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Strategic Partnerships and Regional Security Architectures: Delineating India's Peace and Security Approach in the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain

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ABSTRACT

The paper is empirical research that reviews India's peace and security policy and developments from 2014 till 2019 towards regional peace and security. Taking an overview of New Delhi's approach towards Indo-Pacific using maritime engagements provides a crucial insight into this. A reading of the first tenure of maritime trends suggests that New Delhi has been taking a two-pronged approach: while establishing strategic partnerships at the bilateral level with countries that include military exercises and defence related trade. On the other hand, India has shown an increasing interest in developing 'regional security architectures' at the regional level as its multilateral preference of engagement with the like-minded countries having common regional interests and objectives. Development of the region in terms of infrastructure- building, connectivity and addressing common threats to peace and development jointly has been country's approach at the multilateral level. It further overviews the emerging geopolitical developments and security issues that has its imprint on the development of Asian maritime security architecture. Lastly, the paper concludes that even though bilateral engagements are leading to deliverables, it is under the larger ambit of the multilaterals that India is developing normative and conceptual maritime security frameworks that India should seek proactive arrangements in the coming years.

Keywords: Asian Security Architectures; Bilateralism; Joint Maritime Exercises; Look East Policy; Multilateralism.

Introduction

Alignment of India's Neighbourhood First Policy with the maritime interests has been one of the focal points of Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's foreign policy engagement. There has been a fresh and vocal political stance on Indian Ocean related policies like Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) as well as Indo-Pacific in the quest for revival of Act East policies along with the historic ties with South East Asian neighbours. However, how have maritime engagements with the South East Asian countries shaped up eventually towards the end of five years becomes the testing waters for the current Indian government that is now in its second term? Therefore, the goal of this paper is to examine New Delhi's Act East Policy (component of its Neighbourhood Policy) and its 'maritime approach' as the basis of engagement since 2014 as

the scope of the paper. This provides a progress report on the India's maritime approach with respect to its South East Asian littorals. Furthermore, one can expect formation of a concrete road on the existing maritime blueprints and institutions. In other words, Indian government has attempted to utilise the existing ideas and tools that were available to it in addition to some fresh influx, to their optimal potential. The objective of this proactive maritime approach has been two-fold: to increase its engagements with its neighbouring states under LEP as well as for securing the waters of the Indian Ocean for the holistic growth and development of regional economies.

The paper further describes that India has extended its regional relations in the maritime domain in a *two-pronged approach*- building bilateral strategic partnerships and developing multilateral regional strategic architectures. Though the bilateral strategic partnerships are based upon defence ties and military training and exercises with these countries; the regional engagements have focussed on addressing on the issues of regional security threats such as piracy, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) activities, transnational crimes, maritime domain awareness (MDA) and so on, at a formal collective level. New Delhi's increasing role in building common consensus for peace, stability and prosperity at the regional level has also led to its involvement with Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific security architecture formation.

The objective of this paper is to provide a context to the New Delhi's renewed focus on its neighbours through maritime engagements to achieve peace, security and development of the region as whole. The threats originating in the maritime domain are transnational in its character and therefore impact the region more than a specific nation. India's recognises its position in the region to take the responsibility of 'security provider'. However, this recognition also comes with an appreciation of the fact that most of regional countries face challenges in terms if capacity and capabilities to address the threats emanating from the maritime domain. Therefore, there is an attempt for extension of India's own maritime vision at the regional level to bring cooperation with like-minded neighbours through capacity and capability building exercises both at the bilateral and multilateral level.

