

India's Act East Policy and Implications for China-India Relations

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Abstract: Since taking charge as Prime Minister in May 2014, Narendra Modi has invested time and energy in international engagements. To a certain extent, India's image as a significant player in international affairs has improved. The Modi government also proposed the Act East policy to strengthen its engagement in the Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, India has publicly expressed its concerns about China's activities in the South China Sea. China has been closely watching India's presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The main argument set forth in this study is as India carries out its own pivot to Asia-Pacific policy, a national role transformation is underway. In order to provide a fresh look at the complex relationship between India and China, the paper aims to explore the specific parameters of India's Act East Policy.

Introduction

In the recent years, there has been a renewed emphasis on Asia-Pacific region in India's foreign policy. In August 2014, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj announced that the decades-long "Look East" policy, initiated in 1991-92, would become "Act East" policy".¹ It was followed by the speech of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the East Asia Summit in Myanmar in November 2014. He formally

¹ "Time for 'Act East Policy' and not just 'Look East': Sushma Swaraj," *Daily News and Analysis*, August 24, 2014, <<http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-time-for-act-east-policy-and-not-just-look-east-sushma-swaraj-2013294>>.

asserted, India has turned the “Look East” policy into “Act East” policy”.²

In fact, as early as in 2013, some Indian strategists had already proposed the concept of “act east”.³ It appeared that there has been a serious consideration and effort towards “acting east”. Though New Delhi has not clearly outlined key features, content and the scope of the policy initiative, the Act East policy is not only the continuation of the Look East policy, but also represents a transformation in India’s foreign policy.

Under the Act East policy, New Delhi has purposefully intensified its engagement in the Asia Pacific region. India and countries in the region have come together on a number of issues, ranging from joint military exercises to high-level visits, which illustrate the increasing strength of political and military ties. Having secured the support from the US and some countries in the region, India is now looking to expand its presence in the South China Sea. The Asia-Pacific region has come to have more strategic importance for international society, in part because of China’s rise and the US rebalance to Asia. While for years India’s position towards the region has not attracted much attention, this is gradually changing.

The main argument set forth in this study is as India carries out its own pivot to Asia-Pacific policy, a national role transformation is underway. India is not satisfied of being identified as a mere regional power confined in South Asia. Instead, over the last few years, India has signaled a willingness to play a greater strategic role in the Indo-Pacific, building up partnership with the US, Japan and Vietnam. The

² Prime Minister's Office, “English rendering of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi’s remarks at the East Asia Summit, Nay Pyi Taw,” *Press Information Bureau, Government of India*, November 13, 2014, <<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=111346>>.

³ D. Suba Chandran, “The Indo-Pacific: India’s Look East 3.0,” *The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, #3843, March 14, 2013, <<http://www.ipcs.org/article/india/the-indo-pacific-indias-look-east-30-3843.html>>.

development also reflects the wider canvas of changing strategic equations in the region with the rising of China and India. There is an undercurrent of uneasiness that exists between India and China as the two powers continue their ascent up the global hierarchy.

In order to advance the frontiers of current understanding of India's engagements in this region, this study will explore the specific parameters of India's Act East Policy. Also, it will be useful to have a more nuanced reading of India's motivations and strive to occupy a more visible position in the South China Sea. Since Beijing needs to scrutinize the attendant security ramifications for China, the final part of this study will explore the Chinese perspective of India's Act East policy.

India's Act East Policy and Regional Role Transformation

There are several dynamics shaping the contours of the transformation of India's policy to the Asia-Pacific. First of all, the launch of India's East Policy reflects India's rising clout in the world. India's power has been gradually recognized since the economic reforms and nuclear weaponization. As Hillary Clinton put it, "India is taking its rightful place in the meeting rooms and conference halls where the world's most consequential questions are debated and decided."⁴

The present Narendra Modi government has made a deliberate push to further India's international status through the big-power diplomacy, viz, securing a global power status and strengthening its relations with other big powers. The Modi government aims to transform India itself from the dominant country in South Asia to

⁴ Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century," *U.S. Department of State*, July 20, 2011, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168840.htm>>

a true world power.⁵ Similar point was made by Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, as she said, India has become a natural participant in most important global conversations.⁶ Therefore, with the rising influence and capability, it seems to be natural to for India to extend its influence beyond the sub- subcontinent. Part of the expectation is that India can play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific.

