

Chapter 4

India's Security Outlook and Views on Multilateral Cooperation: The Emerging Asia-Pacific Theater

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The Importance of the Asia-Pacific for India

New Delhi's current perception of the Asia-Pacific is closely linked with the emerging facets of Asia's power politics, which includes maritime politics and the evolving Asian security architecture. A multiplicity of forums, albeit with converging schema, shapes Asia's power dynamics and current security architecture. Given its strategic interests, mainly maritime, India has encouraged the quest for peace, stability, and security in the region. Advocating a "stable and secure Asia," New Delhi envisions an "inclusive regional approach" where the stress and focus is on maritime freedom in the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea regions, and deeper economic integration in the region. In official parlance, "India will work to build a regional design that promotes partnership and reinforces convergences, reduces tensions and tries to produce the ethos and spirit of collective or multilateral norms and engagements."¹ In the words of A.K. Antony, India's Defense Minister, "maritime freedom has become one of the key salients in our security discourse today."²

Four correlated factors have shaped India's current outlook on the Asia-Pacific: (a) the geographic vitality of the region; (b) the multilateral power politics where the thrust is on ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and ASEAN Maritime Forum; (c) emerging maritime power politics in East/Southeast Asia and in the Indian Ocean region; and (d) major-power calculus, including the rise of China. India did not use to take the

¹ Ministry of External Affairs: Government of India, "External Affairs Minister on 'India's Foreign Policy Priorities for the 21st Century' at the launch of the 'India Initiative' by Brown University," September 28, 2012, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/20639/>.

² A.K. Antony, Minister of Defense, India, *Protecting Maritime Freedoms*, Second Plenary Session, The 11th IISS Asian Security Summit: The Shangri-La Dialogue, June 2, 2012.

Asia-Pacific as seriously as it does now. *Three* looming aspects have brought about the current comprehensive change in this outlook: USA's "pivot" to Asia vis-à-vis the "rebalancing strategy"; China's growth and assertiveness as a maritime power in Asia; and the politics of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). India's advocacy of a "stable and secure Asian order" lays considerable emphasis on maritime security, freedom of navigation, unimpeded lawful commerce, the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes, and access to resources as per the norms of international law.³

This paper aims to address *three* sets of questions. *First*, the importance of the Asia-Pacific in India's security outlook, and whether New Delhi's approach to this region on the whole is cooperative or competitive. To what extent does India see or view the emerging Asia-Pacific politics as being confrontational to its strategic interests? *Second*, what is India's assessment of the existing multilateral security frameworks like ADMM+ and ARF? Are they relevant and effective? Which multilateral forums have priority in India's security calculus? *Third*, what is the prospect of the existing frameworks to create a better strategic environment for India? In the process, an attempt will be made to narrate the interplay of the geopolitics of the region and the multilateral politics that it invites.

The paper is broadly structured as follows. The ensuing Part II explores the vitality of the region for India's strategic interests and how Asia-Pacific multilateralism compels India to advocate a distinct security order. Part III addresses the vitality of ASEAN and how ARF and ADMM+ are two important constructs in India's perspective. Part IV discusses the growing vitality of maritime politics, which includes the need to contain the Chinese maritime assertiveness. The conclusion discusses India's future policy contours with regard to the region.

Major Powers in the Asia-Pacific and India

The Asia-Pacific region has currently become the center of gravity for many powers including India. The USA's "Asia pivot," or "rebalancing" strategy; and China's emergence as a maritime power, are two core aspects of this politics. *Map I* shows the compactness of maritime and strategic politics where both the USA and China are factors. The geographic location of the Asia-Pacific, which brings East

³ Minister of External Affairs: Government of India, "India's Foreign Policy Priorities for the 21st Century."

Asia, Southeast Asia, Indian Ocean, and the Pacific countries together on a single platform is at the essence of these politics. The volume of trade and the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea also make the Asia-Pacific more inter-reliant and symbiotic as a region. The Indian Ocean is the most important, as most of the world's trade and energy routes pass through it. India, being close to the Indian Ocean, is exposed to the security concerns related to it. Almost 90% by volume, 75% of total energy supplies are transferred via the Indian Ocean, and 77% in terms of value of India's global mercantile trade pass through this ocean.⁴ The Asia-Pacific is closely linked with India's twenty-year-old Look East policy. Almost 54% of India's exports are within Asia; East Asia and ASEAN together account for 28% of this figure.⁵

US Re-balancing and India

The USA's Asia "pivot" vis-à-vis a "re-balancing" strategy is the crucial factor in India's current security outlook in the Asia-Pacific. On November 17, 2011 President Barack Obama explicitly acknowledged in the Australian Parliament the vitality of India's Look East policy and the potential of India as an "Asian power"⁶ in the context of the USA's strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific. Concurrently, India's perception of The Asia-Pacific has also matured, drawing enthusiastic approval in the official US circles to the effect that India is "the linchpin for America's new defense strategy or rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific,"⁷ and is also a potential "strategic bet"⁸ for upholding global peace and security.⁹ India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) encourages the US Pacific Command (USPACOM) to consider taking India seriously on board. The most immediate area where both

⁴ Ambassador Meera Shankar's speech at Harvard Kennedy School- "India-U.S. Relations in an Asia-Pacific Century," Cambridge, MA, USA, April 21, 2011, https://www.indianembassy.org/archives_details.php?nid=1574.