Evolution of Act East in Indian Ocean to Indo-Pacific since 2014

PM Modi's 2014 policy of 'Act East' can be called as re-engagement with the SE Asian countries under Look East Policy (LEP) which has seen little progress since its inception in 1991. India's foreign policy processes saw a revival post the Soviet collapse the late 1980s. For its economic revival, India like several other countries was envisaging a global system where the liberalised domestic economies can be aligned with the other global economies and hence establishing a liberal economic order. There was an attempt for the revival of historical and cultural ties with its Southeast Asian neighbours named as Act East Policy in 1992 under PM PV Narasimha Rao's leadership. Originally conceived as an economic initiative, the evolved policy addressed to existing issues of missing cooperation and dialogue through engagements in political, strategic, and cultural dimensions. However, the lack of connectivity and infrastructure development along with dialogue-deficit between India and SE Asian countries became the hindrance for any considerable success of the LEP. India and ASEAN signed the goods Free Trade Agreement in 2009 that was implemented in 2010. While imports from ASEAN countries have seen a rise,

exports from India to that region have not seen a significant jump, largely missing the objective of the pact. The Act East Policy was seen as corrective measure to this in addition to expand the scope of engagements.

One of the striking foreign policy features that was exhibited in 2014 under India's new Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi was related to 'Neighbourhood First' Policy. The approach was seen as a corrective step to transform New Delhi's perception as the Big Brother in the South Asia that was reflected by the country's position as the largest regional country, holding world's largest demographics, third largest economyⁱ, and equipped with the world's fourth most powerful militaries in the worldⁱⁱ. As South Asian milieu remained unstable due to individual domestic reasons, India was compelled to engage itself with these countries with an objective to bring peace and stability in the region. This engagement led to some unfruitful as well as unfortunate outcomes, gaining this tag for India over the decades. The neighbourhood became wary of India's regional approach over the decades. However, Modi's invitation to all the leaders of the SAARC nations including Pakistan for his swearing-in ceremony and their reciprocity demonstrated by full attendanceⁱⁱⁱ was seen as diplomatic victory for Indian leadership. This was observed as a new beginning of India's engagement with its neighbours.

Further Modi outlaid his vision for the maritime domain as the basis of furthering India's domestic development (SAGAR) as well regional growth and stability (Indo-Pacific) as explained further. Indo-Pacific has come as the evolving geo-strategic concept since Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe "free and open Indo-Pacific" speech in 2013. In 2017, several regional Asian (India and Japan) and extra-regional countries (especially Australia, the USA) have pronounced Indo-Pacific concept in their individual foreign policy statements. Modi's vision of the Indo-Pacific at the ShangriLa Dialogue 2017 was based on inclusiveness rather than confrontation as he stated "India does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a group that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country". With that clarity, India has been developing its maritime relations with the Indian Ocean littorals based upon recognition of common interests and threats present in the region.

Regional geostrategic scenario

Speaking of it in a nutshell, the changing geopolitical scenario in the maritime domain where all both India and most of the ASEAN countries stand as stakeholders necessitated a reinvigoration of their policies. Threats such as piracy, terrorism, and environmental disasters etc. in the waters of Indian Ocean Region became a connecting point for these countries to think beyond purely economic engagements and develop common regional policies. Moreover, there have been wavering American policies especially with regards to South and Southeast Asia since 'Pivot to Asia' under the US President Barack Obama in 2009 produced mixed results for the regional strategic environment. Growing American presence in the region to counter China's economic Rise and influence over these economies was seen as a threat by Beijing. Repeated statements and white papers since 2009 from the People's Republic of China quoted American presence in the Asia-Pacific as a threat to China^{iv}. This had a visible regional impact with China's increasing belligerence in terms of its activities in the South China Sea region that forms the crucial geo-strategic and geo-economic location between Indian and Pacific Oceans. The SCS due to its

geographical location provides a maritime buffer zone to Beijing to strengthen its military presence as reaction of the lessons learnt in its maritime defeats that the country faced in the 19th century due to poor focus on naval strength.

The aggressive posturing of China in the SCS irritated several ASEAN countries that share their maritime claims and interests in the region. The combination of several conditions such as the inability of these countries are to match China's military during any unwarranted scenario combined subdued American responses, the region has seen increasing defence expenditure as a part of their internal balancing against any security threats. Furthermore, India and ASEAN policies have also shown convergence in bilateral defence trade and joint exercises to address various traditional and non-traditional security threats.

