



INDIA-ASEAN DEFENCE COOPERATION

Dr.V.Ramesh Babu

Associate Professor, Centre for Southeast Asian & Pacific Studies, S.V.University, Tirupathi

Dr.G.Vijay Kumar Reddy*

Associate Professor, Centre for Southeast Asian & Pacific Studies, S.V.University, Tirupathi*Corresponding Author

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India's defence strategy towards Southeast Asia can be understood in terms of two broad sets of strategic objectives that together drive India's relationships in the region. These include its ambitions to be the predominant power in the Ocean and a broader objective to assume a greater strategic role in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. India's aspirations to increase its defence presence in the region are broadly consistent with the perspectives of many ASEAN states, which mostly see India as a positive factor in the Southeast Asian balance of power. But India is yet to demonstrate itself as a useful and consistent security partner for much of the region. India is hindered by a lack of strategic focus and planning that is consistent with many of its strategic relationships

New Delhi sees several strategic imperatives to be the predominant power in the Indian Ocean, which includes the huge bay comprised of the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. For India, the northeast represents a key defensive space against potential threats that may emanate from or through the Southeast Asian archipelago. The ability to control the sea lines of communication that cross the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea and enter the Pacific Ocean through the Malacca Strait would also provide India with considerable strategic leverage in dealing with rival powers. The area also has numerous immediate security issues that may either directly threaten India's interests or otherwise require it to act as a regional maritime security provider, including piracy and smuggling, maritime terrorism, the activities of separatist movements in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and India, and territorial disputes over offshore energy resources. India's second set of strategic objectives in Southeast Asia stems from its desire to expand its strategic role in Southeast Asia and further into the Pacific. India is driven by an imperative to balance China's growing influence in Southeast Asia as well as its aspirations to expand its own strategic space. India has been relatively successful in recent years in expanding its influence in Southeast Asia in a cooperative and relatively benign manner. It has little choice but to proceed in that way. India's lack of strength compared with other major powers, particularly China, means it must remain flexible and discreet in its engagement with Southeast Asia with the expectation that its relative power will grow in coming decades.

Despite these imperatives, India does not yet have a clearly articulated strategy for its defense engagement with Southeast Asia. New Delhi has made it clear that closer defence relations with Southeast Asia is a key part of its Look East policy through which India has sought to develop a comprehensive economic, political, and security relationship with the region. At a diplomatic level, India has engaged in regional security groupings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Shangri-La Dialogue and the ASEAN Defence Ministers + 8 meetings, as well as establishing regular bilateral dialogues at Defence Minister level with key states such as Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and

Thailand. New Delhi has frequently allowed the Indian Navy to lead the way in building military-to-military relationships. This has involved developing a naval presence where it could through regular exercises, coordinated patrols and ship visits. The Indian Navy has also sought to emphasize its role as a leading provider of public goods to the region, including in areas such as piracy, smuggling, maritime terrorism, and humanitarian and disaster relief. Through these means, India is seeking its gradual acceptance over time as a benign power and a preferred security partner to ASEAN, if one having a somewhat undefined role.

Although India is a strong supporter of ASEAN as a regional organization, the lack of a regional defence policy among ASEAN states means that most engagement takes place at a bilateral level. India's initial focus in expanding its influence into Southeast Asia has been on Singapore, which historically recognized India as being a natural security provider to the region. India has also had a political alliance with Vietnam stemming from the Cold War era, but which has been revived in recent years. But India will need to make considerable investments of resources and political will to develop other partners in the region, some of which have been more hesitant in recognizing India's regional security role.

India's Leading Maritime Security Role in the Indian Ocean The starting point in any discussion of India's defence strategy in Southeast Asia is India's leading maritime security role in the Indian Ocean. Key ASEAN states such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Myanmar lie on or near these waters. India's role in this area is a function of its geographic advantages, its relative capabilities and its perceived strategic imperatives. India has dominated the northeast Indian Ocean since at least 1971, when the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan removed any challenge to its position from any potential rival. India's successful naval blockade of Bangladesh severely inhibited Pakistan's ability to defend the territory and was an important reminder of the strategic consequences of control over the Bay of Bengal/Andaman Sea.

In recent years, India has been reinforcing its capabilities in the Indian Ocean. Much of India's naval modernization program over the last decade has focused on improving its capabilities. There has been an effective "rebalancing" of the proportion of defence resources committed to the India's eastern waters, reflecting relatively reduced conventional maritime threat perceptions in relation to Pakistan and relatively increased threat perceptions in relation to China. This rebalancing includes the planned construction of a major new base for the Eastern Fleet south of Visakhapatnam on India's east coast, with capacity for two aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, among other things.

India dominant strategic position in the Indian Ocean is underpinned by its possession of the Andaman and Nicobar islands, which run north-south through the Andaman Sea near the western end of the Malacca Strait. As K. M. Panikkar once commented, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands potentially give India strategic bases "which if fully utilised in coordination with air power can convert the Bay of Bengal into a secure area."² These islands also form a natural base for India to project power into the Malacca Strait and beyond into the South China Sea. They also have the potential to dominate the Malacca Strait and have been described by a Chinese naval writer as constituting a "metal chain" that could lock the western end of the Malacca Strait tight.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, India developed extensive military facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, including port facilities to service elements of the Eastern Fleet and air bases for surveillance and strike aircraft. The operational radius of aircraft based in, or staging through, the Andaman's encompasses the Malacca Strait and large portions of the South China Sea. Under a plan announced in 2010, there will be a major development of military infrastructure, including runway upgrades and the development of port infrastructure for use by major vessels. In addition, there will be a permanent deployment of UAVs and an expansion of the 3,500-strong army brigade to divisional strength.⁵ In July 2012, the Indian Navy opened a new forward air base on Great Nicobar, at the northern end of the Malacca Strait, which will be used primarily for maritime surveillance. However, the Indian Air Force has not yet permanently deployed frontline strike aircraft in the islands.

