

## **India's South China Sea Policy: Acting East but Acting Prudently**

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India has become increasingly involved in the South China Sea. It is not a party to the disputes nor is it a littoral country. Nevertheless, it has become quite vocal on the issue and its navy has for some years sailed into the area. Three drivers are cited as being the cause of New Delhi's involvement: freedom of the high seas and regional stability, economics (trade and energy), and containment of China. Of the three, containment is the primary driver. This is understandable given India's worry about China's growing influence in what New Delhi considers its backyard, namely, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. India's China policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi since May 2014 has been more assertive including on the South China Sea. It is not clear if Indian policy in the South China Sea and its more assertive policy under Modi is advancing or damaging its interests.

### **Freedom of the High Seas and Regional Stability**

India has on several occasions particularly in the past 3-4 years stated that it would like to see a peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute and that it supports the principle of the freedom of the high seas consistent with UNCLOS provisions and hopes that the parties concerned will honour the Declaration of Conduct signed by the ASEAN states and China. Ankit Panda in his review of Indian pronouncements on the South China Sea shows that especially since 2013 India has become more vocal about solving the problem within

UNCLOS norms and procedures including arbitration.<sup>1</sup> A typical formulation is the following statement by the Indian foreign minister in 2014 at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Myanmar: India opposes the use or threat of use of force and supports freedom of navigation and access to resources in accordance with principles of international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. These principles should be respected by all. We have noted that the parties concerned are engaged in discussions to address the issue, and we hope that progress will be made with respect to implementation of Guidelines to the 2002 Declaration of Conduct on the South China Sea and the adoption of a Code of Conduct on the basis of consensus.<sup>2</sup>

India made very similar statements in September 2014 when Modi visited the US, in October 2014 when the Prime Minister of Vietnam visited New Delhi, in November 2014 when Modi attended the India-ASEAN Summit Nay Pyi Taw, with the US and Japan during summits in 2015, and again at a meeting with ASEAN Foreign Ministers in August 2015.

Central to New Delhi's interventions has been an insistence that all parties to the dispute should respect UNCLOS and international law. India, like other countries, has an interest in upholding freedom of the high seas for commercial and security reasons. The concern is not simply freedom of the high seas though. It is a more general interest in respect for international norms and rules and global public goods which uphold international order. Like

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<sup>1</sup> Ankit Panda, "India's Got a Plan for South China Sea Disputes (And China Won't Like It)," *The Diplomat*, March 11, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/indias-got-a-plan-for-south-china-sea-disputes-and-china-wont-like-it/>, accessed on November 21, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> "Intervention by External Affairs Minister at 21st ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Meeting, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/23882/Intervention+by+External+Affairs+Minister+at+21st+ASEAN+Regional+Forum+ARF+Meeting+Nay+Pyi+Taw+Myanmar>, accessed February 5, 2017.

most states, India has an ambivalent view of international norms and rules – favouring them against others and insisting on exceptions for itself – but it does recognize that small and weaker states need the comfort of international law.

While India is ambivalent about international norms and rules, it has delimited all its maritime boundaries with neighbours in Southeast Asia. India signed continental shelf delimitations with Indonesia (1974, 1977) and with Thailand (1978), agreements at the tri-junctions with Indonesia and Thailand (1978/9) and with Burma and Thailand (1995), and bilateral maritime boundary agreements with Burma in 1987 and with Thailand in 1996. China's only maritime boundary agreement, by contrast, is with Vietnam, on the delimitation of the Gulf of Tonkin waters.<sup>3</sup>

In July 2014, India and Bangladesh accepted the decision of the arbitration tribunal on their maritime dispute in the Bay of Bengal. New Delhi's acceptance of the tribunal award with Bangladesh did not go unnoticed internationally in the context of the South China Sea dispute. In the wake of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) decision on the Philippines' request, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia Abraham Denmark promptly suggested to Beijing that it should follow New Delhi's example in accepting arbitration. China rejected the parallel to its situation in the South China Sea.<sup>4</sup> New Delhi for its part has not sought to suggest that Beijing should follow its example; but it is possible that

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<sup>3</sup> On India's agreements see Directorate of Strategy, Concepts and Transformation, *Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy*, Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), Government of India, New Delhi, October 2015, p. 22. See also Tara Davenport, "Southeast Asia Approaches to Maritime Delimitation," AsianSIL Working Paper 2012/7, Asian Society of International Law (AsianSIL), Singapore.