⁵ Ibid.

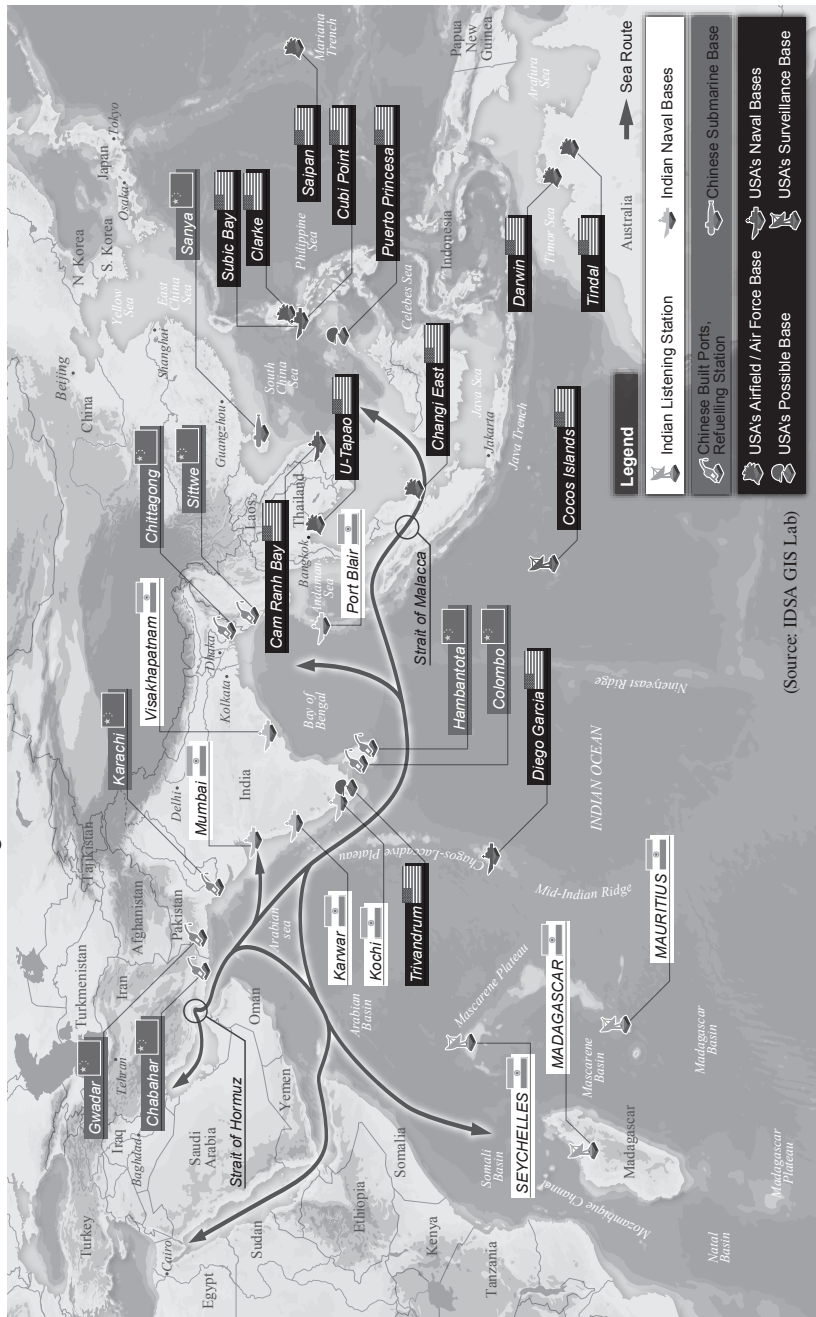
⁶ The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament," Parliament House, Canberra, November 17, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

⁷ Leon Panetta, "Partners in the 21st Century," Defense Secretary, United States' lecture at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, June 6, 2012, <http://www.idsa.in/keyspeeches/LeonEPanettaonPartnersinthe21stcentury> (accessed September 17, 2013).

⁸ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century (accessed September 29, 2013).

⁹ S. Amer Latif, "U.S.-India Military Engagement: Steady As They Go," *A Report of the CSIS Wadhvani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies*, Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), December 2012, pp.3, 30.

MAP-I: USA Rebalancing, China's Maritime Presence & India: Asia-Pacific Theatre



India's and USPACOM's strategic interests converge is the scope for robust maritime cooperation.