Bilateral naval exercises

India has been working towards military engagements and maritime cooperation as a part of its Neighbourhood First policy. This section lists down the countries with whom Indian Navy has been participating in bilateral exercises as a part of maritime engagements with the Indian Ocean littoral states. Indian Navy has been engaged with other littoral navies since as early as 2002. The detailed look of these exercises highlight that the essential elements of maritime cooperation have been sale of military equipment, exercises, training, as well as exchange of intelligence, assistance in hydro-graphic requirements, and port visits by ships and aircraft carriers.

There has been and substantial increase in these arrangements with certain countries in terms of exchanges and bilateral agreements. On the other hand, the brief atrophy in the bilateral relations with some countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives etc. was a manifestation of their individual domestic political and economic upheaval. The domestic stability brought back normality in the both the sets of the bilateral relations.

1. India- Indonesia

India and Indonesia share the common maritime goal in the waters of Indo-Pacific, i.e., peaceful presence and solidarity with friendly countries towards ensuring good order in the maritime domain and to strengthen existing bonds between India and Indonesia. The Indonesian Navy and the Indian Navy have been participating in the coordinated patrol (CORPAT) twice a year since 2002^v to keep this vital part of the Indian Ocean Region safe and secure for commercial shipping and international trade. In October 2018, the 32nd edition of India – Indonesia CORPAT took place from Andaman and Nicobar command entered Belawan harbour, Indonesia.

Additionally, India participated in multinational HADR exercises-KOMODO organized by Indonesia since 2002. It is aimed at enhancing mutual understanding on maritime security and involves boarding operations as well as establishment of medical camps ashore. The Indian participation of INS Sumedha and Maritime Patrol Aircraft aims to bolster bilateral ties and enhance maritime inter-operability in particular between the two navies and for further strengthening the strong bilateral ties and extensive maritime interaction between India and Jakarta.

2. India-Maldives

To address common maritime concerns, India is assisting Maldives in setting up Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS). During EEZ surveillance a special team consisting of IN divers

carried out underwater hull welding onboard Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) ship *Huravee*, thereby enabling the operational availability of the ship to the MNDF.

In July 2018, India-Maldivian Action Plan for defence was concluded keeping the focus on defence cooperation as being an important component of the bilateral relationship and the shared strategic and security interests of the two countries in the Indian Ocean region. The main elements of the security cooperation consisted of the development of ports, continuous training, capacity building, supply of equipment and maritime surveillance^{vi}.

3. India- Malaysia

India-Malaysia defence ties can be traced back to the colonial days when troops of Madras Native Infantry served in Malacca, Singapore and Penang^{vii}. In continuance to the bilateral cultural, economic and commercial ties and India's Act East Policy the two countries carry out joint exercises to elevate their defence ties to a new high.

IN ship Komorta participated in the biennial maritime cooperation exhibition organized by Malaysian Navy, Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) in March 2015. It is aimed at improving maritime cooperation and bringing together military and civil industrial partnership. IN has been participating regularly in LIMA. In March 2017, IN ship Kora participated in the LIMA exercises.

4. India- Mauritius

In 2014, Defence cooperation between the two countries has been strengthened through trainings, exchange visits, hydrography, port calls by Indian ships, deployment of defence assets etc.

Prime Minister Modi was the Chief Guest at the Mauritius National Day celebrations and commissioning ceremony of MCGS Barracuda. The MoU on Hydrography with Mauritius has been renewed till October 2020. In 2015, Chief of Naval Staff inaugurated the White Shipping¹ Data Fusion Centre, commemorated the Accord of Producer Nation status and visited the site for new Mauritius Coast Guard Dockyard. Additionally, Inaugural Coast Guard Staff Talks were held in October 2015. India further helped Mauritius with its INS Darshak that was deployed for 31 days in Dec 2016 to Mauritius for the conduct of hydrographic surveys based on requests received from the government.

5. India- Seychelles

India's bilateral diplomatic ties were established with Seychelles after its independence in 1976, but the links date back even earlier^{viii}. Several bilateral agreements/MOUs have been signed between the two countries, ranging from culture, healthcare, science and technology, coastal surveillance and so on over the past decades. PM Modis' March 2015 visit to Seychelles and the

¹ "White Shipping" information refers to improve data sharing on non-classified merchant navy ships or cargo ships.

reciprocal visit of Seychelles President James Alix Michel's State visit to India in August later that year saw six out of nine total agreements² signed on the maritime cooperation.

