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India and the South China Sea

Upscaling Maritime Diplomacy



Araudra Singh

VIF Paper

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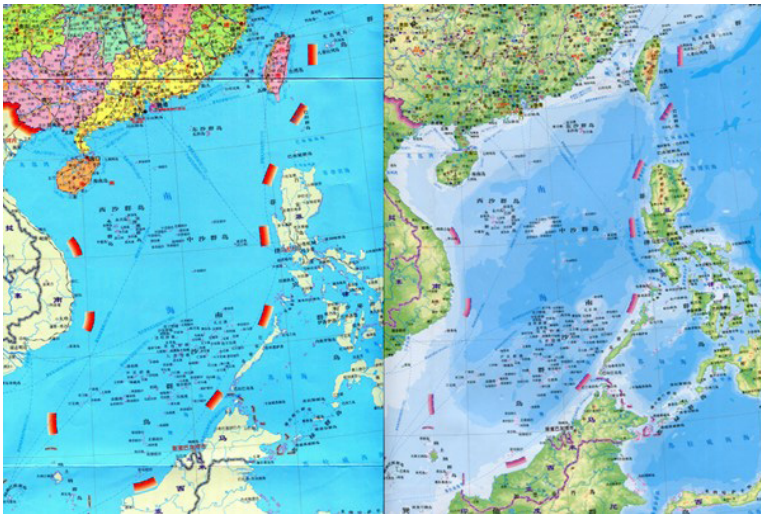
Abstract

While the Indian Navy (IN) was first deployed in the contested waterways of the South China Sea (SCS) in 1958,¹ its visits to Southeast Asian countries increased fourfold between 2013 and 2017.² A noticeable shift in India's strategic posture towards the SCS has been discernible only post-pandemic, witnessing official support for both, the 2016 Arbitral Award,³ and the Philippines in upholding its sovereignty.⁴ The defence partnership with claimant states has also evolved to encompass arms sales, declared plans for joint arms development and multilateral naval exercises. Increased defence and security cooperation between India and some Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states should be viewed in the backdrop of India's commercial, and strategic interests along with littoral states rallying for active involvement of regional stakeholders, in an attempt to hedge against China's maritime aggression. Complemented by the objectives of the Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS), Act East Policy (AEP), and Indo-Pacific Vision, the IN remains committed to safeguarding "greatest commons", protect maritime interests, and project power whilst burnishing its credentials as a net security provider in the region. As its operational ambit steadily expands to include the Western Pacific, IN's aspiration to "build bridges of friendship" and exercise deterrence seems an onerous task, and is likely to experience acute challenges across diplomatic, strategic, security and policy fronts. Although establishing a permanent naval presence in the SCS is not officially desired, therein lies considerable traction and scope for India to advance the maritime security of ASEAN in general and claimant states in particular.

Background

The *South China Sea* (SCS) today remains one of the most widely contested region in the world, which has witnessed increased tensions in the recent past. China's expansive claims, expressed by its 2023 edition of the 10-dash line map,⁵ encompasses almost the entirety of the disputed waterways. Beijing's claim of its jurisdictional waters overlaps with that of littoral states-Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines.⁶ While Indonesia is not a claimant state, its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) intersects with China's extensive claims.⁷

Image 1: Part of China's National Map, 2023 Edition



(Source: SinoMaps Press)

With acute power asymmetries vis-à-vis claimant states, China, whilst simultaneously obstructing the conclusion of long pending Code of Conduct (COC) in the SCS through its implausible demands⁸ has been consistently encroaching EEZs of counter-claimants. The disputed region has become a global flashpoint, in part due to Beijing's land reclamation and island-building activities, and subsequent militarisation of the geographical features. This has resulted in China's dominant control in terms of surveillance and power projection⁹. Perceiving the SCS to be a "core interest",¹⁰ China's uncompromising stance as "inherent territory"¹¹ and coercive actions have gravely affected regional peace and security. The Southeast Asian states, unable to confront Beijing's aggression on their own have fostered cooperative security steps by external like-minded partners.¹² While attaining a balance of power remains in the interest of regional stakeholders in general, and India in particular, it would be far from a plain sailing exercise.

Layout of the Paper. This Paper discusses the matter of India and the South China Sea under the following headings:-

- Rationale for India's Naval Presence;
- The Indo-Pacific Vision;
- Evolving Regional Dynamics;
- China's Growing Aggression in SCS;
- The ASEAN Way;
- Assessing India's Balancing Efforts through a Theoretical Prism;
- Challenges to India's Regional Interests and Strategy;
- China's Strategic Approach towards the South China Sea;
- South China Sea in the Indian Maritime Security Strategy;
- The Way Forward.

Rationale for India's Naval Presence

Building on historical links and strategic partnership with the ASEAN, IN's deployments in the contested waterways are demonstrative of India's commercial, regional and strategic interests.

Civilisational Linkages

India views Southeast Asia as a natural strategic partner, given the historical linkages.¹³ The links tethering the Indian subcontinent with its extended neighbourhood can be traced back to ancient times, as early as the 6th century BCE. The region was under Indian influence until the 15th century, a testament to which lies in similarities in cultural values, folk heritage, rituals, literature, language, architecture, artefacts, indigenous knowledge systems and other living traditions.¹⁴ There is a plenitude of historical and archaeological evidence regarding India's cultural, political, and commercial exchanges with the Southeast Asian kingdoms.

To trade, Indians have sailed in the extended waters of Southeast Asia for over 1500 years, right from Kedah in Malaysia to Quanzhou in China.¹⁵ Dynasties based on the Southeast coast of the Peninsula in particular had deep commercial bonds. The Pallavas, who ruled from the 4th to the 9th century CE were well known for commercial enterprise and frequently ventured into eastern sea routes, which set a precedent for furthering Indian presence. Subsequently, traders, adventurers, priests and teachers

from the Tamil region traversed to Kingdoms in Thailand, Burma, the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia.¹⁶

Cultural influence of India has been enormous.¹⁷ Archaeologists in Malaysia have discovered artefacts and ruins in the Bujang Valley settlement that date back to 110 CE. This civilisation is thought to be the earliest in Southeast Asia and was influenced by ancient Indians. Malaysia's neighbour, Thailand also has a rich history of exchanges with the erstwhile kingdoms in India. Although direct contact with Thailand spans back to the third century BCE when Buddhist monks were dispatched by Ashoka, cultural and commercial ties date back to the sixth century BCE. During the Sukhothai era (1275–1350), there were two types of Indian immigrants to Thailand: merchants who travelled to Siam for trade, and Brahmans who were highly respected astrological and ceremonial specialists in the Siamese court. Besides, India also had a political footprint in the region. The Khmer Empire, that was dominant in the neighbourhood from the ninth to fifteenth century founded a kingdom in central Cambodia, under King Jayavarman II. Later the empire spread to Thailand and East Vietnam as well.

Therefore, IN's increasing contemporary forays in the region can be viewed as a means for building on the deep civilisational connection that India has always shared with Southeast Asian kingdoms. Additionally, IN deployments are in part attributable to the commercial ties that remain entrenched to this day.

Sea Lanes of Communication

The upscaling of IN's deployments in the SCS is a clear indicator of the significance of India's seaborne trade through the disputed littoral space that amounts to 55 per cent of its total trade.¹⁸ New Delhi's commercial

stakes warrant free passage of cargo and oil traffic through the SCS, for which freedom of navigation becomes imperative. Additionally, India's joint hydrocarbon exploration project with Vietnam¹⁹ makes regional security equally important, if not more.

Indian firm ONGC Videsh Limited, one of the largest companies in the oil and gas industry, has made investments totalling almost US\$430 million since the early 1990s²⁰. To carry out cooperative oil drilling in two Vietnamese blocks located in the Phu Khanh Basin of the SCS, OVL and Vietnamese company Petrovietnam inked an Agreement of Cooperation in 2011.²¹ The primary focus of the agreement involves new investments, expansion, and operations of oil and gas exploration and production, including refining, transportation, and supply. The agreement aimed to create long-term bilateral cooperation in the oil and gas industry, also including working trips by experts and officials from petroleum-related fields. While one of the blocks was disbanded due to bleak prospects, the other block was retained. In spite of China's clear discontentment, warning, and rejection of the extensions,²² rooted in its claims of "indisputable sovereignty", Petro-Vietnam has on seven occasions extended the contract.²³

Two years after Beijing's protests, in a further boost to Indian presence, Vietnam offered OVL with an offer of seven oil blocks in the SCS in 2013, including three that were provided exclusively.²⁴ India thereby has legitimate interests in maintaining freedom of navigation, overflight, and commercial activity—all of which depend on regional stability. The SCS's instability, including drawing from increased China-Philippines escalation could prove to be detrimental to the security of shipping lanes. To protect commercial interests amidst Beijing's continuous militarization and coercion, and signal the latter of vital Indian commercial imperative in the region, IN's operations have assumed considerable importance.

In the near future, the dependence on Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) is very likely to increase if India's strategic interests and growth trajectory pose as any indicators. ASEAN is India's one of the largest trading partners, accounting for 11.3 percent of the latter's global trade.²⁵ There lies enormous potential in sectors like infrastructure, tourism, e-commerce, pharmaceuticals, education and skill development. That India is well aware of the strategic complementarities it has with ASEAN is evident by plans posited during the 20th Annual ASEAN-India summit, held in September, 2023. Indian PM Narendra Modi's 12-Point Proposal²⁶ that underlines India's commitment to strengthening ties with ASEAN across various sectors, offers tremendous opportunities for Indian businesses to expand their regional footprint and further trade and commercial ties.

In an additional potential stimulus to India-ASEAN trade, the 20th ASEAN-India Economic Ministers' Meeting in Semarang,²⁷ held two weeks before the annual summit involved discussions surrounding the review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA), 2009 as the meeting's main agenda. The review negotiations, expected to conclude by the end of next year are expected to enhance and diversify mutually beneficial trade through inculcating changes in Rules of Origin along with trade remedies. The review of the AITIGA was a long-due plea of Indian businesses to facilitate the FTA trade and address trade imbalance.