<sup>4</sup> Mohan Malik, "India's Response to the South China Sea Verdict," *The American Interest*, July 22, 2016, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/07/22/indias-response-to-the-south-china-sea-verdict/>, accessed February 5, 2017.

India's quiet acceptance of the arbitration ruling in the Bangladeshi dispute – despite the fact that the judgment was substantially in Dhaka's favour – was intended to underline China's obduracy in the South China Sea.

New Delhi's various statements on SCS have emphasized not only the sanctity of UNCLOS and international law but also have supported regional conflict resolution based on the ASEAN-China Declaration of Conduct (DOC) which commits both sides to a series of confidence building measures and norms of stabilizing behaviour. Clearly, India is keen to use this formulation as an effort to signal its support for an ASEAN-led regional order.

Beyond diplomatic ingratiation with ASEAN, India's interest in the DOC and a putative COC is that these could dampen differences and prevent them from blowing up. New Delhi has a genuine interest therefore in its success. Violence in Southeast Asia could have negative consequences unrelated to the original dispute and as far away as South Asia. In addition, the role of the US is a worry. If Washington does not step in militarily, this would shake the regional order which depends on US protection *in extremis*. If Washington does respond and the conflict escalates, this too would shake the region. Should China come out victorious in either case, Beijing's prestige and influence in Asia would rise dramatically and present India with an enormous strategic challenge. Peace in East and Southeast Asia is ultimately in India's interest.

### **Trade and Energy**

India's interest in the South China Sea is also rendered in terms of trade and energy. Replying to a parliamentary question, the Minister of State for External Affairs, V.K. Singh, noted: South China Sea is a major waterway and over US\$ 5 trillion trade passes through the sea lanes in this region. Over 55% of India's trade passes through South China Sea. Peace and

stability in the region is of great significance to India. India undertakes various activities, including cooperation in oil and gas sector, with littoral states of South China Sea.<sup>5</sup>

It is not clear how the Indian government has arrived at the trade figure, but several of its major trade partners are from the region: the ASEAN states, China, Japan, and South Korea. In addition, some of its trade with North and South America transits through the South China Sea. These flows together could well amount to more than half its trade. Having said this, it is not just India that is worried about freedom of commerce through the South China Sea.

Global trade depends on open waterways here and elsewhere. Any Chinese attempt to stop the flow of cargo would be tantamount to declaring war on the international trading system, with massive dislocations to China as well. It is hard to conjure up circumstances in which Beijing would be willing to risk a global economic and diplomatic disruption. If global disruption is unlikely, should India worry that China will interfere with goods bound for India or stop Indian commercial shipping through the waters in retaliation for Indian actions that it does not like? This is a theoretic possibility, but even this would pose considerable problems for Beijing. Goods bound to and from India are carried on international ships; and Indian ships carry goods for many countries, not just India. Again, it is hard to construct a scenario in which Beijing would need to resort to interdictions of this kind against New Delhi. In any case, in the event that it does so, the Indian Navy is capable of returning the favour in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean – a possibility that can hardly be lost on China.

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<sup>5</sup> “QUESTION NO.2014 INDIA’S INTEREST IN SOUTH CHINA SEA REGION,” August 4, 2016, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/27229/QUESTION+NO2014+INDIAS+INTEREST+IN+SOUTH+CHINA+SEA+REGION>, February 5, 2017.

While India's trade interest in the South China Sea is plausible, its "cooperation in gas and oil" is largely symbolic. Indian activity here is restricted to Vietnam. India has been active in hydrocarbon exploration with Vietnam since 1988, and in 2006 was awarded two additional blocks in the Phu Khanh basin which Hanoi claims is in its EEZ.<sup>6</sup> Neither block has paid off commercially. While India had pulled out of one of the blocks fairly soon, in 2012 the Indian SOE, ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), announced that it would be pulling out altogether because exploration was not viable commercially. When OVL announced its withdrawal plans, it was quickly put under pressure by the Indian government and had to reverse its decision to remain engaged. Since then, in August 2016, OVL has renewed its rights to one of the blocks even though there have been no significant hydrocarbon strikes. Again, there is no evidence of oil or gas deposits in the block in question. India's motives in persisting with the explorations are political and diplomatic. This is clear enough from OVL's decision to stay on in the one block it had retained. When OVL decided to pull out in 2012, New Delhi forced it to reverse course out of an anxiety that the Indian SOE's departure would be interpreted as buckling to Chinese pressures and would undermine its longer-term interest in containing Beijing's influence.

