



On India's 'Looking East' Policy and the South China Sea

By Alex Calvo / *Issue Briefings*, 3 / 2015

New Delhi is carefully following developments in the South China Sea as part of her “Looking East” policy and helping Vietnam exploit offshore oil and build her maritime capacities. However, Indian policy is cautious and aptly described as “multialigned”, rather than bent on building a coalition to resist China.

As a quasi-island, vitally dependent on sea lines of communication (SLOCs), India cannot afford to ignore developments in the South China Sea, a body of water connecting the country to, among others, Japan. In recent years, New Delhi has supported Hanoi in two crucial ways: first of all, by cooperating in offshore oil exploration and production, and second, by helping build the country's maritime security capabilities. This may be seen as part of New Delhi's “Look



East”¹ policy,² and also as partially motivated by a desire to make it more difficult for China to dominate the South China Sea and thus more easily access the Indian Ocean and put more pressure on India. However, while this may make sense and fit with other Indian policies, such as improving border infrastructure³ in the Himalayas and developing key weapons

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- 1 A.N. Ram (ed.), *Two Decades of India's Look East Policy: Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity*, (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs, 2012). <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09700161.2013.802527>
 - 2 This should not be taken literally as implying that India is not looking carefully in other directions. “India is surrounded by security concerns all around.” Sonia Roy, “Indian Foreign Policy and Terrorism (Post 9/11)”, blog of Sonia Roy, 11 January 2010. <http://soniaroy.blogspot.com/2010/01/indian-foreign-policy-and-terrorism.html> Some explanations of the policy are overtly, and to a large extent understandably, enthusiastic, see for example the following quote from Professor Brahma Chellaney “For India, the Look East policy is a strategic imperative, India has to look East, because looking West India sees only trouble - Pakistan, Afghanistan, all the way up to Iraq and Jordan. So looking West is not useful. Looking East is better, because looking East means you engage with the more dynamic economies and with democracies like Indonesia, Japan, Korea, these are important countries for India now”, Uwe Hoering, Interview with Brahma Chellaney, website of Stiftung Asienhaus, 3 July 2014. http://www.asienhaus.de/uploads/tx_news/asienhaus-hintergrundinformation7-2014.pdf, India has never stopped paying attention to countries such as Iraq. Sonia Roy “Iraq”, in P.R. Kumaraswam (editor), *Persian Gulf 2013: India's Relations With the Region*, (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2014), pp. 107-126.
 - 3 “What India is belatedly seeking to do is to improve its defenses by upgrading its logistics,” said Brahma Chellaney, an analyst who tracks the India-China relationship at the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi, in an e-mail. “By building new railroads, airports and highways in Tibet, China is now in a position to rapidly move additional forces to the border to potentially strike at India at a time of its choosing.”, “India Digs Under Top of the World to Match Rival”, Lydia Polgreen, *New York Times*, 31 July 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/world/asia/01pass.html?pagewanted=all>



systems such as Brahmos,⁴ it does not mean that it is necessarily part of any “grand design” to encircle China. The Brahmos is a “stealthy, supersonic missile designed to elude shipboard defenses like the Aegis combat system”, with a top speed approaching Mach 3 and a range of 290 kilometers. This high speed means less reaction time for the target and greater kinetic energy on impact,⁵ and its range has prompted Chinese naval analyst Zhang Ming to proclaim “that the Islands of India’s Andaman and Nicobar Archipelago could be used as a ‘metal chain’ to block Chinese access to the Straits of Malacca”.⁶ While true that India has gradually developed a wide range of relations with other countries in the region, including joint military drills, the often grand-sounding words employed to describe them rarely match their actual contents. For example, while relations with Japan are important and benefit from the personal warmth between the two prime

4 Radhakrishna Rao, “A Boost to BrahMos”, website of CLAWS (Centre for Land Warfare Studies), 15 December 2014. <http://www.claws.in/1304/a-boost-to-brahmos-radhakrishna-rao.html>