The SCS, contrary to China's perception is regarded as a 'global commons', by several states in the international community, including India.²⁸ India's stance is particularly noteworthy when viewed in the context of its economy. As the Indian economy grows, its energy requirements in the coming years are bound to witness commensurate growth to support its burgeoning economic rise. As per official estimates, New Delhi, over the next two decades is likely to account for 25 percent of global energy

demand growth.²⁹ Notwithstanding its progress in the green energy transition, India's total installed power generation capacity from fossil fuels is still 50 percent plus³⁰ and its efforts to shift to non-fossil fuels remains a time-consuming process. In this scenario, India would need access to the global commons which are lushed with hydrocarbons. According to a study by Rystad Energy, a prominent energy and business intelligence firm, the seascape contains proven 3.6 billion barrels of oil and 40.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.³¹ The semi-enclosed waterway is also rich in coal deposits. The energy riches in the region have naturally drawn New Delhi's attention, inflating its interests.

Similarly, in the near term, what appears to be of considerable significance and relevance is India's connectivity plans. During the Indian PM Narendra Modi's visit to Vladivostok in September, 2019, the annual India-Russia bilateral summit, concluded with the signing of a Memorandum of Intent (MoI) on the Development of Maritime Communications between the Ports of Chennai and Vladivostok.³² The MOI is intended for their mutual interest in exploring the use of the Eastern Maritime Corridor, given its potential for time and cost-efficient trade. The corridor plan again came up in talks on the side lines of the Eastern Economic Forum 2023 held at Vladivostok.³³ The prospective connectivity project would traverse through the SCS by connecting Vladivostok and Chennai. The plan, provided it materialises promises to reduce travel time by 16 days from the current route that transits from Mumbai to St. Petersburg via Europe. Besides, it would also provide India access to the mineral-rich Arctic region.

Therefore, it's clear that going forward China's militarisation and arm-twisting naval posture in the SCS remains antithetical to India's growing interests. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to state that if Beijing's military adventurism continues unabated, India could encounter a scenario of "SCS dilemma",³⁴ akin to what is posited "Malacca dilemma", vis-à-vis China.

Act East Policy

To strengthen commercial and economic ties, the Indian government in 1991 introduced Look East Policy (LEP),³⁵ which was initially an economic initiative to build on historical and cultural links. After considerable progress in trade and investment, New Delhi decided to broad base the scope of engagement with ASEAN, with the promulgation of Phase II in 2003. The second phase, in addition to incorporating an expanded definition of “East” that involved East Asian countries, such as Japan and Australia also marked a shift in focus from solely economic issues to economic and security issues including in the maritime domain.³⁶

In tandem with the growing convergence of interests in several spheres and India’s pursuit towards more substantive engagement amidst China’s rising influence, the Indian government conceived the Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014. Upgrading from LEP, the AEP symbolised a more action-oriented approach, involving political, strategic and cultural dimensions through engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels.³⁷ The increasing convergence on security-related issues has made maritime cooperation an important element of AEP. India remains committed³⁸ to contributing to regional maritime security by strengthening capacity building of ASEAN states through various forms of engagements ranging from joint exercises to hydrographic services, and information sharing.

Indian policymakers realise that AEP’s objective of enhanced connectivity would be better buttressed from the SCS, being free from traditional and non-traditional security threats, enabling safe and secure commerce and movement of people.³⁹ Given that the prosperity of India and its strategic partner is partly contingent upon a stable and secure regional seascape, New Delhi has been forced to adopt a security-oriented approach to the disputes, with AEP serving as a theoretical plank.

The Indo-Pacific Vision

AEP today lies at the heart of India's broader approach to the Indo-Pacific, as evident by its Indo-Pacific vision⁴⁰. The vision recognizes the strategic expanse as a continuum, wherein Malacca Strait and South China Sea connect India to the Pacific, with the ASEAN states conjoining the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, in both geographical and civilisational sense. ASEAN centrality and unity, thereby, lie at the heart of the Indo-Pacific Vision. ASEAN will remain central to India's regional landscape as it seeks to 'cooperate for an architecture for peace and security in this region'.⁴¹ This is why openness and security of seas, equal access to the global commons and freedom of navigation for unimpeded commerce assume prime salience, essential for streamlined regional connectivity, in addition to India's own and regional stability and prosperity.

India's clarion call of respecting international rules and norms, and equality of all nations while side-lining use of force, represents its vision and appreciation of a multi-polar world, based on strategic equilibrium. Striving for a more balanced and predictable world, as India seeks to enhance its strategic profile across the geostrategic continuum, the uncertainty and tensions surrounding China's intentions and aggression in the SCS have affected the regional stability,⁴² whilst exacerbating existing power asymmetries. India, in this scenario besides upping its naval presence, and adopting a relatively strong rhetoric on the dispute strives to

contribute to the restoration of strategic equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific, which has come under increasing strain, including in India's own backyard, the Indian Ocean.⁴³

Balance of Power

Fundamentally, the evolving power dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) can be viewed as a driver nudging India's security overtures in China's periphery. New Delhi, which has traditionally been a preponderant power in the IOR, has underseen its influence steadily wane in the backdrop of an uptick in China's substantive economic and diplomatic footprint, consequently creating an enabling environment for its military presence.⁴⁴

China's grandiose infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) entailing the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) as the maritime component of BRI, complemented by its land counterpart, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) is envisaged to traverse across continents of Asia, Europe and Africa, connecting China and East Asia at one hand to Europe at the other, extending across Central Asia, Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean.⁴⁵ The BRI includes the development of massive infrastructures encompassing ports, and container terminals and connecting these with the mainland through a string of road and railway corridors, logistical stations, storage facilities and free-trade zones including in the Indian subcontinent through unparalleled investments. President Xi Jinping's large-scale initiative not only attempts to circumvent Beijing's "Malacca Dilemma", but also entrenches power and control, posing an acuminous challenge to India's primacy and stature as a security provider in the IOR.⁴⁶ New Delhi's traditionally close partners- such as Myanmar⁴⁷, Maldives⁴⁸ and Mauritius,⁴⁹ have appeared to have been swayed by China owing to the potential benefits that the BRI promises. According to Indian policymakers, Beijing's magnanimity has not been completely benign, at

times with strings attached.⁵⁰

Many officials in India regard the BRI as a cover for Beijing's strategic ambitions,⁵¹ i.e., to secure investments, cargo, and energy shipments in the Indian Ocean through greater military presence, signs of which are already apparent. Development of Beijing's first base in Djibouti only appears to confirm New Delhi's apprehensions, causing further speculation about the 'String of Pearls' design, a plan for multiple logistical hubs in the IOR, to circumvent India.⁵² If doubts regarding China's desire to develop 'dual-use' logistics facilities were not enough to confirm Indian suspicions, its frequent naval manoeuvres in the region seem to rattle politico-security circles in India.⁵³ Since the last decade, an average of eight to ten People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships, submarines and civilian 'research vessels' have operated in the IOR annually.⁵⁴ Besides undertaking mining operations, China has been known to dock and deploy its naval assets on India's periphery as well, in countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Maldives.⁵⁵

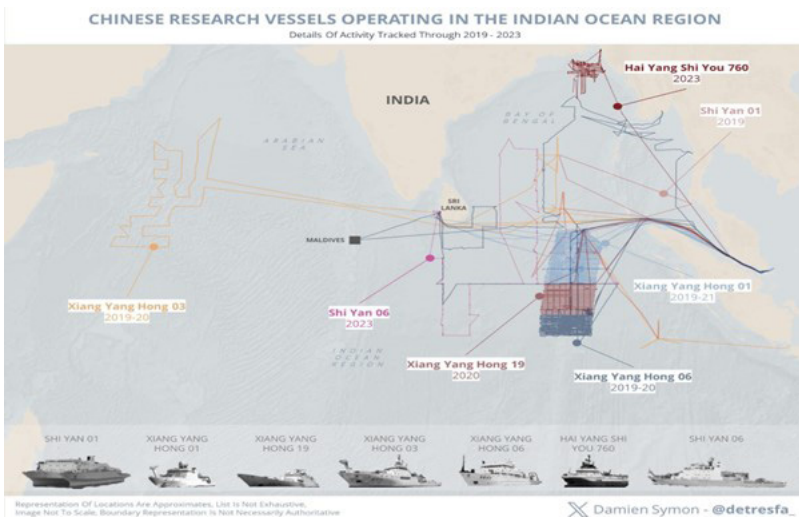
Given its significant and ever-increasing stakes, including with BRI-related projects, one might conceive of China's increasing naval presence as a *bona fide* attempt to secure sea lines of communications SLOCs and civilian assets. However, its largely persistent presence of submarines does not seem to be motivated by concerns of SLOCs.⁵⁶ Beijing with its increasing naval footprint also desires to signal its status as a dominant regional power, that has power projection capabilities in both its immediate and extended neighbourhood littorals. This perception is evident in the writings of China's policy makers, one of whom explicitly contented that "the Indian Ocean is not India's ocean."⁵⁷

Besides its deployments in India's neighbourhood, there have been rising incidents wherein China has deployed surveillance ships in Eastern IOR. The *Dongdiao* class reconnaissance ships earlier known to monitor

warships of the US, and Japan in the Western Pacific, are now operating in the Eastern seaboard.⁵⁸ In fact, in September, 2019 the *Shiyan 1*, a Chinese research vessel was tracked intruding into India’s EEZ off the coast of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, near the capital Port Blair.⁵⁹ There have also been instances in the recent past, wherein Chinese research vessels conducting surveys in Eastern IOR, have stayed for a period of two to three months.⁶⁰

China maintains that its “research vessels” have benign intent- “contributing to humanity’s scientific understanding of the ocean”,⁶¹ and the fact that the surveillance vessels affiliated with its Ministry of Natural Resources and Academy of Sciences might signal its innocuous intentions.⁶² However, both entities have close ties with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), having also signed cooperation agreements with the latter. Before entering civilian service, some of the survey ships were operated by the PLAN, including Xiang Yang Hong class ships that have been known to operate close to the Indian EEZ.⁶³

Image 2: China’s Research Vessels in the IOR since 2019



(Source: Damien Symon)