The USA's current envisaged role in the Asia-Pacific warrants re-balancing its posture in the region, mainly to countervail China's rising presence. India's approach to the Asia-Pacific in its turn has become more intense with Obama's stress on the "deliberate and strategic decision"¹⁰ to shift the Department of Defense's geographical thrust to South Asia and the Indian Ocean. In the official US parlance the USA's strategic and economic interests are closely linked with the "developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia."¹¹ The current USPACOM posture in the region is more towards Northeast Asia, to address issues in the Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula and in Japan.¹² USPACOM's current ability to monitor and respond to situations in the IOR and future possible crises in South-Southwest Asia, however, remains feeble. In this context, India conveniently forms a strategic apex along with Japan and Australia to promote US interests of "re-balancing" the equations in the region. The target area here would be "Indo-Pacific,"¹³ comprising the arc from the Strait of Hormuz through IOR up to the Strait of Malacca. The rise of PLA Navy as a maritime force of considerable clout compels most countries, including the USA, Japan, Australia, and the smaller Southeast Asian countries to view the Asia-Pacific with growing attention. Recognizing its strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific, India for its part has maximized its maritime and strategic ties with the USA, Japan, and the Southeast Asian countries.

China as a Maritime Power and India

Maritime politics and disputes in Asia are entering a new level of power politics. Though disputes like those concerning the South China Sea and the East China Sea may not be directly linked to India's strategic fortunes in the region, China's stern views on "freedom of navigation," the PLA Navy's recent upgraded maritime posture in the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea, and the

¹⁰ The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament."

¹¹ US Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, United States of America, January 2012, p. 2.

¹² Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), *U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment*, Washington DC, August 2012, p.5.

¹³ US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first used the term "Indo-Pacific." See Clinton, "America's Pacific Century."

Chinese leadership's declared resolute policy stance of pushing China's naval and maritime modernization and upgrading to a more robust maritime policy have direct security implications for India. For instance, President Xi Jinping, while recently chairing a study session of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee, articulated the fact that China was determined to push ahead as a "maritime power."¹⁴ He also urged the government to enhance China's maritime law enforcement capacity in the region.¹⁵ While pointing out that China was open to "shelve maritime disputes" and carry out "joint development" in the South China Sea region, China would protect its "maritime interests."¹⁶ By deeming the South China Sea and the East China Sea as China's core national interests, Beijing aims quite confidently to "enhance enforcement to match its national strength."¹⁷

Policymakers in China suggest the possibility of "joint development" in the South China Sea region with other countries, presumably on terms dictated by China. At the same time, the Chinese Defense Ministry has cautioned countries that if they want to carry out projects for their self-interest in the South China Sea region, they should confine them to the spectrum of "freedom of navigation"; besides, "freedom of navigation" should not be a factor in "territorial and ocean rights" of the countries involved.¹⁸ Yang Yujun, spokesman of the Ministry, in reply to a question on the USA-Philippines understanding to protect the freedom of navigation in Southeast Asia, has stated: "The so-called protection of freedom of navigation is in fact a false proposition ... We call on the countries concerned not to seek private interests under the guise of freedom of navigation."¹⁹

But while China has dismissed the notion of "freedom of navigation" in South China Sea region, it has taken a different position on the IOR, which strongly favors the PLA Navy. In the recent round of the "Galle Dialogue,"²⁰ for example, Vice

¹⁴ "Xi advocates efforts to boost China's maritime power," *Xinhua*, July 31, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-07/31/c_132591246.htm.

¹⁵ Ibid.; "China boosts maritime law enforcement capabilities," *Xinhua*, July 9, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-07/09/c_132525392.htm.

¹⁶ Wang Qian and Zhang Yunbi, "Xi vows to protect maritime interests," *China Daily*, August 1, 2013, http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-08/01/content_16859218.htm.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Freedom of navigation in South China Sea unaffected," *China Daily*, August 29, 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/ethnic/china/2013-08/29/content_16930540.htm.

¹⁹ "Freedom of navigation in South China Sea unaffected," *China Daily*, August 29, 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/ethnic/china/2013-08/29/content_16930540.htm.

²⁰ Sri Lanka hosts the "Galle Dialogue" with the aim of promoting understanding and cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. The latest (third) round of "Galle Dialogue" involved 28 countries' representatives across the world.

Admiral Su Zhiqian, commander of the East China Sea Fleet of PLA Navy, said that “the freedom and safety of navigation in the Indian Ocean play a very important role in the recovery and development of global economy and Chinese navy will actively maintain the peace and stability of the Indian Ocean.”²¹ Propelling the concept of “harmonious ocean” in the context of the Indian Ocean,²² the Chinese scheme for the IOR seems to be to gradually upgrade its naval presence in the region. Currently, China is looking west and trying to build its sphere of economic influence in the IOR, seeking to co-opt the countries in the region in pushing China’s commercial and strategic stakes in the region.

