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# INDIA'S GEOPOLITICS AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN SECURITY

C. Raja Mohan

## Introduction

As the weakest of the major powers in Asia, India is understandably the least consequential for the ordering of Southeast Asian security. Nevertheless, India's importance for security politics of Southeast Asia is beginning to grow, if only slowly. The debate on India's rise and its implications for Asian and global balance of power centres around the new expectations and residual scepticism about the sustainability of India's recent impressive economic performance — of around 8 per cent annual growth rates during the first decade of the twenty-first century. If India can maintain this performance, India's political and military weight in Southeast Asia will undoubtedly improve. The last few years have also seen the maturation of India's "Look East" policy launched in the mid-1990s. The expectations on India's rise have also begun to inject a new dynamism into India's relations with the great powers of Asia — the United States, China, and Japan. As a result, India is no longer marginal to either the regional politics of Southeast Asia nor the great power system that shapes it. For the first time since the mid-1950s, when its economy turned inward and its foreign policy drew closer to the Soviet bloc, India is now becoming an important factor in the security calculus of Southeast Asia.

## India's Regional Diplomacy

India's enthusiasm for participating in and shaping regional political and security arrangements is relatively new. After its early disappointments in trying to build Asian unity and solidarity in the 1950s, India's political emphasis decisively turned

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global and multilateral. The presumed leadership of the non-aligned movement (NAM) gave India a stage to articulate its larger aspirations. But the obsession with NAM inevitably diluted the inheritance from British Raj, which was at the heart of the imperial defence system in the entire Indian Ocean littoral.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, newly independent India nursed the ambitions of sustaining the Raj legacy on regional security. Its early political activism in southern Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, its large Army, and the plans to build an ambitious Navy all pointed to a strong Indian role in Asia. The notion that “Aden to Malacca” was India’s sphere of influence was deeply rooted among post-independence foreign policy-makers in New Delhi. In fact, the foreign policy assertiveness of India in the early Cold War years generated deep suspicion in some Western quarters that India might emerge as the “successor of Japan’s Asiatic imperialism”.<sup>2</sup> These fears turned out to be exaggerated.

The enduring consequences of the subcontinent’s partition and the conflict with China over Tibet and the boundary tied down India to dealing with conflicts within its own neighbourhood. India’s insular socialist policies resulted not just in India’s relative economic decline, but also saw the erosion of historic trade links with the neighbouring regions in Asia. With no economic basis, India’s relations with all the major powers, including the United States, Europe, Japan, and China remained under-developed. As India drew closer to the Soviet Union, in order to manage the regional balance of power within the subcontinent, association with Moscow increasingly became disconcerting to even those countries which valued their traditional links with India. The Indian military, which had a long record of participating in wars beyond the subcontinent, was now bogged down in territorial defence. The foreign policy of non-alignment also meant the Indian military shunned contact and cooperation with the outside world, including the Soviet Union. Although India’s Third World activism meant taking positions on all global issues, these degenerated into mere posturing against one or both superpowers and the inability to come to the aid of friendly nations in conflict with their neighbours. Where it did take bold positions, as in Indo-China in support of Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia, it put New Delhi at odds with all the great powers, other than the Soviet Union, and ASEAN.<sup>3</sup>

It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, that India was compelled to take a more national interest based approach to different regions. India’s new economic policies demanded a more focused outreach that emphasized trade and commercial cooperation. It also demanded a direct political approach to different regions of Asia, rather than the multilateral mechanisms of G-77 and NAM. As India began to reorient its foreign policy

after the Cold War, the idea that much of Asia and the Indian Ocean formed its “extended neighbourhood” began to take root. As India’s relations with Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Middle East began to acquire a new dynamism, the old notion of reclaiming a security and political role from Aden to Malacca, so emblematic of Lord Curzon’s British India, began to resurface.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly the first regional initiative was towards Southeast Asia, and was called the “Look East” policy. A host of literature has already emerged outlining the origins and ideological underpinnings of India’s Look East policy.<sup>5</sup> The urgent imperative was to be a part of the region’s new economic dynamism and rebuild frayed political relations with the rest of Asia during the Cold War. Among all the subregions of Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, Southeast Asia promised to be the most attractive in terms of the political and diplomatic opportunities. In Central Asia, India was quick to reach out to the newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union. Yet its ability to influence developments there were constrained by the lack of direct geographic access. The oil-rich Persian Gulf was now at the top of India’s foreign policy agenda. But the overwhelming dominance of the United States in the Gulf and its extended conflicts with Iran and Iraq left little room for any major initiative by India. This was also true of the Middle East, where India now sought to generate greater balance between its ties with the Arabs and Israel, but hardly expected to play a major role in the region. India’s significant interest in Africa (and eventually Latin America) had to wait until its economic growth accelerated and provided new options in the first years of the twenty-first century.

