys-submarine-vela-of-project-75-launched/articleshow/69197224.cms>

⁴⁰ “Hostile Neighbourhood Wants to Destabilise India: Rajnath at INS Nilgiri Launch,” *Economic Times*, September 28, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/hostile-neighbourhood-wants-to-destabilise-india-rajnath-at-ins-nilgiri-launch/articleshow/71346697.cms>

Modi's 'Extended Neighbourhood' Policy

In Asia-Pacific, India's interest has a clear 'strategic dimension.' The two strategic concepts — 'Extended Neighbourhood' and 'Indo-Pacific' brings with it the "sense of geographic regions outside South Asia in which India aspires to gain, maintain and defend its interest."⁴¹ The Indian External Affairs Minister asserted on the articulation of concept as the region which "stretches from the Suez Canal to the South China Sea and includes within it West Asia, the Gulf, Central Asia, South East Asia, East Asia, the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region."⁴² The 'Extended Neighbourhood' policy comprises of 'Act East' and 'Act West'/'Link West' policy.

a) *Act East Policy*

The core of India's 'Indo-Pacific' strategy is 'Act East' policy which was reinvented from the 'Look East policy' of 1990s. It aims at expanding India's economic and security engagements with the countries of East that is South East Asia, North East Asia across Pacific. "The policy was originally conceived as an economic initiative which has gained political, strategic, and cultural dimensions including establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation."⁴³ There are three main characteristics of Act East Policy: firstly, increased interaction with the smaller countries in East Asia (member of ASEAN); secondly, active economic engagement with the countries like Japan, China, and South Korea in terms of aid, investments, trade, technology and strategic industrial cooperation; thirdly, the strategic orientation of Act East policy. The policy "enforces the India's incorporation of multiple mini-lateral alignments to its East and further development of its military cooperation with the US and its allies in

⁴¹ David Scott, "India's 'Extended Neighborhood' Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power," *India Review*, vol. 8, no. 2 (April 2009): 107-143 quoted in David Scott, "India's Role in the South China Sea: Geopolitics and Geo-economics in Play," *India Review* 12 (May 2013): 51-69.

⁴² Yashwant Sinha, "12th SAARC Summit and Beyond," February 3, 2004, <http://meaindia.nic.in/speech>

⁴³ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, "Act East Policy," December 23, 2015, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=133837>

Southeast and Northeast Asia.”⁴⁴ It will help India strengthen its foothold as a major power in the region.

The key instrument in India's 'Act East' policy is the Indian Navy which provides diplomatic outreach to countries in East and South-East Asia particularly ASEAN members. The underlying objective of the policy is not economic but strategic as asserted by Manmohan Singh in 2012 ASEAN-India Summit. In order to strengthen economic and security cooperation, project *Mausam* was launched in 2014 and the project SAGAR – “Security and Growth for All in the Region” in 2015. The cooperation has expanded the areas of cooperation with the “ASEAN plus India” and “Asia Summit Framework”.

Another area of India's 'Indo-Pacific' strategy is the South China Sea. The Indian *Maritime Military Strategy* defines the South China Sea as a 'blue water' area of interest. From the economic perspective, nearly 55 per cent of Indian trade transits through the Strait of Malacca to the South China Sea.⁴⁵ Any interruption of the choke points in the Bay of Bengal or South China Sea is not favourable to the Indian interests. For open navigation, India regarded the sea as 'Global Commons' and is supportive of the United Nations (UN) rulings on the South China Sea.

In addition, economic resources of the South China Sea attract India. The sea is rich in oil and hydrocarbon resources and “according to the US Energy Information Administration holds approximately 11 billion barrels' oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.”⁴⁶ This provides an opportunity to India to diversify its energy imports and earn huge benefits through oil exploration. For instance, India's oil exploration company in Vietnam is exploring two offshore fields in the disputed waters of the sea. The Indian Navy is also conducting patrols along with Thailand and Indonesia and has acquired logistic and fuelling rights at the Changi naval base from Singapore. India has also signed an agreement with Russia on a sea route

⁴⁴ Wooyeal Paik and Rajiv Kumar, “India's Extended “Act East” Outreach to Northeast Asia: Its Economic and Security Interactions with China, Japan, and South Korea,” *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 17, no. 1 (April 2019): 4.

⁴⁵ Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, “South China Sea: India's Maritime Gateway to the Pacific,” *Strategic Analysis* 39, no. 4 (2015): 364.

⁴⁶ EIA, “South China Sea,” <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/regions-topics.php?RegionTopicID=SCS>

which will extend from Eastern Russia to Bay of Bengal in eastern India. It will pass through the disputed area of South China Sea.