### **Containing China**

While India has an interest in regional stability and in shipping access through the South China Sea, its involvement in the dispute is driven largely by its desire to contain Chinese influence. India's interest in Southeast Asia grew apace from the late 1980s and found clearest expression in the Look East Policy of the mid-1990s. However, beginning in 2004, India made a series of moves to underline its interest in the South China Sea. In that year,

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<sup>6</sup> Shishir Gupta, *The Himalayan Face Off: Chinese Assertion and the Indian Riposte* (new Delhi: Hachette India, 2014), pp. 137-138.

India's Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha included the South China Sea in India's "extended neighbourhood". Three years later, India's new naval doctrine referred to it as a "strategic interest". Indian Naval Chief Joshi suggested in December 2012 that the navy would be deployed in the South China Sea to protect Indian energy interests. In response to "Chinese assertiveness", India raised the issue of the South China Sea in various regional meetings in 2014 and 2015 and seemingly criticized China's land reclamation projects as well as Beijing's opposition to Manila's referral of the dispute to the UNCLOS tribunal.<sup>7</sup>

India's containment policy has gathered pace since Narendra Modi came to power in May 2014. Under Modi, New Delhi is committed to going beyond Looking East to Acting East. In essence, this has meant going beyond a policy of ASEAN-led regionalism. While India continues to support ASEAN's stewardship of East Asian security, it is increasingly focused on building a coalition with the US, Japan, Australia, and Vietnam in trying to increase its own bargaining hand bilaterally with China but also in stemming Beijing's influence in the region.

The US had urged India to Act East during the first Obama Administration but, under Manmohan Singh, New Delhi had avoided any public commitments. When Modi came to office, he quickly adopted the Act East vocabulary and set about fashioning a new coalition to deal with China. The centrepiece of the coalition was the US. A crucial moment in the evolution of the partnership with the US was the publication of an article in the *Washington Post* in September 2014, authored by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Barack Obama, stating that the two countries would "jointly work to maintain freedom of navigation

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<sup>7</sup> David Scott, "India's Incremental Balancing in the South China Sea," *E-International Relations*, July 26, 2015, <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/07/26/indias-incremental-balancing-in-the-south-china-sea/>, accessed February 5, 2017.

and lawful commerce across the seas” – the first time India and the US had referred to a partnership in the East and South China Sea. This was followed by the January 2015 joint statement during Obama’s return visit to India which repeated the partnership theme: “India’s ‘Act East Policy’ and the United States’ rebalance to Asia provide opportunities for India, the United States, and other Asia-Pacific countries to work closely to strengthen regional ties”. In addition, during the visit, the two sides signed a formal partnership document, the “U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region”.<sup>8</sup> In 2016, India and the US went further in announcing more material cooperation, with the Americans committing to help India’s development of aircraft-carrier and jet-engine technology as well as submarine safety and anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and with India preparing to sign a defence logistics agreement it had long resisted. The logistics sharing agreement – LEMOA – would allow both sides to access supplies, spare parts, and services from land facilities, airbases, and ports.<sup>9</sup> The US will also likely support the proposal by Boeing and Lockheed Martin to produce F-16s and Super Hornet fighter aircraft in India.<sup>10</sup>

Japan too has figured more importantly under Modi. By late 2013, India had already drifted closer to Tokyo under Manmohan Singh. Modi quickly embraced the emerging relationship,

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<sup>8</sup> Narendra Modi and Barack Obama, ‘A renewed U.S.-India partnership for the 21st century’, *Washington Post*, 30 Sept. 2014; ‘U.S.-India Joint Statement’, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, Washington, DC, 25 Jan. 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-statement-shared-effort-progress-all>, accessed 17 Oct. 2015; and “U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region,” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, January 25, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>, accessed November 16, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Vivek Raghuvanshi, ‘India, US Reach Agreement on Logistics, Boost Defense Ties’, *Defense News*, 12 Apr. 2016, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/2016/04/12/india-us-reach-agreement-logistics-boost-defense-ties/82936758/>, accessed 26 Jun. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Sujan Datta, ‘India, US seal military pact on hold for 14 years’, *The Telegraph*, 13 Apr. 2016.



making Japan his first state visit abroad in September 2014, just 5 months after taking office. His visit was notable not just for the personal bonhomie with Prime Minister Abe but also for the deepening of economic, defence, and political ties with a clear eye on China.