In contrast to all these regions, the greater coherence of ASEAN and the goodwill of countries like Singapore provided the opening for sustained Indian diplomacy in the region. While the steady expansion of economic links provided a new basis for India’s cooperation with the region, it was the admission of India as an institutional partner of ASEAN that allowed India to develop an all-encompassing engagement with the region. From the tentative sectoral dialogue partnership to a more affirmative nod to the membership of the East Asia Summit (EAS) process in 2005, India’s Look East policy advanced steadily and became one of the most organized components of its external relations. Besides a new level of political comfort at the highest levels, ASEAN offered a model for globalization just when India was fighting the many demons in its mind about economic reform. This debt of gratitude was freely acknowledged by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who was present at the creation of India’s Look East policy as India’s finance minister and later had the opportunity to elevate it to a higher level. Speaking in 2006, he said,

I must pay tribute to our East and Southeast Asian neighbours for shaping our own thinking on globalisation and the means to deal with it ... in 1992 our Government launched India's "Look East" policy. This was not merely an external economic policy; it was also a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy. Most of all it was about reaching out to our civilisational Asian neighbours.<sup>6</sup>

While ASEAN held India's hand at a moment when the big ship of the Indian state was turning, there was considerable scepticism, even at the turn of the millennium, on New Delhi's ability to make a difference in the region, especially in security affairs. A Southeast Asian analysis at the time underlined the region's reservations about India as follows:

India remains effectively contained geopolitically in South Asia by Pakistan and China. As long as this is so, its geopolitical impact on Southeast Asia will continue to be limited. To break out of this geopolitical impasse, the emergence of an open, outward looking and dynamic economy is an essential condition, but not a sufficient one. Other important requirements may include diplomatic ingenuity and political will to resolve disputes with Pakistan at an appropriate time and the continued maintenance of domestic political stability under secular conditions.<sup>7</sup>

Put another way, the doubts about India's internal stability, its capacity to emerge as an economic force, its geopolitical bind with Pakistan and China were deeply entrenched in Southeast Asia. Therefore security partnership with India could only be considered as a distant prospect. By 2005, however, this perception had eased considerably and was reflected in ASEAN's decision to invite India, against the known reservations of China, into the EAS process. A whole host of factors, including India's superior performance, New Delhi's improved ties with Islamabad and Beijing, the warming of India's relations with the United States under the Bush administration, and the larger perception of a more purposeful Indian diplomacy helped change the attitudes of the region towards security cooperation with India.

### **India's Security Cooperation with Southeast Asia**

As India reconnected with Southeast Asia, security issues were not a priority for either New Delhi or ASEAN. While the ASEAN leaders were prepared to experiment on the prospects for a deeper economic relationship with India, they were intensely wary of a security entanglement with New Delhi. As they prepared

to launch the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the early 1990s, the ASEAN leaders explicitly told India not to press its case for membership and when New Delhi did push for it, it was rejected.<sup>8</sup> ASEAN was concerned that India would bring the whole baggage of its difficult problems with Pakistan and China into ASEAN. While India was eventually admitted into the ARF in 1997, there was an explicit understanding that India would play a low-key role for the moment, and as its economic interaction with the region expanded it would be possible to eventually consider wider political and security relationship. In India's own understanding of the history of its Look East policy, the first phase was focused exclusively on economic and institutional partnership. It was only in the second phase that began with the turn of the millennium, that the security dimensions of the Look East policy came to the fore. As India's External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha pointed out in September 2003, the Look East policy began to move

away from exclusive focus on economic issues in phase one to a broader agenda that involves security cooperation, including joint operations to protect sea lanes and pooling of resources in the war against terror. The military contacts and joint exercises that India launched with ASEAN states on a low-key basis in the early 1990s are now expanding into full-fledged cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

A central feature of India's new security engagement with Southeast Asia was a steadfast naval diplomacy that was unveiled in the early 1990s. Shedding decades of military isolationism, India now opened up to service exchanges with major powers as well as the regional actors in the Indian Ocean littoral.<sup>10</sup> Although India's preliminary naval interaction with the United States got considerable international attention, India devoted special attention to military engagement with the Southeast Asian nations. India's new naval outreach to Southeast Asia was not a mere consequence of its new interest in the United States, but part of an effort to develop its own independent security relationship with the region. Throughout the 1980s, India confronted a growing suspicion of its maritime intentions as Southeast Asia reacted to its growing military, especially naval capabilities. India had the immediate need to remove the misperceptions, rooted in Southeast Asia's wariness of India's strategic partnership with the Soviet Union. It has been argued:

For New Delhi, getting in touch with Southeast Asian capitals directly, in order to establish contacts in defence matters, meant that it had cut itself off from the paradigm of derived relationships. The improvement in relations with Southeast Asia was not considered an upshot of the rapprochement

with Washington. It thenceforth became a strategic objective in its own right, one that New Delhi intended to follow actively.<sup>11</sup>