India and Seychelles have close defence relationship marked by high level visits, training exchanges, supply of defence assets, hydrography, etc. For effective patrolling of its EEZ, India has gifted a Coast Guard Fast Interceptor Boat and other associated items to Seychelles in January 2016. INS Sunayna visited Seychelles in June 2017 to participate in Seychelles National Day celebrations. IN ship Tarkash was deployed for EEZ surveillance and provided Outer Island Support to Seychelles (and Mauritius) in 2017. Further, INS Mumbai visited Victoria in November 2017 to undertake bi-annual EEZ and anti-narcotics patrol with Seychelles. Officials from the Anti-Narcotics Bureau of the Seychelles Police Force, Seychelles Fishing Authority and Maritime Police participated in the joint patrol.

6. India- Singapore

The air forces of the two countries signed a bilateral agreement in 2007, followed by an agreement by the two armies in 2008. It was in 2017; the two countries completed the trinity by signing the agreement between the navies. However, the bilateral naval exercise, SIMBEX has been held annually since 1994 and grown in tactical and operational complexity. It has transcended the traditional emphasis on Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) to more complex maritime exercises, such as Air Defence, Air and Surface practice firing, Maritime Security, and Search and Rescue Operations^{ix}.

A Technical Agreement on 'Sharing of White Shipping Information' was concluded during the visit of Chief of Naval Staff to Singapore in July 2015. INS Satpura indigenously built guided missile stealth frigate and INS Kamorta, the latest and indigenous Anti-Submarine Warfare Corvette was operationally deployed to carry out exercises in Southern Indian Ocean and the South China Sea in May 2015. These ships participated in IMDEX-15 and later conducted bilateral naval exercise SIMBEX-15 with the Singapore Navy in May 2015. SIMBEX 2016 was held in the Bay of Bengal region as 23rd in the series, was aimed to increase interoperability as well as develop common understanding and procedures for maritime security operations.

Singapore Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen during his November 2017 visit to India was reportedly quoted on shared maritime values and interests between India and Singapore. He stated that "... both countries strongly advocate adherence to international law and norms, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.^{xii}" The concern to address maritime security threats was reflected in the nature of bilateral exercises in the coming years. IN ships Shivalik, Sahyadri, Kamorta and Jyoti participated in the exercise in SIMBEX 2017 conducted at Singapore. The focus of the SIMBEX-17 was on Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), integrated operations with Surface, Air

² (i) MoU on Renewable Energy Cooperation; (ii) MoU for Cooperation in the field of Hydrography; (iii) Protocol on Sale of Navigational Charts / Electronic Navigational Charts; (iv) Agreement on the Development of facilities on Assumption Island; (v) bilateral air services; (vi) agricultural cooperation; (vii) blue economy; (viii) tax information Exchange; (ix) and gifting of a second Dornier aircraft to Seychelles.

and Sub-surface forces, Air Defence and Surface Encounter Exercises^{xi}. SIMBEX 2018 that was held at Vishakhapatnam was a landmark event to celebrate 25th edition of the longest uninterrupted bilateral maritime exercise that India has had with any navy. It also saw largest ever participation by the Singapore Navy in any bilateral exercise.^{xii}

7. India- Sri Lanka

India and Sri Lankan navies participated the bilateral maritime exercises SLINEX in 2005. Post hiatus of seven years, the exercises resumed in 2013 and since then three exercises have been conducted- 2015^{xiii}, 2017^{xiv} and 2018^{xv}. SLINEX is aimed at further enhancing the capability of the two navies to work together at sea and contribute towards maritime security in the region. These exercises are focused on fleet work, seamanship, communication, replenishment at sea, Visit Board Search and Seize (VBSS) operations and helicopter operations.