China also looks determined to establish overseas strategic points where PLA Navy ships can carry out long-distance expeditions, with necessary logistic supplies assured. Reports indicate that China is aiming to establish three sets of strategic points in IOR as follows: Djibouti, Aden, and Salalah will be used for logistic supply; Seychelles will be used for logistic supply; and ports in Pakistan would be used in emergencies.²³ Reports also indicate that the Chinese aim is to thrust on different supply chains—south, west and north—around IOR.²⁴ The southern supply chains will touch upon places like Seychelles and Madagascar. The western supply chain will touch upon Djibouti, Yemen, Oman, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique.²⁵ The northern supply chain will connect to Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar.²⁶ Obviously, IOR remains a priority concern in China’s maritime strategy. Indicative of this is the expressed Chinese interest in becoming a core member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), formerly known as IOR-ARC: currently, China is just a dialogue partner.

What Type of Security Order does India Prefer?

The challenge for India is whether it can adopt an independent and autonomous Asia-Pacific policy without taking sides, which, in the current dispensation, is simply not possible. India would at the same time prefer a multilateral cooperative framework to push for greater peace and stability in the region. Where maritime

²¹ “Chinese navy to actively maintain peace and stability of Indian Ocean,” *People’s Daily*, December 17, 2012, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90786/8059819.html>.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Yu Runze, “Chinese navy expected to build strategic bases in Indian Ocean,” *SINA English*, January 7, 2013, <http://english.sina.com/china/2013/0106/545538.html>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

politics in IOR are concerned, New Delhi places stress on IORA and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). In official parlance, in IOR, “India assumes greater responsibility for security and stability, through bilateral engagement with countries in the region and through regional or multilateral initiatives like Indian Ocean-Rim Association for Regional Cooperation.”²⁷

India’s main objective would be how not to concede too much cosmos to China in IOR, and how to systematically negate Beijing’s emerging clout in the region without confronting it. Its preference is for a “constructive dialogue”²⁸ on various security issues through a number of bilateral and multilateral chains of networks. To quote India’s Minister for External Affairs: “Our engagement in the Asia Pacific Region is characterized by strong bilateral ties extending from Myanmar to Australia, deepening linkages with regional organizations, especially ASEAN, a web of comprehensive economic partnership agreements and ambitious plans of connectivity.”²⁹

While India has enhanced its defense, political and security understanding bilaterally with several countries in Southeast and East Asia and in the Asia-Pacific with Australia and New Zealand, similar efforts are equally noticed in multilateral engagement and understanding in the region. India’s thrust so far has been on ASEAN, ADMM+, ARF, IOR-ARC and IONS to encourage stout understanding on maritime freedom and security and advocating and building an inclusive security architecture. India advocates a leading role for ASEAN and seems committed to “ARF as well as ADMM+, expanded Maritime Forum and others.”³⁰

ASEAN, ARF and ADMM+: Between India’s ‘Look East’ and ‘Asia-Pacific’ Design

India’s engagement with the Asia-Pacific is becoming a comprehensive one. The terms and volume of this tryst today extend from a range of bilateral to multilateral

²⁷ Minister of External Affairs: Government of India, “India’s Foreign Policy Priorities for the 21st Century.”

²⁸ India is currently engaged actively in the “process of constructive dialogue on security issues” with both smaller and bigger countries in Asia, where the thrust has been both on bilateral and multilateral understanding. See Antony, *Protecting Maritime Freedoms*.

²⁹ Minister of External Affairs: Government of India, “India’s Foreign Policy Priorities for the 21st Century.”

³⁰ External Affairs Minister’s Intervention on “Exchange of views on regional and international issues” at 20th ARF meeting in Brunei Darussalam, Ministry of External Affairs: Government of India, July 2, 2013.

contacts in the areas of economic, strategic, political and military ties, as part of its Look East policy. Institutionally, while India participates in the East Asia Summit (EAS), ARF and ADMM+ processes, the foundation of these institutional engagements is the ASEAN-India Summit and the strategic partnership that both India and ASEAN have recently signed. Over the years, India has capitalized its Look East policy around the import of ASEAN and has tried to evolve its outlook towards the Asia-Pacific accordingly. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in his speech at the 8th India-ASEAN Summit noted, for example: "India believes that ASEAN is the core around which the process of economic integration of the Asia-Pacific region should be built."³¹