The new outward orientation of the Indian Navy steadily gathered momentum in the 1990s with wide-ranging contacts bilaterally and multilaterally. India began to expand its joint naval exercises with all the nations of Southeast Asia, stepped up its port calls in the region and received ships from the region at its own ports. The Indian Navy conducted naval exercises for the first time in South China Sea in 2000. While the visit was seen by some as a challenge to China, by entering its strategic waters, the Navy also included simple exercises with the PLA Navy.<sup>12</sup> At the end of 2004, the Indian Navy was quick to respond, on its own, to the tsunami disaster and later joined the navies of the United States, Japan, and Australia to provide relief in Southeast Asia. The scale and scope of India's tsunami relief operations that involved thirty-two ships in five different operations on the Indian coast, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia was impressive. This signalled both the operational readiness of the Indian Navy and its immense potential to contribute to future humanitarian and other contingencies in Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup>

In 2005, the Indian Aircraft carrier, INS *Viraat*, arrived for the first time in the ports of Southeast Asia — Singapore, Jakarta in Indonesia, and Klang in Malaysia. In the spring/summer of 2007, the Indian Navy sailed all the way up to Vladivostok and conducted a series of bilateral and multilateral exercises with a number of nations that included major powers like the United States, Japan, Russia, and China as well as regional actors like Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines.<sup>14</sup> India has also been keenly interested in supporting the efforts of the littoral states of the Malacca Straits, including the conduct of bilateral naval patrols, to promote security in this vital sea lane.<sup>15</sup> India's recent military diplomacy culminated in large-scale naval exercises with the United States, Japan, Australia, and Singapore in the Bay of Bengal. While these exercises raised alarm about a potential "Asian Nato",<sup>16</sup> India is focused more on expanding its own regional profile rather than the creation of a new alliance. This was reflected in the Indian Navy's initiative to convene for the first time an Indian Ocean Naval conclave in February 2008.<sup>17</sup> Only littoral navies from South Africa to Australia were invited. That the navies of the United States, China, and Japan were not invited is explained by Indian officials in terms of geography, but there is no mistaking the enduring intent of India to affirm its own independent engagement of the Indian Ocean littoral.

Beyond the expanded reach and scope of its naval diplomacy, India had from the early 1990s embarked on wider and more institutionalized cooperation with the military establishments of Southeast Asian nations. India and Malaysia signed a

memorandum of agreement on defence cooperation in 1993 under which India began to train the air force personnel of Malaysia. Training of Singapore military personnel also expanded steadily and culminated in a more comprehensive arrangement in 2003 when the two countries signed a bilateral defence cooperation agreement. Since then India has given Singapore a more convenient and wider access to training facilities in India.<sup>18</sup> New Delhi in turn obtained for its Navy a useful arrangement under which it could frequently call at the Changi naval base. Some of the more recent agreements signed by India hint at the possibility of going beyond training to transfer of arms. For example, the declaration on strategic partnership issued by the Indian and Vietnamese prime ministers in July 2007 states:

Recognising the important role that India and Vietnam are called upon to play in the promotion of regional security, the two leaders welcomed the steady development of bilateral defence and security ties between their countries and pledged themselves to *strengthen cooperation in defence supplies, joint projects, training cooperation and intelligence exchanges* (emphasis added).<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, India and Indonesia too are reportedly discussing the prospects of jointly producing weapons and military equipment. Ideas about equity tie ups between companies on both sides in the defence sector have apparently been put on the table. These proposals have emerged out of the pursuit of security cooperation arising from the defence cooperation agreement signed in 2001. A joint declaration on strategic partnership issued in New Delhi in November 2005 said, "President Yudhoyono welcomed India's offer of cooperation with the Department of Defence of the Republic of Indonesia in the procurement of defence supplies, defence technologies, joint production and joint projects."<sup>20</sup> At the moment, India's arms exports are rather limited. As it privatizes its defence industry and begins to co-produce advanced weapons systems with various traditional producers, India might eventually be in a position to meet some of the arms requirements of the Southeast Asian countries.

Underlying India's unfolding military diplomacy in Southeast Asia is a basic political change. For nearly four decades, India had withdrawn into a shell of military isolationism that became the flip side of its foreign policy of non-alignment. From being a lone ranger, India has begun to emphasize the virtues of offering security cooperation to friendly neighbours in Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral. While India's security diplomacy covers many regions, it is the most advanced in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN leaders, who were reluctant to countenance a larger security role for India in the region, have over the last decade and a half



recognized the value of strategic partnerships with India. As the perceptions of India's rise began to take hold in the region and the awareness of a fundamental transformation in the security environment of the ASEAN, the old reservations on India yielded to some new enthusiasm for security cooperation with India. This resulted in the ASEAN supporting India's membership of the EAS process, when it was launched in 2005. The seeming incongruity of bringing India into an avowedly East Asian forum was explained by Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong when he revealed some of the thinking that went into this decision in early 2005:

With India's rise it will be increasingly less tenable to regard South Asia and East Asia as distinct strategic theatres interacting only at the margins. US-China-Japan relations will still be important, but a new grand strategic triangle of US-China-India relations will be superimposed upon it ... Reconceptualising East Asia holistically is of strategic imperative ... It would be shortsighted and self-defeating for ASEAN to choose a direction that cuts itself off from a dynamic India.<sup>21</sup>

## **India's Great Power Relations and Southeast Asia**

The dramatic rise of China, the slow but certain re-emergence of India, the reassertion of Japan, and the uncertainties in the policies of a power that has dominated the region for more than half a century — the United States — have compelled Southeast Asia to rethink its strategic environment and devise new approaches to managing the emerging challenges to its security. Referring to the emerging multipolarity in Asia, Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said:

As they grow and take on new roles, it is inevitable that China, India and Japan will all loom larger on each other's radar screens. And since East Asian integration will be loosely multipolar, the jostling between New Delhi, Beijing and Tokyo that will certainly ensue must be squarely confronted and cannot be wished away. ... However, competition need not lead to conflict if it can be managed within an agreed framework. This, for example, was the original, and remains the essential, *raison d'être* of ASEAN.<sup>22</sup>

Minister Goh, of course, was not merely seeing the regional balance in terms of China, Japan, and India. For him, the question of future U.S. role was even more important. He argued:

The U.S. will remain a key, indeed the dominant, player well into the 21st century. American power will provide the overarching strategic unity

within which the interactions of Chinese, Indian and Japanese interests with American interests will be an increasingly important factor. ... An East Asian architecture that does not have the U.S. as one of its pillars would be an unstable structure.<sup>23</sup>

As the region copes with the new complexities of Asian security, the focus here is on how India will relate to other great powers in Asia and how its potential rivalries and partnerships might play out in Southeast Asia.

Since the end of the Cold War, India has enjoyed an unprecedented and simultaneous deepening of its relations with all the great powers. India's bilateral relations with China, United States, and Japan are today in their best ever period since the middle of the last century. India has proclaimed "strategic partnerships" of varying intensity with all the three powers. Yet the fact remains that none of India's three great power relationships has arrived at a plateau. All three remain susceptible to significant swings — up or down. Changes in one relationship are bound to affect the other two. Against the backdrop of this dynamism, the following is an assessment of India's relationships with China, the United States, and Japan and how they intersect with Southeast Asia.

The ties between India and China are extraordinarily complex and are misunderstood both within the two nations and in much of the world. Neither the passionate debates within India about China nor the external impressions of Sino-Indian relations match with the real direction of Sino-Indian relations. Within India, the public debate on China is deeply divided between those who see China as India's principal long-term threat and those who for ideological reasons have long romanticized the prospects for building an Asian century in collaboration with China. As the two nations remerged on the world stage, in the middle of the last century after a long period of relative decline, India and China did not find it easy to build good neighbourly relations. Even as they proclaimed high principles of friendship the two giants drifted towards inevitable conflict. Distrust over Tibet resulted in India concluding bilateral security treaties with Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim during 1949–50. As India drew closer to Soviet Union amidst the Sino-Soviet conflict, China was wary of Indian policies that appeared to focus on balancing China. New Delhi in turn was concerned by what it considered hostile policies of China, especially its support to Pakistan in its quarrels with India and the strengthening of Islamabad's strategic capabilities, including its nuclear and missile programmes.

This behaviour of mutual balancing has been partly mitigated in recent years as India and China have worked hard to construct a more cooperative relationship.<sup>24</sup> After a tentative rapprochement that began at the end of the Cold War, India and

China have successfully deepened and broadened their relationship. Bilateral trade between the two countries is booming and is expected to exceed US\$60 billion dollars by 2010. China is all set to become India's largest trading partner in a few years. The two countries are embarked on a dialogue to resolve their long-standing political differences. In 2003, the two countries resolved their differences over Sikkim's integration into India. They are also engaged in an intensive political exercise to find a fair and reasonable solution to their difficult boundary dispute. Meanwhile, the interaction between the two societies is rapidly expanding. These positive trends, however, do not necessarily imply that the sources of competition between the two countries have dried up.

As both nations acquire greater economic and political clout, there is also a sense of competition between them across a broad front — from the maritime domain to outer space. From Latin America to Siberia, and from southern Africa to Central Asia, China and India are locked in a global competition, and occasional cooperation to ensure resource security.<sup>25</sup> Citing the protection of their sea lines of communication, China and India are determined to expand naval power and ensure maritime presence far away from their shores. That China and India might increasingly bump into each other in far corners of the world does not necessarily mean India's relations with China will inevitably turn adversarial. The Sino-Indian relationship is likely to see enduring elements of both rivalry and cooperation. The challenge before Beijing and New Delhi is to continuously expand their cooperation and develop a better mutual understanding and prevent any potential misreading of each other's intentions.