⁵ James R. Holmes, “India’s Military Comes of Age: The BrahMos Missile”, *The Diplomat*, 27 July 2012. <http://thediplomat.com/2012/07/indias-military-comes-of-age-the-brahmos-missile/>

⁶ Ranjit B Rai, “China’s String of Pearls vs India’s Iron Curtain”, *Indian Defence Review*, 19 February 2013. <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/chinas-string-of-pearls-vs-indias-iron-curtain/>



ministers,⁷ New Delhi and Tokyo are yet to conclude a civil nuclear agreement, which would certify the end to India's "nuclear apartheid". New Delhi remains cautious concerning China, and rather than engaging in a multinational alliance against Beijing, Professor Brahma Chellaney has more accurately described the country as having moved "from nonaligned to multialigned"⁸ under a prime minister whose foreign policy "hallmark" is "pragmatism".⁹

On Beijing

The Indian national security community is fully aware of the consequences that full control by Beijing of the South China Sea would entail. This concern, however, coexists with continued suspicions of the United States and of foreign entanglements in general. Three tweets earlier this year by Saurav Jha, a commentator on energy and geopolitics, are quite

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- 7 Alex Calvo, "Abe's Election Good News for Japan-India Ties", *Shingetsu News Agency News*, 21 December 2012. http://www.shingetsunewsagency.com/SNA/SNA_News/Entries/2012/12/21_Abes_Election_Good_News_for_Japan-India_Ties.html
 - 8 Brahma Chellaney, "From a nonaligned to multialigned India?", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 15 December 2014. <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Geopolitico/From-a-nonaligned-to-multialigned-India>
 - 9 Brahma Chellaney, "Reshaping India's diplomacy", *The Japan Times*, 18 January 2015. <http://chellaney.net/2015/01/18/reshaping-indias-diplomacy/>



indicative in this regard. On 24 January 2015, he wrote, “All the 'pivot' posturing has already served its purpose. All this Asian NATO talk is only for those who want to import expensive platforms”. Jha continued, “Indian analysts missed the significance of the Obama-Jinping Maryland retreat when they agreed on Yuan-dollar dynamics”, adding “America has no desire to fight China and even overtly they keep saying that they do not seek to contain China or build alliances against it”.¹⁰

On Washington

While the trip to India by US President Obama in January this year was widely considered to have been successful, with Dhruva Jaishankar (a fellow with the German Marshall Fund) concluding that “Anti-Americanism is dead”,¹¹ still more than a few Indian voices are reluctant to enter into any set of alliances that may led to entanglements or see the country used as a pawn against China. Thus, while Jaishankar explained that “Modi has been unabashed about deepening partnerships with

10 Tweets by Saurav Jha, @SJha1618, 24 January 2015.

11 Dhruva Jaishankar “Anti-Americanism is dead”, *Indian Express*, 27 January 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/anti-americanism-is-dead/99/>



countries in the Indo-Pacific region with which India shares both interests and values, particularly Japan and Australia”, seeking to “manage China's rise by diversifying regional security partnerships” and establishing a “closer relationship with the US”,¹² Manimugdha Sharma, a journalist specialized in military history, tweeted “For decades, US propped up Pakistan to offset and upset its bigger neighbour. Let's hope we don't become Pak in US' scheme against China”,¹³ adding that “India, so far, has very wisely stayed away from grand coalitions and alliances. Even in the aftermath of 9/11, when there was pressure on India to join the war against terror, we very wisely avoided sending troops. So logically speaking, India would avoid being used ... we must set boundaries on this new friendship with the Americans”.¹⁴

This does not mean that the South China Sea is absent from Indo-American exchanges. The “Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific & Indian Ocean Region” released on the occasion of Obama's January visit to India referred to the South China Sea, reading “Regional prosperity depends on security. We

12 Dhruva Jaishankar “Anti-Americanism is dead”, *Indian Express*, 27 January 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/anti-americanism-is-dead/99/>