Further, India has been conducting defense and related exercises with the Sri Lankan forces. Trilateral exercise 'DOSTI' involving Indian Coast Guard, Sri Lankan Coast Guard and Maldives National Defence Forces was conducted in Maldives in October 2014. Similarly, INS Darshak was deployed for 56 days from March 2017 whilst INS Sutlej has been deployed for 59 days from October 2017 to Sri Lanka for the conduct of hydrographic surveys based on request received from Government of Sri Lanka.

8. India- Thailand

The two navies conduct bi-annual Coordinated Patrol [CORPAT] exercises. Since 2005. The 26th of Coordinated Patrol [CORPAT] between the Indian Navy [IN] and the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) was held in November, 2018. The objective of these exercises is to keep a vigil in the Indian Ocean Region and to enhance mutual understanding and inter-operability between the two navies. It further facilitates as a bilateral institution of measures to prevent unlawful activities at sea as well as conducting of Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. Most importantly, the exercises bolster the already strong bilateral relationship between the two nations besides contributing to enhancing maritime security in the region.

9. India- Vietnam

India and Vietnam signed Strategic partnership agreement in 2007 that was graduated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016. The countries have seen exchange of several high-level visits in recent years. As a part of defence and security cooperation, Indian Navy has also been involved in assisting with EEZ surveillance, Search and Rescue, HADR and other capacity-building and capability-enhancement activities for addressing the non-traditional threats emanating in the Indian Ocean Region.

Further to deepen its defense related ties with Vietnam, India has offered a line of credit, provides training of Kilo class submarine training, Sukhoi fighter aircrafts to Vietnamese Navy and Airforce in addition to conducting joint armed forces exercises. New Delhi has offered to supply Brahmos supersonic cruise missile and Akash area defence missile to Hanoi. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Indian Coast Guard and Vietnam Coast Guard to combat transnational crime and develop mutual cooperation were signed during the visit of Vietnam President H.E. Mr. Tran Dai Quang in March 2018.

Building of Security Architectures at regional level

In addition to carrying out bilateral naval exercises, New Delhi has remained proactive in formulating the maritime blueprint for the IOR and the Indo-Pacific. This has led to institution building based upon common and agreed objectives amongst the littoral states. Indian approach can be seen as to have build upon existing international norms of free, open, inclusive and sustainable development of the maritime order. Good maritime governance, peaceful resolution of disputes and rules-based order has been repeatedly stressed upon. There has been a visible development in the conceptual framework as well as functional aspects in the regional maritime regimes, as detailed below:

1. SAGAR –As a conceptual framework in Indian Ocean Region

The Indian Ocean is the key to our future, connects regions of diverse cultures and a zone of peace and prosperity. Ships of several countries pass through the region, hence, raising the concerns of stability and contest. India's own maritime goals and objectives as delineated under PM Modi's SAGAR speech connect and extend to the country's Neighbourhood First as its maritime approach. PM Modi at International Fleet Review 2016 held at Vishakhapatnam enunciated the term SAGAR^{xvi}. The vision became a template for the maritime policies and connectivity for India in the coming years. At his speech at Shangrila Dialogue at Singapore in June 2018 coupled India Act East policy with the SAGAR vision. PM Modi further stated, "Indian Forces, especially Navy, are building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region for peace and security, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief".

The Indian External Minister Sushma Swaraj built over the template during his visit to Vietnam in August 2018. The minister elucidated the all-encompassing concept of security that includes traditional, non-traditional and newly emerging threats. The maritime domain is a function of both economic prosperity and maritime security. She, therefore, called for India and ASEAN countries to work together to build up 'regional security architectures'^{xvii} based upon universally recognized international norms, transparency, openness, financial responsibility, and promoting a sense of local ownership for better and sustainable development.

2. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)-As a Governing/Legislative Framework

IORA is an inter-governmental organization comprised of 22 IOR nations as member states³ and 9 observer states, established in 1997. Established with the aim of promoting economic and technical cooperation, the forum works to achieve mutually beneficial cooperation through a consensus-based, evolutionary and non-intrusive approach. The highest authority of the Association rests with the Council of (Foreign) Ministers (COM), which meets annually reflects

³ Commonwealth of Australia, People's Republic of Bangladesh, Union of Comoros, Republic of India, Republic of Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kenya, Republic of Madagascar, Malaysia, Republic of Mauritius, Republic of Mozambique, Sultanate of Oman, Republic of Seychelles, Republic of Singapore, Federal Republic of Somalia, Republic of South Africa, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, United Republic of Tanzania, Kingdom of Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Republic of Yemen.

the institutional strength at the regional level. One of the flagships projects of IORA, the 'Indian Ocean Dialogue' was first held at Kerala in 2014, followed by Australia in 2015 and Indonesia in 2016, respectively. Discussions range on topics such as economic cooperation, maritime safety and security, blue economy, human assistance, and disaster relief, etc.

The IORA Summit 2017 was a landmark event as the countries commemorated the 20th anniversary of IORA and concluded the First ever leader's summit with the attendance of the Heads of all the member states. Furthermore, IORA secretariat statement issued strategic vision document, known as the Jakarta Concord, that "sets out a vision for a revitalized and sustainable regional architecture". From an organization that had low impact over the years, the IORA transformed into a vehicle of regional maritime cooperation between the Indian Ocean countries.

3. Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)- As an Executive body

The IONS is a voluntary grouping of 36 littoral Indian Ocean navies that conduct biennial meetings. In addition to 24 members states, the nine states with observer status are namely- China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Madagascar, Malaysia, Netherlands, Russia and Spain. IONS is a regional forum to increase maritime security cooperation, to discuss regional maritime issues and to promote friendly relationships among the member nations. The objective of IONS is to generate a flow of information between naval professionals necessary for common understanding and possibly cooperative solutions on the regional maritime issues.

In 2018, the organization completed its tenth anniversary. The theme for 2018 IONS symposium held in India was "IONS as a catalyst for SAGAR" thereby underlining the importance of naval cooperation in the overall IOR maritime cooperation. In other words, regional institutions such as IONS have the executive or the functional responsibilities in the IOF apart from agenda setting at the institution level.

There is other sub-regional maritime security frameworks in the IOR as mentioned below:

4. Goa Maritime Conclave (GMC)

In November 2017, Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman inaugurated the maiden 'Goa Maritime Conclave' (GMC) was conducted at Naval War College, Goa. It is a unique initiative wherein Chiefs of Navy, Heads of Maritime Agency and the representatives of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Maldives, Malaysia, Mauritius, Myanmar, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand attended the Conclave. It was aimed at 'Addressing Regional Maritime Challenges' such as emerging maritime threats and need for force structuring, maritime domain awareness, maritime security architecture, and maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

At this conclave, India offered to share intelligence of maritime movements including movement of commercial traffic as well as intelligence, in the Indian Ocean in the 'real-time bases with 10 Indian Ocean littoral States^{xviii}.

5. MILAN Exercises at Sea (MILES)

In March 2018, the 10th edition of Milan concluded with Milan Exercise Sea (MILES), conducted in the Andaman Sea. The MILES 2018 saw participation of 20 ships⁴ from nine countries including

⁴ Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

India, making it the largest multilateral exercise. The common objective of the exercises was to enhance interoperability between navies of the region and to exchange best practices. The navies carried out exercises such as Weapon firing, Search and Rescue operations, Air Defence exercises, Cross-deck flying, Boarding Operations and Medical Evacuation drills.

6. ADMM Plus Exercise on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism:

ASEAN Defence Ministers Meetings' Plus (ADMM Plus) as the de facto multilateral security mechanism in the Asia-Pacific is now a regular event. It focuses on seven domains of maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counterterrorism, military medicine, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian mine action, and cyber security also provided for military-to-military interactions and cooperation.

The Indian Navy has been a regular participant in maritime exercises conducted by the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meetings' (ADMM) Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism. It is a multinational exercise under the larger aegis of ADMM Plus consortium. The 2018 edition commenced in Brunei and culminated in Singapore, with various drills and exercises in the South China Sea. During the exercise, the Indian Navy engaged with navies from Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar, China, Japan, Russia, Australia, Republic of Korea and US. Such exercises are held with a common objective of regional security, strengthen and deepen India's relations with the ASEAN countries beyond existing civilisation, economic ties.