Such a role transformation also comes from the encouragement of the US. As the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in 2011, Washington encouraged New Delhi “not just to look East, but to engage East and act East.”⁷ Washington deems India’s rising is of its strategic interest and actively support the discourse. As the U.S.-India Joint Statement of 2014 describe, the US is “a principal partner in the realization of India’s rise as a responsible, influential world power.”⁸ The US has also encouraged India to play a more active role in East and Southeast Asia.

Frequent exchange of high level political visits has provided sustained momentum to bilateral cooperation. Prime Minister Modi visited the U.S. on 26-30 September 2014. A Vision Statement and a Joint Statement were issued during the visit. The visit was followed by U.S. President Barack Obama’s visit to India as chief guest at India’s Republic Day celebrations in January 2015. During the visit, the two sides issued a Delhi Declaration of Friendship and a Joint Strategic Vision for

⁵ Nicholas Burns, “Our next president must maintain America’s strong partnership with India,” *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2016, <
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/our-next-president-must-maintain-americas-strong-partnership-with-india/2016/06/03/7d68184a-2834-11e6-b989-4e5479715b54_story.html>.

⁶ “Speech by External Affairs Minister at the inauguration of Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi (March 01, 2016),” Ministry of External Affairs, March 1, 2016,
<<http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26432>>

⁷ Clinton, “Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century.”

⁸ “US-India Joint Statement,” *the White House*, September 30, 2014,
<<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement>>.

Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region, which indicated that a closer partnership between the US and India is indispensable to promoting peace, prosperity and stability in those regions.⁹

Defense partnership between India and the US has assumed priority. More recently, the US and India agreed to sign a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) during the US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's visit to India in April 2016. If signed, the treaty would enable both the militaries to use each other's base facilities and forge closer defense ties between India and the US. The development is welcome by many strategists in Washington. For example, the former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns argued, Washington's "strengthening partnership with India is a striking success."¹⁰

New Delhi is glad to leverage Washington's influence in global and regional state for its rising, and looks to the US as a new source of investment, technology and cutting-edge military equipment. On the other hand, the US sees India as a promising market and a democratic model for developing countries. The Indo-American strategic partnership, according to the US *National Security Strategy*, is underpinned by shared interests, shared values as the world's two largest democracies, and close connections among people.¹¹ Accordingly, India's relations with the US have become multi-faceted.

However, there is a strong strategic impetus for the US to cultivate India as a strategic partner in Asia. Just as Robert Kaplan put it, the US is "beginning an elegant

⁹ "U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region," January 25, 2015, *The White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>>.

¹⁰ Burns, "Our next president must maintain America's strong partnership with India."

¹¹ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, p.43.

decline by leveraging the growing sea power of allies such as India and Japan to balance against China”.¹² India’s Asia-Pacific policy in the making has become indispensably critical to the U.S. strategy. The US would seek to work with India to promote stability in South Asia and elsewhere in the world. ¹³

Given the convergence of strategic and economic interest in the region, the US is taking vigorous steps to rope New Delhi into its Asia-Pacific strategy. India’s Act East policy is seen as complementary to American's rebalance to the Asia-Pacific.¹⁴

The second dynamic for India to pursue a more active Asia-Pacific policy is its lingering threat perception about China’s rise and growing assertiveness. India-China relations reached a low ebb in 1962 as the countries fought a brief war along the disputed border. Till today, India’s strategic community is still very concerned about unexpected Beijing’s adventurism. The Indian strategist C. Raja Mohan once claimed that India has been balancing against China since the day the Chinese invaded Tibet in early 1950s.¹⁵ The border dispute, especially incidents of transgression, remains a key irritant in India-China relations. Some other issues including China-Pakistan axis, Tibet issue, and trade imbalances, have also fueled the mistrust between India and China.

¹² Robert D. Kaplan, “Center Stage for the 21st Century: Power Play in the Indian Ocean,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2009, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2009-03-01/center-stage-21st-century>>

¹³ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, p.4.

¹⁴ “Joint Press Briefing by Secretary Carter and Minister Parrikar in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” *The U.S. Department of Defense*, December 10, 2015, <<http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/633703/joint-press-briefing-by-secretary-carter-and-minister-parrikar-in-the-pentagon>>.

¹⁵ Cited in Daniel Twining, “The New Game: Why the Bush Administration has Embraced India,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, December 20, 2006, <<http://www.gmfus.org/commentary/new-great-game-why-bush-administration-has-embraced-india>>.

