

The Act East Policy and South China Sea: Need for Harmonization

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ABSTRACT: *Foreign policy of a nation should resonate with the developmental policies in equal measure. Due to rapid changes in the eco-political scenario of the world in recent times, India has also symbiotically linked its national goals and objectives, as defined by its political order, to its foreign policy. Foreign policy of India is substantially driven by the demands of development and security. The Look East Policy/Act East Policy is seen by researchers / academicians in different perspectives ranging from defensive realism to enhancement of security of the nation.*

The paper discusses New Delhi's current approaches to Maritime Asia's regional security in general with South China Sea in focus. The paper views the region through the prism of India's Act East Policy operating in the East Asian security super complex along with the need to update India's present naval strategy to better protect Sea Lines of Communication in the South China Sea. The paper tries to discuss the nuanced areas pertaining to India's diplomatic and naval strategic policies with key Southeast Asian and other outside its sphere of influence. The paper focusses on Vietnam, the United States and Japan along with the ubiquitous China.

Keywords; *South China Sea, String of pearls, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, One Belt One Road, diplomacy, Foreign policy*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The most significant geo-political development of the recent times is the tremendous structural shift in the world economy due to rising influence and role of emerging economies across the globe. This development has brought a sea change in the global economic relations and the emerging economies led by China and India have evolved from being mere policy takers to policy makers. India has become the world's sixth-largest economy, moving ahead of France, according to updated World Bank figures for 2017. India's gross domestic product (GDP) amounted to \$2.597 trillion at the end of last year, against \$2.582 trillion of France.

After the end of the Cold War and the subsequent demise of USSR, India has gradually increased its interest in regional security issues. India has been actively involved in a multitude of regional and international groupings like BRICS, G20, ASEAN, and SAARC along with synergistic economic bodies like New Development Bank and the China led Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank.

Over the years, India has given a new direction to its economic and political diplomacy. It has negotiated comprehensive free trade agreements with some of the important economies of the world which include Japan, Korea and ASEAN. Currently, India is negotiating the largest trade agreement called Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with ASEAN and its free trade partners a game changer in near future. India has become an attractive partner in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Asian Pacific countries. India has become focal point of interest in terms of global governance and international security in recent times (Cooper & Antkiewicz 2008; Gray & Murphy 2013; Jain 2006; Kahler 2013; Mittelman 2013; Mukherjee & Raja Mohan 2016; Nadkarni & Noonan 2012; Narlikar 2013).

However, the economic might has not strengthened the security architecture in India as the country is often addressed as defensive and a security maximizer. With the rise of the Red Dragon in its backyard, India has reluctantly joined the regional and global security architecture by forming the Quad Group with Japan, U.S.A and Australia. India has to move beyond its role of a net security provider to an active participant in containing the monopolistic tendencies in the Indo-Pacific.

II. NEW DYNAMICS OF INDIA'S GLOBAL ECONOMY

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The most significant geo-political development of recent times is perhaps a shift of balance of powers between the global north and the global south. After the collapse of USSR and end of cold war, India waved an adieu to the long years of economic development pursued under the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) strategy and introduced new economic policy in 1991. The Look East Policy (LEP) initiated in 1991 was a real turning point in India's economic policy. It emerged as an important strategy for India to make foray in Southeast and East Asian countries. The attempt of India to enter into closer economic relationships can be viewed from three different perspectives: regional and sub-regional integration, proliferation of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and re-orientation of domestic economic policy which altogether is pursued after the launching of the policy. With the high economic growth achieved since the apogee of economic success after 1991, India began to occupy an increasingly important place in the world economy and a prominent place in the international structure of power. The Look East Policy (LEP) then emerged as important politico - economic strategy and reveals clear signs of what India wants to achieve as an international player. India's policy of opening and reforming the economy is beginning to bear fruit. At present, India has become the world's sixth-biggest economy, pushing France into seventh place, according to updated World Bank figures for 2017. India's gross domestic product (GDP) amounted to \$2.597 trillion at the end of last year, against \$2.582 trillion for France. The latest forecasts for the next fifteen years mention growth rates of up to seven percent a year and predict that by 2050, the country will be the third biggest national economy worldwide. The dimensions of India's economic output are remarkable. Its per capita income has risen by 79 percent within the last few years, its dynamics showing similarities to China's. Furthermore, the country's economic productivity has grown considerably as well.