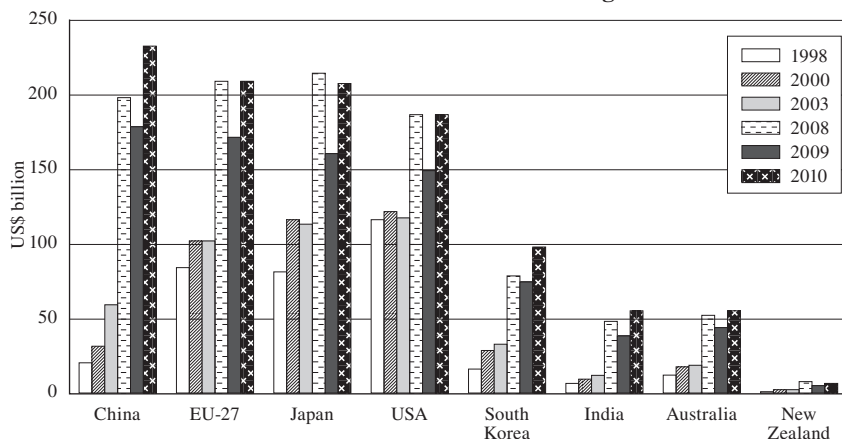
ASEAN's Current Import for India

As part of India's Look East policy, in 2012 both India and ASEAN upgraded and pushed their bilateral engagement to a "strategic partnership." The 20th anniversary of the India-ASEAN dialogue partnership and the 10th anniversary of the India-ASEAN summit witnessed both sides advancing their engagement in a range of aspects – political to economic, strategic to security, and diplomatic ties to comprehensive understanding, with emphasis on maritime relationship. India's current approach to ASEAN is best explained in Manmohan Singh's opening statement at the Plenary Session of the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit on December 20, 2012: "We see our partnership with ASEAN not merely as a reaffirmation of ties with neighboring countries or as an instrument of economic development, but also as an integral part of our vision of a stable, secure and prosperous Asia and its surrounding Indian Ocean and Pacific regions."³²

³¹ "PM's statement at the 8th India-ASEAN Summit," Hanoi, October 30, 2010.

³² "PM's opening statement at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit," New Delhi, December 20, 2012.

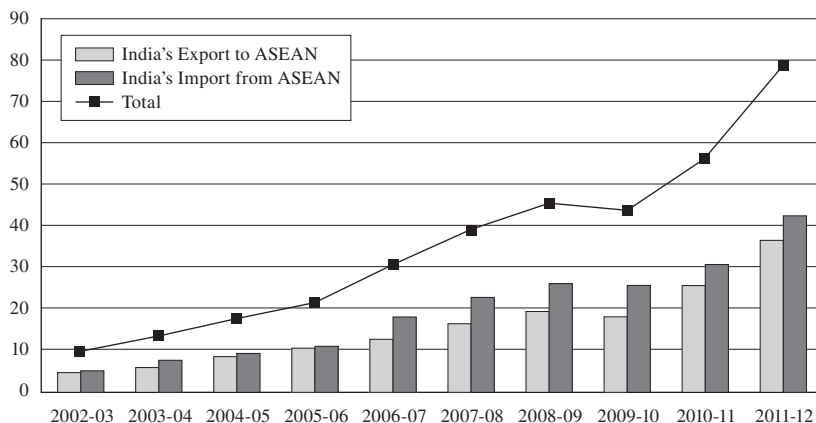
CHART 1
ASEAN Total Trade with Selected Trading Partners



Source: ASEAN Community in Figures, 2011, available at www.asean.org.

ASEAN is vital to a number of countries around the world. Both regional and extra-regional powers are connected to it massively. *Chart 1* illustrates the economic aspect of this connection. India's trade contacts with ASEAN have also improved substantially in the recent past, though they remain far below those of China or the US. As a prime multilateral body, ASEAN is central to India's politics in the region of the Asia-Pacific. More highly, it connects three important neighboring regions: South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. India's recent approach has been to capitalize more on its strategic partnership with ASEAN. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the India-ASEAN partnership as "transformational," and expressed his aspiration that bilateral trade between the two sides should reach US\$200 billion in the next decade, setting a realistic target of US\$100 billion by 2015. India-ASEAN trade contacts have been rising since the implementation of their free trade agreement (FTA) in August 2009, increasing massively by 41 percent in 2011-12; it has currently reached US\$80 billion (Chart 2).

CHART 2
India-ASEAN Trade (2002-03 to 2012-13) (US\$ bn)



(Source: Dept. of Commerce: Ministry of commerce and Industry; Govt. of India)

Indian Perspective of ARF and ADMM+

The ideas and spirit of East Asia Integration (EAI), mainly India's perspective towards ARF and ADMM+, highlight New Delhi's vision for the Asia-Pacific. India locates the dialogue of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific in the context of the East Asia Summit (EAS). In its view, the "East Asia Summit is the forum for building an open, inclusive and transparent architecture of regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region."³³ The course, context, and vitality of the EAS is argued and understood in Indian foreign policy mainly within the construct of ARF and ADMM+.³⁴ India's official perception of ARF is explicitly outlined in the speech delivered by its Minister for External Affairs at the 20th ARF meeting in Brunei Darussalam. *Three* aspects of India's outlook remain clear with regard to ARF: *first*, ARF as a dialogue forum can be productive and effective, provided it is backed with commitment and foresight by all nations; *second*, ARF can be a bridge of hope and solution for addressing security issues, including terrorism and maritime security; and *third*, ARF can be pushed ahead as a multilateral cultural approach to

³³ "PM's statement at the 6th East Asia Summit Plenary Session," Bali, November 19, 2011.

