India’s Pivot to the Asia-Pacific and the Transformation of Its International Role

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Abstract:

In the recent years, New Delhi has purposefully intensified its engagement with countries in the Asia Pacific region. Having secured the support from the US and some countries in the region, India is now looking to expand its presence in the Asia-Pacific. While for years India’s position towards the region has not attracted much attention, this is gradually changing. The development also reflects the wider canvas of changing strategic equations in the region with the rising of China and India. The main argument set forth in this study is as India carries out its own pivot to Asia-Pacific policy, a 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. India also tries to be a security provider as New Delhi is carefully following developments in the South China Sea. There is a widespread perception that India’s role in the region will continue to grow. Beijing will remain alert to the risk that India’s Act East policy represents and nurture a response adequately.

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 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 “act east” discourse.\(^3\) But the intention was transferred into diplomatic actions only after the Modi government came to power. Though New Delhi has not clearly outlined key features, content and the scope of the policy initiative, it appeared that there has been a serious consideration and effort towards “acting east”. More importantly, 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 transfers 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 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

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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 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.

**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.”

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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 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-continent. 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
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 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

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9 “U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region,” January 25, 2015,
10 Burns, “Our next president must maintain America’s strong partnership with India.”
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 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.

India has been also watchful China’s activities in the Indian Ocean. Most Indian maritime strategists have seen Chinese Navy as the no. 1 threat to India in the Indian Ocean. For example, former Indian Ambassador M K Bhadrakumar deemed that the U.S.’s naval dominance is declining, while China’s navy may have more warships than the U.S.’s in the coming decade. 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.

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. India also expanded its

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naval presence as far east as the South China Sea as a response to China’s rise.\textsuperscript{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 politico-diplomatic engagement of western Pacific littorals is also seen by Indian scholars as a mean to counter China’s influence at the strategic level.\textsuperscript{21} India’s naval engagement in the East, therefore, is considered a “tit-for-tat” for China’s forays into the India Ocean.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 share concerns about China, India’s presence can be the opportunity for many countries. For some ASEAN states, India can be counterweight again China.\textsuperscript{25} Nicholas Burns straightforwardly

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\textsuperscript{20} Robert D. Kaplan, “Center Stage for the 21st Century: Power Play in the Indian Ocean.”
\textsuperscript{25} Wang Li-rong, “Yindu 'dong jin' Nan Zhongguo Hai: fangshi ji yinhxiang”(India Involved the Dispute of South China Sea: A Approach and Influence), \textit{Southeast Asia and South Asian Studies} (Dongnan Ya Nan Ya Yanjiu), p.50.
\end{flushright}
put it, “the glue” that will bind India and the US together is their mutual concern about a newly assertive China in Asia. Chinese scholars agreed that the common strategic goal between the US rebalance to Asia and India’s Act East policy is to jointly balance China.

In the opening statement at the 12th India-ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, Prime Minister Modi stated that India would like to partner with ASEAN states to enhance our cooperation in advancing balance, peace and stability in the region. 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.

India’s launching Act East Policy is related to 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. 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

26 Burns, “Our next president must maintain America’s strong partnership with India.”
Ocean and beyond.\textsuperscript{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 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{33} More recently, Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatani applaud 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


\textsuperscript{33} Pant, “India, US must collaborate on South China Sea.”
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 region, India is becoming a “Pacific player.” 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: 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

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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 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. That is, India’s involvement in the South China Sea is partly driven by the needs of its economic development. 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 made it an influential player in the


38 Yu Yinghong, “Yindu Modi xin zhengfu de dui Hua zhengce,” p.73.
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 is partially motivated by a desire to make it more difficult for China to dominate the South China Sea and thus more easily access the Indian Ocean. 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. 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.

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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 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”. It 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.

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

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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 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. 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. 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.\textsuperscript{46} The point was repeated by Indian navy chief Admiral DK Joshi, who said India will hold the exercise in the South China Sea to protect India’s interests there.\textsuperscript{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 sails in the South China Sea with India’s Act Policy. In May 2015, the Indian Navy’s Eastern Fleet sent worships 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.\textsuperscript{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 descried 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 Rahn 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.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{47} “Indian Interests in South China Sea Being Protected.”


\textsuperscript{49} “Eastern Fleet Ships on deployment to South China and North West Pacific,” \textit{Press Information of
India’s navy operations have been widely interpreted as pitting India against growing Chinese maritime dominance in the region. By strengthening the defense 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. 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?”

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.

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50 Mishra, “Revealed: India's Ambitious New Naval Strategy.”
52 Ibid.
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 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 conducted 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. 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. 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. As a result, New Delhi desires not to provoke Beijing. Joint patrols with the

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,
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 military navigation through its EEZ.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{58} India will simply step in only it feels its core interests threatened.

**Concluding Remarks**

India’s efforts to step 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 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.

Meanwhile, 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

\textsuperscript{57} Baruah, “What India Thinks About the South China Sea.”

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
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.