The nexus between State-affiliated entities and the PLA is a cause for serious concern to India when considered under the framework of Beijing's policies. China's Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) Strategy⁶⁴ has blurred lines between the country's civilian and military, scientific, technological, and economic development. The nefarious machination of the MCF policy is clear from China's 14th Five-Year Plan,⁶⁵ which includes deep sea exploration as one of its focus areas, striving to develop "submarine scientific observation networks". The guidelines posited by the Ministry of Natural Resources for pursuing the objectives stated in the Five Year Plan have been conceived in a manner that links ocean surveying to military objectives.⁶⁶ Moreover, the PLA personnel have postulated detailed accounts of the need to develop advanced deep-sea technologies to support undersea warfare. While the PLA officials consider rivalry with the US as the primary motive for China to advance its undersea domain capabilities, the data collected by the latter's research vessels could aid in bridging subsurface knowledge and capability gaps of the PLAN.⁶⁷ Subsequently, this could give PLAN an edge vis-à-vis the IN in terms of submarine warfare capabilities, regarding which Indian officials share fears.⁶⁸

Thereby, in the rapidly shifting power balance, India seems to be developing a sense of strategic urgency to leverage its geographical location, rising naval capabilities, and benign perception among ASEAN states⁶⁹ to preempt further PLAN's footprint, by IN's forays in the SCS. To be sure, while India's security engagements in SCS might have slightly increased post-Galwan clash, its naval posture remains passive at best, a perception shared by ASEAN, which expects India to play a more proactive role in the regional security dynamics.⁷⁰

Evolving Regional Dynamics

Before delving into ASEAN's perception of India's role, it is essential to assess the regional strategic landscape, the China-ASEAN dynamics in particular. There remains an entrenched incongruence in ASEAN's stance towards China on the latter's aggression in the SCS, which is antithetical to the ASEAN Way.⁷¹ The discord among the member states is not only among those involved in the SCS dispute and the non-claimants but also in terms of their strategic orientation towards China. Although the scope and scale of Southeast Asian states' ties with China keep varying according to changes within their respective regimes, and consequent threat perceptions, some states pursue a policy of deep engagement, while others opt for equidistance.⁷² However, there appears to be a steadily growing collective realisation that asymmetrical interdependence on China and the latter's coercion in the SCS is not in the region's long-term interest.^{73 & 74} Not only has Beijing repeatedly violated the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), 1976⁷⁵ despite being the first non-ASEAN signatory, but the region's strategic vulnerabilities have been furthered by growing economic dependence on China,⁷⁶ signs of which are already apparent.

ASEAN face a serious dilemma in managing its economic linkages with the most important economic player in the region, yet a source of accentuating vulnerability. ASEAN-China merchandise trade over the last decade has

grown more than twofold, totalling \$722 billion in 2022, making up for almost one-fifth of ASEAN's international trade.⁷⁷ Similarly, Beijing's aggregate investments in the region are approximately \$15 billion,⁷⁸ on a consistent uptick even after the onset of the pandemic, post which ASEAN became China's largest trading partner for the first time. The continued upscale in trade is attributed to agreements and initiatives, such as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) 2005, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the BRI.⁷⁹ Through enhanced tariff cuts, supply chain links, and connectivity, the landmark initiatives have swiftly facilitated trade. The resulting growth in ASEAN imports from China has been remarkable, soaring by 70 percent between 2017 and 2022. What is particularly worrying is that imports of critical industrial items constitute over 80 percent of the total imports basket.⁸⁰

Table 1: ASEAN-China Merchandise Trade in Billion US\$

| ASEAN Trade with China | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|--------|--------|
| ASEAN Exports | 153.3 | 154 | 145.2 | 143.9 | 187 | 197.6 | 202.5 | 218.8 | 281.8 | 290.7 |
| ASEAN Imports | 198.2 | 212.6 | 218.2 | 224.6 | 253.9 | 280.8 | 305.4 | 299.7 | 388.4 | 431.3 |
| Balance of Trade | -44.8 | -58.6 | -72.9 | -80.6 | -66.9 | -83.1 | -102.8 | -80.8 | -106.6 | -140.5 |
| Total | 351.5 | 366.7 | 363.4 | 368.5 | 440.9 | 478.5 | 507.9 | 518.6 | 670.2 | 722.1 |

(Source: Compiled from ASEAN Statistical Yearbook)

Economic dependence introduces contingencies relating to Beijing's economic vagaries, supply chain disruptions, and trade weaponisation. One particularly noteworthy case of China's economic coercion that merits reminder was in 2012⁸¹ when tensions flared between China and the Philippines. Following the maritime standoff in the contested Scarborough Shoal, China immediately curbed its neighbour's banana exports. The ban, promulgated for over five months not only affected

Manila's export revenue, being the world's second-largest banana exporter, but also jeopardised the sustenance of thousands of local farmers.

Analogous to the effect of Beijing's trade weaponisation is that of the latter's recent economic slump. After its economic slowdown, the second quarter of 2023 saw a 13.5 percent decrease in ASEAN's imports from China⁸², with notable drops in a number of sectors. ASEAN's exports to China were also affected. For example, Vietnam, a significant exporter of electronics and textiles, reported a 14 percent decrease in exports in the second quarter of 2023 compared to the same period the previous year.⁸³ Whereas, as a result of Beijing's slowdown, Malaysia's economic growth reached its lowest point in almost two years. Meanwhile, major factors affecting Thailand's economic trajectory in the previous fiscal year included a decline in tourism and demand for intermediate items from China.⁸⁴ Thus, the unabated trend of deepening economic integration and the ensuing vulnerabilities have raised concerns across the region.

According to the 2023 annual survey report of ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, which serves as one of the most reliable indicators of prevailing attitudes among ASEAN states vis-à-vis domestic and international environment, China remains the most influential economic and political-strategic power in the region.⁸⁵ However, there are clear signs that China's ever-expanding influence is not well-received by the region's strategic community. 64.5 percent of the respondents across the region share their concerns about Beijing's exacerbating influence.⁸⁶ And some nations like Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, have recorded greater worries about Beijing's burgeoning economy.⁸⁷

A careful balancing act appears to be in the making as ASEAN strives to mitigate strategic risks while enduring its economic exchanges. Pursuing a multifaceted approach continues to be the safest course of action for

the region as it seeks to develop resilience while it navigates an intricate economic environment. This entails broadening the range of trading partners while enhancing intra-ASEAN commerce.⁸⁸

China's Growing Aggression in SCS

On the other hand, Beijing's maritime aggression⁸⁹ in the SCS has meant recurring violations of TAC, 1976 maxims, specifically those relating to sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and existence free from coercion. Through continued coercion China's actions have not only served to erode the trust level within ASEAN but also posed an impediment to the latter's approach to the dispute⁹⁰ i.e., setting norms to foster stability, thus enabling an environment for conducting dialogue. Since the commencement of China-ASEAN formal negotiations for COC in 1992, despite the mutual objective to establish peaceful conditions in the littorals, the situation on the ground has seldom been conducive for negotiations. Moreover, exploiting existing divisions within ASEAN through its geopolitical heft and lobbying has allowed China to gain a firmer *de-jure* and *de-facto* grasp over the issue, eventually prompting its unilateral posture in the SCS.⁹¹

China, over the past two decades, has underseen the largest military build-up since World War II.⁹² In addition to surveillance, communication and logistics infrastructure, it has deployed military assets, ranging from laser, and jamming equipment to missile systems, fighter jets, and gun batteries among other platforms and facilities. Supplemented by maintaining a strong military and paramilitary presence, i.e., PLA Navy, Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), and People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), one-party authoritarian state has attempted to impose its unilateral

jurisdiction across the contested waterways.⁹³ For instance, the CCG law, 2021⁹⁴ that grants the coastal agency seemingly unbounded authority, including employing coercive measures such as using ship-borne weaponry and delineating ‘temporary maritime security zones’ underscores not only her disregard for international law but also the extent to which it can go to exercise expansionist claims.

The vessels of CCG and PAFMM have been primarily used to harass the vessels and fishery boats of claimant states, impeding their exploration activities in their respective EEZ, at times swarming, and ramming the adversarial ships.⁹⁵ Under the guise of protecting what China refers to as its “Maritime Rights Protection Force System”, the CCG and PAFMM personnel have not only imposed unilateral months-long fishing bans⁹⁶ inside the EEZ of countries like the Philippines and Vietnam but also reported to have used military-grade laser, temporarily blinding crews of contesters.⁹⁷

On March 4, 2024, in a recurring display of China’s peacetime blockade, CCG cutters blasted water cannons and rammed Manila’s resupply mission to one of its landing ship at the Second Thomas Shoal. Consequently, the damaged Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessel with its crew injured was forced to withdraw from Philippines’ own EEZ.⁹⁸ China has also continued to threaten the use of force while employing grey-zone tactics to obstruct hydrocarbon drilling operations of claimants in their respective EEZs/oil and gas blocks.⁹⁹ Claimants such as Vietnam and Malaysia have also been a victim to the arm-twisting measures of CCG and PAFMM vessels. For instance, since 2013 China has ensured a near-constant [coast guard presence](#), engaging in highly provocative behaviour around Luconia Shoals, lying on the Malaysian continental shelf.¹⁰⁰ Both have been known to engage in frequent standoffs on these shoals, wherein much larger and armed CCG and PAFMM vessels have often encircled and intimidated

Malaysian drill ships and resupply vessels around its oil and gas reserves.¹⁰¹ Similarly, under pressure and threats from Beijing, Vietnamese government, on multiple occasions have had to halt oil and gas drilling projects on the contested Spratlys, including on gas field of the country's south-eastern coast.¹⁰² Neither has Beijing shied away from projecting strength through kinetic means. In August 2020, for instance, China in another blatant violation of its commitments under the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC), held an exercise, launching four medium-range missiles across the stretch from Hainan to the Paracel Islands.¹⁰³

Therefore, it's clear that China's coercive and escalatory steps have affected the stability of the seascape, including by infringing upon the contesters' legal rights guaranteed by the UNCLOS (The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), including the right of innocent passage and exploring and exploiting sovereign natural resources.