Meanwhile, the long-standing perception across the world that Southeast Asia forms one of the important theatres of conflict between India and China has regained some weight. This is rooted in the belief that in South Asia and Southeast Asia the presumed spheres of influence of New Delhi and Beijing overlap.<sup>26</sup> The theory states that Beijing resents India's attempt to seek influence in Southeast Asia and similarly New Delhi tries to prevent China from seeking its legitimate interests in the subcontinent. In Southeast Asia, analysts date back this rivalry to the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955, when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai upstaged Jawaharlal Nehru.<sup>27</sup> India's cultivation of a special relationship with Vietnam in the 1970s and its support to Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia and opposition to China's war against Vietnam tended to confirm the thesis of an enduring rivalry between India and China in Indochina.<sup>28</sup> Since the early 1990s, the intense engagement of New Delhi and Beijing with the military rulers of Burma has been widely seen as a renewed manifestation of Sino-Indian rivalry.<sup>29</sup>

Most of the projection of Sino-Indian rivalry in Burma misreads the fundamental change in the context of Sino-Indian relations. Unlike in the previous decades, India and China now have an expansive relationship. Despite much accumulated baggage, they have carefully steered the bilateral relationship around many crises and challenges. While new elements of competition are indeed visible, it is unlikely that it will acquire an antagonistic dimension. Both New Delhi and Beijing reject the thesis of rivalry in Southeast Asia and beyond. Whatever might be the tone of the somewhat exaggerated debate in India about rivalry with China, policy-makers in New Delhi are acutely conscious of its limitations in Southeast Asia. Their aim is to expand India's strategic weight in the region and not to set up a rivalry with China. Indian leaders at the highest levels and quite consistently have argued that Asia is large enough to let both China and India meet their aspirations. Beneath that rhetoric is the realism that any attempt to construct its security ties with Southeast Asia in the matrix of an ineluctable rivalry with China will be counter-productive. While China acknowledges India's increased activism in Southeast Asia, Beijing's own influence in the region has risen more rapidly. As a Chinese scholar notes, "India has a long way to go in competing with China in Southeast Asia where economic and political relations are hugely tilted in Beijing's favour". Without ruling out future geopolitical competition, he suggests that "with greater transparency and a clearer identification of shared interests in Southeast Asia, there is scope for even better relations and constructive engagement among China, India and ASEAN".<sup>30</sup> Beijing's real concerns might have less to do with what India does in Southeast Asia than the prospects of New Delhi joining Washington in an alliance to contain China.

China has kept a close eye on the rapid movement in Indo-U.S. relations in the Bush years. Since 2001, the Bush administration had made a sustained effort to change the very fundamentals of the relationship with India. On the deeply divisive issue of Pakistan, the United States has ended its traditional political tilt towards Islamabad and positioned itself for the first time as a neutral actor. In the process, the Bush administration has achieved the near impossible simultaneous improvement in relations with both India and Pakistan. On the other traditional bone of contention, nuclear non-proliferation, the Bush administration has made a big move to accommodate India into the global nuclear order. It has changed its own domestic non-proliferation laws to facilitate renewed civilian nuclear cooperation with India and is working with the international community to change the global rules on nuclear commerce with India. Underlying this unique American readiness to spend political capital on India is the recognition that New Delhi is bound to emerge as the crucial swing state in future global balance of power.<sup>31</sup>

The Bush administration has publicly declared its commitment to assist India's rise as a great power and has offered it a full range of military cooperation from advanced conventional weapons to missile defence.

The deal on resuming civilian nuclear cooperation and the growing military relationship between New Delhi and Washington have raised some important questions. How far is India willing to go in partnering the United States? Is India in fact ready for an alliance-like relationship with Washington? The record of India's foreign policy and its reluctance to accept the dictates of other great powers suggests that India will never sacrifice its freedom of foreign policy action in favour of a tight alliance with the United States that might constrain its options.<sup>32</sup> That there is such vigorous domestic opposition in New Delhi to the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal and the Manmohan Singh government might fall on this issue points to the depth of Indian sensibility for an independent foreign policy. Sensing the real, if unstated, Chinese concerns about India's relationship with the United States, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh went out of the way to reassure his Chinese hosts in January 2008 that there is no question of India abandoning its independent foreign policy. In an address to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, Singh declared that "the primary task of our foreign policy is to create an external environment that is conducive for our rapid development. Our policy seeks to widen our development choices and give us strategic autonomy in the world. The independence of our foreign policy enables us to pursue mutually beneficial cooperation with all major countries of the world."<sup>33</sup>