India has been also watchful China's activities in the Indian Ocean. Most Indian maritime strategists has seen Chinese Navy as the no, 1 threat to India in the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ For example, former Indian Ambassador M K Bhadrakumar deemed that the U.S.'s naval dominance is declining. On the other hand, China's navy may have more warships than the U.S.'s in the coming decade.¹⁷ In addition to the famed "string of pearls" strategy and the much-talked-about "One Belt One Road" initiatives, China's submarines have been spotted more frequently in the Indian Ocean since 2010 and have raised hackles in New Delhi.¹⁸

Feeling threatened by China's Indian Ocean ambition, India needs to craft its own approach to counter China's expanding influence. For example, the recent finalization of the Chabahar Agreement between India and Iran is seen as a latest initiative to mitigate Chinese leverage in the Indian Ocean through the Gwadar port in Pakistan. Moreover, China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean and assertiveness in maritime territorial disputes in East Asia has reinforced India's desire to enhance its engagement with its Asia-Pacific partners.¹⁹ India also expanded its naval presence as far east as the South China Sea as a response to China's rise.²⁰ That is, the growing Indian efforts in the Asia-Pacific can be seen as a response to China's rise in general, and growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean in particular. A

¹⁶ Shi Hongyuan, "Yindu dong jin Nan Zhongguo Hai: yitu, fangshi, ji yinxiang"(On India's East Engagement into South China Sea: Motivations, Means and Influence), *Yindu Yang jingjiti yanjiu* (Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review), p.7.

¹⁷ M. K. Bhadrakumar, "Sri Lanka Wards Off Western Bullying," *Asia Times*, May 27, 2009, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/KE27Df01.html>.

¹⁸ Vivek Mishra, "Revealed: India's Ambitious New Naval Strategy," *National Interest*, June 2, 2016 <<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/revealed-indias-ambitious-new-naval-strategy-16438?page=show>>

¹⁹ Danielle Rajendram, "India's new Asia-Pacific strategy: Modi acts East," *Lowy Institute*, December 2014, p.1.

²⁰ Robert D. Kaplan, "Center Stage for the 21st Century: Power Play in the Indian Ocean."

politico-diplomatic engagement of western Pacific littorals seen by Indian scholars as a means to counter China's influence at the strategic level.²¹ India's naval engagement in the East, therefore, is considered a "tit-for-tat" for China's forays into the India Ocean.²²

Some Chinese scholars share similar viewpoints. Shi Hongyuan argued that India likely to raise pressure on China in order to reach a China-India border solution in India's favor, to balance China-Pakistan partnership, and to repel China from the Indian Ocean.²³ In fact, India may not be able to stop the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. But as David Scott argued, India can apply countervailing pressure through going into China's own backyard.²⁴

That New Delhi has its own reasons to compete with Beijing has brought the interest of the US, Japan and some ASEAN countries. Given the shared concerns about China, India's presence can be the opportunity for many countries. For some ASEAN states, India can be counterweight against China.²⁵ Nicholas Burns straightforwardly put it, "the glue" that will bind India and the US together is their mutual concern about a newly assertive China in Asia.²⁶ Chinese scholars agreed that the common strategic goal between the US rebalance to Asia and India's Act East policy is to

²¹ Gurpreet S. Khurana, "China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and Its Security Implications," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.32, No.1, January 2008, p.21

²² Harsh V Pant, "India, US must collaborate on South China Sea," *Hindustan Times*, March 13, 2016, <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/india-us-must-collaborate-on-south-china-sea/story-RcrRLrT1TcNqJ2jegwGCMO.html>>

²³ Shi Hongyuan, "Yindu dong jin Nan Zhongguo Hai: yitu, fangshi, ji yinxiang," p.7.

²⁴ David Scott, "India-China Competition Across the Indo-Pacific," *Center for International Maritime Security*, April 26, 2016, p.5.

²⁵ Wang Li-rong, "Yindu 'dong jin' Nan Zhongguo Hai: fangshi ji yinxiang"(India Involved the Dispute of South China Sea: A Approach and Influence), *Southeast Asia and South Asian Studies* (Dongnan Ya Nan Ya Yanjiu), p.50.

²⁶ Burns, "Our next president must maintain America's strong partnership with India."

jointly balance China.²⁷

In the opening statement at the 12th India-ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, Prime Minister Modi stated, India would like to partner with ASEAN states to enhance our cooperation in advancing balance, peace and stability in the region.²⁸ Against this background, India's Act East policy represents an attempt to warn China away from India's neighborhood and provide confidence to other Asia-Pacific countries that want to stand up to China's assertiveness.