The ASEAN Way

While the characteristics of the ASEAN way, entailing consensus, and soft regionalism based on the ASEAN Charter along with active Chinese lobbying in some states has meant organisational limitations in coming up with a concerted stance vis-à-vis the dispute, there is an implicit uneasiness. The collective position in the December 2023 ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on Maintaining and Promoting Stability in the Maritime Sphere in Southeast Asia,¹⁰⁴ containing references positing 'concern' and the need to 'exercise self-restraint' regarding recent activities serves as a testament. Meanwhile, the ISEAS survey report¹⁰⁵ clearly indicates that increased military tensions in the SCS tie are perceived among the top regional challenges. At the country level, respondents from the claimant states- Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei expressed relatively more concerns about China's strong-arm tactics in the contested geography.

Meanwhile the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)¹⁰⁶ adopted in June 2019 also included references relating to the dispute, evoking concerns. The AOIP acknowledged 'existing geopolitical challenges' such as 'unresolved maritime disputes that have the potential for open conflict' as impediments to the region's primary objective of ensuring a conducive environment for peace, and prosperity. Thereby, AOIP to address regional challenges, including the SCS issue strives to strengthen existing ASEAN-led institutions such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional

Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus, and ASEAN Maritime Forum by capitalising on opportunities manifesting from the current regional and global landscape.

To avoid experiencing domination by any single power, especially China, ASEAN, with its inability to adopt a confrontational approach towards its giant neighbour has been involved in institutional balancing and co-optation.¹⁰⁷ Hence, it has encouraged the growing involvement of regional powers like Japan, India, and Australia, building on the involvement of the most consequential external player, the US.¹⁰⁸ Amongst the regional stakeholders, members of the Quad grouping, which the majority of the ASEAN populous perceive as constructive,¹⁰⁹ are becoming increasingly involved in the SCS territorial dynamics, being crucial regional stakeholders. Corresponding to the idea of cooperative security, the strategy pursued by ASEAN has been termed “double binding”.¹¹⁰ Whilst engaging China, and simultaneously enveloping prominent stakeholders through its institutional mechanisms, the regional organisation aspires to ensure a stable, and predictable regional environment. Consequently, ASEAN has fostered the regional stakeholders to upscale strategic ties with itself for expanding their respective stake in regional security.¹¹¹ As the regional bloc treads on its course to being a shrewd broker amidst heightening strategic competition, it is also seeking out “third parties” to maximise its strategic space and options.¹¹²

ASEAN's Perception of India's Role

Amidst a rapidly evolving regional environment, marked by power shifts, partnerships and exacerbating strategic rivalry, India has become a crucial player in the regional strategic calculus, even as the bloc probes to further mutual engagement with the “third parties”.¹¹³

ASEAN, being cognisant of India's strengths welcomed its zeal to play a meaningful and positive role in contributing to regional security dynamics and architecture.¹¹⁴ This demonstrably manifested in the latter's affiliation as a Dialogue Partner and ARF in 1995 and 1996 respectively. The then Singapore's Foreign Minister (FM), S. Jayakumar, while accepting India as an ARF member during the 29th Ministerial Meeting in 1996, posited the organisation's collective inclination to chart long-term and comprehensive security exchanges with New Delhi. The Singaporean FM stated, "India, given its size and strategic location in the Indian Ocean can play a constructive and positive role in contributing to the stability of the region."¹¹⁵

Thereafter, India's status as the Summit-level partner in 2002, meant being a part of a limited group of four countries with which ASEAN then had summit dialogues. For the regional bloc, the ASEAN-India Summit was regarded as a framework that would "add some sheen to the organisation", bequeathing it with immense benefits.¹¹⁶ Three years later, India became a part of the East Asia Summit (EAS), Indo-Pacific's premier platform, that discusses key strategic issues, facing the region. The establishment of India's membership in the EAS in 2005 was compared to the 'engine' of the East Asian aircraft by the former ASEAN Secretary General, Ong Keng Yong. He postulated an "aircraft analogy", portraying India as the engine of the aircraft, of which ASEAN was the 'pilot'.¹¹⁷

Reasons for consistent upscale in India-ASEAN relationship go beyond just the convergence of strategic and economic interests, or the regional confidence manifested by diligent promulgation of the LEP by India.¹¹⁸ In ASEAN's steady co-option of India into the bloc's orbit, the characteristics shaping New Delhi, are considered equally significant. The string of attributes being, its growing military and economic might, its sincere effort to develop a blue water naval force, and maintain strategic autonomy as a

nuclear power, and a status-quo power having no expansionist ambitions, its outlook regarding the need to establish a rules-based international order and ASEAN centrality in its Indo-Pacific vision. India's credentials and strategic thinking thus have served as compelling factors for ASEAN to probe deeper entrenchment in ties across a range of areas, including maritime security, eventually culminating in the status of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during the 19th ASEAN-India Summit, held in November 2022.¹¹⁹

While the bloc's doubts about India's substantive engagement in regional issues are still unmistakable¹²⁰ with the perceived distractions relating to 'internal and sub-continental issues', the overall trust levels have been improving. India's importance in regional strategic calculus has particularly been on the rise, in the recent past. The fundamental milestones like the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-India diplomatic ties in 2022, and India's G20 Presidency have translated into its enhanced visibility. Complimenting the recent developments is the region's unprecedented confidence in India as a military power, viewed as an "asset for global peace and security".

Assessing India's Balancing Efforts through a Theoretical Prism

In contrast to perceptions of India's military, the Chinese military exudes distrust in the region. Countries such as Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore consider the PLA as a 'threat' to their respective interests and sovereignty.¹²¹ The concept or a notion relevant to the regional perceptions vis-à-vis the Chinese military, and India's power balancing measures is the Security dilemma. The concept originating from the Realist School of thought in International Relations¹²² propounds that the steps taken by a state to increase its security tend to decrease the security of other actors, as each perceives its own actions as defensive and that of others as potentially offensive. The permanent insecurity is deemed inescapable due to two factors i.e., making assessments regarding others' intentions with absolute certainty remains impossible, and the anarchic nature of the international system, with the absence of globally overarching enforcement authority.¹²³ Hence, the security dilemma catapults states, concerned with current levels of their security to balance aggressive power through dual means, that is external and internal balancing. While external balancing involves security cooperation amongst like-minded states, internal balancing denotes strengthening one's own economic and military capabilities.

China's maritime belligerence in the region can be ensconced under 'Offensive Realism',¹²⁴ a branch of Neo-Realism, that postulates that

an actor's augmentation in power occurs at the expense of others in the international system due to the former's ambition of attaining hegemony. In its persistent drive for regional domination, China has continually employed power and expansionist measures that have meant an alteration in the territorial status quo. The primary motivation of the power-maximising state, China in this case has exacerbated regional power asymmetries.¹²⁵

On the other hand, India's maritime diplomacy with the SCS littorals can be understood through Defensive Realism,¹²⁶ another branch of Neo-Realism. The defensive realist scholars assert that states are essentially security maximisers, as the primary motive is to maintain their respective security, meaning maintenance of the status quo. To ensure the balance of power as a means of survival, actors with shared goals adopt a security-oriented counterbalancing approach in cooperation. Enhanced India-ASEAN cooperation in the maritime domain is rooted in their shared interests. Both strategic partners have a similar position regarding the full and effective implementation of the DOC and the early conclusion of the COC, which should be consistent with the UNCLOS,¹²⁷ This indicates their mutual objective for ensuring a rules-based order in the SCS.

India's External Balancing

In addition to AEP, the *Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (IMSS)¹²⁸ serves as a theoretical undergird to IN's deployments in the Western Pacific. India's revised Maritime Doctrine promotes a steady increase in the IN's operational footprints across its areas of maritime interest', including through its status as a net security provider against prevailing cross-the-spectrum threats and challenges. The strategy also advocates expansion in operational engagements, through an increase in scale and scope of the exercises along with capacity building activities with friendly foreign navies.

Concomitant to India's growing economic and military capabilities and Indo-Pacific vision, the traditional distinction between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific might have appeared to have eroded only in the recent past, but maritime cooperation between India and ASEAN is neither new nor solely targeted at China.¹²⁹ With its first deployment in the contested space going back in 1958, IN has steadily stepped up its benign role across both traditional and non-traditional security domains.¹³⁰ Its exchanges with the ASEAN navies through regular joint exercises, coordinated patrols, training exchanges, port calls, and unilateral deployments have resulted in bettering mutual understanding, coordination and inter-operability in several scenarios ranging from Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations and intelligence-sharing.¹³¹

Table 2: IN's Exercises and Deployments in the Eastern Indian Ocean and Western Pacific

| Year | Operational Engagements |
|------|---|
| 2015 | INS <i>Kamorta</i> , and <i>Satpura</i> , with the Singapore Navy, took part in SIMBEX-15 in May, deployed to the South Indian Ocean and South China Sea. ²²⁷ |
| 2015 | INS <i>Saryu</i> participated in a week-long ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Disaster Relief Exercise (DiREx) conducted in Penang, Northern Malaysia in May. ²²⁸ |
| 2016 | INS <i>Airavat</i> participated in the ADMM Plus (ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus) Exercise on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism (Ex MS & CT) in May, which commenced at Brunei and culminated at Singapore, with various drills and exercises in the South China Sea. ²²⁹ |
| 2016 | The Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet- INS <i>Satpura</i> , <i>Sahyadri</i> , <i>Shakti</i> and <i>Kirch</i> in May, were on a two-and-a-half-month-long operational deployment to the South China Sea and North West Pacific. The fleet made port calls at Cam Rahn Bay (Vietnam), Subic Bay (Philippines), Sasebo (Japan), Busan (South Korea), Vladivostok (Russia), and Port Klang (Malaysia). ²³⁰ |

| | |
|------|---|
| 2016 | In April, INS <i>Sumedha</i> arrived in Padang, Indonesia to participate in the International Fleet Review and the second edition of the Multilateral Naval Exercise KOMODO (MNEK). ²³¹ |
| 2020 | During the 2 nd edition of Singapore and Thailand Trilateral Maritime Exercise SITMEX-20, INS <i>Kamorta</i> and <i>Karmuk</i> took part in a two-day maritime drill held in November in the Andaman Sea. ²³² |
| 2020 | The Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet, in July, carried out a military exercise with a US Navy carrier strike group led by the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS <i>Nimitz</i> off the coast of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. ²³³ |
| 2020 | The INS <i>Sabyadri</i> and <i>Karmuk</i> undertook PASSEX with the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in the East Indian Ocean Region in September. ²³⁴ |
| 2021 | INS <i>Ranvijay</i> and <i>Kora</i> , in August, conducted bilateral exercise with Vietnamese counterparts in the South China Sea. ²³⁵ |
| 2021 | Four-ship Eastern Fleet of Indian Navy- INS <i>Ranvijay</i> , <i>Shivalik</i> , <i>Kadmatt</i> and <i>Kora</i> as part of a two-month deployment to South East Asia, the South China Sea and Western Pacific participated in MALABAR-21, a multilateral exercise with Quad members in the Philippines Sea during the first phase. The deployment also involved bilateral exercises with Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. ²³⁶ |
| 2023 | INS <i>Delhi</i> , INS <i>Satpura</i> , maritime patrol aircraft P8I and integral helicopters on a two-day Sea Phase in May, participated in the first ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise, conducting across the spectrum operations in the South China Sea. ²³⁷ |