As the world speculates on the prospect of India joining the United States against China, the reality is that Sino-U.S. relations remain broader and deeper than those between New Delhi and Washington. Nor has Washington made up its mind to go beyond a hedging strategy towards China. In that sense there is no American invitation to a containment party that India is obliged to respond to. To be sure, there is bound to be a triangular dynamic between the United States, China, and India. All of them are engaged in a hedging strategy.<sup>34</sup> Three propositions must be kept in mind in assessing New Delhi's future relationship with the United States and China. First, India's main objective is to emerge as an indispensable element in Asian balance of power. Second, India's emphasis will be on simultaneous expansion of political and economic relations with all the great powers and avoid choosing sides between them. India is quite pleased that it is under no compulsion at the moment from either Washington or Beijing to choose one of them. Three, it is reasonable to expect that there will be greater military and strategic content to Indo-U.S. relationship than the Sino-Indian ties. For example the U.S. decision to help modernize India's armed forces while

maintaining an arms embargo against Beijing clearly works in India's favour. This does not necessarily mean that India has to become a junior partner for the United States in Asia. The United States is aware that a stronger India, even outside the U.S. alliance system, will inevitably contribute to regional stability. India's principal objective, in turn, is to ensure an enduring balance of power in Asia.<sup>35</sup>

India's new ability to engage all the great powers has reinforced its potential role in Southeast Asian security. An expanding relationship with the United States has raised the stakes for China in an improved relationship with India. Unlike in the past, when India's difficulties with the United States and China inevitably diminished its role in the region, deepening ties with both Washington and Beijing make New Delhi a much more acceptable partner for Southeast Asia. While there are prospects for future tensions between India and China in Southeast Asia, there is a broad convergence of Indian and American interests in the region. From protecting the security of sea lanes to preserving the strategic autonomy of the Southeast Asian states, to working together on humanitarian contingencies, India and the United States have no conflict of interest in the region. Their expanding naval cooperation, the prospects of greater interoperability of their armed forces, and the ability to work together as in the tsunami relief operations at the end of 2004 suggests that India and the United States are now capable of underwriting the collective goods for Southeast Asian security.<sup>36</sup>

India's determination to retain its independent strategic identity might also help it to limit the potential costs of being identified too closely with the United States in Southeast Asia. During the initial phases of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, India undertook extensive consultations with the Southeast Asian states before escorting American warships through the Malacca Straits in 2002 in its "Operation Sagittarius".<sup>37</sup> New Delhi's broad support to Washington at the United Nations on initiatives to promote democracy and its readiness to join a Japanese-sponsored forum of four democracies in Asia — the United States, Japan, India and Australia — might have raised some concerns in Asia on whether India, would follow the United States in trying to promote political values in Asia. India, however, has its own views on being a democracy and exporting it to others.<sup>38</sup> India was utterly reluctant to extend it to Myanmar during the political crisis there at the end of 2007 despite considerable pressures from the West to isolate Yangon.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, on the question of international intervention in Myanmar to promote democracy, India found itself on the same side as China. More important than the merits of the Indian position on Myanmar, it was a clear signal of India's independent positions on regional issues.

An intensified relationship with Japan fits naturally into this broad framework of balance of power and multi-directional engagement that India has set for itself. Japan has been the last among the great powers of the world to sense India's rising power potential. But during the final years of the premiership of Junichiro Koizumi and the brief tenure of Shinzo Abe, Japan has moved rapidly to define a new approach to India.<sup>40</sup> Unlike much of East Asia, India carries no baggage about Japan's history or a grudge against its nationalism. The implementation of the Indo-U.S. nuclear agreement and the likely change in Japan's policy on sensitive exports to India could open the doors for a very rewarding high technology partnership between Tokyo and New Delhi. India and Japan have also agreed to expand their current defence cooperation which is focused on securing the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean, so vital for Japanese access to energy and raw materials.<sup>41</sup>

Traditionally, India was not part of Japan's conception of Asia. In expanding its geographic definition of Asia to beyond Myanmar in the west, and drawing India into a strategic partnership, Japan believes it has a better chance of coping with the unfolding redistribution of power in Asia and establish a stable balance of power in the region. India, in turn, sees huge strategic complementarities with Japan. To be sure, India's improved relations with the United States have made it easier for Tokyo to embark on a new relationship with New Delhi. Equally important is the fact that growing uncertainty in Sino-Japanese relationship has had the same effect on Tokyo.<sup>42</sup> Sensing the new dynamic in Tokyo, India was quite happy to endorse Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's proposal for greater political coordination between Asia's four leading democracies.<sup>43</sup> India was, however, quite conscious of potential Japanese backsliding, given the internal divisions in Japan and the depth of the Sino-Japanese economic relationship. India had no desire to present its emerging partnership with Japan as directed against China, but was signalling the prospect of a deeper relationship with Tokyo and the political will to move at whatever speed the Japanese would be able to manage. Meanwhile, India's security interests in Southeast Asia are parallel to those of Japan. More active political cooperation between India and Japan to strengthen the strategic autonomy of ASEAN is likely in the near future. Such cooperation will also help enhance the diplomatic weight of both the countries in Southeast Asia.