The third motivation for India launching Act East Policy is its role transformation in the region. Just as Danielle Rajendram asserted, India's new Asia-Pacific strategy is partly motivated by India's desire for a greater global role.²⁹ This has been backed by New Delhi's heightened sense of responsibility towards maintaining security in the region. Countries such as the US and Japan also welcome India's role as a security provider in the region. In fact, the term "Net Security Provider" in the Indian context was first proposed in 2009 by the US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who argued that the US looks to India "to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond."³⁰

The idea has been appreciated by Tokyo. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has called for that India and Japan should join together to shoulder more

²⁷ Yu Yinghong, "Yindu Modi xin zhengfu de dui Hua zhengce" ("The policy trends of India's Modi new government towards China"), *Ya Fei zongheng* (Asia & Africa Review), No.5, 2014, p.75.

²⁸ "Opening Statement by Prime Minister at the 12th India-ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar," *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, November 12, 2014, <<https://www.mea.gov.in/aseanindia/SpeechStatementASEM.htm?dtl/22566/Opening+Statement+by+Prime+Minister+at+the+12th+IndiaASEAN+Summit+Nay+Pyi+Taw+Myanmar>>.

²⁹ Danielle Rajendram, "India's new Asia-Pacific strategy: Modi acts East," *Lowy Institute*, December 2014, p.1.

³⁰ Anit Mukherjee, "India as a Net Security Provider: Concept and Impediments," *Policy Brief*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, August 2014, p.1.

responsibility as guardians of navigational freedom across the Pacific and Indian oceans. He proposed a “Democratic Security Diamond” which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific.³¹

But India’s potential as a “security provider” was not fully realized. With the Act East Policy, India will be able to respond to the growing expectations. In the words of the Indian analyst Dhruva Jaishankar, Prime Minister Modi has been unabashed about deepening partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, seeking to manage China’s rise by diversifying regional security partnerships and establishing a closer relationship with the US.³² Harsh V Pant termed Indian navy’s eastward move into the South China Sea and the Pacific Rim as a ‘naval forward strategy’. He concluded that India’s engagements with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines have become more serious.³³ More recently, Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatani applauded the role of India as he said it is very significant for Japan, India and the US to strengthen cooperation to ensure the security of the vast Pacific and Indian oceans.³⁴

India’s regularized presence in the Asia-Pacific is a projection of its ability to act as a “trans-regional” power, if not a global one. With its increasing presence in the

³¹ Shinzo Abe, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012, <<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe/chinese>>.

³² Dhruva Jaishankar “Anti-Americanism is dead”, *Indian Express*, January 27, 2015, <<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/anti-americanism-isdead/99/>>

³³ Pant, “India, US must collaborate on South China Sea.”

³⁴ IANS, “Japan, India to strengthen security ties with US,” *The Times of India*, June 4, 2016, <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Japan-India-to-strengthen-security-ties-with-US/articleshow/52590042.cms>>.

region, India is becoming a “Pacific player.”³⁵ By launching India’s Act East Policy, India seeks to expand its geo-strategic space and to strengthen its image as a big power. Such a “trans-regional” aspiration could also be found in Prime Minister Modi’s address to the joint session of the US Congress on June 8, 2016. Prime Minister Modi stated, “India is already assuming her responsibilities in securing the Indian Ocean region. A strong India-U.S. partnership can anchor peace, prosperity and stability from Asia to Africa and from Indian Ocean to the Pacific.” Clearly, India tends to step up its role as a pan-Asia power, instead of a South Asian state.

India in the South China Sea

India’s perceptible recalibration to the South China issues in the past few years has been at the center of its transformation from a Look East to an Act East policy. India had seen South China Sea as its areas of maritime interest:³⁶ However, in the past, India had maintained a certain distance from the South China Sea dispute.

With implementing the Act East policy, India has gradually shifted its position towards the South China Sea. In 2014, an India-US joint statement referred to the South China Sea for the first time, reading “The leaders expressed concern about rising tensions over maritime territorial disputes, and affirmed the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea.”

It was followed by the India-Japan joint statement, issued during Japanese PM

³⁵ David Scott, ‘Strategic Imperatives of India as an Emerging Player in Pacific Asia,’ *International Studies* Vol. 44, No. 2, 2007, pp. 123–40.

³⁶ Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Indian Maritime Doctrine 2009*, updated online version 2015, <<http://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian-Maritime-Doctrine-2009-Updated-12Feb16.pdf>>.

Shinzo Abe's visit to Delhi in January 2015. India and Japan, for the first time, have jointly voiced their concerns about the South China Sea. The statement stated, "In view of critical importance of the sea lanes of communications in the South China Sea for regional energy security and trade and commerce which underpins continued peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific, the two Prime Ministers...called upon all States to avoid unilateral actions that could lead to tensions in the region."

