

# LOOK EAST TO ACT EAST

Transforming  
India-ASEAN Relations in  
Modi Era

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# 1

## Geopolitics of Indo-Myanmar Relations and Its Relevance for India's Act East Policy

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Since the inception of human civilization, geography remains an important element for the formulation of policies. Former PM, Atal Bihari Vajpayee once stated that you cannot change geography so you have to cope up with geographical challenges. Kautilya propagated the theory of realism in the spheres of international politics 2400 hundred years ago. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century E.H. Carr and Morgenthau campaigned for the cause of realism in the realm of international politics, however a sizeable component of idealism was mixed with their theories.<sup>1</sup> In the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century an important development was the emergence of neo-realism, associated in particular with Kenneth Waltz whose key argument was that the international behaviour of states derived from the anarchical character of international politics.<sup>2</sup> States had to protect themselves in a situation where there was no overriding authority. Balancing behaviour was the most obvious example of how states sought to achieve their security goals. In Waltz's view international politics was best explained in terms of the nature of the system as a whole, rather than by focusing on the characteristics of states or even human nature. He gave less explicit attention to moral issues than did Carr and Morgenthau. Nevertheless, goals such as peace and security are important to Waltz. His concern is to show how the achievement of such goals is dependent upon understanding how states function in international politics. Liberalism (or liberal

institutionalism) provides an important alternative to the various versions of realism.<sup>3</sup> As an approach to international politics, liberalism places some emphasis on the role of states but also gives attention to other actors such as international organizations, transnational corporations, and non-governmental organizations. Whereas realism focuses on the high politics of security issues, liberalism puts more emphasis on issues concerning economic and social interactions.

The interdependence of all actors in the international domain is a particular theme. In general, liberalism is not explicitly concerned with moral issues. There is, however, an assumption that increasing interdependence will promote international peace and promote human welfare. Some of the themes in liberalism are developed further in globalization theory.<sup>4</sup> Globalization as a theoretical approach is particularly important in fields such as sociology and international political economy, but it also has implications for understanding international politics. The key point is that increasingly political, economic, social, and cultural processes need to be understood on a global level. In the economic domain there is an assumption (no doubt oversimplified) that the global marketplace is dominant. Individual states have less control over their destiny in such a situation (although this can vary with the particular state, of course). From this perspective the high politics of realism is dealing with only one aspect of a very complex world, and is thus grossly oversimplified.

Located among India-China and ASEAN-Myanmar has had immense geo-strategic importance since ages. In Vedas, which is considered 10,000 years old and perhaps oldest global literature, it is mentioned as 'Swarnbumi'.

Myanmar has a great geo-strategic location and is one of the important balancing actors in rapidly changing security architecture of Asia in post-Cold War era. Myanmar formally known as Burma is geo-strategically a trifurcation among ASEAN, India (South Asia) and China (East Asia). It has a huge sea coast with Bay of Bengal and considered as one of the best geo-strategically located countries within Asia. It has emerged as one of the important places within Asia due to its geo strategic location. It is also the largest country within ASEAN in terms of landmass. In post-Cold War era, an intensive power struggle is going on in Asia to restructure the security architecture. Myanmar has a great similarity with Pakistan because military have been prominent power centres in both countries and have also ruled directly for a sizeable number of years in their post-independence period.

In light of India's changing foreign policy over the last three decades, particularly

after the end of the Cold War, Indo-Myanmar relations have also changed radically. The reasons thereof pertain principally to four factors: the economic development of India's North East, India's increased interest in trade with ASEAN, India's search for energy security and increased Chinese involvement in Myanmar and its geo-strategic importance in the chessboard of balance of power in Asia.

PM Modi had visited Myanmar in November 2014 during his first term (2014-19) to participate East Asia Summit and India-ASEAN bilateral summit also. He launched 'Act East Policy' during this visit. It is a new avatar of 'Look East Policy' which was invented by PM Narasimha Rao in 1993 to connect with the countries of Southeast Asia. In fact, Act East Policy is the furtherance of Look East Policy. Only major transformative difference is it that it is more proactive and has stretched its geographical span from Myanmar to Australia. This paper intends to dwell upon the importance of Myanmar in India's Act East Policy. It has become more important when PM Modi has been reelected for the second term (2019-2024) with bigger majority. His government has become a maiden one after 1971 to return in power with full and accelerated majority with the same leader. It is bound to accelerate the proactive implementation of the foreign policy further, which has been hallmark of Modi government since 2014.

Myanmar was not in the focal agenda of India's Foreign policy in first decades of independence despite the fact Myanmar was one of the pioneers of Non-Aligned Movement super headed by Prime Minister Nehru to maintain neutrality during the Cold War era. Nehru was a Wilsonian idealist and never tried to understand Kautilayan notion of realism in the realm of foreign policy. Nehru's utopia was shattered into pieces after 1962 war. China has resolved boundary disputes with Burma almost at the same time. The interesting thing is that in case of demarcation of its boundary with Myanmar, China had conceded McMahon Line, which it had refused to accept with India just after the 1962 war and till date opposes. Former Chinese Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao (2003-2013) met 15 times with his Indian counterpart Dr. Manmohan Singh and Present Chinese President Xi met over 13 times with PM Modi but boundary dispute remains unresolved. When PM Vajpayee visited Beijing in June 2003 it was agreed that high-voltage talks headed by both countries NSAs will take place to resolve the long-standing border issue. Till date even after 21 rounds of the high-voltage talks no progress has been made to resolve it. It has further broken the tall claims of the harbingers of the process of globalization that they have the capacity to resolve thorny conflicts between two big adversaries.

Myanmar is of course a different country for India in comparison with China. Myanmar was part of India till 1935 and even today a good number of Indians are in Myanmar. India and Myanmar share over a 1600 km land border and four Indian northeastern states (Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland & Arunachal Pradesh) have porous border with Myanmar. China is intended to protect its southern flank from possible future Indian threats and needs access to the sea to export goods from land-locked southern China. India fears encirclement by Chinese client states, like Pakistan and to some extent Myanmar. Both major powers need Myanmar's natural gas to fuel their rapidly expanding economies. Since independence, however, Myanmar sought autonomy in managing relations with India and China.

Since the post-Cold War, India has upgraded the contours of its Myanmar policy and discarded promotion of democratic values and adopted realism to deal with it. This strategic competition worries members of ASEAN, who are concerned that an apparently weak and vulnerable state like Myanmar will fall into Beijing's orbit and become a Chinese stalking horse in the region. Prevailing divergences between China and ASEAN countries over South China Sea have further eroded trust deficit despite high voltage trade. Other Asia-Pacific countries, like Japan and South Korea, are concerned about the impact this competition will have on their sea lanes of communication to the Middle East, on which they depend for oil. Meanwhile, Russia is keen to consolidate its foothold in the region, and secure energy contracts with Myanmar, which it is wooing through the sale of arms and a nuclear reactor.

The United States fears that left abandoned by the western countries, Myanmar may slip in the full ambit of China and could become another pariah country. The United States is worried about containing Chinese influence in Myanmar therefore it is engaging Myanmar.

President Obama visited Asia-Pacific just after his re-election in November 2012. Interestingly, he visited Myanmar also and has established a minimum level of bilateral relationship between two estranged countries for many decades. Months before, Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton had also visited Myanmar and it was a maiden visit by any top US officials after 1955. At the same time India-US bonhomie is also propelling and this has been a push factor for the softening of the US attitudes towards Myanmar. All these efforts of engagements have taken place despite a long rhetoric against military government and now military controlled government by India and all other important Western countries including the US. It is merely due to geo-strategic importance of Myanmar. Since the end of the

Cold War, the architecture of Asian balance of power is changing therefore Myanmar has started to exploit its excellent geo-strategic position to maximize its interests through keeping diversity in foreign relations.

Over the previous two and half decades, Myanmar has skilfully exploited its sensitive geo-strategic position, and the fears about its close relationship with China, to win favourable deals from India and some of the key ASEAN countries, notably Singapore and Thailand. Yet Myanmar's military government still feels threatened by the US and other Western countries. To contain the wrath of the Western countries and the US, Myanmar has started to diversify its foreign policy. To achieve this it has started to engage India with full will power and also with the Western countries and the US.

During the expansion of European imperialism even Myanmar was important among competing imperial powers due to its geo-strategic importance. Myanmar has always in some sense been a focal point of political and economic interest or contention. Starting in 1820, the British colonial empire absorbed Myanmar into British India through a series of three expensive and contentious Anglo-Burmese Wars.

Post-Cold War and post-9/11 global architecture of power has given a new twist to Asia. It is widely argued by the pundits of the international politics that Asia will dominate the global system in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are almost coming to an end, but there is hardly any possibility of emergence of Asia. This situation has arisen due to conflict of interests among major powers of Asia. In the case of Myanmar, although all important stakeholders of Asia are involved but India and China are involved deeply due to their geo-strategic clash of interests, and needless to say that Myanmar is of strategic interest for both. Kautilya had stated that two big geographical neighbours cannot be friends. India and China are not only big geographical neighbours but nursing great ambitions as global powers.

Myanmar has abundance of natural resources which both countries need to feed their expanding economies. Myanmar's geo-strategic location is also important for both countries because it is sandwiched between both countries, landlocked areas which despite their all-round progress remain underdeveloped. For maritime point of view, it is again important for both countries. Myanmar is also important because it connects South Asia to Southeast Asia and thus remains extremely important for India, China, ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and of course also to the US due to its unipolar status in global politics.

### Geo-Politics of Myanmar and Sino-India Relations

Myanmar is strategically located between ASEAN and India and also between two fastest growing Asian economies China and India. The relation between 'territoriality' and foreign policy has always interested students of both Geopolitics and Foreign Policy analysis. These fields of study are much more interrelated than is traditionally acknowledged.