India is also a member of “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) which is also known as the Quad formed for security cooperation in Asia-Pacific.” It includes the US, Australia, Japan and India. The Quad was formed in 2007 and revived in 2017 against the backdrop of China’s assertiveness in South China Sea and its growing influence in the region. The US with the Quad members has also initiated a new concept of ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) which aims “to improve connectivity between Asia and Africa through free and open ‘Indo-Pacific.’”⁴⁷ It has three components: economy, security and governance. The initiative calls for regional economic engagement with greater transparency in governance and promotion of freedom of civil society. It can arguably be considered as an alternative arrangement of multilateralism against the Chinese approach of building a ‘community of common destiny.’

With the US assistance at hand, the Indian maritime operational engagements have increased and include anti-piracy, maritime security, NEO (Non-combatant Evacuation) and HADR (Humanitarian and Disaster Relief) operations, exercises, enhanced training, technical and hydro graphic cooperation with friendly maritime forces such as “Multilateral Naval Exercises (MILAN), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Indian Ocean Regional Association (IORA).” Further, the Indian naval command at Nicobar and Andaman is geared up to manage and engage regional navies in East Asia and to carry out multi-spectrum role ranging from deterrence, patrol to trafficking and disaster relief missions. It is also conducting bi-annual Coordinated Patrols (CORPATs) with Thailand and Indonesia, SIMBEX exercise with Singapore and MILAN with America and Japan.

b) *‘Act West’/‘Link West’ Policy*

Unlike the US, India’s ‘Indo-Pacific’ vision encompasses countries of the Western Indian Ocean and is defined in its ‘Extended Neighbourhood.’⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Report-Public Talk, “BRI and FOIP: Are They Compatible?,” *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, September 30, 2019.

⁴⁸ Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushmna Swaraj statement on inauguration of India-Africa Friendship Rose Garden, October 25, 2015 , <https://www.business->

India has huge economic interests in Western Africa and frequently engages with the countries through diplomatic forums. In 2017, the Indian government also released a “Vision Document for the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)” to facilitate economic cooperation in four areas: “development and cooperation projects, quality infrastructure and institutional capacity, capacity and skill development and people-to-people partnerships.”⁴⁹ India has also developed ties with African countries through IORA.

In Africa, the nature of the Indian interests is predominately economic which requires ‘connectivity.’ Thus, India is interested in building a route connecting Africa with Asia. It is trying to build a narrative in which Africa gets included in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ region. Another Pacific power, Japan, also shared interests with India. Tokyo and New Delhi enjoy friendly relationship with strategically significant African country — South Africa. India has already signed an agreement of Three-Year Strategic Programme of Cooperation (2019-2021) with South Africa. Thus, in future, any collaboration on connectivity between India-South Africa and Japan will pave the way for AAGC. The Indian think tanks are also advocating for connecting AAGC with SAGAR.⁵⁰

In naval domain, there is already cooperation between the three countries as they have conducted joint naval exercises, IBSAMAR VI between India, Brazil and South Africa in 2018 and JIMEX-18; Japan-India maritime exercise to improve tactical and operational level of maritime missions and increase military to military coordination in the states. India has also acquired the rights to use French and the US naval bases at Djibouti, Reunion Island and Diego Garcia by signing military

standard.com/article/current-affairs/africa-a-part-of-extended-neighbourhood-india-115102500362_1.html , and “Keynote Address at 6th IISS-MEA Dialogue on ‘India’s Extended Neighbourhood: Prospects and Challenges,” Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, March 4, 2014.

⁴⁹ Aman Thakker, “5 Big Ideas for the Indian Foreign Ministry’s New Indo-Pacific Desk”, *The Diplomat*, March 1, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/5-big-ideas-for-the-indian-foreign-ministrys-new-indo-pacific-desk/>

⁵⁰ Retika V, “Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)-An Initiative strong enough to balance out the Maritime Silk Road (MSR),” *Chennai Centre for China Studies*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.c3sindia.org/geopolitics-strategy/asia-africa-growth-corridor-aagc-an-initiative-strong-enough-to-balance-out-the-maritime-silk-road-msr-by-retika-v/>

logistic support agreements. This has increased MDA and power projection capabilities of Indian Navy as a ‘Blue Water’ navy.