Although India is not the South China Sea littoral state, there are sound reasons for it to expand its presence in the waters. First, Indian interests are linked to freedom of navigation. An uninterrupted passage of ships for trade in the region are vital to India as more than 40 percent of India's trade traverses through the South China Sea.³⁷ That is, India's involvement in the South China Sea is partly driven by the needs of its economic development.³⁸ New Delhi cannot afford to ignore developments in the Asia-Pacific and senses the need to secure India's sea lanes in the South China Sea.

Second, the South China Sea is seen as the gateway to the Pacific. India's increasing forays into the South China Sea made it an influential player in the Asia-Pacific.³⁹ The focus on the South China Sea has been critical to be a regional security provider in the Indo-Pacific region. The third, and the most weighted, reason is the China factor. India's approach towards the South China Sea is partially motivated by a desire to make it more difficult for China to dominate the South China Sea and thus

³⁷ Ashok Sajjanhar, "2 Years On, Has Modi's 'Act East' Policy Made a Difference for India?" *The Diplomat*, June 3, 2016, <<http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/2-years-on-has-modis-act-east-policy-made-a-difference-for-india/>>

³⁸ Yu Yinghong, "Yindu Modi xin zhengfu de dui Hua zhengce," p.73.

³⁹ Shi Hongyuan, "Yindu dong jin Nan Zhongguo Hai: yitu, fangshi, ji yinxiang," p.19.

more easily access the Indian Ocean.⁴⁰ Considering that the South China Sea is inextricably linked to its objectives in the Indo-Pacific region, the waters have become one of India's areas of interest.

As for the South China Sea disputes, New Delhi demands restraint from all parties to the disputes in the South China Sea. It also requests all parties to abide by the Declaration on the Conduct on South China Sea and the guidelines on the implementation, and to conclude the Code of Conduct to keep peace and stability in the region.⁴¹ More importantly, India hopes China not to move unilaterally in ways that are provocative. If, for Beijing, the Indian Ocean is not an India's ocean, New Delhi's imperative is to contest impressions that the South China Sea is not the waters fall under China's control.

Since India is not a party to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, it needs to enhance maritime security and defense cooperation with countries in the region in order to legitimize its involvement in the issue. In such a strategy, India's relations with the countries embroiled in territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea have figured prominently, most noteworthy, its cooperation with Vietnam in the regional domain.

Both India and Vietnam have close and friendly relations. The two countries had fought against China and still have territorial disputes with China. New Delhi has cooperated with Hanoi in offshore oil exploration in the waters of the South China Sea since 1988. The joint oil exploration did not attract much attention in the early phase. Both India and Vietnam has finally begun to lend a strategic dimension to the

⁴⁰ Alex Calvo, "On India's 'Looking East' Policy and the South China Sea," *Issue Briefings*, no.3, 2015, p.2.

⁴¹ Prime Minister's Office, "Remarks by Prime Minister at the 10th East Asia Summit in Kuala Lumpur," *Press Information Bureau Government of India*, November 22, 2015, <<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=131781>>

oil project in 2011 when India and Vietnam agreed to extend the agreement on oil and gas exploration and production despite China's protests. Beijing had warned that those exploration activities off the Vietnam coast were illegal and violated China's sovereignty. Ignoring strong objections from Beijing, New Delhi decided to continue the exploration project with Vietnam. Interestingly, the Indian Oil and Natural Gas Corporation admitted that it has not found any hydrocarbons in the block in the contested waters, but would "continue operations in line with India's strategic and diplomatic interest in the region".⁴² Just as Indian navy chief Admiral DK Joshi had said, since the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation has oil exploration blocks off the Vietnamese coast and should the need arise, the Indian navy will be on standby.⁴³

In this regard, Vietnam also looks India as a reliable counterweight. To further the cooperation, Vietnam has invited India to explore and exploit natural resources within its 200-nauticalmile exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea.

What is even more remarkable is that India and Vietnam has increased the defense and maritime cooperation. The Indian Navy warships have called on the ports of Vietnam every year since 2000, and as a result would sailed through the South China Sea. The Modi government sent its advanced guided missile stealth frigate of INS Shivalik class to visit Vietnam in August 2014, and in October 2015. Indian government admitted that Indian Armed Forces have been engaged with the capacity building of the Vietnamese Armed Forces particularly the Navy. During the meeting

⁴² PTI, "ONGC Videsh Ltd not to exit Vietnam block despite poor prospectivity," *The Economic Times*, July 12, 2015, <http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-07-12/news/64333955_1_block-128-block-127-block-06-1>.