Economically, Modi got Tokyo to commit \$35 billion towards infrastructure. On defence, the two countries entered into the most serious discussions ever. At the heart of these was India's desire to co-produce arms with Japan and to buy Japanese equipment including the US-2 aircraft and Soryu submarine.<sup>11</sup> The most important moment of Modi's trip, though, was a political one. At a meeting with Japanese businessmen, the prime minister publicly derided China, only days before President Xi Jinping's arrival in India:

The world is divided in two camps. One camp believes in expansionist policies [i.e. China], while the other believes in development. We have to decide whether the world should get caught in the grip of expansionist policies or we should lead it on the path of development....<sup>12</sup>

The reference to expansionism was a repetition of views expressed by candidate Modi during the Indian elections. It is unthinkable that Manmohan would have made such a combative remark about Beijing's policies, particularly in the lead-up to a state visit. The statement as well as the economic and defence discussions during the visit were clearly part of an effort to

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<sup>11</sup> 'India interested in buying Japan's Soryu-class submarines', *The Japan Times*, 29 Mar. 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/03/29/national/politics-diplomacy/india-interested-in-buying-japans-soryu-class-submarines/#.Vjdw12ugzcw>, accessed 2 Nov. 2015. Indian interest in the US-2 goes back to Manmohan's time: see Vivek Mishra, 'The benefits for India of a US-2 deal with Japan', *The Diplomat*, 24 Oct. 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/10/the-benefits-for-india-of-a-us-2-deal-with-japan/>, accessed 2 Nov. 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Einhorn, 'Visiting Japan, India's Modi pokes at China', *Bloomberg Business*, 2 Sept. 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-09-02/visiting-japan-indias-modi-pokes-at-china>, accessed 31 Oct. 2015.

give expression to Modi's view that India and China should 'look at each other eye to eye not lower our eyes'.<sup>13</sup>

Under Modi, India has also sought to develop a stronger partnership with Australia. During the Cold War, particularly in the 1980s, the two countries had looked at each other with suspicion. In Canberra, India's naval expansion was regarded as part of a plan for Soviet-Indian partnership in the Indian Ocean. India for its part saw Australia as a proxy for the US and lacking an independent voice on international affairs. In the 1990s, the two were in conflict over nuclear proliferation and India's nuclear tests. A thaw had begun in the 2010s as a function of growing bilateral trade as also China's rise. Nevertheless, New Delhi remained reluctant to talk openly about a strategic partnership.

Modi's trip to Australia, the first by an Indian prime minister in 28 years, signaled a clear change in India's attitude. Modi addressed the Australian parliament, also a first for an Indian leader, and hit it off personally with Prime Minister Tony Abbott. Most importantly, during the visit, the two sides agreed on a Framework for Security Cooperation that provides for annual dialogues between the prime ministers, foreign ministers, and defence ministers, regular interactions between senior officials and military leaderships, counter-terrorism cooperation, collaboration in defence R&D, the sale of uranium to India, and regular maritime exercises.<sup>14</sup> Manmohan had prepared the ground for the security partnership but had been unwilling to embrace it openly. By contrast, Modi in his speech before the Australian

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<sup>13</sup> 'I Want to Run the Government Professionally: Narendra Modi', *ANI*, 17 Apr. 2014, <http://www.narendramodi.in/i-want-to-run-the-government-professionally-narendra-modi-3173>, accessed 14 Nov. 2015.