(Source: Compiled from the Indian Navy and PIB website, and MOD Annual Reports)

Bridges of Friendship

IN as mandated by the IMSS aspires to build “bridges of friendship”, through its four-pronged role: military, diplomatic, constabulary and benign.¹³² IN conducts joint operations in broadly five formats i.e., Passage

Exercise (PASSEX), Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT), Institutionalised Exercises, Occasional exercises, and multilateral exercises. Each of these operational methodologies is relevant in the case of the ASEAN states.¹³³

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PASSEX: The PASSEX exercises are conducted whenever a foreign vessel passes near its partner country's coast i.e., whenever the opportunity arises. These are not pre-planned, unlike high-end war drills, and are held for maintaining freedom of navigation, countering piracy and ensuring concerted response to natural disasters. IN has been involved in PASSEX with the navies of ASEAN states such as Vietnam, Philippines and Malaysia.¹³⁵

CORPAT: The CORPAT exercises are held to improve mutual understanding, interoperability, information-sharing and surveillance. The exercise involves a range of non-traditional security-related activities such as monitoring of regulations on the protection and conservation of natural resources and seabed environment, prevention and suppression of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, drug trafficking, piracy, and exchange of information on prevention of smuggling and illegal immigration. The partner states in this format are Indonesia and Thailand.¹³⁶

Institutionalised Exercises: At the heart of exercises with foreign navies lies institutionalised exercises. These are undertaken on a regular basis across the areas of maritime interest, with navies of partner countries, with whom maritime cooperation is substantive. Partner nations in this case are Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore. The interactions are relatively more evolved at both tactical and operational levels, ranging from staff talks and training courses to Air defence and Search and Rescue (SAR) operations.¹³⁷

Occasional Exercises: These are generally held on special occasions, besides addressing natural and man-made contingencies like tsunamis, typhoons, and aircraft crashes. In addition to burnishing our credentials as 1st responder and as a net security provider, these exercises demonstrate IN's enhanced outreach. The Navy has been involved with each of the ASEAN member states on different occasions.¹³⁸

Multilateral Exercises: On the multilateral front, the IN through the MILAN exercise has been engaged with navies of the regional littorals, including Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia.¹³⁹ In May 2023, IN in the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME)¹⁴⁰ participated in a maiden multilateral exercise with all ASEAN nations, with the sea phase of the multilateral drill undertaken in the SCS. Additionally, India participates in an annual exercise MALABAR, that includes Quad members. Notably, in MALABAR-21¹⁴¹ format, the IN with its partner navies conducted the sea phase of the exercise in the SCS, which naval experts such as Collin Koh labelled as India's participation as the "most visible 'show of flag' naval presence east of the Malacca Strait." Exercises like these are particularly useful in sending firm signalling, besides reflecting "India's standing in the global comity of nations."¹⁴²

Multilaterals entail a policy undergird, that brings together like-minded nations that train and operate jointly towards establishing the regional synergy needed to achieve the shared objectives. Involving a multitude of activities covering both traditional and non-traditional domains, these supplement in building military ties.

Operational engagements with navies of regional littorals are geared towards expanding the IN's distant seas presence and capacity to provide immediate response, reinforcing the mechanisms of strategic communication and interoperability, whilst simultaneously signalling the will and wherewithal

to deter China.¹⁴³ Corresponding to IN's modernisation, it has enhanced credibility in the region. New Delhi's role as a comprehensive net security provider becomes more critical in shaping the regional waterways that have been embroiled in illicit and escalatory activities.

One of the requirements, advocated by the IMSS remains buttressing the strategy of external balancing for deterrence with that of internal balancing.¹⁴⁴

India's Internal Balancing

Indian Navy's present force level comprises about 130 ships and submarines.¹⁴⁵ The current blueprint for modernisation is guided by two documents of the IN: *Maritime Capability Perspective Plan (MCP) 2022-23* and the *Indian Naval Indigenisation Plan (INIP) (2015)*.¹⁴⁶ INIP puts forth a robust foundation for realising the vision of emerging as a blue water navy. The 15-year indigenisation plan to facilitate a full-fledged evolution from a 'buyer's navy' to a 'builder's Navy', emphasises the need for developing various advanced systems for its platforms, by fostering the involvement of both private and public entities.

MCP 2022-23, on the other hand, aims to scale up the IN's total fleet to over 200 by 2037,¹⁴⁷ in addition to a significant upgrade of existing hardware. As officially acknowledged in the IMSS,¹⁴⁸ there remains a requirement of decommissioning some existing assets as well as capability gaps cannot be afforded, given the potential vulnerabilities obsolete assets would create for India's maritime environs. The objective of self-reliance in naval platforms is deemed essential for both economic and strategic reasons.

In India, both public and commercial shipyards are currently building 64 of the country's cutting-edge ships and submarines.¹⁴⁹ The IN's INIP 2015–

2030 has begun to develop shipborne systems in line with the Government of India's Make in India (MII) vision. Two methods have been used for indigenisation: one, using DRDO's research and development (R&D) potential, and the other transferring technology (ToT) with industry partners.¹⁵⁰

Under MII, the facilitation of the IN's coordination and cooperation with various sectors of the defence industry has seen some success in the indigenous development of advanced defence technology. Projects such as 15 A and 15 B launched in 2001 and 2009 respectively for the acquisition of cutting-edge technology-based destroyers have made decent headways, including with commissioning of guided missile destroyers- *INS Kochi*, *INS Kolkata*, and *INS Vishakapatnam*.¹⁵¹ These premier destroyers are equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry, surveillance technology, and sophisticated digital networks. Analogous progress has been made under Project 28 introduced in 2003, which underseen the commissioning of three maiden indigenous Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) stealth corvettes, including *INS Kadmatt* and *INS Kiltan*. These platforms are equipped with modern systems like a Total Atmospheric Control System, Integrated Platform Management System, and enhanced stealth features. Project 28 has catapulted New Delhi into an elite group of countries with advanced indigenous stealth ships.¹⁵²

Before delving into the progress and issues in indigenisation of equipment, its essential to be cognizant of different categories of naval equipment, i.e., 'Float', 'Move' and 'Fight'. Float category encompasses all materials, equipment and systems associated with the hull structures and fittings.¹⁵³ Whereas, Move type of equipment implies propulsion systems, diesel, gas or steam based engines, alternators, associated control systems including Integrated Platform Management Systems, and Automatic Power Management Systems, and auxiliary mechanical systems like pumping

and flooding. It also concerns firefighting systems and other systems such as general electrical equipment.¹⁵⁴ Lastly, the Fight equipment involves all the ship borne weapons and combat related sensor systems.¹⁵⁵

Over the years, India has gained sufficient proficiency in the hull design and construction of various types of warships. Similarly, in terms of propulsion systems and related auxiliaries, along with support services like air conditioning, and refrigeration, New Delhi has acquired requisite production capabilities, primarily due to similar requirements of the civil sector.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, IN is self-sufficient in components such as power generation and distribution systems, communication systems, Combat Management Systems, Sonars and Electronic Warfare Systems.

The progress, however, has not been uniform across the spectrum of systems. While the technology absorption has matured in areas, such as the 'Float' category, underseeing 90 per cent indigenisation, acute capability gaps still exist.¹⁵⁷

India still remains imports dependent vis-a-vis critical technologies, like system engineering, materials, hi-tech components and advanced manufacturing processes. Similarly, although India possesses design know-how, significant performance improvements are required in the undersea domain preparedness. The manufacturing base in terms of underwater weapons and sensors, multi-function radars, and IT-based systems is far from self-reliant since their critical subsystems and components are imported. India has achieved 50 to 60 per cent indigenization in the 'Move' category of equipment, but it has yet to acquire indigenous development capabilities in critical systems including propulsion systems, and gearboxes.¹⁵⁸

Perhaps the area that requires utmost attention is the 'Fight' category equipment of the INIP, with current indigenization levels of a mere 30

per cent.¹⁵⁹ India has yet to acquire design capabilities in systems and components like surface and air-based radars, sensors for submarines, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), Unmanned Surface Vehicles (USV) and Autonomous Underwater Vehicles (AUV),¹⁶⁰ The evolving nature of warfare makes the induction of unmanned platforms a prerequisite for the IN.

The infirmities in indigenous naval capability are attributed to three factors¹⁶¹: Inadequacy in the R&D ecosystem in military sciences and technologies, synthesis between R&D and the manufacturing sector and coordination among users, designers and manufacturers. Albeit, the recent past has underseen conscious effort to synergise the Navy with the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Defense Public Sector Undertakings (DPSU's), private sector and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME's), there still lies significant scope for integration. The integrated approach, especially the sharing of technical know-how by leveraging the manufacturing experience private sector and MSME remains necessary to cut delays in acquisition.

Thereby, the IN has clearly stated the necessity for requisite imports in areas, wherein the domestic industry confronts serious capability gaps to fulfil the time-sensitive requirements of the force.¹⁶² The process of acquisition of naval assets is innately not only time-consuming but also capital and technology-intensive. The private sector, to begin with, needs to get more involved, for which the government needs to reinforce incentivisation structures. Thus, there lies a long road ahead for meeting the needs of the IN, alternatively for India's pursuit towards internal balancing. However, the challenges for India to establish a credible seas presence in SCS go beyond naval indigenization and are multifaceted.