Geopolitics was born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and disappeared from universities with the end of the Second World War. International Relations as a separate academic discipline was born during the interwar period. Despite the fact that both IR and geopolitics deal with common issues and share many common assumptions, IR theory never directly mentions geopolitics or its prominent branch. This was at first due to the idealist character of American IR when it emerged during the interwar period. After the Second World War realists came to the fore. Unlike the idealist's worldview, realists viewed IR as power politics and competition between self-interested states in an anarchical international system. It is ironic that the Second World War marked the victory of realism and at the same time loss of geopolitics. Just like the term race, geopolitics was erased from academic literature in accordance with its close association with Nazism. It is assumed that mainstream IR theories cannot be properly understood or analyzed without addressing the theories of geopolitics that abounded and informed them during the period of their genesis. The fields of geopolitics and political geography were central to political thought long before IR grew of its own as a separate academic discipline in the aftermath of the First World War. Although the term geopolitics was only coined in 1899, by Rudolf Kjellen, the field of geopolitics as an intellectual tradition and an expression of state interest and identity politics<sup>6</sup> dates back further to the universities, geographical institutes, and centres of learning in the rival empires of the late nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Some of the eminent writings by intellectuals in this field over the years are: Alfred Mahan, Halford Mackinder, Friedrich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellen, Karl Haushofer, Nicholas Spykman, and George Kennan, as well as some others. Political geography developed as a branch of the discipline of geography and was in common use until the invention of geopolitics in 1899. Political geography argued that states' politics emanated from their geography. As territory is one of the constitutive elements of states, geography is essential to inter-state politics. That is why the age of discovery was sponsored by states. That is why Napoleon, who argued that every state pursues the politics of its own geography, founded the first chair of geography at the Sorbonne University.<sup>7</sup> According to the Dictionary of Human Geography, political geography is:

"[t]he study of the effects of political actions on human geography, involving the spatial analysis of human phenomena. Traditionally political geography was concerned with the study of states—their groupings and global relations (geopolitics) and their morphological characteristics, i.e. their frontiers and boundaries. In the last 20 years increasing interest has been shown in smaller political divisions, i.e. those within states, involving an appreciation of the interaction between political processes and spatial organization, e.g. the nature and consequences of decision-making by urban government, the relationship between public policy and resource development, the geography of public finance and electoral geography."<sup>8</sup>

India was pursuing promotion of democracy as an agenda of its foreign policy in terms of Myanmar since last independence but changed the discourse while anticipating growing Chinese imprint and geopolitical importance of Myanmar in post-Cold War scenario. ASEAN was also apprehensive about the credentials of military dominated governments in Myanmar and therefore was hesitant to include Myanmar in ASEAN, but was finally compelled to incorporate it to maintain cohesion. China is known for its arm-twisting tactics as far as boundary issues are concerned with all of its neighbors but with Myanmar it has accepted the same McMahon's Line as legitimate boundary which Chinese have rejected with India.

It is vindicating Napoleon's assertion that every country is basically pursuing its own geography in the realms of foreign policy. In mid-April 2013, Chinese troops entered 19 km deep into Eastern Ladakh within Indian territory and after great efforts returned in the first week of May 2013. Such incursions into the LAC (Line of Actual Control) are still on and well thought out Chinese ways to test India's courage and send a candid message to India that it should not be allied with its competitor particularly the United States. China is making regular incursions and violating McMahon Line, but has accepted the same line as legitimate in case of Myanmar. Chinese have also occupied strategic Pakistani port of Gwadar in February 2013 and developing it to consolidate its geo strategic status. But through this it has almost surrounded India from all sides. It is estimated by intelligence experts that a strong presence of PLA is already in Pakistan occupied Kashmir. These incidents are indicators that many negative things are occurring in this part of the world and India must correct this situation while offering new vistas of cooperation with Myanmar and other like-minded countries of the region.

### India-China Thrust for Energy Security and Myanmar

The demand for energy in Asia is growing exponentially. A 2011 State Department Public Affairs document projects that:



"if Asia continues its current trajectory, the region will likely account for nearly one-half of the expected growth in the world oil demand between 2008 and 2030."<sup>9</sup>

In particular, the growing economies and populations of China and India are placing an incredible strain on the domestic energy resources of their respective countries. Decision makers recognize that diversity in energy supply will strengthen their economic and political stronghold in the region. In general, their consensus is that a country that relies on a few sources of energy risks being at the mercy of those suppliers and comprises the security of its economic, political, and military agendas. Energy security is thus closely tied to national security, and can even be considered an aspect of it.

Merging the elements of security and energy is a concept that has garnered more attention in the last few decades, accompanying the general realization that energy resources such as gas and oil are becoming scarce. The sustainable growth of India and China despite many global and regional odds has further aggravated the issue. But many of the newly discovered gas and oil deposits are in politically tenuous and unstable regions of the world. Increased demand plus restricted supply drives many governments to re-evaluate this heightened risk; they stretch beyond their borders and political comfort zones to secure access to a cheap and diverse supply of oil and gas, thus establishing energy security.<sup>10</sup>

The competition between China and India, specifically over energy, has regional implications for security. These countries have practiced an energy resource tit for tat, seeking a competitive advantage in securing energy supplies. They use the full array of their diplomatic and economic "arsenal" in securing energy supplies with the "overall strategy to forge closer strategic and political ties with oil-rich countries."<sup>11</sup>

In most instances, both countries directly compete for energy contracts in which the "winner reasoned that the risk of pursuing oil in the "distant and insecure oil supplies in Persia" (present day Iran) was outweighed by the oil's promise of "strategic benefits... of greater speed and more efficient use of manpower."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Churchill saw that oil would not only improve the operational ability of the British Fleet, but also diversify the energy supplies of the British Empire.<sup>13</sup>

The challenge that Churchill faced in the early 1900s is not dissimilar to that faced by contemporary China and India. China and India are "two of the fastest growing economies in the world...(and) are expected to consume a substantial share of the World's energy resources in the coming decades."<sup>14</sup> The pursuit of

energy security is an important component of China and India's national strategies and shape their political and economic decision-making process. The need is so acute that both countries have diversified their energy supply from all possible energy surplus countries of the globe.

Sino-Indian competition is not entirely centered on the pursuit of energy, and the geopolitical facet of their overall competition is a clear illustration of the dynamics between the two countries in the region. Politics and economic interests are inseparable and "there are still considerable strategic misgivings between the two countries that hamper bilateral cooperation in the energy sector."<sup>15</sup> Yet, as Chatterjee contends, both countries have realized that the "lack of energy cooperation...will not only impair their own energy security, but may also have negative implications on regional stability, as has happened in the case of Sino-Japan relations."<sup>16</sup> The intricate and often despairingly political dynamic between these two countries is best exhibited by their energy interests in Myanmar.

In contemporary Myanmar, China and India pursue the same priorities: resource extraction and regional dominance. Their approach toward Myanmar is both comprehensive and competitive in their political support of the Burmese regime.<sup>17</sup> Their support of the current regime is merely a choice of strategic benefit as they have "supported the Myanmar government's seven-step roadmap to democracy and strongly opposed Western sanctions against Myanmar."<sup>18</sup> China and India have chosen in many instances to ignore questionable actions by the Burmese regime, specifically in domestic politics, in order to gain lucrative oil and gas contracts.

China's appetite for energy has significantly grown throughout the recent years. In late 2010, "China's energy import dependency had already amount(ed) to 50% of its total consumed energy, and according to some sources, even 60% or higher."<sup>19</sup> The importance of establishing a consistent and reliable supply of energy is intricately tied to the infrastructure of the Chinese economy. The economy depends on this growing infrastructure, which in turn depends on a consistent and reliable supply of energy.

The rapid lust for more space for energy security in Myanmar by China and India has created environmental problems. The Burma Environmental Working Group (BEWG) published a report on environmental issues concerning Burma.<sup>20</sup> Of particular interest was the impact of multinational companies on the environment; because those companies often represent the interests of various host governments, the report contains useful data on Chinese investment in energy

resources. The authors concluded that, "Chinese companies have invested \$8.2 billion USD in the resource sector in March 2010 alone, including \$5 billion in hydropower, \$2.15 billion in oil/gas sector, and nearly \$1 billion in mining."<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Burma has benefited from a "30-year interest-free loan (from China) in September 2010 amounting to 30 billion Yuan (4.2 billion USD)...for economic development."<sup>22</sup> In short, the revenue and investment figures presented by the Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, the National Bureau of Asian Research, and the BEWG show a trend of significant investment and energy associated revenue in Burma by China.

India's energy security is a critical component of its national strategy. The population of India amounts to an estimated "16% of the world's population."<sup>23</sup> But the country only has "0.4% of the world's oil reserve" to support the energy consumption of the high population.<sup>24</sup> India must therefore import a considerable amount of its oil which currently is estimated at 75 per cent and according "to an estimate by the International Energy Agency, by 2030, India will need to import 91 per cent of its total oil demand."<sup>25</sup> India relies heavily on its ability to secure energy reserves and supplies outside of its borders.