³⁴ Ibid.

address Asia's growing security and political dynamics.³⁵ But this official discourse is mostly rhetorical, primarily because the ARF has neither been forthcoming about its perception of regional peace and stability, nor has it helped in uniting the thoughts and spirit of its constituents the way it was originally meant to address.

ADMM+ is a relatively new security mechanism. It has been in the limelight of ASEAN politics for some time now, and continues to remain the new flavor of the emerging Asia-Pacific security calculus. It has promoted a "new wave of multilateralism" not only between ASEAN members and its eight dialogue partners (Australia, China, Japan, India, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia and the United States), but also for a broader Asia-Pacific community. In August 2013, at the second ADMM+ meeting, the thrust was on attaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. Seen mainly as a confidence-building initiative, ADMM+ aims at addressing not only key governance issues in the Asia-Pacific, but also tries to address regional security and political issues with territorial implications. Countering terrorism, building cooperation in areas of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, peacekeeping, and maritime security are some of the main areas of focus of the ADMM+ mechanism. But to what extent ADMM+ will bring peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific in maritime security remains to be seen. Disputes concerning the South China Sea and the East China Sea remain the most challenging aspects.

In its vision of ADMM+, India has stressed two key aspects: the vitality of ARF and the import and substance of ADMM+ in the regional security architecture, and that there is scope for these two multilateral frameworks to emerge as effective confidence-building frameworks to address the security environment of the region. Though India has emphasized time and again its perception that ARF and ADMM+ carry considerable weight in the Asia-Pacific, India's future perspective will nevertheless depend on how and to what extent India's maritime interests are protected in this region with the intervention of these two mechanisms. At the moment, the possibility and prospect looks discouraging.

It is currently acknowledged that ASEAN is the foundation of India's Look East policy and the cornerstone of India's foreign policy where this region is concerned.³⁶ India pays close attention to the ARF as a regional coordinating agency and ADMM+ as an emerging confidence-building measure. However, these two aspects have been

³⁵ External Affairs Minister's Intervention on "Exchange of views on regional and international issues."

³⁶ "PM's statement at the 9th ASEAN-India Summit," Bali, November 19, 2011.

raised concurrently with the idea of maritime security, where the ASEAN Maritime Forum is a factor, and regional economic integration. The appreciation of regional economic integration from an Indian perspective is based on the fact that East Asian economic integration should forge with the ASEAN+6 mechanism, and should converge with the sentiments of EAS where India is a factor. India's aim and core thrust currently is to build a stable regional economic and political order through RCEP among the prospective members of this region. India needs to push forward the RCEP mechanism, with a view to renovate and transform the region with higher economic growth through more robust cross-border trade and investment. For India, ASEAN currently remains the foremost draw. It is in India's interest that this multilateral body evolves further as a comprehensive arbitrator in regional politics. India has consistently advocated the ASEAN+6 RCEP mechanism and would like to see the positive culmination of this process. RCEP could be an inclusive regional economic integration model, and carries a huge trade potential to emerge as the most effective and largest free-trade bloc in the world.

Search for a Maritime order? India's Extended China Obstacle

India has showed a keen interest in the recent past in maritime politics, and with this aspect has associated its regional interests with ASEAN. While hosting the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit during December 20-21, 2012 in New Delhi, for example, India advocated renewing its bonding with ASEAN and the region as a whole, mainly in maritime and commercial aspects.

In Southeast Asia, India's prime strategic interest is to maximize trade and commercial dealings. India has no maritime territorial ambition in Southeast Asia. Its aim and objective in the region is purely commercial. The South China Sea is not only a prime energy-located maritime zone, but is also strategically vital for India's commercial dealings with Southeast Asia. While Vietnam and the Philippines have shown a keen interest in joint oil exploration in the region with India, India's economic and commercial interests have been affected by the Chinese antipathy in the region. While describing India's oil exploration with Vietnam as "illegal and invalid," China has opposed India's commercial moves in the South China Sea. Jiang Yu, spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, has stated: "As for oil and gas exploration activities, our consistent position is that we are opposed to any country engaged in oil and gas exploration and development activities in waters under

China's jurisdiction. We hope foreign countries do not get involved in the South China Sea dispute.”³⁷

Officially, India has clarified its position on the South China Sea issue on *four* counts³⁸: *first*, where it is a “sovereignty” issue, India is not a party to it: it must be resolved by countries that are parties to it; *second*, freedom of navigation and right of passage in this maritime region must be maintained; *third*, India's interests in this region are purely commercial, aimed at energy exploration; and *fourth*, maritime security and freedom and safety of SLOCs must be maintained as per the norms of maritime laws or international law. Commenting on China's reservation over India's commercial interests in the South China Sea, India's Minister for External Affairs, Salman Khurshid, stated: “there are fundamental issues there that do not require India's interference.”³⁹