Challenges to India's Regional Interests and Strategy

Intra-ASEAN Divisions on the Dispute

Even though the ASEAN has issued its maiden joint statement on the SCS issue, expressing 'concern', the language in the statement still remains non-confrontational at best. ASEAN's diplomatic timidity on the SCS issue is down to long-drawn intrinsic divisions within the bloc. The characteristics of the ASEAN way enshrined in its charter,¹⁶³ especially the requirement of consensus have worked in China's favour.

The first sign of the discord among ASEAN states, regarding the SCS issue can be traced way back to 2000, when the Philippines made its strong case for a legally binding DOC in an attempt to moderate China's coercion across the contested territory. Nonetheless, it was forced to settle for the non-binding DOC, due to lack of backing from its fellow ASEAN members.¹⁶⁴

Perhaps, the 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM), which took place in Phnom Penh in July 2012, was the most striking instance of ASEAN's divisions.¹⁶⁵ The event was marked by its failure to issue a Joint Communiqué for the first time in the organization's history, shaping it in a negative light. This setback demonstrated the infirmities in the solidarity and unity of ASEAN. Thailand and Cambodia spoke mutually

in favour of negotiating disputes over territory in order to protect the “excellent relations” between China and ASEAN. On the contrary, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore expressed similar concerns to those of the Philippines and Vietnam, realising the necessity of adopting an assertive stance indicating a “clear expression of our concerns on the SCS in the joint communiqué”. In spite of their representatives’ insistence, Hun Sen, the prime minister of Cambodia, and bloc’s Chair at that time, was adamant that the Joint Communiqué not include a reference to China’s standoff with the Philippines and Vietnam over the Scarborough Shoal. The rationale behind Cambodia’s rejection was that the disputes in question were bilateral in nature, and a joint communiqué containing the different country perspectives instead of a shared organisational viewpoint would make a resolution of the dispute even more difficult.

Additionally, the intra-ASEAN split was conspicuous both before and after the July 12, 2016 PCA ruling that rejected China’s expansive claims to territory in the SCS.¹⁶⁶ A statement issued by the Malaysian Foreign Minister expressing “serious concerns over recent and ongoing developments, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions, and which may have the potential to undermine peace, security, and stability in the South China Sea” was swiftly retracted by ASEAN during the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Kunming in June 2016, less than a month before the judgement. The spokeswoman for the Malaysian Foreign Ministry justified the withdrawal by citing the need for an “urgent amendment,” yet no revised statement was released at that time.¹⁶⁷ The Indonesian Foreign Ministry went on to clarify that the incorrectly released statement was merely a “media guideline” to be used as a reference during the press conference following the meeting.¹⁶⁸ Even though it was promptly fixed, this diplomatic blunder highlighted ASEAN’s involuntary acquiescence to Beijing’s heavy-handed diplomacy to get the statement expunged by nimbly playing its Cambodia-Laos card,

with the backing of both Cambodia and, crucially, Laos, the ASEAN Chair at the time.¹⁶⁹

Even prior to the PCA ruling, Cambodia had clearly put forth its stance against supporting a strong ASEAN statement on the ruling since it had no incentive to get entangled in a dispute, it was not a party.¹⁷⁰ Similar to its approach before the PCA ruling, Cambodia's stance on the ruling led to ASEAN eventually issuing a placatory joint statement.¹⁷¹ Again to the dismay of the Philippines, Cambodia maintained its inherent stance, postulating for the exclusion of references to the PLA award and often used phrase- "militarisation" in the Joint Communiqué of the 49th AMM on July 2016, just one week post the ruling was announced. Subsequently, a timid section on the "South China Sea" in the Joint Communiqué expressed concerns over "land reclamations" and "escalation of activities" in the geography, omitting any mention of Beijing or the PCA verdict.¹⁷² This indicated the inclination of non-claimant ASEAN nations to avoid offending China, fearing the repercussions, much to the annoyance of claimant states such as Vietnam and the Philippines.

These instances of explicit discord within ASEAN can be attributed to China's leveraging of Cambodia, ASEAN's Achilles' heel, into its ambit, whilst completely isolating Cambodia, Brunei and Laos from the rest of the ASEAN states. Beijing's success in driving a diplomatic wedge is evident by the conclusion of a Four Point Consensus on the SCS, in April, three months before the PCA award.¹⁷³ The Consensus essentially acknowledged that the dispute "should not affect China-ASEAN relations" since not every ASEAN state is party to the dispute. Additionally, the Consensus also posited that disputes over territorial and maritime rights and interests "should be resolved through dialogues and consultations by parties directly concerned under Article 4 of the DOC."¹⁷⁴ As a result, it not only separated the three signatories from the remaining ASEAN members but also called into question the idea of ASEAN centrality, reflecting Beijing's inclination

towards bilateralism as opposed to the bloc's belief in multilateralism in resolving the dispute.

Thereby, the disunity within ASEAN drawing from a conciliatory stance of some member states towards China has manifested in the accommodating and minimalist posture of the bloc on the dispute. The regional diplomatic diffidence and consequent attenuation in its negotiating heft vis-à-vis China has translated into furthering the latter's unabated maritime aggression. Beijing's dominance across the SCS in turn, has transpired as a challenge to India's policy interests, which was also evident during the latter's stance at the 9th East Asia Summit in 2014. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that India desires not only adherence to "international law and norms for peace and stability in the South China Sea", but also "a serious and sustained dialogue" among stakeholders to address "complex and unresolved issues" in the region.¹⁷⁵

The escalatory manoeuvres of PLAN, CCG and PAFMM drawing from Beijing's pursuit of *de-facto* sovereign control over the contested seas has not only affected the operational space, maritime rights and interests of littoral navies but promises to jeopardise that of regional stakeholders including India.¹⁷⁶ China's unbridled militarization of the disputed islands could affect freedom of navigation for traversing vessels, especially with authority granted to CCG to delineate 'temporary maritime security zones' in virtually any situation.¹⁷⁷ Beijing's overwhelming military and paramilitary presence and arm-twisting tactics in the SCS pose a credible threat to the Indian imperative of freedom of navigation, unimpeded lawful maritime commerce and other lawful uses of the seas.

India-ASEAN Economic Engagement

Beijing's strategic influence in ASEAN, including among the non-claimants rests mostly on its robust economic ties.¹⁷⁸ As exemplified by

Table 1, China remains an indispensable economic partner for the region, with significant dependence on the former. Capitalizing on the need of ASEAN for trade, infrastructure and investment, Beijing in addition to being the largest trading partner, has poured in billions in FDI.¹⁷⁹ The investment by its firms in big-ticket critical infrastructure projects across various sectors remains the key driver of regional development, especially in Least Developed Countries (LDC) like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, which are among the primary beneficiaries of the BRI.¹⁸⁰ It is due to the economic dependence of these LDCs and Brunei on China that has produced diplomatic giveaways to the latter at ASEAN ministerial meets. These countries do not share close ties with any other external power, translating into strategic cooperation with China, as a clear priority.¹⁸¹ This has fostered Beijing to continue with its salami slicing and grey zone tactics across the contested littorals.

China, being a much older player in the region has an edge relative to other partners of ASEAN, including India. For instance, Beijing's trade with the ASEAN states that it has cajoled onto its side on the SCS issue far surpasses the latter's respective trade figures with India. In 2022, China's bilateral merchandise trade totalled \$16 billion with Cambodia, about \$5.7 billion with Laos, and \$3 billion with Brunei.¹⁸² In an acuminous contrast, India's goods trade amounted to \$447 million with Cambodia, \$73 million with Laos, and \$385 million with Brunei¹⁸³.

While ASEAN today is one of the biggest trading partners of India, with the total trade accounting for \$131 billion in 2022-23,¹⁸⁴ the bloc's trade with New Delhi's strategic rival, China is almost six-fold of its trade with India. What makes the situation more grim is China's unparalleled FDI level,¹⁸⁵ which in the near future appears inimitable for India, with a mere \$677 million recorded in 2022.

Table 3: India-ASEAN Trade

| India's trade with ASEAN | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| EXPORT (USD Billion) | 30.96 | 34.20 | 37.47 | 31.55 | 31.49 | 42.32 | 44.00 |
| %Growth | 23.19 | 10.47 | 9.56 | -15.82 | -0.19 | 34.43 | 3.95 |
| IMPORT (USD Billion) | 40.62 | 47.13 | 59.32 | 55.37 | 47.42 | 68.08 | 87.57 |
| %Growth | 1.77 | 16.04 | 25.86 | -6.66 | -14.36 | 43.57 | 28.64 |
| TOTAL(USD Billion) | 71.58 | 81.34 | 96.80 | 86.92 | 78.90 | 110.4 | 131.57 |
| TRADE BALANCE (USD Billion) | -9.66 | -12.93 | -21.85 | -23.82 | -15.93 | -25.76 | -43.57 |

(Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry)

While India-ASEAN trade has doubled since the promulgation of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) in 2010,¹⁸⁶ the economic partnership remains one with untapped potential, given the complementarities in sectors such as agriculture, industrial machinery, pharmaceuticals, and textiles. There has been no conscious effort from either side to leverage synergies by creating regional value chains¹⁸⁷ that would increase market access, which itself remains one of the major issues, primarily due to ASEAN's non-reciprocity in FTA obligations, non-tariff barriers and import quotas on a range of Indian products.¹⁸⁸ Consequently, the economic ties could witness substantial progress with the focus on developing regional value chains, which is likely to reduce production and subsequent trading costs.

The most significant impediment derailing advancement in trade linkages remains connectivity.¹⁸⁹ Besides, inadequate institutional connectivity i.e., harmonisation of trade and investment policies between the two sides, the physical aspect of connectivity merits instruction. Improved transport connectivity is a prerequisite for strengthening ASEAN-India ties. It is the efficient transport networks that are critical to the smooth flow of goods and services across international borders. The India-Myanmar-

Thailand Trilateral Highway, India's maiden regional connectivity project, has not exactly served the purpose, with its stalled progress in spite of construction beginning back in 2012.¹⁹⁰ The traditional infrastructural and transportation constraints have meant inefficient connectivity between India from Southeast Asia. These include subpar roads, deficient ports and rail linkages, and customs cooperation. Thus, potential economic integration is still hampered by poor transit connections.