Yet even with this demand for import oil, India was still initially hesitant in its engagement with Myanmar. The relationship started to become focused in 1988 and is characterized by scholars and policy makers to have evolved from "more pragmatic to less moralistic."<sup>26</sup> Initially, that is, India was quick to condemn the domestic policies of the neighbouring Burmese regime. As a result, the relationship between the two countries suffered and long-standing disagreements concerning border disputes, the treatment of the Indian diasporas population in Burma, and trade were aggravated.<sup>27</sup> However, India's "state socialism gave way to economic liberalism" and national policy became more focused on establishing itself as a regional influence in Southeast Asia.<sup>28</sup>

#### Myanmar as a Pivot of India-ASEAN deepening ties

The year 2012 witnessed many changes in economic and strategic dynamics of India and ASEAN. India's bilateral trade with ASEAN has reached to \$80 billion in 2012 even surpassing India-China trade of \$67 billion in the same period. The bilateral trade volume between India and ASEAN was \$71.6 billion in 2016-17; interestingly in the same year, ASEAN-China bilateral trade was \$452.31 billion.<sup>29</sup> ASEAN-India trade is likely to touch \$100 billion by 2020, Union Urban Development and Housing Minister Hardeep Singh Puri stated, calling for greater cooperation between the two sides in economic sector.<sup>30</sup>

Significantly Indo-Myanmar bilateral trade remains \$2.05 billion in 2015-16 to \$2.18 billion which is extremely low given the proximity of both countries.<sup>31</sup> In FY of 2017-18 it was \$1.6 billion.<sup>32</sup>

It vindicates the deepening of relations between both partners. India and ASEAN have also inked much awaited trade agreement in December 2012 at New Delhi. Since 1992, when Look East Policy was launched India has become members of many ASEAN platforms. Meanwhile, discord between ASEAN and China is also growing due to several prevailing differences, but particularly due to the South China Sea. Many among us have perhaps forgotten that ASEAN came into being in 1967 and one of the most important goals of its formation was to contain Chinese expansionism. It is also an open secret that ASEAN and China have a huge trade relation, far ahead than India-ASEAN, but at the same time it is also true that it has not been translated into strategic front. One of the important concerns of China has been the acceptance of its peaceful rise by their neighbourhood. Deng initiated a low-profile foreign policy in late 1980s but it is at stake due to the pursuance of present hawkish policy. A sizeable section of Chinese foreign policy thinks tanks believe that it is time when China must translate its economic power into a strategic arena. Some ASEAN countries who have land and maritime border problem with China are seriously concerned with assertive China and intended to contain it by promoting other regional and global power to ensure their presence in the region. The core issue that China's foreign strategy faces is how to respond in the international community's anxiety towards China and how to make China's rise acceptable to other Asian powers. The real goal for China is to reduce external pressure to win the acceptance and support of other key actors. The Chinese government has paid more attention to surrounding areas than ever before by declaring its 'surroundings Area First' strategic since 2003.<sup>33</sup> But the arrogant behaviour of China towards ASEAN has reminded them to back the ambience of its formation in 1967. ASEAN is now trying its level best to diversify their foreign policy and engage many outside powers, like India, United States, Japan, South Korea, Russia and Australia, to neutralize China. ASEAN wishes that Asia must be multipolar and this will promote and protect their national interests. It is vindicated with the editorial of leading Indonesian daily Jakarta Post:

"The evolving geo-strategic framework inexorably impels countries in Southeast Asia to accept China and India as major regional powers. In the first case, it is necessary consequence of the former...Beijing has also shown an unequaled zest in its economic diplomacy with the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations, ASEAN. Delhi on the other hand has been a late bloomer...ASEAN wants India's presence as much as India needs to be active in the region...ASEAN makes available a strategic framework and regulated forum which India can bluntly interact with economic powers Japan and South Korea along with fellow regional power China. This is an opportunity in which Delhi must not be hesitant. It cannot afford to miss the boat again.<sup>34</sup>

International players are also concerned for engaging Myanmar due to its geo-strategic importance and changing security architecture of Asia. The US has been most critical of Myanmar due to its dismal human rights and democracy record. In August 2011 putting the pundits of international system under deep surprise, the Obama administration announced the appointment of Derek Mitchell as special representative and policy coordinator for Myanmar, an office integral to the administration's 'dual track' approach of engagement and sanctions. He visited Myanmar and cleared the way for the most significant development in improving relations. It was the visit of US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in November 2011, which was a maiden visit since 1955, and it came in the light of what President Obama described as "Flickers of Progress" in Myanmar. The Secretary met the President, Thein Sein, in Naypyidaw, and a day later in Rangoon they met with Aung San Kyi, both of whom described the visit as "historic".<sup>35</sup> President Obama himself visited Myanmar in November 2012 and reinforced deepening of ties. So is the case of many high profile visits from the Western world. Japan has also shown keen interests to develop warm relations with Myanmar. Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe visited Myanmar in the first half of the 2013. British PM has also visited Myanmar. Myanmar's President has also visited Washington in May 2013 and further cemented the ties. The US is aware about growing Myanmar importance in Asia-Pacific. These significant visits by US and allied leaders should be seen in the backdrop of America reinserting itself as a key player in Asia-Pacific, becoming a counterweight to a rising and assertive China, and rallying Asian countries under the banner of the stars and stripes.<sup>36</sup>

This opinion by a leading ASEAN daily justifies the urge of the region. We have witnessed a smooth relationship between India and ASEAN since the adoption of Look East Policy in 1992. But the actual fruit of deepening relationship with ASEAN will only be realized when connectivity will be established between both sides. It was conceived almost 20 years ago but till date proper land route has not been established. Once it gets established, it will be a game changer for both India and ASEAN in the areas of trade and commerce, cultural relations, tourism and people to people exchange. It will also be accelerating the pace of growth and

development of our northeastern states. Majority of road network has already been constructed in Myanmar, only few bridges and missing links have yet to be constructed. Once network will be ready in Myanmar, it will be extended up to Thailand and then it will be connecting India to Hanoi, Vietnam. According to Union Minister of Road Transport, Mr Nitin Gadkari, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is likely to be operational by December 2019. According to him, extension of trilateral highways to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam is being planned and are at different stages of implementation.<sup>37</sup>

We had been obsessed with the policy of democracy promotion in Myanmar therefore we had some problem of trust deficit. Historically, Myanmar has been pursuing diverse foreign policy. While facilitating connectivity with ASEAN, Myanmar will be intensifying its strategic independence and maximize its national interest. India and ASEAN have neither land nor maritime boundary problem. The proposed connectivity will provide India an important foothold within the security architecture of Asia-Pacific. PM Modi visited Myanmar in November 2014 and it was followed by other high-profile visits from both sides.

The ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit was held in New Delhi on 20-21 December 2012. The Vision Document that was adopted proclaimed a Strategic Partnership and underlined the importance of regional integration and connectivity. The Commemorative Summit was attended by the Sultan of Brunei, Presidents of Indonesia and Myanmar, Vice President of the Philippines and PMs of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.<sup>38</sup> In January 2018, all ASEAN heads of states were collective guests for India's Republic Day celebrations. It coincided with India-Summit also. Many bilateral agreements were inked.

The report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) records the extraordinary rise of Asia and points out that, "Asia is in the midst of a truly historic transformation. If it continues to grow on its recent trajectory, it could by 2050, account for more than half of Global Domestic Product (GDP), trade and investment, and enjoy wide spread affluence."<sup>39</sup> Likewise Robert Kaplan, Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, observes that the world's new centre of gravity is in 'monsoon Asia. According to him, "...the sum total effect of US preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan has been so fast forward the arrival of the Asian century, not only in the economic terms that we all know about, but in military terms as well."<sup>40</sup> But the question remains that Asia is fighting within much before its dominance over the global system has been established. In this new security architecture of Asia, Chinese interests are not converging with India, ASEAN, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea and Australia. United States of course has

propelled containment of China policy tacitly and trying to expand the alliance. In this calculation too, Myanmar has immense use for India because of its geo-strategic location.

### Importance of Myanmar for India's Act East Policy

The growing Myanmar-India relationship could be detrimental for the insurgents in northeast India. The northeastern states of Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh share a long porous border with Myanmar. Consequently, almost all rebel groups of the Northeast maintain sanctuaries in remote areas on the Myanmar side of the border. Many parts of North and Northwest Myanmar bordering India are not in control of the establishment. The policy of Myanmar towards Indian insurgents has been a mix. Because India was earlier supporting pro-democracy elements therefore, Myanmar was also supporting northeast insurgents to contain India. But it is also a fact that Myanmar has never had an inimical attitude towards India in terms of supporting insurgents' groups despite Chin, Mizo and Kachin ethnic groups being spread on both sides of the border. The fact remains that when India is not supporting Myanmar it was extending a temporary support to the insurgents. Myanmar cannot sustain the process of supporting insurgents because the Naga insurgent groups like NSCN (K)'S aim of 'Greater Nagaland' includes large areas of Myanmar is a direct threat to Myanmar's national integrity.<sup>41</sup> Many insurgent groups active in Manipur and Assam have bases in Myanmar also. All these rebel groups obtain weapons from various clandestine sources on the Sino-Myanmar border. Some of these weapons originate in China's Yunnan province and while others are made in secret gun factories in areas in Northeastern Myanmar. Myanmar is the corridor to Yunnan where a low-profile Chinese organization known as 'Five Tigers' runs arms deals with tacit understanding of the Chinese authorities.<sup>42</sup> China is very happy to witness that insurgency will sustain in India. Only Myanmar has a common concern with India due to its own vulnerability from the synergy of ethnic groups on its side too. Myanmar has taken practical steps to curb insurgent training centres from its soil but many training centres are still active and need to be dealt with. In June 2019, Myanmar and Indian forces jointly executed operations against insurgents in their territories.<sup>43</sup>

Myanmar has been their natural habitat since decades but since the last one decade their natural habitat has been devastated in Bhutan, partially in Bangladesh and now Myanmar has extended its cooperation to weed out insurgents from its soil. Modi government has taken proactive interest in these affairs and convinced

Myanmar that insurgents' sanctuary in deep Myanmar is not only detrimental for India's security but for Myanmar also, given the fact that it has a larger ethnic spectrum and majority are fighting against the state. Besides this important prevailing cooperation to eliminate insurgents which will facilitate normalcy in northeast India, we need to contain drug menace too that originated from Myanmar known as Golden Triangle. In northeast India this drug trade has created a social havoc where sizeable numbers of youth are suffering with HIV-AIDS. The drug trade is also providing lucrative financial base to insurgent groups. Myanmar is eager to cooperate in this regard because of its own similar problems.

At the same time, one should not forget that Myanmar is a unique country which believes in diversity in its foreign policy options. The changing security architecture of Asia-Pacific has given this opportunity to Myanmar due to its geo-strategic location. China and India have already become the engine of growth in Asia and expected to sustain the process in foreseeable future. As mentioned above western block is also seriously engaging Myanmar for maximizing its national interests in prevailing situation. Myanmar has also become important within ASEAN.

The US and other important members of western block are reengaging Myanmar. India has also renewed its deepening relationship with Myanmar.

PM Modi visited Myanmar in September 2017. It was his second visit after coming into power in May 2014. During this visit many new agreements were inked. In May 2019, PM Modi returned to power for the second term (2019–24). PM Modi had launched 'Act East Policy' while participating in India-ASEAN summit in November 2014 in Myanmar. Act East Policy is a new incarnation of Look East Policy and came out with a new comprehensive mechanism to cope up with new challenges in India's relations with the region. Myanmar also participated in the swearing-in ceremony of PM Modi in his second term on 30 May 2019. We should not forget that Myanmar is the only land bridge between India and ASEAN.