There is room for India to shape a well-crafted maritime drive over the South China Sea region. This has been well-articulated in the *Vision Statement* of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit. Under the heading *Political and Security Cooperation*, it mentions that both India and ASEAN “are committed to strengthening cooperation to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation,” and safety of SLOCs “for unfettered movement of trade in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS.”⁴⁰ This can become the basis for a robust maritime political order in Southeast Asia, with its significant reference to “freedom of navigation.” ASEAN has institutionally called on India to be forthcoming and promote intense institutional cooperation in trade, economy, and maritime security. ASEAN member countries have in addition urged India to take a more “decisive” stance towards the region, including over the South China Sea. President Nguyen Tan Dung of Vietnam has asked for direct intervention by India in maritime issues. Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra of Thailand has stressed the need for closer India-ASEAN cooperation and connectivity. He has expressed the view that there should be deep cooperation between the two sides on sea safety, disaster management, energy security, and

³⁷ “India makes waves with South China Sea oil and gas exploration,” *Global Times*, September 18, 2011, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/7598163.html>.

³⁸ “Vietnam seeks India's support in resolving South China Sea row,” *Economic Times*, December 20, 2013, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-12-20/news/35933788_1_india-asean-asean-and-china-asean-india-commemorative-summit.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ “Vision Statement ASEAN India Commemorative Summit,” December 21, 2012, <http://www.asean.org/news/asean-statement-communicues/item/vision-statement-asean-india-commemorative-summit> (accessed September 22, 2013).

more. This treatise suggests an ASEAN discourse that there is a bigger potential role and space for India to engage with the region more intensely and closely.

Chinese Maritime Assertiveness

Geographically, the South China Sea is a slice of the Pacific Ocean, encompassing the waters from Singapore to the Taiwan Strait in the northeast. *Three* correlated factors that drive the Chinese to take a somewhat aggressive stance on the issue are: (a) it is a key maritime transportation zone for China's future energy and maritime posture; (b) it is a resource-rich region; and (c) the legality of this sea zone is a vital factor in maritime diplomacy. Crucial for the Chinese is the unique distinction of the South China Sea as the "maritime transportation" zone between the Asia-Pacific and the rest of the world. There has recently been an escalation in China's aggressive posture. On January 1, 2013, a Chinese ship started patrolling the disputed areas. This was part of the policy designed by the Hainan Maritime Safety Administration, which, in its latest step, has also launched the vessel *Haixun 21*. Its main aim is to monitor maritime activities in the region, besides keeping an eye on maritime traffic safety.⁴¹ *Haixun 21* will cover the high seas, which is a new advance.⁴² Officially, China has consistently and glumly held that it has strictly abided by the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. China is also sensitive to issues pertaining to the East China Sea.

The way China decides to handle these disputes will largely determine its future image and strategic posture in the neighborhood, particularly in East Asia and Southeast Asia. It will also shape China's future international image, which is extremely vital for China in projecting a "soft power" image as that of a benevolent power. A new leadership has taken over in Beijing, but China will nevertheless like to continue with its claim over the maritime region, as aggressively as before. History suggests that China hardly ever compromises on territorial and sovereignty issues linked to its national interests, genuine or perceived. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang are continuing the tradition of their predecessors Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, though there could be a minor re-tuning of policy where demonstrative aggressiveness is concerned. Southeast Asia as a neighbor is a vital priority for Chinese foreign policy. Obviously, China would prefer to maintain good relations with the region. China's

⁴¹ Wang Yuanyuan, "China sends first oceangoing patrol vessel to South China Sea," *Xinhua*, December 27, 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-12/27/c_132066881.htm.

⁴² Ibid.

healthy trade and commercial contacts with these countries bear witness to this.

India's Options

If China continues to pursue an aggressive posture regarding the South China Sea and East China Sea, there will be a huge setback to its posture of “peaceful rise” in the neighborhood. It is not far-fetched to see that such a development in due course could affect its trade and economic contacts in the region. It may also be conducive for the USA and other powers like India and Japan in the region to persuade the other nations in the region to take shelter under their welcoming wings. China certainly would not want this. As it is, the Americans are constantly searching for new partners in the region under the new strategic focus on Asia and the Asia-Pacific.

In the circumstances, India has three possible options in fabricating policy measures. *One*: It is not a party to the South China Sea politics. At the same time, the legitimacy of exploring energy in the maritime region under “freedom of navigation” vis-à-vis international maritime law and jurisprudence is sacrosanct. It would be prudent for both India and ASEAN to integrate this policy stance in their *Vision Statement* to pre-empt any unpleasant future contingencies from the Chinese side. *Two*: India must maximize its bilateral and multilateral political, economic, diplomatic and military contacts in Southeast Asia more vividly. Engaging with ASEAN as a multilateral institution should be a priority in its foreign policy. *Three*: Assess the current contours of the regional politics, and reinterpret the situation to come closer to the region. The Asia-Pacific is neither geographically far from Southeast Asia, nor is the South China Sea cut off from the maritime politics of Asia and the Indian Ocean.