Moreover, while Indian businesses have complained about market access restrictions on main export commodities such as chemicals, plastics, minerals, textiles, gems and jewellery,¹⁹¹ some ASEAN states have conveyed discontentment with India's Customs Administration of Rules of Origin under Trade Agreements Rules, 2020 (CAROTAR),¹⁹² which was introduced to restrict flooding of Chinese products claiming AITIGA duty waivers under the garb of ASEAN exports. Besides, traditional frustration among ASEAN states about red-tapism and slow-moving bureaucracy in India has not shown signs of relief.¹⁹³

The unresolved issues, among other things, have adversely affected ASEAN's perception of India. While ASEAN in general feels that India's ability to focus on its foreign policy remains handicapped by its internal and subcontinental problems, countries like Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand have serious doubts about India's political will and capacity to take on leadership mantle.¹⁹⁴ In the ISEAS survey of 2023, a mere 0.9 percent of the respondents regarded India as the strongest political and strategic power. Conversely, although there is increasing consternation about China's strategic influence in the region, it continues to be perceived as the most influential economic and strategic power.¹⁹⁵ Going ahead the prospects of China's influence in the region look good if the expert estimates regarding future benefits from China-led RCEP and BRI accrued to ASEAN are any indicators.

The stark difference in ASEAN's perception vis-à-vis India and China drawing from the extent of strategic and economic engagement, makes the scenario particularly daunting for New Delhi's interests in the SCS. Amidst Beijing's strategic and military dominance, India's desire to ensure regional strategic equilibrium is further hampered by its limited economic engagement with the SCS littorals. In the 21st century realpolitik, both economy and security are integral to a country's strategy or securing of national interests. Even if any contingency necessitates, India is likely to face resistance to greater naval presence, without being a substantive economic player in the region.

India's potential to contribute towards equilibrium in the littoral space would in part depend on its own future economic trajectory and consequent ability to reduce the gap with China in terms of regional economic integration. Its increasing economic engagement with the region will in turn nudge its military presence and strategic capability to counterbalance China in the heart of the Indo-Pacific.

As ASEAN traverses its path to cultivate good relations with both India and China, in an attempt to maximize its developmental prospects, balancing by India would depend on realizing the primary objectives of Act East Policy, i.e., strengthening of strategic and commercial ties.¹⁹⁶ Therefore, India has a long road ahead of itself before it can reach near the levels of China's economic engagement with the region and possibly emerge as a key driver of regional development and security.

China's Strategic Approach towards the South China Sea

The economic gulf between India and China is unlikely to be bridged substantially by the mid-twenty-first century, when China aspires to have its “world-class” army ready.¹⁹⁷ For CCP, the modernisation of the armed forces is essential to deter the US in the Western Pacific, while “defending national sovereignty, security, and development interest” in the SCS.¹⁹⁸ Beijing’s pursuit towards a world-class army and *de facto* control over SCS without any interference should be viewed in the context of the “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation. The drive for greatness entails a “great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful.”¹⁹⁹ The vision clearly reflects the salience of a strong military and control over the SCS in the Chinese dream, with both being integral to China’s security and developmental requirements.

Conjoining the compulsion of attaining national interests with those of development and security interests, China’s Military Strategy (CMS) 2015²⁰⁰ advocates the necessity to develop a modern maritime military force structure, whilst adhering to the concept of active defence. The Chinese leadership has underscored the significance of blending strategic defence with tactical and operational offence to firmly deal with its adversaries. The CMS, in addition to its emphasis on issues concerning the US regional

military presence and offshore neighbours also states the ‘meddling’ of ‘some external countries’ on the SCS dispute.²⁰¹ This should be considered as an implied reference to extra-territorial players including India, with its evolving regional strategic posture in the recent past.

The rhetoric from the Chinese administration on India’s involvement in the SCS affairs has been uncompromising and stern, akin to the former’s stance on its territorial dispute. In every instance, China has taken Indian engagement with a pinch of salt. After OVL and Petro-Vietnam signed an Agreement of Cooperation for joint oil exploration in 2011, Beijing’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu stated: “Our consistent position is that we are opposed to any country engaging in oil and gas exploration and development activities in waters under China’s jurisdiction.”²⁰²

The reaction has become more hawkish of late. For instance, the December, 2023 India-Philippines joint naval exercise in the SCS was followed by a strong comment from the Spokesman of the Chinese Defence Ministry Senior Col Wu Qian: “No third party has the right to intervene. China will maintain a high degree of vigilance and take necessary measures to resolutely safeguard national sovereignty, security and maritime rights and interests.”²⁰³ Another case that merits mention is India’s External Affairs Minister Dr. Jaishankar’s visit to Manila on March 26th this year. In a joint press conference with his Filipino counterpart Enrique Manalo, Dr. Jaishankar “firmly” backed the Philippines “for upholding its national sovereignty”, whilst reaffirming the need for all parties to adhere to UNCLOS both in letter and in spirit. Thereafter, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian reacted in an expected fashion urging India to respect its sovereignty claims and maritime interests over the disputed SCS, while again asserting “Third parties have no right to interfere whatsoever.”²⁰⁴ Meanwhile the Global Times, CCP owned daily in its routine pejorative tone lamented that “India’s involvement in the

South China Sea will also pose a significant negative impact in China-India relations.”²⁰⁵

While the reaction from the Chinese side might not have tangible implications for India, the same case cannot be made for CMS, the consequences for which are already pronounced. With SCS under its firm grasp, India’s backyard and its Andaman islands in particular have been under scanner of Chinese politico-security circles. Acknowledging the strategic imperative of both offshore waters defence and open seas protection, the latter for protecting the security of strategic SLOCs, the CMS calls for a commensurate shift in the PLAN operational focus while continuing efforts to “build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure.”²⁰⁶ The directives of the CMS indicate that PLAN’s increased forays in the IOR are not spontaneous or capricious, but rather ensue from an institutionalised strategy that is primarily dictated by Beijing’s desire to overcome its ‘Malacca dilemma’. Besides Malacca Strait being a critical SLOC, the ongoing construction of BRI projects such as a deep-sea port in the Kyaukpyu islands in Myanmar²⁰⁷ has furthered the significance of IOR for the CCP. The PLAN since 2012 has undertaken frequent submarine patrols in the Andamans. There has been an average of three to four Chinese submarine sightings every three months and is perceived to conduct reconnaissance and surveillance operations around the islands.²⁰⁸

For the IN, the PLAN’s encroachments in and around the Andaman Sea are particularly perturbing as the latter not only connects the IOR with the Pacific through Malacca but also empowers New Delhi to project naval power in the Southeast Asian region. With a tri-service command and naval base, the Andamans are considered to be New Delhi’s unsinkable aircraft carrier and would represent India’s first line of defence in case of an India-China maritime conflict.²⁰⁹ While owing to geographical handicap,

China remains aware that unlike in the SCS, it does not have the capability for a permanent naval presence in the Andamans. However, this should not make India complacent given China's diligent investments in modernising its sea-denying platforms-submarines, which currently figure to 70 plus.²¹⁰

Thus, some naval experts hint at the possibility of increased PLANs forays close to Andamans due to an additional incentive, that is INs upscale in deployments and joint exercises with navies of the US and the regional littorals in the SCS.²¹¹ Given China's perceptions and ever-increasing stakes vis-a-vis IOR, along with India's recent investments for bolstering surveillance and operational capabilities from Andamans,²¹² barely 200 kilometres from Malacca, the prospects of China's expanding naval forays cannot be ruled out.

South China Sea in the Indian Maritime Security Strategy

While the apprehension to avoid irking China might pose an impediment, the tangible and more weighty limiting factor to INs increased presence in SCS is an internal one. Although India's stakes in the SCS cannot be overstated, which are likely to rise in the near future, the fact that SCS in IMSS remains a "secondary area of interest" and not primary, is indicative of our priorities.²¹³ Unlike India's comprehensive security profile in the eastern IOR, where IN with its robust operational capabilities is a significant actor, its endeavours further East, across the contested seascape are primarily confined to addressing non-traditional security threats, capacity building initiatives, joint exercises with regional navies and intermittent port visits.

The IMSS, while acknowledging the changing national perceptions towards the seas amidst a vivid recognition of maritime security being a consequential element of national capability and external engagement, entails IOR as a focus area throughout the document with SCS finding mention just twice.²¹⁴ One of the objectives of the doctrine is "to shape a favourable and positive maritime environment, for enhancing net security in India's areas of maritime interest". To enhance the security of India's maritime environs, it advocates multi-mission engagement of the IN with regional navies, involving maritime capacity building and capability enhancement through cooperation in training, and technical areas, in addition to cooperation for the development of regional MDA, and the

conduct of maritime security operations.²¹⁵

In tandem with the guidelines, the naval force has been engaged in various capacities in all areas of maritime interest. However, the IN deployments and operational engagements have been very limited in the SCS, compared to IOR, and involve cooperation primarily on non-traditional security issues. For instance, the inaugural AIME in the SCS while unprecedented, winning much applause for mutual signalling and interoperability, didn't involve high-end combat-oriented operations.²¹⁶ The maiden exercise was confined to operations such as cross-deck landings, and seamanship evolutions. Similarly, as parties to the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery of Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) India-ASEAN cooperation as the name suggests circumvents itself to information sharing and capacity building arrangements for addressing armed robbery and piracy.²¹⁷

India's primary areas of maritime interest according to the maritime doctrine are particularly extensive. The priority areas begin from its 7500 km plus coast, more than 1,300 islands, and an expansive EEZ that stretches to regions such as the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea, The Persian Gulf the Gulf of Oman, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, South-West Indian Ocean, and no less than eight choke points across the wide expanse of IOR. Naturally, the sizeable list of prime interest areas requires significant resources and investments to ensure their security.²¹⁸ This makes it very onerous to devote significant resources and time to secondary areas of maritime interest which in addition to SCS involves a multitude of sea planks. Thus with the SCS not being an immediate security concern, there remains inadequate budget to support these naval deployments.