⁴³ "Indian Interests in South China Sea Being Protected," *The Hindustan Times*, December 3, 2012, <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/indian-interests-in-south-china-sea-being-protected/story-6OiuTRJQ1qHDSF6HA84Dsl.html>>

with the Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, Indian Prime Minister Modi announced to operationalize a \$100 million line of credit to enable Vietnam to acquire naval patrol vessels from India.⁴⁴ More recently, the Modi government has cleared sale of BrahMos supersonic cruise missile to Vietnam in addition to four patrol vessels.

As a reciprocation to Indian assistance for building Vietnam maritime security capabilities, Vietnam has facilitated a greater Indian role in the South China Sea to contest China's claims. The Vietnamese Prime Minister praised India as a major power in the region and asserted that India should actively support parties involved in the South China Sea disputes.⁴⁵ The India-Vietnam strategic partnership becomes an important pillar of India's South China Sea policy.

In addition to Vietnam, India has gradually developed a wide range of relations with other countries in the region, particularly joint military exercises, and frequently sent its warships to the region to add military heft and expand the scope of India's maritime cooperation. India's naval presence in the South China Sea is seen as being crucial for advancing its interests. Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony in 2011 stated, India would go to the South China Sea for exercise to guard the country's interests.⁴⁶ The point was repeated by Indian navy chief Admiral DK Joshi, who said

⁴⁴ "India, Vietnam Shore Up Defense, Energy Ties as China Watches," *Voice of America*,
<<http://www.voanews.com/content/india-vietnam-shore-up-defense-energy-ties-as-china-watches/2499246.html?>

⁴⁵ "India, Vietnam Shore Up Defense, Energy Ties as China Watches," *Voice of America*,
<<http://www.voanews.com/content/india-vietnam-shore-up-defense-energy-ties-as-china-watches/2499246.html?>

⁴⁶ "Defence Minister Antony rules out increasing Naval presence in South China Sea," *ANI News*,
October 12, 2011,
<<http://aninews.in/newsdetail2/story17270/defence-minister-antony-rules-out-increasing-naval-presence-in-south-china-sea.html> >

India will hold the exercise in the South China Sea to protect India's interests there.⁴⁷ Indian naval ships have frequently established their footprint in areas of the South China Sea and beyond.

Although Indian navy had entered the South China Sea earlier, it now tries to link its sail in the South China Sea with India's Act Policy. In May 2015, the Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet sent warships to South East Asia and Southern Indian Ocean, and participate in the bilateral naval exercise SIMBEX with Singapore. During this deployment, the ships visited Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia. The Ministry said the operational deployment was in pursuit of India's Look East and Act East policy.⁴⁸

In May 2016, India sent another four ships of the Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet for a two-and-a-half-month operational deployment to the South China Sea and northwestern Pacific. India's Ministry of Defence described the operation as a demonstration of its operational reach and commitment to India's Act East policy. During this overseas deployment, the ships made port calls at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, Subic Bay in the Philippines, Sasebo in Japan, Busan in South Korea, Vladivostok in Russia, and Port Klang of Malaysia. These warships also participated in MALABAR-16 maritime exercise with the US and Japan.⁴⁹

India's navy operations have been widely interpreted as pitting India against growing Chinese maritime dominance in the region.⁵⁰ By strengthening the defense

⁴⁷ "Indian Interests in South China Sea Being Protected."

⁴⁸ "Indian Naval Ships Enter Jakarta, Indonesia," *Press Information Bureau, Government of India*, May 31, 2015, <<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=122171>>.

⁴⁹ "Eastern Fleet Ships on deployment to South China and North West Pacific," *Press Information of Bureau, Government of India*, May 18, 2016, <<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=145438>>.

⁵⁰ Mishra, "Revealed: India's Ambitious New Naval Strategy."

exchanges with the countries in the region, New Delhi is sending the message that if the concerned parties desire to flesh out credible plan for freedom of navigation within and across the South China Sea, it can now count on India's support.