Myanmar has an important geo strategically location in Asia. During the Cold War period it was not vindicated. In the post-Cold War period too, it was not been reflected since few years back. It is connecting South Asia to Southeast Asia. Myanmar has been dominated by the military both overtly and covertly since its inception. China has been dominant in Myanmar since last two decades and invested in energy and infrastructure sector in a huge way. Although in 2011, a mega Dam project was withdrawn from China by Myanmar but still China has a dominating role.

Till recently, India was obsessed with the idea of promotion and protection of democratic values in Myanmar but growing Chinese muscle has motivated India to reconsider its policy towards Myanmar to cope up with the emerging situation. China has given military equipment to Myanmar in a huge volume. China also provides the Myanmar Army with training in the technical use of weapons and weapon systems. Goods bought from China over the years have included armoured personnel carriers, tanks, fighter aircraft, radar systems, ammunition, surface-to-air missiles and short-range air-to-air missile systems. China has already nurtured and availing the status of 'all weather friendship' and their deepening relations with Myanmar could mean that India would find itself surrounded on three sides by Beijing and its area of influence leaving no buffer states. We have noticed the arrogant Chinese behaviour since last few years particularly with the growing incidents of border incursions. In this situation we need to be proactive instead of reactive. Narasimha Rao had initiated this policy engaging Myanmar when his foreign secretary J.N. Dixit visited Myanmar and laid the foundation of convergence. Since the NDA regime (1998-2004) India has accelerated the Kautilyan realism to engage Myanmar. Former PM Manmohan Singh (2004-13) has sustained the process. In the year 2011 and 2012, Myanmar President visited India and it was reciprocated by high-profile visits from the Indian side.

It has created a good opportunity for India. Historically, Myanmar has been pursuing diversified foreign policy and never allowed any particular country to dominate it. Myanmar bilateral relation is not simply important for us but it also connects India to Southeast Asia and that is extremely important for the unexpected growth of India. We could establish connectivity by road and rail with ASEAN only through Myanmar.

### Conclusion

Engaging Myanmar will pay lucrative dividends to us on the chessboard of Asian balance of power. It will be another fulcrum of India's Act East Policy. We are moving on the right direction. The arrival of Modi government for the second term in May 2014 has given a boost to Act East Policy. Myanmar-India bonhomie is all set to grow with prevailing security architecture of Asia. The geopolitics of Myanmar will be a facilitator of our role as an Asian power.

Need of the hour is that we have to deepen our relationship with Myanmar, which will not only be a win-win situation for both but in addition it will facilitate justice-based order in Asia.

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# INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY MODI 2.0

Challenges and Opportunities

Editor

Sudhir Singh

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# 1

## Indo–Iran Relationship: Challenges and Opportunities in the Changing Context

*Aaradhana Singh*

*“Among all the nations and races who have come in contact with India none of them has so everlasting influence on our culture and civilisation as that of Iranians.”*

*– Discovery of India by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru*

The ties between India and Iran date back to the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great. The nations have long influenced each other in the fields of culture, art, architecture, and language, especially during 1526-1757 when the Mughals ruled India. India and Iran also shared a border until 1947. For many centuries, Persian remained the language of Indian judiciary. The first Persian newspaper “Mirat-ul-Akhbar” that was started by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, an Indian social reformer, tells us about the influence that Persian culture had on our history and society. However, after independence, particularly during Cold War era India’s relation with Iran could not sustain the same warmth due to a gamut of prevailing compulsions. Iran, along with Pakistan and Turkey, joined the American-led capitalist block after the Second World War and in contrast India adopted the dogma of non-alignment and tilted towards the Soviet Union–led socialist block. Pakistan has remained a factor between India and Iran. But after the end of the Cold War, many changes have taken place at the bilateral as well multilateral level and these changes have brought India and Iran closer than ever despite many divergent interests and opinions. In the backdrop of the July 2015 nuclear deal with the Western world, Indo–Iran relationship was getting smoother but President

Donald Trump again clamped sanction against Iran and finally scrapped the nuclear deal. These prevailing aspects will be analysed within the ambit of this chapter.

India and Iran have a lot of issues of convergences and few points where they diverge. It must be mentioned that the Indo-Iran divergences are manageable; therefore, despite many odds India and Iran relations strengthened after the Cold War.

Kautilya had opined that convergences in interests are the basic formulation of the foreign policy. Growing India-Iran bonhomie has vindicated this fact. It has also rejected the traditional notion that religious synergy could be a common bond between co-religious countries. Saudi Arabia is the self-proclaimed harbinger of the global Islam and Iran also considers herself fit for the same role but both never had cordial relations particularly after the Cold War. So is the case with Pakistan and Iran. The fact remains that there are more convergences of interests between Saudi Arabia and Iran than between Iran and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia is a key ally of Pakistan and Iran-Pakistan has huge trust deficit. The systematic elimination of Shias started from General Zia-ul-Haq period and all anti-Shia sectarian militant groups have enjoyed tacit support of the military. This ongoing establishment (Pakistani military in Pakistani context) supported violence against the Shias and that has angered Iran. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia proximity has also accelerated the prevailing trust deficit between Pakistan and Iran.

Imran Khan-led PTI came into power in August 2018. Pakistan is facing unprecedented economic crisis. Saudi Arabia came forward to help and gave \$3 billion support and oil of the same amount with late payment.

A major bone of contention between Saudi Arabia and Iran is treatment of Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. In the southern provinces of Saudi Arabia, which is the hub of oil reserves, Shias are in majority and additionally these areas are the important contributors of Saudi oil production. Shias are persecuted in Saudi Arabia because the ruling Saud family of Saudi is basically propagating Wahhabism as their ideology which is Sunni hyperviolent ideology with zero tolerance for the Shias. In the backdrop of Syria and Yemen crisis, sectarian angle is going to be significant within the Arabian world.

Besides, Saudi Arabia has propelled Wahhabism, which perpetuates intolerant Islam and even considers Shias as non-Muslim. Being the richest country of the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia has propagated this ideology of Wahhabism throughout the globe. Iran started protesting export of Wahhabism by Saudi Arabia particularly after 1979 revolution and since then has sustained its protest.

When we go and take a look at the history, General Zia-ul-Haq captured power after overthrowing an elected government led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (a Shia), in July 1977. And through implementation of Nizam-e-Mustafa in 1979 (Rule of the Prophet), Zia consolidated his position. Shias of Pakistan took this initiative as the beginning of their marginalization within Pakistani society as had been mooted against Ahmadis by declaring them as non-Islamic. Since then, more than 20,000 Shias have been killed in Pakistan in sectarian violence. Pakistan is a Sunni-majority country but Shias constitute around 20-25% of the overall population. They are educated, wealthy and possess big land holdings as well. There are ample evidences that Pakistani state and particularly army is nurturing Sunni sectarian groups to eliminate the sphere of influence of Shias. It is also due to the fact that Shias prefer to vote PPP, which is led by Bhutto family and has been harbinger of democratic movements. This has not gone well with the army and it has extended tacit support to the Sunni groups to eliminate Shias. 1979 Iranian Revolution has further boosted the moral of Pakistani Shias and they are hell bent to sustain their exclusive position in the power structure of Pakistan. This has accelerated the sectarian violence against the Shias and being the custodian of Shias across the globe, Iran remains upset with Pakistan.

Iran has proclaimed itself as the custodian of the Shias globally whereas Saudi Arabia has taken up the same role, but for the Sunnis. This bitter enmity between these both countries is accelerating violence within their territory where both sects are dominant by all counts. For the last three decades, Pakistan has become a battleground for them to propagate their interests. We are aware of the nexus between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda with Pakistan. The assassination of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011 at Abbottabad (Pakistan) has vindicated the fact that both have been working with tacit understanding. Interestingly, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda both are claiming themselves as the harbinger of global Islamic Ummah but they are killing Shias in Pakistan. Taliban ruled over Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. During this period, they executed thousands of Shias and fiercely tried to divide the ethnic and sectarian mosaic of Afghanistan. In Mazar-e-Sharif, many officers of the Iranian consulates have been killed during the Taliban period (1996-2001) which brought both Afghanistan and Iran at the brink of a war. Due to the mediation by Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif (1997-99), the tension subsided. Even at this juncture, Shias are under serious threat from the Taliban and their Sunni counterparts, and their sustainable elimination has been going on both in Pakistan and Afghanistan. We are aware that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are two important countries out of three, who gave recognition to the Taliban

government as required under the provisions of the international law. The third one was UAE.

Since March 2011, violence in Syria is taking place between the government and the opposition forces, and according to the United Nations and other global agencies, till December 2018 around 5,25,000 people have been killed. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (a Sunni militant organisation) had declared in July 2013 that they had dispatched their fighters to wage Jihad against the government forces in Syria. One of the most important motivating factors behind this decision of the TTP is that the President Assad is Shia. Saudi Arabia along with their supporters is with the opposition forces and Iran along with China and Russia is supporting President Assad's government. It exposed the egalitarian claim of the Sunni militant groups that they are fighting for the cause of Islam.

Afghanistan is a matter of utmost concern both for India and Iran. During the Taliban regime, India and Iran along with Russia extended their support to Northern Alliance led by legendary leader Ahmed Shah Masood. By December 2014, NATO forces withdrew themselves from Afghanistan. Since 18 years, Karzai and Ghani regimes, an elected one is ruling the country and has tried to build the strength of Afghan National Army (ANA) but there are apprehensions that after the NATO withdrawal, the ANA would not be able to properly contain Taliban. In this prevailing situation, Taliban may take over and given its previous governance record, it could be detrimental for the national interests of both India and Iran. By the end of 2019, this apprehension rules the roost in Afghanistan. In this situation, they must forge a strong alliance to protect and promote their interests in Afghanistan. Needless to say that Pakistan will not allow this to happen; therefore, India and Iran must formulate a combined strategy to handle this situation. Saudi Arabia, the traditional arch rival of Iran, will also support Pakistani position to export its narrow version of Islam as it had already done during the previous Taliban regime. Needless to say that Taliban has been the harbinger of the conservative version of Islam in Afghanistan.