In fact, IN's operational and surveillance capabilities even across the primary interest areas remain insufficient due to low budgetary allocations. While India continues to be amongst the top global spenders on its

military, the expenditure of its Defence Ministry as a percentage of the total disbursement of the Centre has steadily reduced. In the 2016-17 fiscal year, 17.8 percent of the centre's expenditure was allocated to defence which plunged to 13.2 percent as per the budget estimates of 2023-24.²¹⁹ Thereby, The Ministry of Defence (MOD) in a memorandum submitted to the 15th Finance Commission has conveyed acute capability gaps in the operational preparedness of the defence forces, including the IN.²²⁰ While the last decade has seen the expenses on modernisation of the IN increasing at an annual rate of 10 percent the hard fact that the navy receives the lowest funds of all three services in each fiscal year is still prevalent. In the 2024-25' budget for example, contrary to the hefty disbursement of 68.1 percent of the Defence Service Revenue share going to the Indian Army, the Navy received a mere 11.6 per cent of the aggregate.²²¹

India might have made considerable headways in terms of guided missile destroyers, and stealth frigates, but it still lacks platforms that are primary means of power projection and deterrence, the need for which is urgent given the Chinese forays in the IOR. That the last decade witnessed an addition of over 150 ships to the latter's inventory, greater than aggregate fleet strength of IN, should nudge the Indian government to make fiscal room for advanced combat platforms, especially Aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN).²²²

IN with its current two aircraft carriers is in need of a third, if it has to secure the IOR effectively. India's contemporary naval posture is to station a carrier each, both in the Bay of Bengal and in the Arabian Sea. As India has only two carriers, its defensive capabilities are feeble whenever one of them is docked for routine maintenance.²²³ Consequently, acquisition of third air carrier remains an imperative, for maintaining a constant sea control capabilities on both the seaboard. While the third carrier is reported to be planned, the Defense Acquisition Council is yet to give

a final approval.²²⁴ With the limited fiscal space at disposal, the MOD agency Defence Procurement Board, in December 2023 approved a plan to acquire a “light” 40,000-tonne aircraft carrier, instead of a large 60,000-tonne carrier.²²⁵ This step, axiomatically is not ideal as small carriers have constrained operational capabilities whilst operating in contested or Anti-access/Area-denial environments.

Similarly, the nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) project has been stalled in an ambivalent intent. The acquisition of SSN is imperative for the IN as it has considerably better reach, and speed than the diesel submarines. And unlike the latter, it can remain submerged for months, besides serving as an ideal platform for the anti-ship, and surveillance operations. While India boasts of having three Arihant class ballistic missile nuclear submarines (SSBN) as part of its nuclear triad, they serve as an instrument of nuclear deterrence, and cannot be deployed for tactical missions. The project to build six indigenous SSNs over a 15-year period was initially accorded in-principle approval in February 2015 by the then Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar. After slashing the plan to just three SSNs owing to high costs in 2019, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) has yet to give a final go-ahead to launch the project.²²⁶

Thus, India's restricted fiscal capacity for meeting its navy's requirements could potentially jeopardise the latter's ability to safeguard its extensive coastline, and plenitude of islands among a host of other primary interest areas, stretching across the spacious expanse of the IOR. Against this backdrop, the SCS ranks very low under the INs scanner. Although India might not have an official desire and capabilities for a permanent naval presence or a more active involvement in the contested waterways, the same cannot be said of its inclinations to bolster maritime security of the littoral states.

The Way Forward

While India has steadily upped its strategic posture in the region, including on the SCS dispute, there lies immense scope for furthering maritime security cooperation between India and ASEAN in general and claimant states in particular.

Firstly, at the diplomatic level, a staunch rhetoric on the dispute might not be possible during ASEAN Summits or Ministerial Meetings, given the intra-ASEAN divisions. However, India could consider using a bolder stance at regional forums such as EAS and Quad. Against the backdrop of the “abnormal” nature of India-China ties, amidst enduring cross-border aggression by Beijing, it seems an opportune moment for New Delhi to go beyond just expressing “concern” over actions that “erode trust”. At multilateral forums, India’s stance akin to its support for the Philippines in upholding its sovereignty in the joint press conference in Manila, would generate confidence among claimant states. Similarly, India could employ a more favourable voice, jointly with countries like Vietnam, with whom India shares a robust security bond.

Secondly, India needs to make renewed efforts in putting IMSS into practice, be it in terms of operational footprint, cooperative framework or as a net security provider. New Delhi could contemplate using the co-chair of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) Working Groups on Maritime Security and HADR for the forthcoming cycle as an opportunity

to discuss SCS maritime dynamics by including it in the Work Plan of the grouping to reach a common understanding. This is important with IONS involving the two claimants- Indonesia and Malaysia as member countries. While bringing the SCS issue on the agenda might entail painstaking lobbying efforts by India, it remains within the latter's grasp when viewed in the context of India's strong ties with most of the member states in the Working Group on Maritime Security.

Additionally, besides increasing the frequency in bilateral exercises and port visits to littoral states, India should explore trilaterals on the lines of the IN Maritime Partnership Exercise with the Indonesian Navy and Royal Australian Navy (RAN). Navies of littorals with relatively assertive posture and with which IN has good interoperability including the Philippines and Vietnam pose as viable actors to probe. IN could also ponder over advancing staff links with the regional navies. The Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) exemplifies that building stronger staff links through professional interactions and training courses results in bettering trust levels that nudge the maritime partnership to include complex and high-end operations. The trilateral format exercises along with high-end joint drills would go a long way toward IN's aim of consolidating "bridges of friendship". To upscale IN's regional presence, India would also do well to sign a long due logistic access agreement with the latter's maritime neighbours and fellow IONS members-Indonesia and Malaysia. Concluding logistic pacts with these countries remains necessary for an assured presence in times of any contingency, besides strengthening interoperability, and addressing shared challenges.

Thirdly, India could mull over bolstering cooperation with regional countries for enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), which is essential not only for ensuring unimpeded commerce but also for tackling a range of traditional and non-traditional security threats. The

MDA has also assumed enhanced salience in the recent past, with the surge in dark shipping including in the IOR. Since the IMSS incorporates Malacca Strait as primary area of interest, bringing in International Liaison Officers (ILOs) from Malacca littorals Indonesia and Malaysia to INs Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) remains long due. Having ILOs from India's maritime neighbours would make the MDA more comprehensive, as MDA of a wide expanse like IOR cannot be generated by any single nation. Moreover, while India has signed white shipping information agreements with Singapore and Malaysia, concluding the commercial shipping pact with Indonesia would also aid in bridging MDA gaps, by exchanging information in real-time.

Fourthly, India's efforts in capacity building of navies and coast guards of regional littorals should be maintained in the near term. India has made its entry into defence market of some ASEAN states, but the majority the arms exported comprise non-combat equipment and component parts. Since becoming a reliable and high-end arms supplier, whilst competing with top arms manufacturers like Russia and the US would take time, India's immediate priorities should be focused on deepening and widening the scope of capacity building across both traditional and non-traditional domains. New Delhi's measures in the Western Indian Ocean Region appear as substantive and relevant examples that can be emulated across Southeast Asia. India's provision of courses and workshops on coastal management and engineering techniques to Mauritius and Seychelles and workshops on fisheries management for Somalia remain germane for the ASEAN nations as well, given their susceptibility to natural disasters, with a considerable share of fisherfolks. If similar initiatives are promulgated, the region stands to benefit from Indian expertise.

Lastly, India would also benefit from improved commitment towards Act East Policy, since advancement in commercial and strategic ties and

subsequent influence, is likely to prompt its naval presence across the contested space. While India has a long road ahead to get close to the extent of China's economic engagement with the region, the finalisation of Terms of Reference for AITIGA Review Negotiations is a positive sign, the conclusion of which would foster and diversify trade. Both sides would do well to implement product-specific rules, established through dialogue. Notwithstanding the merit of complaints of Indian businesses regarding market access restrictions on their respective exports, the Indian government should push its exporters into adopting a strategic view of the dynamic, and fast-growing market and overlook trade imbalance in the near term. Through established mechanisms like ASEAN-India Business Council (AIBC) Meetings, New Delhi can probe engagement in complementary high-potential areas, leveraging its competitiveness in community-centric sectors such as health, education, digital public infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, and skill development.

India can also attempt to utilise its diplomatic capital to address the concerns of the sole non-ratifying member state - Cambodia on the ASEAN - India Investment Agreement, 2015. Equally significant is the need to explore and actualise synergies between the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and India's strengths. India can start engaging in quick yield sectors mentioned in MPAC. For instance, in the Digital innovation pillar, there is tremendous scope for India to make Digital Public Infrastructure in ASEAN countries inclusive by facilitating access to user-friendly mobile banking services and capacity building for MSMEs. New Delhi's collaborative experience with Singapore in FinTech including interoperability in the payment system, can serve as a supportive model to build on. Moreover, India's Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) focused institutes and Cyber security firms can aid in preparing the ASEAN workforce for future needs through skill development courses, with the latter's pursuit towards bridging the gap

between demand and supply in vocational skills of the workforce. Capacity building efforts in the social sector would not only enhance regional goodwill for India but also buttress its strategic profile.

Conclusion

In tandem with India's advancing naval presence across the SCS since the last decade, its official stance has become bolder in the recent past. With India's significant stakes, which are expected to increase in future, and regional expectations for a more proactive strategic engagement by New Delhi, the AEP needs renewed vigour and investment. While the SCS is not a primary area of interest, China's dramatically expanding naval forays in India's backyard, IOR threatens to question the latter's primacy in its prime theatre. China's manoeuvres in the IOR make it imperative for New Delhi to further deterrence and power projection in the contested waterways. Therefore, upscaling of INs deployments and operational engagements as a focal means of maritime diplomacy need to be simultaneously pursued with India's soft security cooperation with ASEAN to lend a fillip to its Indo-Pacific vision, which calls for ensuring free, and open seas, while adhering to the rule of law.

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