Over the last two decades, the Indian Navy has played a leading role in developing cooperative security relationships with several ASEAN states bordering the Bay of Bengal/Andaman Sea, including through conducting joint naval patrols, bilateral exercises, and hosting the biennial MILAN "gathering" of regional navies at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands. The absence of the United States and China from the MILAN meetings is a none-too-subtle reminder of India's assertion of regional leadership. As the same time, the Indian Navy has made considerable efforts to prove itself the leading provider of public goods to the region, providing maritime security in areas such as piracy, smuggling, refugees, terrorism and separatism. The Indian Navy has also demonstrated its capabilities to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to several ASEAN states, including following the 2004 Tsunami, which affected much of the northeast Indian Ocean, the 2007 Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh, and 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar. All of these initiatives help legitimize India's naval presence in the region.

India's Maritime Security Ambitions in the Malacca Strait

A focal point of India's maritime security ambitions in the northeast Indian Ocean is its ambitions in the Malacca Strait, which is identified by the Indian Navy as part of its "primary area of interest." The Malacca Strait is the primary route for sea traffic between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and one of the world's busiest waterways, including a projected 140,000 ship movements per annum by 2020. Around one third of global trade and the bulk of energy supplies from the Middle East to East Asia transit it. An ability to exert negative control over the Strait would be significant for India's strategic role in Southeast Asia, and indeed the entire Indian Ocean. Some claim that for India the Strait represents a rough counterpart to the strategic importance of the Panama Canal to the United States.⁸ Kaplan describes the Strait as being as strategically significant in coming decades as was the Fulda Gap during the Cold War.

India's defense facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

provide it with considerable measure of potential control over the western approaches to the Malacca Strait. Over the last decade India has also sought to develop an active security role—either direct or indirect—inside the Strait. At the turn of this century there were considerable concerns about piracy and the potential for maritime terrorists to block use of the Strait. In 2002, following an unsolicited request from the United States, India provided naval escorts for high-value commercial traffic through the Strait as part of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom. India's participation in the operation was supported by Singapore (which hosted Indian naval vessels), and India is believed to have consulted Malaysia and Indonesia as well as the Philippines and Australia on the initiative. As the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Pace, commented in 2006, the United States was "very comfortable with the fact that India has offered its assistance" in providing security in the Strait.

Most ASEAN states now see India's defence presence in the Indian Ocean in relatively benign terms and regard India as a net security provider. This contrasts with a degree of unease felt in the region during the 1980s about India's ambitious naval modernization plans and what was seen to be its opaque intentions. Regional perspectives about India also contrast sharply with perspectives on China's naval build up in the South China Sea, which is now seen as a major destabilizing factor in the region. But India's ambitions in the Malacca Strait are seen somewhat differently from its presence in the Bay of Bengal/Andaman Sea and there seems little prospect at the moment that all the littoral states will agree to giving India a direct security role in the Strait. Among other things, there are few immediate security threats (such as piracy and maritime terrorism) to be addressed and any Indian naval presence in the Strait would likely be regarded as highly provocative by China. But if the security environment changes and littoral states come under increased pressure to take action on Strait security they may allow India to participate in Strait security on their terms. Any security role for India would be a significant, not only with respect to the Malacca Strait, but also in legitimizing India's claims to be a benign security provider to the region as a whole.

India's Defence Engagement with Southeast Asia

India's second set of strategic objectives in Southeast Asia relate to its broader ambitions to expand its political and security role in the region. India is driven not only by an imperative to balance China's growing influence in Southeast Asia but also by its aspirations to expand its own strategic space into the region as part of its own growing economic and military power. Several Southeast Asian states are encouraging India to play a greater role in the region as a useful balance to China.

The United States is also encouraging India to assume a greater role in the Southeast Asian balance of power, including through developing its defence relationships with U.S. allies and friends in the region. Washington is also actively promoting the idea of the "Indo-Pacific" as a single security region, which justifies India playing a greater political and defence role in East Asia/Pacific. In the longer term this includes potentially assuming a direct security role in the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea. The United States hopes that India might become an important political partner in East Asia, which can help bolster its efforts to temper China's strategic ambitions.

The majority of ASEAN states have, to a greater or lesser degree, welcomed an increased regional role for India, including in maritime security. Many now see India as potentially playing an important role in the regional balance of power through helping to ensure a balanced distribution of power in the region, alongside other key extra-regional

powers such as the United States, China, Japan and Australia. Singapore, in particular, has consistently welcomed and encouraged a balanced role for external security providers on the basis that competition between major regional powers "must be squarely confronted and cannot be wished away." Singapore's conception of a "balance of power" involves a multipolar balance that provides freedom to smaller states. As the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has argued, Singapore's concept of a balance of power "depends on the competing interests of several big powers in the region, rather than on linking the nation's fortunes to one overbearing power. The big powers can keep one another in check, and will prevent any one of them from dominating the entire region, and so allow small states to survive in the interstices between them."

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