## Conclusion

From the early 1990s, when India launched its Look East policy, its relationship with East Asia has come a long way. ASEAN's experimental economic engagement



with India, after many disappointments, has begun to yield fruit. Although its economic ties with ASEAN are yet to acquire the depth of China, the expectations of India's robust economic performance and the prospect that it will emerge as one of the world's four largest economies has created a sound basis for India's relations with ASEAN. With faster economic growth, it is inevitable that India's military and strategic capabilities will become consequential. As India embarked on a purposeful "big power" diplomacy with the United States, China, and Japan, ASEAN's profound reservations about security cooperation with India have begun to melt. After a tentative start focused on military exchanges, the security cooperation between India and ASEAN is beginning to broaden to include more substantive areas like training and future arms transfers. India's positive relations with all the major powers and ASEAN's own sense of new vulnerabilities has made New Delhi an attractive partner. As they recognized that the rise of India is a reality, ASEAN had little difficulty in inducting India into the EAS. The important question is not whether India will ever match the power potential of China. Nor is it whether the region sees India as a "counter weight" to China. So long as India is seen as moving forward purposefully, it will remain a valuable partner for Southeast Asia. The principal objective of ASEAN is to construct a broad framework in which the changing balance of power in and around Southeast Asia can be managed. A rising India generates options that did not exist before. The new India's willingness to abandon its traditional bluster about leading Asia, its emphasis on pragmatic cooperation rather than ideological posturing, a new recognition in New Delhi of its own limitations, and its willingness to defer to ASEAN's initiative on regional security have created a new basis for security cooperation between the two. ASEAN understands that a dynamic India will serve its pursuit of a regional balance of power. As the smallest of the great powers, India, in turn, has the biggest stake in seeing that ASEAN remains a coherent, strong and autonomous force in Asia.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a summary of India's crucial role as the fulcrum of regional security role in the Eastern and Western parts of Asia, see John Peter Brobst, *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, Indian Independence and the Defence of Asia* (Akron: University of Ohio Press, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> A U.S. State Department assessment in 1950 quoted in Baldev Raj Nayar and T.V. Paul, *India in the World Order: Searching for Major Power Status* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 119.



- <sup>3</sup> For a discussion of India's policy towards Southeast Asia until the late 1980s, see Mohammad Ayoob, *India and South-East Asia* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- <sup>4</sup> See C. Raja Mohan "Rediscovering Lord Curzon", in *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Viking, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> See Kripa Sridharan, *The ASEAN Region in India's Foreign Policy* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1996). For the ideational roots of India's Look East policy, see Christophe Jaffrelot, "India's Look East Policy: An Asianist Strategy in Perspective", *India Review* 2, no. 2. (2003): 35–68.
- <sup>6</sup> Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's address to Asia Society Corporate Conference, Mumbai, 18 March 2006, available at <<http://www.pmindia.nic.in/speeches.htm>>.
- <sup>7</sup> Daljit Singh, "The Geopolitical Interconnection between South and Southeast Asia", in *India and ASEAN: The Politics of India's Look East Policy*, edited by Frederic Grare and Amitabh Mattoo (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), p. 38.
- <sup>8</sup> For the initial difficult period of the Look East policy, see J.N. Dixit, *My South Block Years: Memoirs of a Foreign Secretary* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1996), pp. 264–71.
- <sup>9</sup> Speech by External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha at Harvard University, 29 September 2003, available at <<http://www.mea.gov.in/>>.
- <sup>10</sup> Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "The Role of Naval Diplomacy in India's Foreign Policy", Foreign Service Institute, *Indian Foreign Policy*, vol. 2, (New Delhi: Konark, 1998), pp. 194–206.
- <sup>11</sup> Isabelle Saint-Mezard, *Eastward Bound: India's New Positioning in Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), p. 293.
- <sup>12</sup> Stratfor, "India challenges China in South China Sea", 26 April 2000, available at <<http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/BD27Df01.html>>. See also Josy Joseph, "Indian Navy hails Successful South China Seas Visit", 17 October 2000, available at <<http://www.rediff.com/news/2000/oct/17spec.htm>>.
- <sup>13</sup> See Vijay Sakhuja, "Indian Naval Diplomacy: Post-Tsunami", Institute for Peace & Conflict Studies, New Delhi, 8 February 2005, available at <[http://ipcs.org/Military\\_articles2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=1652&keyArticle=1019&status=article&mod=a](http://ipcs.org/Military_articles2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=1652&keyArticle=1019&status=article&mod=a)>.
- <sup>14</sup> See C. Raja Mohan, "East Asian Security: India's Rising Profile", *RSIS Commentaries*, 81/2007 (Singapore: RSIS, 30 July 2007).
- <sup>15</sup> Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Cooperation among Maritime Security Forces: Imperatives for India and Southeast Asia", *Strategic Analysis* 29, no. 2, (April/June 2005): 295–316.
- <sup>16</sup> Praful Bidwai, "Five Nation Drill Presages Asian Nato?", 8 September 2007, available at <<http://www.antiwar.com/bidwai/?articleid=11574>>s.
- <sup>17</sup> For details, see the official website of the Indian Navy, <[indiannavy.nic.in/ion.htm](http://indiannavy.nic.in/ion.htm)>.