<sup>14</sup> 'Framework for security cooperation between India and Australia', 18 Nov. 2014, <http://www.narendramodi.in/framework-for-security-cooperation-between-india-and-australia-6907>, accessed 2 Nov. 2015.

parliament was effusive, saying ‘we see Australia as one of our foremost partners in the region. Australia will not be at the periphery of our vision, but at the centre of our thought. I see a great future of partnership between India and Australia and, a shared commitment to realize it’.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, India is seeking to build closer political and defence ties with Vietnam. India and Vietnam have held high-level political visits involving Presidents, Prime Ministers, Speakers of the houses of parliament, and General Secretaries of the Communist Party on more than an annual basis since 2003. Between 2011 and 2015, they had 26 ministerial exchange visits.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, New Delhi promised to play a greater role in strengthening Hanoi’s military capabilities. On offer from India are a number of items including \$100 million in defence credits for the purchase of four ocean patrol vessels, surveillance equipment, assistance for Vietnam’s space and satellite programmes, and, at some point in the future, the BrahMos hypersonic cruise missile being jointly developed with Russia. New Delhi will also expand its training programmes for Vietnamese pilots, submariners, and IT specialists.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond New Delhi’s coalition diplomacy is the development of a more activist naval policy in the region. Thus, it has pushed its navy up into the South China Sea, and since 2000 its

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Narendra Modi’s Speech to the Australian Parliament in Full’, *Wall Street Journal*, 18 Nov. 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2014/11/18/narendra-modis-speech-to-the-australian-parliament-in-full/>, accessed 23 Jun. 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Computed from “India-Vietnam Relations,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, [http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Vietnam\\_Dec2014.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Vietnam_Dec2014.pdf), accessed on November 21, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Thayer, ‘India and Vietnam advance their strategic partnership’, *The Diplomat*, 11 Dec. 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/india-and-vietnam-advance-their-strategic-partnership/>, accessed 2 Nov. 2015, and Indrani Bagchi, ‘India ignores China’s frown, offers defence boost to Vietnam’, *Times of India*, 29 Oct. 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-ignores-Chinas-frown-offers-defence-boost-to-Vietnam/articleshow/44965272.cms>, accessed 2 Nov. 2015.

ships have entered these waters roughly twice a year to carry out unilateral or bilateral exercises and ports of call.<sup>18</sup> In September 2011, an Indian naval ship, *INS Airawat*, heading to a Vietnamese port was hailed and asked to withdraw, ostensibly by a Chinese ship. The Indian Navy denied the encounter, and the episode remains a murky one – there is a view that the *Airawat* was not contacted by a Chinese ship at all but rather by some other vessel, perhaps mischievously – but the reports suggested that the *Airawat* ignored the warnings.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the Indian Navy continues to show the flag in the South China Sea, calling at various ports in the region including Shanghai, and receives Chinese ships in return.<sup>20</sup>

Acting East with the US, Japan, Australia, and Vietnam has led to a series of military and strategic moves. For instance, India is contemplating a trilateral dialogue with Japan and Vietnam ‘to coordinate positions on security and economic policies’.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, Modi invited Japan to join the India-US Malabar naval exercises as a permanent member rather than as an intermittent ‘foreign invitee’. Under Manmohan, mindful of China, India had been

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<sup>18</sup> Scott, “India’s Incremental Balancing in the South China Sea.”

<sup>19</sup> The story originated in a *Financial Times* article. See Ben Bland and Girija Shivakumar, “China Confronts Indian Navy Vessel,” *Financial Times*, August 31, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/883003ec-d3f6-11e0-b7eb-00144feab49a.html#axzz1xa611SWm>, accessed June 12, 2012. It is unclear if the Indian ship was accosted by a Chinese naval ship. See the statement of India’s foreign ministry: “Incident involving INS Airavat in South China Sea,” Ministry of External Affairs, September 1, 2011, <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/3040/Incident+involving+INS+Airavat+in+South+China+Sea>, accessed November 16, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> “Indian Navy Ships Arrive in Shanghai for 3-day Visit,” *CCTV.com English*, June 13, 2012, <http://english.cntv.cn/program/china24/20120613/114513.shtml>, accessed on November 16, 2016 and “Chinese Training Ship in Kochi on Four-Day Visit,” *NDTV*, <http://www.ndtv.com/article/south/chinese-training-ship-in-kochi-on-four-day-visit-208493>, accessed November 16, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Indrani Bagchi, ‘India Ignores China’s Frown, Offers Defence Boost to Vietnam’, *Times of India*, October 29, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-ignores-Chinas-frown-offers-defence-boost-to-Vietnam/articleshow/44965272.cms>, accessed November 2, 2015.