Iran is traditionally a peaceful country. Iran established a national army only recently, under the Pahlavi dynasty. The country has no martial tradition unlike its western neighbour Turkey. After Iraq war, Tehran has avoided direct military conflict, but its military expenditure is slightly higher than compared to those of smaller Gulf countries.<sup>1</sup> In the case of India and Iran, there are less divergences and more convergences of interests and that makes the case that they should cooperate. The changing security architecture of South and South West Asia has

also pushed both countries on the same platform. There are many critical areas where the national interests of the two countries are converging.

Drug trafficking and terrorism is a major concern for both countries. Since the last three decades more than 5,000 Iranian border guards have been killed while containing drug trafficking. Iran shares a large portion of its border with Afghanistan and Pakistan and therefore is being used as a convenient route by drug traffickers to export drugs to Europe. There are strong inter-linkages between drug trafficking and terror network and India and Iran are the worst affected nations from this menace. Pakistan and Afghanistan are the dens of global drug trafficking and terror network. To prevent these situations from having a spillover effect on India and Iran, they must come together and take adequate steps to cope with the future challenges.

Since independence, Pakistan sees India as its mortal enemy. During Cold War, Iran and Pakistan shared a cordial relation. Iran extended its adequate support to Pakistan during 1965 war. In 1979, the monarchy of Iran was thrown out by an Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini. He was considered one of the leading Islamic ideologues along with Maulana Maududi of Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt. Iran has been supportive to the right to self-determination of Kashmiri Muslims particularly during the cold war.

Iran-India relationships have grown manifolds due to many compulsions brought by the end of the Cold War. Many converging interests have been the real cementing force of the Indian foreign policy, as was aptly stated by Kautilya. Three Indian Prime Ministers have visited Iran since the end of the Cold War. In 1993, Prime Minister Narsimha Rao visited Tehran and opened new vistas of a deepening relationship. In 2001, Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited Tehran. This visit was unique because it initiated cooperation in many areas that were unexplored previously—Central Asia, energy and military matters, cooperation in Afghanistan that began along with strategic security. Iranian leaders had reciprocated these top visits. Many other dignitaries from both countries also visited each other. In 2003, Iranian president visited India and was honoured as the Chief Guest for the Republic Day of India, a very special invitation only reserved for the closest Indian friends. In August 2012, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh visited Iran to participate in the 16<sup>th</sup> Summit of the NAM. During this visit, many rounds of negotiations were held with notable delegations. It was agreed that along with Afghanistan, India and Iran must work together on the areas of common benefits. PM Modi also visited Iran in 2016. PM Modi met

Iranian leaders many a times on other platforms as well; the last time they met was during SCO summit in Bishkek in June 2019.

In April 2013, Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid visited Tehran and it was agreed that Chabahar port facility will be expanded. India and Iran have already connected Central Asia through this port while making Delaram Zaranj highway in western Afghanistan. It has also reduced Afghanistan's dependence over Karachi port for trade and other necessities. During this visit, many bilateral agreements were inked ranging from energy supply to defense cooperation. India by all available calculations will become world's third largest energy consumer by 2020. In April 2015, transport minister Nitin Gadkari visited Tehran and pledged the connectivity of Central Asia and Afghanistan through newly developed Chabahar port jointly built by India and Iran. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Indian PM Modi met in Ufa (Russia) in July 2015 and had a 90-minute bilateral talk. During this meeting, it was pledged that India and Iran will accelerate their bilateral relations. In July 2015, Iran and the Western world signed a nuclear deal and now gradually, the decade-long sanctions imposed against Iran were supposed to be lifted. In August 2015, Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, had visited New Delhi and met PM and other ministers. Again it was pledged that cooperation on all fronts will be accelerated. During a one-day visit of Mr. Zarif issues, related to Islamic State threat, energy investments, Afghanistan and development of Chabahar port were discussed. He also stated that India is an important player in West Asia and can play a leading role in the region. PM Modi conveyed India's commitment to work with Iran for development of the Chabahar port that would have far-reaching benefits, not only for the people of India and Iran, but also for Afghanistan and the entire Central Asian region. Mr. Zarif acknowledged India's support during turbulent times. PM Modi visited Iran in May 2016. His delegation included many top brasses including Surface and Shipping Transport Minister, Nitin Gadkari. Many agreements were inked during this visit.<sup>2</sup> Iran has enormous energy reserves and India is today the 5<sup>th</sup> global energy consumer and by 2025 will be 3<sup>rd</sup> largest energy consumer after pushing Japan and Russia. It is also opined by the global economic pundits that India will be representing 23% of global GDP by 2050. For the sustainability of India's growth saga, sustainable and diverse supply of energy is must.

India has more than double the Muslim population of Iran and one fourth among them are Shias. They are peaceful, stay away from any anti-state activities and are contributing enormously in the national development. It is also a big state of satisfaction for Iran because almost all countries where Shias are under

suppression are Islamic countries, but despite the majority of Hindus, Shias are comfortable in India.

The United States and India share a good relationship since the last two decades. The nuclear agreement inked in 2008 and the deepening bonhomie is the testimony. Dr. Manmohan Singh visited Tehran despite a huge protest by U.S.-led block. Tension still prevails between Iran and the Western countries over the nuclear issue despite truce made by President Obama and President Rouhani after their telephonic conversation in the latter part of 2013. In the backdrop of this tension, Dr. Singh's visit was path breaking. Many bilateral treaties were inked during the visit. This visit gave renewed hope to Iran and negated the notion that it has been isolated at the international level. President Donald Trump has discarded previous agreement inked by President Obama with Iran and imposed gamut of sanctions despite the opposition of their NATO allies.

Afghanistan remains a top agenda between India and Iran because of convergence of interests. Iran never supported Taliban and forged a Northern Alliance along with Russia and India. During its five years (1996–2001) of rule, the Taliban executed thousands of Shias in Afghanistan. Being the only Shia-majority country on the globe and an immediate neighbour of Afghanistan, it was a matter of serious concern for Iran. In the recent decades, Iran was compelled to understand that Saudi Arabia has started sharing a much deeper relationship with Pakistan; therefore, it has set a new tone for its relationship with India. Under the Imran Khan-led PTI government which came into power in August 2018, the bonhomie between Saudi and Pakistan has further emboldened.

Kautilya had said that an enemy's enemy is a friend and trust deficit between Iran and Pakistan has provided India an opportunity to cooperate with Iran on a variety of issues. Iran has cooperated with several other regional countries, notably India and Russia, to gain influence in any post-American Afghanistan. During the Afghan civil war in the post-Soviet period, these three countries constituted the bloc that supported the Northern Alliance in opposition to the Pakistani and Saudi-supported Taliban forces.

#### Strategic Imperatives for the Development of Chabahar for India and Iran

In order to address its need to secure energy routes, and to contain the growing Chinese influence in the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean, India brought Iran into an economic and strategic alliance. India invested huge resources

for the construction of Iranian Port of Chabahar. It will be easily accessible for Indian imports and exports through road and rail links to Afghanistan and Central Asia. In the last week of February 2019, a Himalayan step was taken in this direction when maiden Afghan goods were uploaded on ships at Chabahar port which is jointly developed by Iran and India.

According to Afghan officials, 23 trucks carrying 57 tonnes of dried fruits, textiles, carpets and mineral products were dispatched from western Afghan city of Zaranj to Iran's Chabahar port. The consignment will be shipped to the Indian city of Mumbai. At the inauguration of the new export route, President Ashraf Ghani said Afghanistan was slowly improving its exports in a bid to reduce its trade deficit. "Chabahar port is the result of healthy cooperation between India, Iran and Afghanistan this will ensure economic growth".<sup>3</sup> Chabahar has provided an easy access to a port to Afghanistan and has ended Afghani dependence over Karachi port of Pakistan for export/import activities. Chabahar port has enabled both countries to engage in trade by passing Pakistan.

Chabahar's geo-strategic location plays an important role in connecting India to Afghanistan and Central Asia both militarily and economically. India perceives Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan situated at the crossroads of overland trading routes as a potential consumer market for Indian products. Similarly, Iran wants to get India's cost-effective source of high-technology inputs.<sup>4</sup> India's ultimate objective is to bypass Pakistan, and also cooperate with Iran on a highway and rail system that leads from Chabahar port into Afghanistan and Central Asia. Highway connecting Afghanistan and Central Asia has been in order for many years. Rail system has to be restored. Modi government has inaugurated 1<sup>st</sup> phase of the port and it became operational and has also secured its exemption from the American sanctions against Iran. The first meeting of the follow-up committee for implementation of the trilateral Chabahar agreement between India-Afghanistan and Iran was held in the port city of Chabahar on 21 December 2018 to finalise trade and transit corridors. They agreed on the routes for the trade and transit corridors between the three countries. India Ports Global Limited had opened an office in the port city and taken over operations of the port.