Map No. 1
Naval Bases of China, India and United States in Asia-Pacific



Source: David Tweed and Adrian Leung, “China Is Making a Bold Military Power Play,” *Bloomberg*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-china-navy-bases/>

Implications for China

Manifested in its approach towards the region and ambitious policies, India’s growing interest and footprints in Asia-Pacific would have security implications for China. Some of these are discussed below:

a) *Sino-Indian Naval Competition and Enduring Rivalry*

India and China are engaged in ‘enduring rivalry’ relationship since the war of 1962 and as recent as in May 2020, locked horns in a military standoff in Ladakh which escalated tensions between the two neighbours.⁵¹ The border tension has escalated due to India’s attempt to build strategic infrastructure

⁵¹ Enduring Rivalries literature categorise dyadic rivalry between India and China as an ‘enduring rivalry’ based on peace and rivalry data compiled by Goertz, Diehl and Balas and described in Goertz, G., Diehl, P. and Balas, A., *Puzzle of Peace: Explaining the Rise of Peace in the International System* (Oxford University Press, 2016) and updated on The Correlates of War Project website.

along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the disputed Ladakh region. In August 2019, India, in a unilateral decision, changed the status of Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IOJK) and redrew its map which evoked strong reaction from China. On many occasions, India has also shown displeasure over China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and has been suspicious of Beijing's growing influence in the Indian Ocean. The projection of 'China threat' is quite apparent in India's strategic thinking which views Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean as a threat to India's maritime security and now aggravated after the faceoff. Therefore, to counter Chinese presence in the region, India has embarked upon naval modernisation and, consequently, extended its naval cooperation to the US in East Asia and Pacific. The strategic partnership with the US and India's willingness to play the role of 'net security provider' is rationalised through 'China threat.'⁵²

The Indian maritime doctrine accentuates the hype of China threat. It has identified threats "from those states with history of aggression against India and those with continuing disputes or maintain adversarial postures to India's national interests."⁵³ It further stated, "nations that have the capability to harm Indian interests and display inimical intent against India".⁵⁴ It takes cognizance of China's growing interests, investments and cooperation in Indian Ocean. The statement of Indian Navy Chief Admiral, Karambir Singh voicing concerns on China's presence in the IOR only reinforces this viewpoint. He stated, "China's BRI and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) impinge on our sovereignty."⁵⁵ Moreover, India's naval doctrine referred to China when it talks about the policies of countries "concerning a third country, which may maintain postures that are inimical to India's security interests."⁵⁶ The doctrine here refers to Pakistan relations with China.

The growing naval competition coupled with enduring rivalry can escalate tension between the two countries which can overshadow the

⁵² Over the last decade, 'China Threat' is been propagated by Indian and western academicians, think tanks and journalists. India mirrored the 'China threat theory' rationalised by the US and Japan in their contemporary security discourse.

⁵³ Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas*, 37.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Impinge India's Sovereignty: Navy Chief Admiral Karambir Singh at Raisina Dialogue," *Hindustan Times*, January 15, 2020.

⁵⁶ Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas*, 37.

positivity generated by China-Indian Summit at Wuhan.⁵⁷ The recent Indian withdrawal from the negotiations regarding China's regional free trade agreement, Regional Comprehensive Economic Framework (RCEF) is a case in point.

b) Accentuating Malacca Dilemma

China's economic development, trade and energy supplies are dependent upon the eastern sea trade routes. The Malacca Strait is a choke point which connects the Indian Ocean with the Pacific. Any interruption in the SLOCs in the Malacca Strait will be detrimental to the Chinese's interest. Therefore, China has to protect its interests and ensure secure and safe SLOCs.

On the other hand, India views China as an extra-regional player in the Indian Ocean and a threat to its interests in the region.⁵⁸ Thus, India has increased its naval deployment in Eastern seaboard near Malacca Strait. There are 15 Indian warships deployed in the Indian Ocean on Mission Based Deployment (MBD) plan to monitor Chinese naval presences in the area. The Indian Eastern Naval Command is very well equipped with "most modern warships, including the *Shivalik*-class stealth frigates and *Kamorta*-class anti-submarine corvettes,"⁵⁹ along with seven P-17 A stealth frigates. India's first indigenously built aircraft, *INS Vikrant*, is also destined for the Eastern fleet.⁶⁰ The Indian SSBN is sailing in the eastern waters deployed with ready-to-fire SLBMs. The Indian naval deployment in the close proximity and at strategically crucial choke point increases China's security concerns and deepens its Malacca Strait security dilemma.

⁵⁷ Sumit Ganguly, "Argument: The Leaders of the World's Two Biggest Countries Meet and Come Away With Little Progress," *Foreign Policy*, October 14, 2019.