- <sup>18</sup> G.V.C. Naidu, "Whither the Look East Policy: India and Southeast Asia", *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 2 (April–June 2004): 331–46.
- <sup>19</sup> For the text of the declaration, see "Vietnam, India issue joint declaration on strategic partnership", <[http://english.vietnamnet.vn/service/printversion.vnn?article\\_id=954712](http://english.vietnamnet.vn/service/printversion.vnn?article_id=954712)>. For an analysis, see C. Raja Mohan, "The importance of being Vietnam", *Indian Express* (New Delhi), 10 July 2007.
- <sup>20</sup> See Joint Declaration between the Republic of India and the Republic of Indonesia, New Delhi, 23 November 2005, available at <<http://www.mea.gov.in/>>.
- <sup>21</sup> "Reconceptualising East Asia", Keynote address by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong at the official launch of the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, 27 January 2005, available at <<http://www.isasnus.org/events/addresses/1.htm>>.
- <sup>22</sup> "Constructing East Asia", Speech by Goh Chok Tong, Asia Society, 15th Asian Corporate Conference, Bangkok, 9 June 2005, available at <<http://www.asiasociety.org/conference05/goh.html>>.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> For a review of Sino-Indian relations, see Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu and Jing-dong Yuan, *China and India: Cooperation or Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003).
- <sup>25</sup> Stein Tonneson and Ashild Kolas, *Energy Security in Asia: China, India, Oil and Peace* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 2006).
- <sup>26</sup> John Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the 20th century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- <sup>27</sup> See Guy Wint, "China and Asia", *China Quarterly*, no. 1, January–March 1960, pp. 61–71.
- <sup>28</sup> For a discussion, see John W. Garver, "Chinese-Indian Rivalry in Indo-China", *Asian Survey* 27, no. 11 (November 1987): 1205–19; see also Ramesh Thakur, "India's Vietnam Policy", *Asian Survey* 19, no. 10 (October 1979): 957–76.
- <sup>29</sup> For a comprehensive treatment, see Renaud Egreteau, *Wooing the Generals: India's New Burma Policy* (New Delhi: Authors Press, 2003).
- <sup>30</sup> Zhao Hong, "India and China: Rivals or Partners in Southeast Asia?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 29, no. 1, (2007): 139.
- <sup>31</sup> For an informed view of the Bush administration's assessment of India's rise, see Ashley Tellis, *India as a New Global Power: An Action Agenda for the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2005).
- <sup>32</sup> For the prospects and limits of Indo-U.S. security partnership, see Stephen J. Blank, *Natural Allies: Regional Security in Asia and Prospects for Indo-American Strategic Cooperation* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2005). See also C. Raja Mohan, *Impossible Allies: Nuclear India, United States, and the Global Nuclear Order* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2006).
- <sup>33</sup> Manmohan Singh, "India and China in the 21st century", Address to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 15 January 2008, available at <<http://www.mea.gov.in/>>.

- <sup>34</sup> Evan S. Medeiros, "Strategic Hedging and Future of Asia-Pacific Stability", *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2005–06): 145–67.
- <sup>35</sup> See the address by Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Fifth IISS-Asia Security Summit, 3 June 2006, available at <<http://www.iiss.org/programmes/south-asia/ministerial-addresses/pranab-mukherjee/>>.
- <sup>36</sup> S. Jaishankar, "2004 Tsunami Disaster: Consequences for Regional Cooperation", Presentation at the Asia-Pacific Democracies: Advancing Prosperity and Security, 26th Annual Pacific Symposium, 8–10 June 2005, available at <<http://www.ndu.edu/inss/symposia/Pacific2005/jaishankar.pdf>>.
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- <sup>39</sup> Jo Johnson and Amy Kazmin, "India pressed to take lead on democracy", *Financial Times* (London), 30 September 2007.
- <sup>40</sup> Chietigj Bajpae, "Strategic Interests Pull Japan and India Together", *Power and Interest News Report*, 16 February 2007.
- <sup>41</sup> Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation", *Strategic Analysis* 31, no. 1, (January 2007).
- <sup>42</sup> See Teresita Schaffer and Vibhuti Hate, "India, China and Japan", *South Asia Monitor*, 3 January 2007, available at <[http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/january2007\\_india-china-japan.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/january2007_india-china-japan.pdf)>.
- <sup>43</sup> See C. Raja Mohan, "Japan and India: The Making of a New Alliance?", *RSIS Commentaries*, 28 August 2007; see also C. Raja Mohan, "Asia's New 'Democratic Quad'", *ISN Security Watch*, 19 March 2007, available at <<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=17383>>.