The Chabahar port in the Sistan-Balochistan province on the energy-rich nation's southern coast is easily accessible from India's western coast and is increasingly seen as a counter to Pakistan's Gwadar port, which is being developed with Chinese investment under the ambit of CPEC and is located just 80 km east from Chabahar.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, there is active Chinese cooperation in the Port of Gwadar, since it is the only port which can serve the best interests of both China and Pakistan in the region. The Port will, therefore, enable China to keep a strict watch on India's growing influence in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and Persian Gulf. Hence, the possibility of any future economic and military collaboration between India and the US in the region can be effectively dealt with. Another geographical advantage of the port is that it will reduce the distance for energy imports from Persian Gulf to China. Gwadar also holds a geo-strategic significance for China because of its proximity with the sea lanes between West Asia and China. It is vital for oil trade. As a gateway to the Indian Ocean, Gwadar will provide Beijing with a listening base from where the Chinese may exert surveillance on hyper-strategic sea links. The military activities of the Indian and American navies in the region can also be closely watched by the Chinese. Gwadar port will also provide a strong base for Chinese ships and submarines. Since Gwadar Port can fulfil its political, security and commercial objectives vis-à-vis India, China has spent a huge amount on its construction. It is one of most significant signature projects of the Chinese President Xi Jinping. The port will also help both China and Pakistan to promote trade with Gulf States possessing 63% of world's oil reserves.<sup>6</sup>

China has acknowledged the strategic significance of Gwadar no less than that of the Karakoram Highway.<sup>7</sup> This will further strengthen the relations between China and Pakistan. China is also interested to turn Gwadar into an energy-transport hub by building an oil pipeline from Gwadar into Chinese Province of Xinjiang. The proposed pipeline will carry crude oil from Arab and African states. Gwadar's strategic advantage to China is due to its close proximity with the Strait of Hormuz. The presence of the US forces in the region poses not only a threat to Chinese navy but, also to its commercial interest. Gwadar provides China with a strong base where it can monitor US naval activity in the Persian Gulf and Indian activities in the Arabian Sea. China has already set up electronic posts at Gwadar for monitoring maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea. It seems like a historical irony that Gwadar, which used to belong to the Omani sultan, was offered to India in the 1950s under Nehru. At the time, India refused on the grounds that it would not be able to defend it from Pakistan.<sup>8</sup>

Chabahar is a part of the Indian grand design to apparently develop transportation infrastructure. It is however viewed with suspicion to sabotage Pakistan's future strategy of expanding its influence in Central Asia and beyond. Chabahar provides India easy access to Afghanistan and Central Asia through

Indian Ocean. India's ultimate desire is to connect Chabahar with Central Asian republics through roads and a network of railway system to bypass Pakistan, and to reduce the dependency of Central Asian countries on the Pakistani port of Gwadar. Iran is already enjoying close socio-cultural and economic relations with the Central Asian republics. Iran is working on several projects in Tajikistan including the Anzob tunnel, and has constructed a bridge over the Amu Darya (Oxus River) that connects Chabahar with the Khojent route. In addition, the construction of 218-km-long Zaranj-Delaram highway that now links Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar and also connects Herat and Kabul via Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and Kandhar in the south—thereby providing easier inroads in Afghanistan and possibly even further, to Central Asia via Iran.<sup>9</sup>

Owing to the fact that Central Asian countries are land-locked, they depend on Iranian ports, especially on Chabahar for trade and commercial relations with the rest of the world. Moreover, Afghanistan is more friendly and close to India than Pakistan. In this regard, with its eco-strategic positioning in Iran, India gets opportunity to have an access to warm waters through this region. The creation of North-South Corridor is the best prospect for Iran to expand its transit corridor to India. The idea of North-South Corridor has multiple purposes and is, therefore, seen as an opening to bypass East-West Silk Road Project.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, India gains more security, political, economic and strategic advantages from Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia as compared to China. Iran is more stable than Pakistan. It has better relations with Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. Bordering Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, Iran has a natural geographical advantage by providing access to Sea for the Central Asian States. However, intensifying competition between India and China in Arabian Sea and Central Asia, and the growing US concerns about China's offensive capabilities made the global and regional security environment more complex and sensitive.

For India and Iran, the stability of Afghanistan, containment of terrorism, containment of drug trafficking, integration of Central Asia with larger world, energy security, pipeline issues and development of commerce and cooperation in energy sector are some of the important cementing factors of their bilateral relationship. The nuclear issue and Western sanctions on Iran and Kashmir issues are issues of contention between both countries.

There are a range of divergences between India and Iran. These divergences need to be narrowed down. The first and most important among them is nuclear issue. Due to the 2008 nuclear treaty, India and United States have been converted

from being Cold War-era Estranged Allies to Engaged Allies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This development maintains Kautilya's theory that convergences of interests play a decisive role in the realm of international relations. Islamic State has become a serious cause of concern for the countries in the Middle East. Iran is the only country within this region that has shown its willingness to contain Islamic State. The United States is also concerned to contain Islamic State. This is equally true to contain the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan. The resurgent Taliban and the Islamic State is also a serious security threat for India, Russia and China. This prevailing security architecture in the Middle East and South West Asia has pushed India and Iran to deepen their relationship.

This cooperation will bring durable peace and cooperation in the most volatile part of the globe. India, today, is perhaps the only capable country to convince both of them on this issue. Bringing United States and Iran closer on the same page on diverse conflicting issues is in the larger national interest of India and of regional peace also. It will also provide stability to the security of South West Asia. India must convey to the United States that Iran is mutually beneficial for us. India must also advice Iran that instead of confronting the US, it must cooperate with the Western world to protect Shia Muslims on humanitarian grounds. Iran was trying to free Shia places of worships in Iraq but it yielded no adequate results since it was not vacated due to American military operation. After the death of Saddam Hussain in 2003, global community got to know that two of the most sacred places of Shia worship, Najaf and Karbala are in Iraq and not in Iran. Iran must also shed its mindset of opposition for the sake of opposition to the United States. It is also equally applicable for the United States. India is better positioned today to mediate between two bitter rivals probably first time after the end of the Second World War.

Second most important irritant between India and Iran is the Kashmir issue. Recently, Iran has not extended its support to the cause but previously it had extended its support to independence of Kashmir. Iran must understand with its experience in Iraq war that religion cannot be a promoter of national interests. Since many decades, Iran is competing with Saudi Arabia on a number of issues. Both are harbingers of Islam, so then a question that arises is why are they fighting against each other? Only convergences of interests are the cementing factor in foreign policy. It is an open secret that India and Iran's interests converge on several grounds; therefore, they are cooperating not only for the protection and promotion of their national interests but also for peace and stability in the region.

Iran is yet another point of contention between India and the United States although recently India has been motivated by the US to participate in UN-led Western sanctions against Iran. Global concern over Iran's nuclear weapons development program, and the potential for subsequent proliferation has driven US efforts to coordinate a coercive international sanctions regime. India, however, has a long historical and mutually beneficial relationship with Iran centred on trade, commerce, and cultural diffusion, with India currently importing significant amounts of oil from and facilitating the financing of Iranian energy companies—the targets of Western sanctions. India and Iran are two important old civilizations and have been connected to each other since millennia.

After the end of the Cold War, there has been a shift in the global distribution of power from the West to the East. While the political system globally can still be described as unipolar, Asia is characterized by multipolarity. The powers of Asia compete for power, influence and resources. India is amongst the great powers on the rise. India is the seventh largest country in the world, the second most populous and the world's largest democracy.<sup>11</sup> It is one of the world's most powerful economies and has highly professional armed forces, which have made India emerge as an entity that can help shift the global balance of power.

In this changing political environment, India has struggled to define itself and comprehend its power capabilities as well as the possibilities and limitations of that power. Indian global thinking is characterized by a lack of consensus on a strategic framework that can structure its foreign relations.<sup>12</sup> India could change the game while invoking real spirit of NAM in the context of Iran. Given the pressure by the United States on India in this context, we must take a principle stand and advise both to settle their thorny issues through amicable means of settling disputes. Fortunately, the situation is emerging to help India's ideal line on Iran.

### Concluding Observations

What complicates India's Iran policy is that the US and Iran are adversaries. The US wants to isolate Iran, partly through imposing strict economic sanctions on the country, and it wants its other ally countries, including India, to follow this suit. Under President Donald Trump's administration, this prevailing issue has been further complicated. This forces India to engage in a delicate act of balance between, on the one hand, pursuing its regional goals and beneficial policies towards Iran, and on the other hand ensuring that the relationship with the US does not suffer. The question is how big a part the United States' policy has

played on the Indian foreign policy's decisions that concern Iran. Since President Rouhani's rule, Tehran has perhaps understood realist aspects of the delicacy of its diplomacy particularly towards the West led by the United States.

It is a compulsion also of both the parties to resolve the crisis. Things are going on positively at least till date and one must hope that a win-win situation will be achieved by both the parties. At the outset of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the contours of international system have changed radically. It has provided an opportunity for both the countries. India is growing rapidly and all set to become third global energy consumer by 2022. The sustainable growth of India could not be ensured till the ensuring of energy security. Iran is one of the top five global energy-producing countries and its geographical location also gives India an advantage. Iran could be an excellent energy security guarantor to India. In contrast, it can also provide a sustainable energy consumer to Iran. In Central Asia too, Iran and India have several convergences. They wish to connect Central Asia with the Iranian port of Chabahar. It will give an impetus not only to Central Asian Republics but also to India and Iran. Iran is an energy-producing country and its sustainable growth depends on the sale of its precious natural resource. Due to its growing energy requirements, India is and will be an important buyer of Iranian energy products.

Eminent Indian security analyst, Raja Mohan has rightly stated in November 2013, "Any nuclear deal between Washington and Tehran will immediately bring down oil prices, relieve the current macroeconomic pressures on India, and improve Delhi's energy security calculus over the longer term. US-Iran rapprochement will help to strengthen Afghanistan against the Taliban and Pakistan and expand India's room for regional maneuver after 2014."<sup>13</sup> The deal between Washington and Tehran has already been concluded but new regime of President Trump has changed the contours of United States-Iran relations. President Trump administration is tilted towards Saudi Arabia and set to dent Iran. New sanctions have been clamped against Iran by Trump administration and the United States is expecting that India should do away with oil imports from Iran. United States has deployed its all-powerful navy in the Strait of Hormuz and it is going to be stationed there till 2020 US presidential election.

India-United States bilateral relations have deepened since last two decades. In September 2018, United States gave 2+2 dialogue status to India where foreign and defence secretary came together and had a summit level talk with their Indian counterparts. India has to convince United States that Iran has been a stabilizing



factor in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iraq and Syria conflict could not be resolved without Iranian cooperation. Iran is an important player and it had been part and parcel of Indian efforts along with Russia and Central Asian Republics to contain Taliban and formation of the Northern Alliance during Taliban rule over Afghanistan (1996-2001). In the backdrop of NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, this proximity is utmost required and the US interest is also served. Containment of the Islamic State has remained a serious concern for the Western block, Iran, India, Russia and China. The way Islamic State has been executing its captives, it reminds us of the medieval barbarism and through these heinous acts, it has emerged as a threat to global humanity. Iran could be pivotal to contain Islamic State because one of the undeclared objectives of the Islamic State has been to weaken Iranian influence in the Middle East.