ambivalent about inviting Japan to the exercises.<sup>22</sup> Modi too was ambivalent initially – inviting Japan in 2014 and delaying the invitation in 2015 prior to his China visit.<sup>23</sup> After the visit, New Delhi made amends and upgraded Japan’s status.<sup>24</sup> The US had urged India to also include Australia in the Malabar exercise, but Modi stopped short of convening a quadrilateral exercise. Instead, India and Australia held a first-ever bilateral naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal in October 2015, rather pointedly in the same month as the India-US-Japan trilateral.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the bilateral exercise, India also proposed the first-ever India-Australia-Japan security dialogue.<sup>26</sup>

Containing China is important to India, but New Delhi is cautious and knows the extent of its power and influence, and so it will not go beyond a point in provoking Beijing. Its Act East policy is more ambitious strategically than the Look East policy, but it must take into account a series of constraints and limitations.

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<sup>22</sup> Akhilesh Pillamarri, ‘India, Japan, and the US hold joint naval exercises’, *The Diplomat*, 25 Jul. 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/india-japan-and-the-us-hold-joint-naval-exercises/>; Shashank Joshi, ‘Malabar: Modi government misses an opportunity as annual exercise slumps’, *The Interpreter*, 9 Oct. 2015, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/10/09/Malabar-Modi-Government-misses-an-opportunity-as-annual-exercise-slumps.aspx>, accessed 9 Nov. 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Bharat Karnad, ‘Flinching on Malabar’, *Security Wise*, 13 May 2015, <http://bharatkarnad.com/2015/05/13/flinching-on-japan-in-malabar/>, accessed 2 Nov. 2015.

<sup>24</sup> ‘India shuns China, allows Japan in Malabar naval drill’, *Times of India*, 13 Jul. 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-shuns-China-allows-Japan-in-Malabar-naval-drill/articleshow/48047379.cms>, accessed 20 Oct. 2015, and Franz Stefan-Gady, ‘Confirmed: Japan will permanently join US-India naval exercises’, *The Diplomat*, 13 Oct. 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/confirmed-japan-will-permanently-join-us-india-naval-exercises/>, accessed 2 Nov. 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Prashantha Parmeswaran, ‘Australia, India to hold first ever naval exercise amid China concerns’, *The Diplomat*, 1 Sept. 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/australia-india-to-hold-first-ever-naval-exercise-amid-china-concerns/>, accessed 2 Nov., 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Manu Pubby, ‘India kicks off trilateral talks with Japan and Australia; joint training, naval exercises on agenda’, *Economic Times*, 8 Jun. 2015, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-kicks-off-trilateral-talks-with-japan-and-australia-joint-training-naval-exercises-on-agenda/articleshow/47579881.cms>, accessed 2 Nov. 2015.

First, India has strengthened its relationship with the US, but it remains cautious with respect to Washington's policies and postures. For one thing, while India trumpets its support for freedom of the high seas, its stand on freedom of navigation in Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) is the same as that of China and other Asian states.<sup>27</sup> Writing on the South China Sea, Commander Abhijit Singh of the Indian Navy notes that "India does not concur with US attempts at claiming a 'right to uninterrupted passage' in coastal waters without the prior permission of the subject state – especially in areas that are deemed to be within a nation's territorial waters. New Delhi's view on the subject, in fact, broadly corresponds with Beijing – particularly on the need for prior notification by foreign warships before entering a coastal state's territorial waters or EEZ claiming innocent passage."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, India has refused to join US-led patrolling in the South China Sea. Whereas it exercises jointly with the US in the Indian Ocean, it worries that joint patrolling would imply an alliance relationship with Washington. In addition, it fears that China could repay the favour by mounting joint patrols with Pakistan in the Arabian Sea off India's coast.<sup>29</sup> A new worry about the US is the uncertainty surrounding the policies of President Donald Trump. The US's exit from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has undermined the American pivot to East Asia. New Delhi does not know what to make of Trump. On the one hand, he has been belligerent over the One China Policy and over trade and economic relations with Beijing as