	UN			IMF			World Bank			
	2015a	2016b	2017b	2015	2016	2017	2015	2016e	2017f	2018f
World	2.4	2.4	2.8	3.2	3.1	3.4	2.7	2.3	2.7	2.9
Developed economies/Advanced Economies/High Income	1.9	1.8	1.9	2.1	1.6	1.8	2.1	1.6	1.8	1.8
Euro Area	1.9	1.9	2	2	1.7	1.5	2.0	1.6	1.5	1.4
US	2.4	2.2	2.5	2.6	1.6	2.2	2.6	1.6	2.2*	2.1*
Japan	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.6	1.2	1.0	0.9	0.8
Developing Countries/EMDEs	3.8	3.8	4.4	4	4.2	4.6	3.5	3.4	4.2	4.6
Latin America and Caribbean (LAC)	-0.6	-0.6	1.5	0	-0.6	1.6	-0.6	-1.4	1.2	2.3
Brazil	-3.8	-3.4	0.2	-3.8	-3.3	0.5	-3.8	-3.4	0.5	1.8
Russia	3.8	3.8	4.4	-3.7	-0.8	1.1	-3.7	-0.6	1.5	1.7
India	7.3	7.3	7.5	7.6	7.6	7.6	7.6	7.0#	7.6	7.8
China	6.9	6.4	6.5	6.9	6.6	6.2	6.9	6.7	6.5	6.3

Sources: UN, World Economic Situation and Prospects, 2016, Update as of mid-2016; IMF, World Economic Outlook, October 2016; World Bank, Global Economic Prospects, January 2017.

Note: UN: a) Partly estimated, b) Forecast based in part on Project LINK; IMF: For India, data and forecasts are represented on a fiscal year basis and GDP from 2011 onward is based on GDP at

market prices with fiscal year 2011/12 as base year; World Bank: Notes: PPP=purchasing power parity; e=estimate; f=forecast. World Bank forecasts are frequently updated based on new information. Consequently, projections presented here may differ from those contained in other Bank documents, even if basic assessments of countries' prospects do not differ at any given moment in time. Aggregate growth rates calculated using constant 2010 U.S. dollars GDP weights. * The U.S. forecasts do not incorporate the effect of policy proposals by the new U.S. administration, as their overall scope and ultimate form are still uncertain. However, simulations indicate that the large reductions in corporate and personal income taxes suggested by the new administration could—if fully implemented and without consideration of any other policy changes—

increase both U.S. GDP growth and global growth above baseline projections in 2017 and 2018. # For India, the column labeled 2016 refers to FY2016/17.

Table 1: World Economic Growth Estimates for 2015 - 2018 (Annual)

**Annual Report 2016-17 GOI,
Ministry of Commerce & Industry
Department of Commerce**

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India's foreign Trade for April –March 2017-18					
	Merchandise (P)		Service* (P)		Merchandise (P)+ Service
	Values in USD billions	%Growth	Values in USD billions	%Growth	Values in USD billions
Exports	302.84	9.78	175.31	17.63	478.15

Import	459.67	19.59	105.65	19.74	565.32
Trade Balance	-156.83	44.54	69.66	14.56	-87.17
Source: DGCI&S for Merchandise; for Services RBI					
Note 1-Services data for 2017-18 pertains to April-Feb 2018 as Feb 2018 is the latest data available as per RBI's Press Release.					
Note 2- P : Provisionals					

Table-2: India's Foreign Trade: March 2018



Figure 1: Performance of Exports & Imports from 2015-16 to 2017-18

Exports during 2017-18 are at US \$ 302.84 Billion registering a growth of 9.78 per cent in dollar terms vis-à-vis 2016-17. Exports during March 2018 were valued at US \$ 29.11 Billion as compared to US \$ 29.30 Billion during March 2017 exhibited negative growth of 0.66 per cent. In Rupee terms, exports were valued at Rs. 189271.16 crore as compared to Rs. 193028.91 crore during March 2017, registering a fall of 1.95 per cent. During March 2018, major commodity groups of export showing positive growth over the corresponding month of last year are as below:

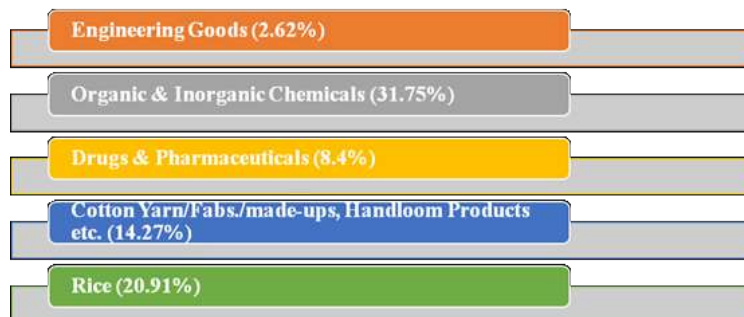


Figure 2: Trend of major commodity groups of export 2018

Imports during March 2018 were valued at US \$ 42.80 Billion (Rs. 278296.95 crore) which was 7.15 per cent higher in Dollar terms and 5.75 per cent higher in Rupee terms over the level of imports valued at US \$ 39.95 Billion (Rs. 263155.49 crore) in March 2017. Cumulative value of imports for the period April-March 2017-18 was US \$ 459.67 Billion (Rs. 2962897.70 crore) as against US \$ 384.36 Billion (Rs. 2577665.59 crore) registering a positive growth of 19.59 per cent in Dollar terms and 14.94 per cent in Rupee terms over the same period last year. Major commodity groups of import showing high growth in March 2018 over the corresponding month of previous year are

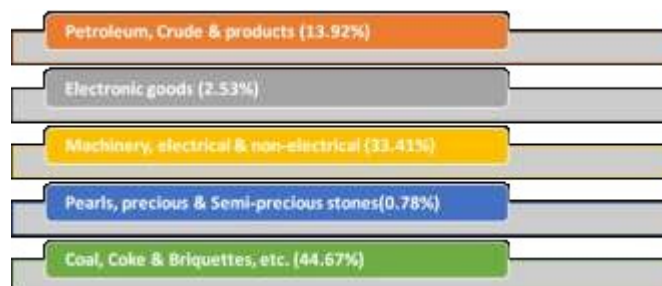


Figure 3: Trend of major commodity groups of imports 2018

(Press Information Bureau, Government of India Ministry of Commerce & Industry)

III. THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea is a marginal sea that is part of the Pacific Ocean that extends from the Strait of Malacca in the southwest, to the Strait of Taiwan in the northeast. The littoral countries of the South China Sea are China, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Until 1947 the Sea remained almost quiet and no claimant occupied a single island in the entire South China Sea. China laid claim to the South China Sea in 1947. It demarcated its claims with a U-shaped line made up of dashes on a map, covering most of the area. Presently it is an area of growing conflicts due to territorial claims by different countries. With respect to the Spratly Islands, different geographic features are reportedly occupied by claimants such as Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, China, and Malaysia. The Paracels Islands are claimed by China, Vietnam, and Taiwan.



Figure 4: The Paracels Islands as claimed by China, Vietnam, and Taiwan

IV. INDIA AND SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea is located in a region of great strategic interest for India. Geographically, it connects the Indian Ocean and the East China Sea via the Malacca Straits, which is one of the busiest sea lanes in the world. This important waterway serves as a vital economic artery for the South Asian state.

Initially India remained acutely conscious of its official position of neither being party to the disputes nor taking sides for many years towards the South China Sea. Though not being geographically in the South China Sea, India is increasingly being recognised as an actor in the balance of power in the South China Sea (Muni 2011; Puri and Sahgal 2011; Sakhuja 2011; Kaushiva 2012; Salil 2013; Majumdar 2013; Chaturvedy 2014; Baruah 2014; Chaturvedy 2015) for its twofold involvement in the area: firstly due to its entangled geopolitical China concern and secondly the geo-economic energy security concerns (Das 2013; Scott 2013).

India believes that the disputes in the Southeast Asian littorals are a litmus test for the international maritime law and in the aftermath of the Hague Tribunal's verdict on the South China Sea, India obligated to take a principled stand on the issue of freedom of navigation and commercial access enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

When formulated in the mid-1990s, India's Look East Policy originally focused on economic cooperation in Southeast Asia channelled through ASEAN. However, a Look East-2 focus in the 2000s cast India's horizons more widely across the South China Sea into the Western Pacific/East Asia, with more overt security consideration. Accordingly, the Indian Navy's 2007 doctrine statement—India's Maritime Military Strategy defined the South China Sea as an area of –strategic interest to India. This leaves India with interests to be gained, maintained and if necessary defended – primarily through the Indian navy's unilateral presence and bilateral security arrangements.