India will extremely benefit with its growing bilateral relationship with Iran and vice versa. Both countries have come together on a wide range of interests—be it economic, strategic, or others; therefore, they must minimize the divergences. In August 2013, Vice President of India was present in the swearing-in ceremony of new Iranian President Rouhani. It was an excellent goodwill gesture. Both countries are availing good relationships but to cope up with the emerging challenges, they urgently need to enhance it.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited New Delhi in February 2018. President Rouhani and PM Modi had extensive talks and inked nine agreements. It includes easing visa rules and cooperation on medical sector apart from a maritime agreement on Chabahar port development.<sup>14</sup> Trade, investment and regional connectivity between India and Iran received a boost from this visit. Deepening India–Iran bonhomie is quite important for the peace and stability in Southwest Asia. One of the most important obligations for a country is to provide basic human rights and security to its people. Both India and Iran could do it successfully through a deepened relationship. It is of utmost importance to both the countries to promote their bilateral relationship. Modi government has adopted 'Look West Policy'. The mandate of this policy has been to engage countries which are situated west to India. Iran is one of the fulcrums of India's Look West Policy due to its energy reserves and geo-strategic location. Modi government has taken many pro-active steps to accelerate Indo-Iran relationship despite many prevailing issues. The prevailing trust deficit between Iran and the United States has complicated India's option for energy security. India imports 12% of its energy demand from Iran. Due to the US sanctions, India is compelled to stop the imports. If tension between the US and Iran will aggravate further, global oil

prices will go up and that could be detrimental for Indian surging economy because India imports over 90% of its energy requirements. Modi-II government is expected to forward its previous NDA policies led by PM Vajpayee with the timely modifications in the context of Indo–Iran relationship.

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# INDIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY

A MARITIME SECURITY  
PERSPECTIVE

*EDITOR*

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## India's Maritime Policy in the context of Changing Asian Security Architecture

Aaradhana Singh

India has emerged as an important Asian power with the advent of 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the global level also, it has become an important player and sharing all important global and Asian multilateral platforms. Since the end of cold war, the locus of global system has started to tilt towards Asia and according to global economic pundits, Asia will be representing more than half of the global GDP. It has further changed the dynamics of bilateral and multilateral relations in Asia.

We are aware of the fact that a wide array of opinions was expressed since the end of the cold war on the idea that Asia will be an important player in the coming decades. At the end of the cold war, debates started on new lines by the formulators of foreign policy that both World system and Asian system must be multi-polar. This is one of the most significant issue where India and China diverge as China's underlying problem lies. China does not have a problem with world being multi-polar but it wants Asian balance of power to be unipolar super headed by China. Japan also thinks similar to Indian line and thus bilateral relationship between India and Japan has been deepening since the end of the cold war. India-Japan relationship has grown rapidly since last one decade. Due to inherent geo-political, economic and strategic dimensions this bilateral relationship is all set to reformulate new Asian balance of power based on multiplicity.

China, Japan, India and Vietnam are indulged in reformulating the balance of power within Asia. Other Asian countries also do not China's supremacy and thus their bonhomie with the competitors of China is deepening in an excellent manner since last one decade and all set to grow in the foreseeable future. In recent years, China has exposed its intention to use force to capture Islands under Japanese rule since many decades.

In various regions of China, protests had been organized against Japan including Hong Kong protests, which demanded capture of Japan ruled Islands in East China Sea. Including United States, India had also insisted amicable resolution of disputes and adherence to international law by all concerned parties. Due to border disputes with China, India has also been apprehensive about Chinese steps and that also has strengthened its bilateral relationship with Japan in a massive manner. These events vindicate that balance of power theory is working well in Asian theater and all set to sustain the process due to Chinese reluctance to accommodate the aspirations of other countries.

The new balance of power in Asia is all set to reshape existing power architecture. However, the theory of balance of power according to its proponents has come into being with the theory of Prisoner's Dilemma. Balance of power has been one of the most debated concepts of the international relations. The balance of power is a form of compromise among states that find its order preferable to absolute chaos, even though it is a system that favors the stronger and more prosperous states at the expenses of the weaker. Great powers play the dominant role in balance of power system because of their preponderant military force and their control of key technologies.<sup>1</sup> The cold war era just after the end of the Second World War is a classic example of balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the post-cold war era even the prevalence of the anarchic international environment has created a fear psychosis. Military build-ups and its competition by rival powers have left every harbinger of the international system insecure therefore all countries are trapped in a dilemma. This phenomenon is called the Security Dilemma.<sup>2</sup>

Right from Keshore Madhubani to several other pundits of international relations, everyone is discussing the emergence of an all-powerful Asia but the weighty question is why Asian powers are not cooperating and thus negating utopian idea of cooperation among Asian countries if we compare them with the European countries. China, India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Iran and Vietnam are some of the important Asian powers. The changing power configuration in Asia has altered Nehru's hypothesis and Asia seems to follow European model of conflict, however the post second world war Europe has emerged as a beacon of cooperation and must be emulated by other regional groupings. Major Asian countries are not cooperating because of underlying divergence in interests among them. China wants its unipolar dominance over Asia but at the global level wants multi-polarity. India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Iran and

Vietnam wanted both Asia and the globe to be multi-polar. Kautilya, one of the earliest strategic thinkers had stated that convergences of interests are the base which determine a state's foreign policy. There are some common interests between India and Japan. This bilateral relationship could be one of the most deepening relationships of 21<sup>st</sup> century Asia. It is also relevant to be noted that they had an average relationship during the cold war. Even after cold war, 1998 Pokhran-II nuclear testings by India took the world by surprise. Many countries including Japan reacted sharply. It suspended all political exchanges and even economic assistance was frozen for nearly three years.

According to two leading foreign policy experts from China Institute of International Studies "India's border dispute with China have yet to be resolved and therefore it views a stronger relationship with Japan as a way to counter balance China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region."<sup>3</sup> As China's dispute with Japan escalates over Islands in East China Sea, China seems worried that India will throw its weight in favor of Tokyo. Chinese experts believe that India and Japan share much strategic common ground on China. First time probably in recent history, Chinese experts have accepted that India is working on the reciprocation of Chinese policy of encircling India within South Asia and therefore deepening its relationships with all estrange neighbour of China.<sup>4</sup>

India-United States relations have also deepened phenomenally since last two decades. Both were estranged allies during cold war era but today they have converted their relationship into that of being engaged allies. In June 2019, G-20 summit has taken place in Japan and besides normal business; sub group summit has taken place in the sidelines of G-20 summit. It is known as JAI (Japan, America and India). Growing India- United States relations have further propelled India-Japan and India-ASEAN relations as well. These strengthening alignments have further complicated the security architecture of Asia.

India is well settled in the midst of the Indian Ocean. It is the natural custodian of Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean has become extremely significant because more than half of the global trade commutes through it. It also connects South China Sea near Malacca Strait which is extended to Andaman Sea. South China Sea connects Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. The growing economic activities have kept the entire sea route of communication extremely congested and it has given birth to new unwanted activities like piracy and others in the region.

Just after the end of the cold war, India's trade was hardly 30 billion dollar, which has reached above 800 billion dollar by the end of 2018. That also makes maritime policy of India quite important not only for India's comprehensive security but also for justice-based sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean and adjoining seas. This paper is, therefore, intending to dwell upon maritime issues in the context of changing security architecture of Asia and how India can cope up with the emerging challenges is moot research point of this paper.

The arrival of Modi government in 2014 has been a new hallmark in Indian politics because after 30 years, people of India gave single party majority to Modi led NDA. In November 2014, PM Modi declared the up gradation of Look East Policy into Act East Policy in India-ASEAN summit held in Myanmar. According to Daniel Rajendran, many saw it as a defining moment of India's Asia policy.<sup>5</sup>

Look East Policy was mooted by PM P. V. Narasimha Rao to consolidate Indian imprint in Southeast and East Asia given the enormous goodwill and soft power India possess in the region. Act East Policy is just an accelerated version of that process. First of all, it has upgraded the ambit from Myanmar to Australia; secondly, it insisted proactive mode instead of reactive and thirdly it has strategic components besides economic aspects.

At this juncture, security architecture in Asia has remained unstable. China is willing to dominate the narrative of sole supreme authority in Asia. India along with like-minded countries are opposing that idea. Interestingly United States, which had not been very cooperative with India during cold war era, has also been standing with India to keep Asia multipolar. It vindicates Kautilyan notion which proclaims that synergy of ideology cannot be cementing factor of international relations only synergy of national interests.

India has developed better than average trade relations with the countries of ASEAN and East Asia. ASEAN and East Asian countries have developed excellent trade relations with China but they have simultaneously been confronting with China because of trust deficit. South China Sea and East China Sea have emerged as flashpoint between China and the countries of its neighborhood. The countries of ASEAN and East Asia want India to act as a counterbalance to China in this region as China has both actively and passively challenged international norms and sovereignty claims in its neighbourhood. Traditionally, India has been considered a weak strategic power due to its slow decision-making process. Arrival of Modi in 2014 for

the first term and its historic repeat in 2019 has infused a new momentum in the contours of India's foreign policy. Dokhlam (2017) and Balakot (2019) has emboldened Indian strategic imprints particularly in Asia. Modi government has adopted proactive foreign policy which is based on the ideals of realism instead of idealism. Post Dokhlam, PM Modi had met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan for an informal summit. Both leaders met 11 times in last five years and President Xi Jinping is coming to India for another summit level talk with PM Modi in later part of 2019. At the same time India remains only country perhaps to oppose Chinese OBOR and other connectivity inter-continental projects.

Maritime policy remains at the core of India's newly calibrated proactive foreign policy being a natural guardian of the Indian Ocean. More than half of the international trade commutes through it. It also connects all important global sea lanes of communication. In recent years, India has upgraded its defense budget and substantial allocation have been made for the naval forces also. Although it is not enough given the fact that major fleets are ageing and need urgent replacements but even with less than required budget, Indian navy is known for its quality and competence and has shown its swiftness to ASEAN countries in the backdrop of 2004 Tsunami.