Conclusion/Scope for further research

The attempt of the paper was to take a review of the of the current leadership's initiatives at the maritime domain while furthering its relations with the neighbouring littorals under the Neighbourhood policy. Five years of a timeframe is indeed small for any government to bring structural changes in the seven-decade-old democracy dealing with several domestic, regional and global issues at various levels and importance. Moreover, it takes years to train ships and forces to build a formidable navy. However, New Delhi has ensured the continuity of the bilateral maritime exercises with most of its littoral neighbours. It has even broadened the scope with adding maritime forces such as Coast Guard exercises as well as the nature of exercises, as detailed above. This highlights a positive trend of engagements keeping India's maritime interests in mind in the region. India's maritime vision as well as the bilateral engagements needs to be continued in the coming years to achieve the common objective of peace and prosperity in the maritime domain. At the bilateral level, India has taken a proactive role in building several sub-regional security architectures to address the common security concerns based on the common objectives of free and open Indo Pacific and rule of internationally accepted norms and rules of law.

Nevertheless, India has been unilaterally reorienting itself to the new geo-strategic realities in the region, in 2017 Indian Navy has revised its 'Mission based deployment' concept. This has broadened the scope and responsibilities of the Indian Navy for "deploying mission-ready ships and aircraft along critical sea lanes of communications and choke points in the Indian Ocean

Region"^{xix}. A total of 14-15 of these ships and corvettes and surveillance aircraft are being deployed in the areas that include the Malacca Strait, Andaman Sea, North Andaman Sea, including Bangladesh and Myanmar, Lakshadweep islands and the Maldives, besides Madagascar and the Persian Gulf^{xx}. In addition to this, Indian Navy is focusing on efforts on capacity and capability development of other navies in the region.

Deliberations over having a security architecture started as early as in 1950s Bandung Conference where several Asian leaders came together to share their vision for Asia as a region. Yet, Asia is still seeking regional security architecture/s and frameworks. Given the multitude of actors, their domestic and regional aspirations as well as the prevailing security situations will have to make way for several sub-regional security framework instead of one overarching architectures. That will assist in capturing the needs and aspirations of individual Asian countries as well as bring together several congregations or collaborations based upon themes or area to be addressed. Regional maritime security framework addressing both traditional and non-traditional issues of regional security could be one of such initiative.

That said, this study also revealed certain issues that require further research for a nuanced understanding of the efficacy of these undertakings. Firstly, despite the growing participation and regularity of the exercise, one must be reminded that most of the bilateral maritime exercises are only 'ceremonial' in nature aimed at deepening cooperation between the countries. Secondly, several of these countries carry out similar maritime exercises with other navies (China, US etc.) as well and therefore, not just dependent on India for their military training or equipment purchase. Third, there is further scope to analyse the shifts in defence related trade between India and the neighbouring maritime countries. As most of the ASEAN countries have increased their defence expenditure, it can provide a pointer on the nature of defence-related trade between India and these countries, based upon the threat perception of each country. Fourth, though the joint exercises train the navies together in addressing the non-traditional security issues, more interview-based analysis of the naval officers can provide an insight if such exercises can be signalled appropriately to avoid any misunderstanding amongst countries. Last but not the least, at the regional level, most of the regional regimes and institutions are still developing in terms of established norms, practices and rule of law.

Countries are evolving novel ways to connect with each other at the regional level to recognise transnational nature of threats and challenges and to promote regional peace and security. India's maritime engagements to strengthen capacity and capability of its regional neighbours through naval exercises needs to be seen from this vantage point. The strategic partnerships are a part of building regional architecture within the Indo-Pacific maritime domain. It requires recognition of common issues of interests, challenges as well as threats amongst all the like-minded countries is one of the steps. Once that is established, the regional architecture can be fortified with different level of engagements such as the joint level naval exercises mentioned in this paper. Such an approach towards regional architecture has immense potential to establish confidence among countries as well as mitigating the threats to establish regional peace and security.

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