India's desire to expand its presence in the South China Sea is well acknowledged and this is likely to continue. India's shift from a quite to relatively vocal stand on the issue may be seen as a sign that India is willing to play a more direct role in the South China Sea.⁵¹ The question is: how far will India go in terms of pressuring Beijing to compromise on the territorial disputes? Just as Darshana M. Baruah questioned, "has India really reached a moment where it will play a more prominent role outside of the Indian Ocean?"⁵²

The escalation of the South China Sea dispute provided a further incentive for Washington to seek closer partnership with New Delhi over the issues. In December 2015, the issue of joint patrols in the South China Sea came up when Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar visited the U.S. Pacific Command in Hawaii. The US invited New Delhi to conduct joint naval patrols in the disputed South China Sea in order to take a more united stance against China over the issue.⁵³

Indeed, any collective endeavor to prevent Chinese territorial expansion may be of India's interest. India and the US have already regularly conducted the Malabar exercise since 1992. The Malabar has been held alternatively off India and in the Western Pacific. The 2016 exercise assumed significance as it is being conducted

⁵¹ Darshana M. Baruah, "What India Thinks About the South China Sea," *The Interpreter*, March 29, 2016, <
<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2016/03/29/What-India-thinks-about-the-South-China-Sea.aspx>
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⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ "U.S. and India consider joint patrols in South China Sea -U.S. official," *Reuters*, February 10, 2016, <
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-india-usa-idUSKCN0VJ0AA>>

close to South China Sea and included participation of Japan. It was reported that India and the US started discussions on antisubmarine warfare (ASW), which is likely to prove a critical maritime deterrent strategy against China's adventures in the Indian Ocean.

Despite the fact India and the US have a convergence of interest insofar as they oppose the Chinese assertiveness, New Delhi has rejected to conduct the joint patrols with the US in the South China Sea. New Delhi is very reluctant to enter into any arrangements which may lead to coalitions and alliances against China.

Bharat Karnad from the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi stated, "India does not want to be seen as part of a joint action against China" by participating with the US in freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.⁵⁴ The dilemma for India is that it needs to engage China on trade, global economic stability and climate change given Beijing's vast international weight and influence, although it did not appreciate China's rise and assertiveness.⁵⁵ The strong economic ties the US and India maintain with China inhibit Washington and New Delhi from taking "hard actions" when Beijing acts provocatively in the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean.⁵⁶ As a result, New Delhi desires not to provoke Beijing. Joint patrols with the US are seen as more direct challenge to Beijing, which New Delhi wants to avoid at this juncture, at least. Besides, there are some differences between India and the US on the freedom of military navigation. India too has reservations regarding freedom of

⁵⁴ "Expert: India, U.S. Relationship with China Make 'Hard Actions' Difficult in South China Sea, Indian Ocean," *the U.S. Naval Institute*, May 25, 2016, <<https://news.usni.org/2016/05/25/expert-india-u-s-relationship-china-make-hard-actions-difficult-south-china-sea-indian-ocean>>

⁵⁵ Burns, "Our next president must maintain America's strong partnership with India."

⁵⁶ "Expert: India, U.S. Relationship with China Make 'Hard Actions' Difficult in South China Sea, Indian Ocean."

military navigation through its EEZ.⁵⁷

As far as the South Asia Sea dispute is concerned, India intends to be an “offshore balancer”. And it is worth noting that India still considers the South China Sea as secondary area of interest. Unless it is a situation directly affecting consequences on India's border issues with Pakistan and China, India's approach toward South China Sea will continue to be slow and steady.⁵⁸ India will simply step in only it feels its core interests threatened.

The Chinese Assessment of India’s East Policy

The Chinese intelligentsia is more than willing to buy Beijing’s official argument that freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is neither thwarted nor threatened. Therefore, India’s backing the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is seen as a pseudo-proposition.⁵⁹ Notwithstanding India’s interests in the East and Southeast Asia, China views the Indian inroads into the Asia-Pacific with disquiet as part of a broad move to counter China’s influence.

There are some aspects which have been affected by India’s eastward orientation. First, India’s Act East policy has imparted greater vigor to India’s ties with the US, Japan and some ASEAN states. As a result, it will reduce China’s regional influence.⁶⁰ India’s presence in the region may also impede “China’s peaceful rise”.⁶¹

Second, Beijing considers India’s naval presence in these waters as a

⁵⁷ Baruah, “What India Thinks About the South China Sea.”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Long Xingchun, “S. China Sea patrols bring no benefit to India,” *Global Times*, February 25, 2016, <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/970471.shtml>>

⁶⁰ Yu Yinghong, “Yindu Modi xin zhengfu de dui Hua zhengce,” p.74.

⁶¹ Shi Hongyuan, “Yindu dong jin Nan Zhongguo Hai: yitu, fangshi, ji yinxiang,” pp.4-22.

provocative and destabilizing act which would automatically raise tensions. Other claimant states in the South China Sea dispute may seek India's assistance to strengthen their military capability against China. India's involvement will contribute to internationalization of the South China Sea.⁶² India's engagement with other parties will put negative impact on China's sovereignty claims over the South China Sea. India-China distrust may grow more intense.