13 Tweet by Manimugdha Sharma, @quizzicalguy, 26 January 2015.

14 Direct communication to the author by Manimugdha Sharma, 26 January 2015.



affirm the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea”. It called on “all parties to avoid the threat or use of force and pursue resolution of territorial and maritime disputes through all peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea”.¹⁵ Furthermore, the trip was accompanied by renewed commentary about “quadrilateral” (Australia–India–Japan–US) maritime cooperation, following Modi's words to that effect,¹⁶ with commentators such as David Lang (analyst at ASPI and an editor of *The Strategist*) stressing that India's Modi and Japan's Abe are both “nationalistic, conservative leaders ... elected with mandates to restart their economies and reclaim lost pride” and “playing for a greater

15 “U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region”, The White House, 25 January 2015. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>

16 “Mr. Modi’s suggestion of fresh security cooperation linking the two with Japan and Australia would bring back a short-lived effort involving the four democracies that began in 2007. Known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, it drew protests from China and was abandoned a year later with a change of government in Australia” Peter Baker and Gardiner Harris, “U.S. and India Share Sense of Unease Over China”, *The New York Times*, 27 January 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/world/us-and-india-share-sense-of-unease-over-china.html>



role in underwriting peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific” and therefore seeking to “engage more with the US, regional partners and multilateral security architectures”.¹⁷

However, as noted above, wariness of entanglements and loss of “strategic autonomy” still runs high in New Delhi, and while democracies in the Pacific generally agree on the need to at least “manage” the rise of China and defend the rule of law at sea, this coexists side by side with a desire not to provoke Beijing and a degree of mistrust concerning the real degree of commitment by other parties to any collective endeavour to prevent Chinese territorial expansion. It is a dilemma well known by experts in game theory. Saurav Jha pulled no punches in this regard, tweeting, “Does anybody seriously think that Indian participation in maritime coalition action against China will not lead to a Sino-Pak land attack?” and “Will Japan open an Eastern front, during an Indian war with China. If not, what the hell is all this quadrilateral pappi-jhappi about?” This led him to express the view that “[u]nless India and Japan agree to a formal nuclear alliance, I really do not see the point of all this bakwaas quadrilateral pappi jhappi”.¹⁸

17 David Lang “Symbolism and strategy on 26 January”, *The Strategist*, 23 January 2015. <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/symbolism-and-strategy-on-26-january/>

18 Tweets by Saurav Jha, @SJha1618, 27 January 2015.



On Tokyo and Hanoi

While Japan and India are yet to conclude a civilian nuclear agreement, there are some similarities between the two countries' policy towards the South China Sea. Among them, both countries emphasize capacity building by regional actors, Vietnam in particular, and in the case of Tokyo, the Philippines. Just like Japan, India has been working to help Vietnam strengthen her coast guard. This fits with two key aspects of Hanoi's policy. First is the need to deploy non-lethal force at sea.¹⁹ That is, Vietnam seeks the ability to confront Chinese forces (often involving a complex mixture of non-naval state vessels, military assets, trawlers, and even oil rigs) without being the first to open fire, thus prompting an escalation. Second is the continued Vietnamese emphasis on a wide range of partnerships giving Hanoi as much room for manoeuvre as possible and avoiding excessive reliance on any single actor. This policy is not that different from India's and means, for example, that both countries strive to be on good terms with both Russia and the United States at the same time.

19 A. Calvo, "Small Wars and Non-Lethal Force at Sea: The Wave of the Future? ", *Small Wars Journal*, 17 July 2014. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/small-wars-and-non-lethal-force-at-sea-the-wave-of-the-future>



For Vietnam, India is a key partner in developing offshore oil, as well as a patrol boat supplier. State-owned Garden Reach Ship Builders and Engineers (GRSE), a Kolkata-based shipyard, is supplying “at least four patrol vessels ... as part of the \$100 million credit line for military extended to Vietnam by India”, according to retired Rear Admiral AK Verma, the company's chairman and managing director. The vessels “will be about 35 meters in length, 10 meters broad and will have specialized Aluminum Hull”. This last characteristic is important, given that, as mentioned, confrontations in the South China Sea often involve ramming and other displays of non-lethal force. As a result, many of the claimants are striving to deploy trawlers and patrol boats with reinforced prows, either newly built or upgraded. GRSE is also competing to build further patrol boats for Vietnam, the company believing the country needs “at least seven more such ships”.²⁰ India has also long been involved in the training of Vietnamese military personnel,²¹ including submarine crews, with speculation last