As far as trade is concerned, up to 97 % of India's total international trade volume is sea-borne, half of which, passes through the straits. By 2013, the increasing adoption of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic framework for India gave the South China Sea closer geopolitical relevance for India. In 2014 with the change in Government, Act East readiness strengthens India's military and economic position in the South China Sea cutting across China's own drive across the South China Sea (Chang 2015). Despite China's protests, India continues its oil exploration in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea from where ONGC Videsh Limited supplies oil to Vietnam. India also supports a negotiated settlement of Brunei's maritime dispute with China and has inked defense cooperation agreement that would provide an institutional foundation for more collaborative work on maritime security and secure India's energy lanes to Brunei. In addition, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) constitutes one of India's largest trade partners, with total trade valued at \$71 billion in 2016/2017.

As earlier also said energy is another component of India's interest in the SCS. With the increase in population, India's consumption of energy is also increasing and by 2015 it became the 3rd largest oil consumer in the world and as predicted the demand would grow @4.2% annually. In order to meet the swelling demand,

India draws its attention towards the potential energy deposits in the South China Sea since early 1990, which has a huge deposit of oil and natural gas in reserves. [As per U.S Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimate around 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas].

Since at least half of India's maritime trade passes through the Malacca Straits, any instability in the SCS would adversely affect India's economy and security. Through LEP / AEP India is pursuing its three-pronged objectives of ensuring peace and stability in the region and keep the vital sea lanes open, maintaining cordial relations with regional powers and ensuring that no potentially aggressive external power comes to dominate the region. There is an increase in economic engagement as well as expansion in strategic cooperation in the form of joint naval exercises, generous lines of credit, military training, and sales of military hardware with regional states. By all these activities it is clear that India has a definite understanding of potential regional developments.

V. INDIA –CHINA RELATIONS

From the Nehru era of the "Hindi-Chini Bhai- Bhai" slogan and the 1962 War, to the 2017 Doklam stand-off, India-China relations have rarely been on solid ground. Trust deficit and a "security dilemma" mar the relationship between the two Asian powers. China is allegedly the principal opponent to India's bid for the United Nations Security Council membership and it has also been opposing India's entry at the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). China is reluctant to devise a consultative mechanism in dealing with South Asian issues where India has large, direct stakes. China opposes Japanese investment in India's Arunachal Pradesh on the one hand, yet itself invests in Pakistan-administered Kashmir on the other. Though China has resolved land boundary disputes with the Central Asian Republics, Myanmar, Russia, and even Vietnam; but with India, it still seems unwilling to find a solution. India has already been encircled by Chinese military and commercial facilities and if as reported, Chinese naval base comes up on Pakistan soil, that's going to be the possible last cog in the chain of pearls encircling India. China has encircled India through its military and commercial facilities in countries falling on the Indian Ocean between the Chinese mainland and Port Sudan. China has already a presence in Kyaukpyu port of Myanmar. Chittagong port in Bangladesh is being developed by China that is also pressuring Bangladesh to have its naval presence there. Hambantota port, which was recently handed over by Sri Lanka to China in return of debt, for around 99 years of lease will have Chinese commercial presence from now on. China imports more than 80% of its oil from West Asia, most of this oil trade is in Indian ocean routes. Strait of Malacca, Gulf of Aden and gulf of Oman are choke points of oil trade. Being an expansionist since history, and to protect its economic interest China is asserting itself in the Indian Ocean region.

Also the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and now its macro form of One Belt One Road (OBOR) under which China will construct various land and maritime trade routes are also seen as a part of China's larger military ambition.



Figure 5: Strategic positing of CEPC, OBOR and String of Pearls

Pakistan has always been China's tool to keep India in check. The Gwadar Port developed by China for the purpose of CPEC is just the tip of the iceberg as the political pundits believe that China will not only assist Pakistan Navy through Gwadar port but would also launch offensive using this port in the scenario of a Sino-Indian conflict.

China hasn't limited itself to lure the countries encircling India, but it has also made its presence felt on the African coast and the Middle East. China is said to have a powerful presence on the African Coast of India Ocean in Sudan and Kenya while it's now building a military base in Djibouti to counter the increase American footprint in the Middle-East and IOR.

VI. COUNTER OF CHINA'S DOMINANCE IN SCS: LEP / ACP

To counter Chinese strategy, India has to increase strategic presence in the Strait of Malacca. For that, India has to engage with Malaysia and Singapore. Recently, Singapore has allowed India to access its Changi Naval Base and to use naval facilities.