Third, the Indian-Chinese rivalry is taking on the dimensions of a maritime competition. The turf war between the two navies is set to grow, as both nations seek greater roles in regional dynamics.⁶³ Chinese scholars argued, the maritime security will be a great distraction that keeps Beijing from border issue with India.⁶⁴ Needless to say, Beijing needs to mitigate the consequence of India's Act policy.

China actually has the ability to retaliate against India whatever the cost and the agony may be. As Long Xingchun, Director of the Center for Indian Studies at China West Normal University, argued, "China is far more capable of making trouble for India than the reverse."⁶⁵ However, Beijing is also of the view that both India and China need to promote economic growth rather than of settling into an adversarial relationship. The popular belief is that the Modi government has a need for greater cooperation with China as New Delhi is keen to attract China's investments. The Modi government's refusal to launch the joint naval patrols with the US implied that it had no attempt to provoke China on the one hand and that its ties with the US are not firm enough on the other.⁶⁶

It may be necessary for Beijing to take appropriate measures to avoid being

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁶³ Pant, "India, US must collaborate on South China Sea."

⁶⁴ Shi Hongyuan, "Yindu dong jin Nan Zhongguo Hai: yitu, fangshi, ji yinxiang," p.20.

⁶⁵ Long Xingchun, "S.China Sea patrols bring no benefit to India."

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

isolated. India has not established any stronghold to choke Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Consequently, the priority for Beijing is to dissuade India from rushing in to de facto alliances against China. Beijing will take Delhi more seriously because Washington does.⁶⁷ It is of Beijing's interest to ensure that the lingering tensions between the two countries do not crystallize into a direct conflict. Even Prime Minister Modi himself sought to downplay the notion of an India-U.S. alliance against China. He said: "There was an age when the world was divided into two camps. That is not true anymore."⁶⁸

To bracket the concerns together, China will appear to be following a dual policy towards India's Act East Policy. On one hand, Beijing will expand its economic cooperation with India to mend the relationship. Some analysts even suggested India's Look East strategy and China's "One Belt One Road" initiative could be integrated.⁶⁹ On the other hand, there is no sign that China will limit its scope of activities in the Indian Ocean. China will not abstain from using all its power to pressure India to when its interests are perceived to be under threat.

Concluding Remarks

India's efforts to set up its influence in the Asia-Pacific region have been increasingly discernible in recent years. The Act East policy reflects the rapidly changing geopolitical realities in the Asia-Pacific, mainly defined by the rising of

⁶⁷ Tanvi Madan, "The U.S.-India Relationship and China," *The Brookings Institution*, January 20, 2015,

<<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/01/20-us-india-relationship-and-china-madan>>

⁶⁸ "Read an Edited Transcript of The Wall Street Journal's Interview With Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2016,

<<http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2016/05/26/read-an-edited-transcript-of-the-wall-street-journals-interview-with-indian-prime-minister-narendra-modi/>>.

⁶⁹ Ding Gang, "China-India competition can upgrade globalization," *Global Times*, June 1, 2016.

China and India, and increased convergence of interest between India and the US.

India's eastward maritime attention has been complemented by unprecedented role changes. India is conceiving a new and more ambitious role for itself in the Asia-Pacific. There is a widespread perception that India's role in the region will continue to grow.

India also tries to be a security provider as New Delhi is carefully following developments in the South China Sea. While India is not a direct stakeholder in the South China Sea territorial disputes. India has pushed this line on the South China Sea in bilateral security discussions with countries including the US, Japan and Vietnam. Today, there is a conscious effort by the Modi government not only to "look South China Sea", but also to 'act South China Sea'. As part of its Act East policy, India is helping Vietnam build up maritime capacities. No matter Beijing likes it or not, India has emerged as one of key players in the Asia-Pacific strategic landscape.

India is well aware of the implications of confronting China and souring relations with Beijing is not in its economic interest. So, New Delhi will not meddle in the disputes directly. India will adopt a more prudent policy towards the South China Sea in a bid to pressure China while avoiding provocations. Even so, India has already achieved some success. New Delhi is welcomed in the region by Washington and its partners. With its growing power, India will strive to expand its influence in the South China Sea. There is still plenty left in the tank.

It is well acknowledged that India's increasing engagement into South China Sea is to counterbalance China. Not surprisingly, Beijing will remain alert to the risk that India's Act policy represents and nurture a response adequately. The future direction of the Sino-Indian relationship depends on their ability to handle significant friction without developing the kind of strategic rivalry.