⁵⁸ "Chinese Navy in Indian Ocean: There have been Instances When We Had to Tell Them To Go Back, says Indian Navy Chief," *Economic Times*, January 17, 2020, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/chinese-navy-in-indian-ocean-there-have-been-instances-when-we-had-to-tell-them-to-go-back-says-indian-navy-chief/articleshow/73277857.cms>

⁵⁹ Eastern Fleet Commander Rear Admiral D K Tripathi statement in "Indian Navy Monitoring All Happenings in Indian Ocean," *Economic Times*, December 6, 2018, [//economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/66956758.cms?from=mdr&utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/66956758.cms?from=mdr&utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

c) Growing Indian Engagements in the South China Sea

India is expanding its strategic footprints in the South China Sea which has raised China's concerns. Beijing perceives India as an extra regional power in the region. Modi's 'Act East' policy is focused on building closer strategic partnership Vietnam, Philippines and Japan. India has signed economic and defence related agreements with the South East Asian countries in the disputed waters despite of Chinese reservations. In the past, China has warned India against joint exploration with Vietnam in the disputed South China Sea, however, India supported Vietnam's claim and the United Nations rulings and has continued its exploration.

d) Competition over Regional Connectivity Order

Another source of concern for China is India's partnership in the US-led regional security cooperation initiatives that are perceived by China as countering BRI and MSR. Under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, the US aims to counter the Chinese influence by the new Bay of Bengal Initiative, including Pacific Islands in its maritime security while "terming it as the confluence of the two seas."⁶¹ India's 'Act West' strategy also tends to have objectives similar to China which is also increasing its investment in Africa. The proposed Asia-Africa Growth Corridor in fact aims to bypass the MSR.

In addition, Indian active participation in Malabar exercises supported by the US in disputed waters of South China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island increases the security apprehensions of China. In May 2019, India participated in a six-day naval drill with the US, Japan and Philippines to project its power and demonstrate its commitment to the role of a 'net security provider.' The Chinese Ambassador to India, Le Yucheng, expressed his country's concerns and stated, "India should ensure that initiatives like the trilateral maritime arrangement or defence ties with other countries are conducive for peaceful and stable Asia-Pacific region."⁶² He

⁶¹ Report-Public Talk, "BRI and FOIP."

⁶² "Message to US & India? Outsiders Should Not Meddle in South China Sea Issue, Says China," *Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/message-to-us-india-outsiders-should-not-meddle-in-south-china-sea-issue-says-china/articleshow/50245721.cms>

cautioned India on its increasing involvement in the South China Sea and stated, “countries who are from outside or have nothing to do with the region should not meddle into these issues.”⁶³ However, India despite the Chinese concerns has continued to flex its muscles in the waters of South China Sea with close US cooperation.

Conclusion

The Modi government has found favourable regional and international environment where India is perceived as an important factor in the future trajectory of power play in the Indo-Pacific. The US and India’s mutual interest vis-a-vis ‘China’ has reinforced India’s ambitious maritime strategy. Washington’s ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy provided India the space and legitimacy to increase its presence in the region. With the support of the most powerful navy of the world, the US, India is expanding its footprints in the region. Over the last couple of years, India is rigorously acquiring advance weaponry to establish itself as a first-class Navy. It will also help India to bolster its ambition of becoming a leading power in the region. The ‘Act East’ policy will not only economically strengthen Indian position but also give much needed diplomatic recognition of a major power to India in East Asia.

However, on the other hand, China’s military rise and expansion of its influence in the region is becoming a reality. The overlapping contradictory economic and security interests of both states in the region are creating differences in Sino-Indian relations. The behaviour of China and India in Asia-Pacific will largely determine the future of major power naval competition in the region.

Moreover, the Indian naval strategy has incorporated the component of ‘Sea denial’ by not only ‘deterrence’ but also ‘punishment’ that means India will not hesitate to inflict damage or attack the adversary. Similarly, China’s naval strategy is also assertive in protecting its national interest which includes trade and open SLOCs for economic development. Therefore, there is more assertiveness in New Delhi’s approach towards sea. Moreover, India is deliberately avoiding China and Pakistan in the regional naval engagements, symposiums and dialogues. The continuous hawkish behaviour of India towards its neighbours and its exclusive approach

⁶³ Ibid.

towards Indian Ocean is increasing 'distrust' in the region. If the current trends in Asia-Pacific continue and the offensive maritime strategic thinking prevails, then the region will be heading towards a 'great fracture' as indicated by the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres.⁶⁴

For peace and stability in the region, India has to maintain balance in its relations with China to keep the 'Wuhan Spirit' alive. Moreover, there has to be a cooperative mechanism in the region based on inclusiveness with presence of all stake holders in the region. India and China have to maintain strategic 'restraint' in their policies as the backbone of Indian and Chinese power is maritime economy and economy flourishes in cooperation rather than in confrontation. The Sino-India clash in the Galwan valley however, may push India closer to the US and intensify strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region.

⁶⁴ United Nations, Secretary General, Statements and Messages, "Warning Against 'Great Fracture,' Secretary-General Calls on General Assembly to Reconnect with Organization's Values, Uphold Human Rights, Restore Trust," September 24, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sgsm19760.doc.htm>