Since last few years, Indian navy has been extremely active in ASEAN, East Asia and larger plank of the Indo-Pacific. It has been one of the hallmarks of Act East Policy. Port calls, joint naval exercises and maritime capacity building programmes with friendly navies has uplifted India's geopolitical status in ASEAN and East Asia. Regular warships deploy in Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea has underlined India's nautical dimensions of India's Act East Policy. Regular and intense joint bilateral and multilateral naval exercises have underlined India's maritime interests in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>8</sup>

Indian trade has also gone up rapidly since the end of the cold war. Before cold war, India's overall trade was almost negligible but now it is roughly touching 1 trillion dollar. India needs justice based free sea lanes of communication for this purpose and needless to say that it is in larger interests of all important countries who have stakes in global trade. India has also shown enough courage to stand with the disputant countries of ASEAN on South China Sea and also stood with Japan on East China Sea issues. In both disputes China has negated the legitimate rights of the disputants and declared that South China Sea as its own territory and also refused to obey international tribunal order in 2016 in favour

of Philippines. United States and many like-minded countries also stood with India on both disputes. It is not for curving out any territory in the region but for the compliance of relevant international laws. South China Sea has emerged as new bone of contention between China and disputant countries of ASEAN. "Never let a good crisis go to waste," the late British Prime Minister Winston Churchill advised. The Reed Bank crisis, which saw a suspected Chinese militia vessel sink a Philippine fishing boat in June 2019, has energised those who advocate upgrading the Philippine-US alliance.

Latest surveys show a growing number of Filipinos now favouring a tougher stance in the South China Sea and advocating for more cooperation with traditional allies against China.<sup>7</sup> Present Philippines President is a Chinese ally but due to changing public opinion he is under immense pressure to change his South China Sea policies. It will gravitate Philippines towards the United States which is proactive to ensure relevant international laws in South China Sea.

New Delhi has moved forward to strengthen strategic maritime relations with the littoral countries of ASEAN and East Asia and sought exclusive greater stability in power balance in maritime Asia. Indian navy has upgraded its ship deployment. In 2013, 4 ships were present in 4 countries but by 2017 the number has gone up to the presence of 17 ships in 17 countries.<sup>8</sup> Vietnam has emerged as the fulcrum of India's maritime policy in the ASEAN and India has invested much in the region and particularly enriched Vietnamese navy and has equipped Vietnamese navy with missiles. In return, Hanoi has permitted Indian warships to utilize its port services and also granted Indian oil company ONGC Videsh Limited to sustain extension to explore Vietnamese oil blocks in the disputed South China Sea waters within its territory which has been objected by the Chinese.<sup>9</sup> Likewise India has developed excellent relations with other maritime powers of ASEAN. Singapore has remained closest Indian maritime partner in the region and bilateral naval exercise with Singapore navy has been extremely successful particularly in the disputed South China Sea. India has also participated in bilateral naval exercises with Indonesia and Japan. In January 2016, Indian coast guard along with Japanese counterpart had a marathon joint naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal and observed a high level of functional synergy and coordination.<sup>10</sup> With Australia also, New Delhi has been involved sustainably particularly in trilateral naval exercises along with the United States and Japan. India had been hesitant to include Australia in the process initially but

that hesitation has started to disappear. Indian leaders have recognised Canberra's acceptance of India's strategic ascendancy and also their vastly converging interests in dealing with China's growing assertiveness in maritime Asia has been an important factor behind the deepening of their relationship.<sup>11</sup>

The moot challenge has been China's expanding maritime footprints. China has developed ports in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Pakistan. President Xi Jinping has commissioned 40 billion dollar maritime silk route and China has been working tirelessly on it. The accelerated speed of Chinese military expenditure has further complicated India's maneuver in the region because the Chinese navy PLAN has been allocated much higher resources in comparison with the Indian navy. The growing imprint of PLAN particularly in South Asia has thrown a series of serious challenges for the Indian navy. Hambantota to Gwadar, China has installed its navy bases across South Asia and it has been perceived by the observers as an effort of China to encircle India within the ambit of maritime in South Asia.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to reformulate maritime policies. Modi government has carried out various exercises and taken many comprehensive steps. We have huge sea coast of over 7400 KM and many islands. Andaman is strategically located and has the potential to contain PLAN moves.

#### Strengthening of Andaman Command

Modi government has taken many structural steps to contain Chinese navy game plan in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere as well. Strengthening of the Andaman bases has been executed primarily to meet this challenge. Importance of Indian Ocean can be understood from the statement of Admiral A. T. Mahan in 1890 that "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the destiny of the world would be decided on its waters". Former Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee also clearly stated India's strategic priorities in November 2003 "the strategic frontiers of today's India, grown in international stature, have expanded well beyond confines of South Asia. Our security environment, ranging from Persian Gulf to Straits of Malacca across the Indian Ocean, includes Central Asia and Afghanistan, China, and South-East Asia. Our strategic thinking has also to extend to these horizons." Hence, Andaman Sea has become a strategic important place to play a major role in maritime security for India. Human civilisations have used Sea extensively for trade and commerce. Due to geographical location of India with the presence

of a long coast line provides a huge opportunity in trade and security for its main land. On the other hand presence of ANIs also provide a secure strategy to monitoring the world's most strategic and overcrowded trafficked Malacca Strait, through which approximately 95,000 merchants, oil and gas cargos, pass through.<sup>13</sup> It makes the strait an energy lifeline for Southeast and East Asian countries.

Straits of Malacca is one of the busiest and longest navigation routes which connects the Indian Ocean via Andaman Sea and the Strait is 900 km in length. Besides, this Strait is shortest, safest and economical for ships to travel through East Asia to Europe. Though the Strait is very narrow and with navigational restrictions nevertheless the Strait is still an attractive and preferred navigational route for international shippers compared to other alternative routes like Sunda or Lombok-Makassar Straits in the Indonesian archipelago.<sup>14</sup> Malacca Straits annually provides safe transit to over 60,000 tankers, cargo vessels, passenger vessels, tug and pilot and it is likely to increase in near future. However, Chinese goods and oil transportation took place in large volume through Malacca Straits and due to India's territory of Andaman and Nicobar, India is having advantage in the region and any disruptions in the Straits will affect its trade and transit. China is not in a position to deal with such disruption in the Malacca Straits and therefore, China is establishing its bases in different neighbouring countries of India to avoid such scenario.

However, India is a growing economy and its national interest is to promote Act East Policy to counter China in the region as well as initiate development in Northeast region of India. India's long pending development initiative in Northeast region has been initiated by taking up the projects such as the Asian highway project in South Asia to link Singapore with New Delhi via Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Vientiane, Chiang Mai, Yangon, Mandalay, Kalembo, Tamu, Dhaka and Kolkata. India also has taken initiative to upgrade and resurfacing 160 km long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalembo road. Besides Kaladan, Multi-modal Transit Transport will connect Indian ports and Sittwe port in Myanmar through Mizoram.<sup>15</sup> It will provide a greater opportunity for the region to develop in every aspect and will provide a huge market for peoples of India and ASEAN as well.

#### Concluding Remarks

To promote maritime component of "Act East Policy" and strengthen India's strategic interests and regional cooperation with ASEAN, Malacca Strait has to play a dominant role. India has developed the tri-command

in Andaman and Nicobar Islands to strengthen its surveillance and monitoring the Malacca Strait as it provides a gateway to the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Majority of Chinese oil supply ships from the Middle East still passes through this narrow way, which is a nightmare for the Chinese due to its proximity with the Andaman. India has already upgraded maritime relations with the Indo-Pacific countries and pledged to further accelerate the process. Maritime power is extremely important to sustain the dominance of a country. ASEAN countries wish India to play a counter balancing role against China in the region. Following comment of Jakarta Times vindicates this point:

"The evolving geo-strategic framework inexorably impels countries in South East Asia to accept China and India as major regional powers. In the first case, it is necessary consequence of the former. ... Beijing has also shown an unequalled zest in its economic diplomacy with the association of South East Asian nations, ASEAN. Delhi on the other hand has been a late bloomer...ASEAN wants India's presence as much as India needs to be active in the region...ASEAN makes available a strategic framework and regulated forum which India can bluntly interact with economic powers Japan and South Korea along with fellow regional power China. This is an opportunity in which Delhi must not be hesitant. It cannot afford to miss the boat again."<sup>14</sup>

Australia-India relations have also improved particularly in the backdrop of November 2014. It was maiden Indian PM visit after three decades which has accelerated the pace of deepening of bilateral relationship. Australia is India's maritime neighbour and our deepening bonhomie has saddened China. India has been engaged in joint maritime exercises with coincidentally democratic countries (Japan, United States, Australia and many ASEAN countries). This has created apprehensions in Chinese strategist thinkers. China's naval watchers have in particular been suspicious of naval exercises involving India, Japan, Australia and the United States, ostensibly aimed at balancing Chinese maritime power in the Asian littorals.<sup>17</sup>

The return of PM Modi for the second term in May 2019 has further given new momentum to India's maritime policy. It remains bedrock of India's Act East Policy. It requires gamut of changes and more resources are required to meet with the swelling expenditure of our navy. Modi government has taken many positive steps in this direction and realignment with the like-minded countries has further consolidated our status in larger context of the Indo-Pacific region.

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Relevance of Aurobindo Today

Edited by : Dr. Sudhir Singh

Shaikshik Foundation

## Relevance of Aurobindo Today



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**Dr. Sudhir Singh**

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#### About the Book

Aurobindo Ghosh was a brilliant champion of Indian philosophical tradition. After serving a satisfying career in politics from 1905 to 1910, he devoted himself entirely to spiritual and yogic exercises at Pondicherry. The relevance of Aurobindo's thought could be summarised in the ideas of Spiritual Nationalism, vision of Freedom, ideals of Passive Resistance and Integral Yoga. He imagined nationalism in terms of human unity and summarised it as realisation of the souls. Sri Aurobindo's seminal work on Indian culture prompted the French Nobel Laureate Roman Rolland to call him as the greatest thinker of modern India and a bridge between East and West. He remained as one of the leading Indian philosophers who represented India in the lights of peace and global harmony to the outside World.

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**Sudhir Singh**

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