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<sup>27</sup> Darshana M. Baruah, "What India Thinks About the South China Sea," *The National Interest*, March 29, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/what-india-thinks-about-the-south-china-sea-15619>, accessed February 4, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Commander Abhijit Singh, "The Escalating South China Sea Dispute - Lessons for India," IDSA Comments, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, March 1, 2016, [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/the-escalating-south-china-sea-dispute\\_asingh\\_010316](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/the-escalating-south-china-sea-dispute_asingh_010316), accessed February 5, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Anjana Pasricha, "India Rejects Joint Naval Patrols with US in South China Sea," *VOA news*, <http://www.voanews.com/a/india-rejects-joint-naval-patrols-with-us-in-south-china-sea/3231567.html>, accessed February 5, 2017.

also the South China Sea. On the other hand, New Delhi has seen several administrations start out tough with China and then soften. Moreover, it is unclear if Trump is genuinely interested in confronting China or if he is simply preparing the ground for a deal, a deal that could see the US retreat from responsibilities in East Asia.

India also is aware that the other parts of its new coalition has its fragilities as well. Each of its putative partners – Japan, Australia, and Vietnam – have deep relations with China, far deeper than they have with India. China is the biggest two-way trading partner of all three. It also has long historical cultural and historical links with Japan and Vietnam. The communist parties of China and Vietnam maintain strong links even now and the two countries were allies against the US during the Vietnam war. China and Vietnam also have well developed defence diplomacy links. Japan's Second World War conquest of East and Southeast Asia means that Tokyo remains hesitant to become a more 'normal' power. Nor is the Abe government's continued refusal to own Japan's responsibility for the war more forthrightly helping its image in the region. Australia's deep economic ties with China cause it to be ambivalent strategically. Vietnam too is deeply involved with China economically. Domestically, there are those who look upon the US with suspicion and who would prefer to strike a deal with China.

In addition, New Delhi must worry about striking a balance between containing China and cooperating with it. China is either India's largest or second largest trading partner. It is also potentially an investor in India's infrastructure projects. Beijing's cooperation will be vital for a final deal on the border dispute which New Delhi. China is also a strategic disrupter in South Asia. Its financial clout, ability to offer military equipment, veto in the UN Security Council, and rivalry with India make it attractive to the smaller states in India's

neighbourhood. Beijing could make life even more difficult for New Delhi if it is provoked beyond a point. It could also, potentially, interfere in India's vulnerable northeastern states. In the churn in maritime relations, PLAN could become more visible and assertive in the Indian Ocean as well which would only add to India's strategic challenges. As things stand, New Delhi does not consider the South China Sea to be a key theatre for its navy which has other priorities. According to the new naval strategy paper of the Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas*, the primary areas of interest are India's coastal waters, the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea, the waters around the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman, the Southwest Indian Ocean, the East African littoral, and various choke points to and from the Indian Ocean. The South China Sea and East China Sea, by contrast, for all the talk of Acting East and the worry about China's power and influence, is in the secondary areas of interest along with such distant theatres as the Southeast Indian Ocean, Southern Indian Ocean and Antarctica, the Mediterranean, and the West African coast.<sup>30</sup> If so, it would not be sensible to provoke China beyond a point and quicken the pace of its entry into the Indian Ocean.

## **Conclusion**

India's South China Sea policy has evolved since the early noughties. As China has become more assertive over the disputes, India has sharpened its comments on the quarrel. Its interests relate to the upholding of freedom on the high seas and the maintenance of regional peace and stability, unhindered trade and commerce, and containment of China. Of these, the interest in containing Chinese power and influence is the foremost. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought to build a new containment coalition with the US, Japan, Australia, and Vietnam rather than simply go along with India's erstwhile stand of support for an ASEAN-

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<sup>30</sup> *Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy*, pp. 31-32.



led regionalism that would enmesh China and socialize it into the local rules of the game. While Modi has been more assertive in building this coalition, New Delhi is aware that there are limits to its diplomacy and military moves in the region. Its putative partners all have deep ties to Beijing, and India is vulnerable to Chinese pressures in its domestic politics, in its bilateral dealings with China, in its own region, and in the Indian Ocean. India will therefore certainly seek to exploit the diplomatic opportunities that Beijing creates by its aggressiveness and obduracy over the South China Sea, but it will do so in a measured and prudent manner. In the long run, its interest is in ensuring peace and stability and its own development rather than contributing to polarization and violence in East and Southeast Asia.