For India, comprehensive engagement with ASEAN and reviving its Look East policy outlook by advocating in favor of ARF and ADMM+ are important and immediate priorities. In this, the prime task is to identify and maximize understanding with ASEAN members on key security and military matters, where the focus in the current context could be on maritime security. But for India, taking the politics of the Asia-Pacific into account, the task is huge. The aim, motive, and objective should be to understand the emerging dynamics of the Asia-Pacific and its priorities in its foreign policy objectives. India has legitimized the coinage “Indo-Pacific” by stating that India is a key power in Asia-Pacific politics.⁴³ The challenge is to coordinate the

⁴³ “PM’s opening statement at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit,” *Speeches*, Government of India, December 20, 2012.

region between Southeast Asia and Asia-Pacific politics, where the connecting factor is maritime politics. In this design, the centrality of ASEAN must be reinvented in Indian foreign policy, to craft a well-balanced policy between ASEAN, Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific, with the "China concern" as a binding factor.

Summing Up

Relatively speaking, India is still a new Asia-Pacific power, and its perception of the region is still nascent. The Asia-Pacific is important to India's rise strategically both at the Asian and global level. As discussed in this paper, the Indian perspective of the Asia-Pacific is linked to a range of geo-political factors and geo-strategic elements where not only regions like East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia are closely factored; but also crucial powers like the USA, China, Japan, Australia, and other Southeast Asian countries. Multilateral bodies or networks are other important influencing factors in India's Asia-Pacific design. ASEAN continues to be the prime factor in India's Asia-Pacific outlook where ARF, ADMM+, EAS, and RCEP remain core hypotheses of this multilateral outlook. India would continue to advocate greater economic integration in East Asia; yet a lot of emphasis would be given to the ASEAN mode of thinking. The key for India will be to ask and push forward RCEP ahead and look for a greater India-ASEAN strategic engagement.

The prime consideration in this context will be the portent of economic multilateralism. India would continue to stress East Asian economic integration and much thrust would be given to the RCEP negotiations. India identifies its economic interests within the RCEP framework as a natural corollary to its East Asia vision and the broader Asia-Pacific calculus. It is aware that the Asia-Pacific is currently having two trade liberalization models, RCEP and TPP: these are not mutually contradictory, but the competing Sino-US politics make them appear as competing models. India is in favor of RCEP. Where TPP is concerned, it would like to first ensure its interests with APEC and would like to advocate for APEC membership for itself. The USA has neither invited India to join TPP, nor has India considered the prospects of TPP in its Asia-Pacific calculus so far. India is yet to become a member of APEC. RCEP would continue to remain the prime multilateral mode in India's Asia-Pacific multilateral design for some time. India would be heavily advocating for the merits of RCEP, and would like the idea and concept of ASEAN+6 to be actualized as soon as possible. The negotiation of the RCEP process will eventually be the key to India

and its future outlook towards East Asia, as well as the Asia-Pacific: it would be an important factor in India's future outlook towards the Asia-Pacific.

India would also like to see the emergence of a peaceful and stabilizing maritime order in Asia. Though it is not directly concerned with the South China Sea and East China Sea disputes, the Chinese assertiveness in these matters has made it vigilant about maritime security in Asia. Besides, the Chinese reservation over India's commercial interests in the South China Sea and the PLA Navy's rising profile in the Indian Ocean compel India to search for a stable and secure maritime order in Asia. India's advocacy of a maritime order in the Asia-Pacific would bring together a variety of bilateral and multilateral chains of understanding, linking regional and extra-regional powers together. In this, two factors India would like to concentrate over in the times to come are: a maritime order where India can establish a strategic chain of understanding and outlook with countries like Japan, Vietnam, Philippines, Australia, and the USA, as these countries' strategic interests in maritime regions largely converge; and concentrate on IORA (formerly known as IOR-ARC) and place a stress on the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) where the aim is to bring peace and stability in IOR.

Upgrading the strategic relationship with vital powers at the bilateral level would be the key, as it will facilitate India's multilateral vision in the region.⁴⁴ The USA would certainly continue to be the most vital factor in India's Asia-Pacific design. However, India needs to emphasize its relationship with Japan as a strategic ally in the region a great deal more.⁴⁵ India identifies its space with Japan at the regional and global levels that promote "economic integration" and an "open rule-based architecture."⁴⁶ At the same time, India also needs to emphasize forging a new level of relationship with ASEAN countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, besides Australia. Briefly, India would prefer a multipolar power structure in the Asia-Pacific, and needs to strive to actualize this aspiration.

⁴⁴ Arvind Gupta, "India's approach to Asia-Pacific," *IDSA Policy Brief*, September 19, 2013, http://www.idsa.in/policybrief/IndiasapproachtoAsiaPacific_agupta_190913 (accessed on November 26, 2013).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Prime Minister's speech at the banquet hosted by the Prime Minister of Japan, Ministry of External Affairs: Government of India, May 29, 2013.