India's Look East Policy (LEP) has been a major pillar of our foreign policy since the early 1990s. In the second half of 2014, LEP was upgraded to Act East Policy which focuses on the extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. The policy which was originally conceived as an economic initiative, has gained political, strategic and cultural dimensions including establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. The key principles and objectives of "Act East Policy" is to promote economic cooperation,

cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels thereby providing enhanced connectivity to the States of North Eastern Region with other countries in our neighbourhood.[Lok Sabha 16.03.2016] Through Act East Policy, India is enhancing its relations with south East Asian countries so that they do not fall in the trap of China. In this regard inviting all heads of State of ASEAN countries in this Republic day is a good step forward. India is also revamping its relations with losing neighbours like Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

For this India is extending them more Line of Credit /loans (India has vowed to give \$5 billion Line of credit to Bangladesh when Sheikh Hasina visited India) for their developmental works. India is giving more importance to historical and cultural relationship and a good step in this regard is that, India through its Kaladan Multimodal connectivity project in Myanmar, which also passes through Sittwe port, can counter Chinese presence. Also, Sri Lanka has offered India to operate an airport just near the Hamantota port, where China has presence. (Sri Lanka has learned from its mistake of taking huge loans from China (6.3% interest rate), while India is offering loans at less than 1%, that's why Sri Lanka offered India to operate MattalaRajapaksha Port, near Hambantota)

India has upgraded its relations to strategic partnership with Singapore in November, 2015. Thus it now has strategic partnership with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia, Singapore and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and forged close ties with all countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Further, apart from ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and East Asia Summit (EAS), it has also been actively engaged in regional fora such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Two summits of Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) were held in Suva, Fiji (November 2014) and Jaipur, India (August 2015). There were several high level visits from both the side. [Lok Sabha 16.03.2016]

Through Act East Policy, India is enhancing its relations with south East Asian countries so that they do not fall in the trap of China. In this regard inviting all heads of State of ASEAN countries in this Republic day is a good step forward. Apart from the Look East policy through which India has been trying to improve relations with China Southern-Eastern neighbors like Taiwan, South Korea, Philippines and Japan, India has been trying to improve its relationship with its neighbors

In countering port of Gwadar in Pakistan, India has operationalized port of Chabahar in Iran, just 80 km away from Gwadar, with recently sending a consignment of wheat to Afghanistan via this port. Recently, India has got access to strategic Duqm port of Oman for military and logistics services; this means that India can now keep its eyes on Chinese activities at Gwadar port of Pakistan, because this port is in proximity to both Gwadar and Chabahar port.

All above collectively, more or less parts of the Indian Iron Curtain strategy which is an answer to Chinese string of pearls.

VII. CONCLUSION

Projection of influence and securing economic interest in the South China Sea does demand a clear strategic vision. Though AEP is yet to deliver the expected results, however, the observations here provide a comprehensive glance to the evolving scenario. India's bid to integrate with the East has been quite successful, barring the exception of China. A pressing question, however, is how to engage China in the short and medium term.

The current AEP has allowed India to successfully penetrate the East Asian Resettlement Support Center (RSC), and particularly the Southeast Asian sub-complex through closer partnerships, and has enabled India to better participate as a rule shaper in the Asia Pacific.

At the economic and political level, the India – China relationship still contains relevant incentives leading to cooperation, notably the increase in bilateral trade and the common interest to provide common public goods such as strong, innovative international financial institutions (New Development Bank, Contingence Reserve Arrangement and AIIB). In February 2016, China and India finally held for the first time its 'Maritime Affairs Dialogue'(Khurana 2016b) that can be viewed as an important opportunity for fostering

maritime cooperation, promoting freedom of navigation and rule of law at sea and a forum to debate to contain Chinese strategy in the IOR.

But above all, bilateral cooperation will serve to New Delhi's interests over its overall security imperatives in the South Asian RSC. In terms of maximizing India's security, both border security and combating terrorism issues that does demand cooperation from Beijing, are likely to dominate the security priorities of India in the foreseeable future. Most likely these two security priorities together with urgent calls to guarantee freedom of navigation in the maritime realm will shape India's AEP vis-a-vis China in the South China Sea and its bilateral relations with Southeast Asia in the foreseeable future.

Trust deficit and a "security dilemma" mar the relationship between the two Asian powers, which need to be replaced by consistent dialogue, regular exchanges, and appreciation of each other's interests and concerns.

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