20 Sudhi Ranjan Sen, “India to Sell Warships to Vietnam, Increase Footprints in South China Sea”, *NDTV*, 19 December 2014.
<http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/india-to-sell-warships-to-vietnam-increase-footprints-in-south-china-sea-636681>

21 “India-Vietnam Relations”, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, December 2014.
http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Vietnam_Dec2014.pdf



year that this could be extended to Sukhoi Su-30 MK pilots. According to an unnamed Indian source, “54 Vietnamese sailors per batch are undergoing the 12-month programme. Vietnam is inducting Russian Kilo-class submarines and Sukhoi fighters, both of which we operate, to strengthen its military capabilities”. Indian ships regularly visit Vietnamese ports.²² Furthermore, a report in April this year pointed out that India may also help train Vietnamese personnel in two further domains: intelligence and the fight against cyber crime.²³ Still in the cards is the possible supply to Vietnam of the joint Russia–India-developed BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, which would require a joint decision by New Delhi and Moscow.²⁴

Indo–Vietnamese relations go beyond the provision of military hardware and training. According to Carl Thayer, “India and Vietnam are expanding their strategic partnership

22 Rajat Pandit, “After submarine training, India likely to train Vietnamese pilots to fly Sukhois”, *The Times of India*, 28 October 2014.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/After-submarine-training-India-likely-to-train-Vietnamese-pilots-to-fly-Sukhois/articleshow/44954895.cms>

23 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Bolstering Act East Policy: India to train Vietnamese intelligence forces”, *The Economic Times*, 6 April 2015.

http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-04-06/news/60866058_1_indian-ocean-region-south-china-sea-pm-dung

24 Ankit Panda, “India–Vietnam Supersonic Missile Talks in ‘Advanced Stage’”, *The Diplomat*, 15 September 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/india-vietnam-hypersonic-missile-talks-in-advanced-stage/>



from energy and trade to defense and space — and beyond”, stressing that “the strategic interests of both countries markedly converged in 2014” and adding that further cooperation will be helped by the fact that Vietnam will be “country coordinator for relations between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India” for the 2015–2018 period.²⁵ Joint statements and the words of both countries' leaders seem to confirm such views. For example, the joint statement issued during Indian President Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Vietnam in September last year underlined the role of “cooperation in national defence” in the countries' “strategic partnership”, while calling for an increase in bilateral trade “to 15 billion USD by 2020” and stressing that “freedom of navigation in the East Sea must not be obstructed”, calling on parties to “practice restraint” and “avoid the threat or use of force”. The text supports the adoption of a “Code of Conduct of Parties in the East Sea”.²⁶ One month later, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited India, and in a statement to the media by his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi explained, “my

25 Carl Thayer, “India and Vietnam Advance Their Strategic Partnership”, *The Diplomat*, 11 December 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/india-and-vietnam-advance-their-strategic-partnership/>

26 “Vietnam-India Joint Statement”, *Voice of Vietnam*, 15 September 2014. <http://vovworld.vn/en-US/News/VietnamIndia-Joint-Statement/270814.vov>



government has promptly and purposefully intensified our engagement in the Asia Pacific region, which is critical to India's future. It is no surprise that Vietnam has been at the forefront of our efforts". Modi also stressed that "We have shared interest in maritime security, including freedom of navigation and commerce and peaceful settlement of maritime disputes in accordance with international law", while labelling the two countries' defence relationship as "among our most important ones". The Indian prime minister underlined that his country remained "committed to the modernization of Vietnam's defence and security forces", adding that this involved the "expansion of our training programme, which is already very substantial".²⁷

On Manila

Concerning India–Philippines relations, they are much less intense than those between New Delhi and Hanoi. As openly admitted by Indian authorities, "The relations between the two countries have been cordial, though the full potential is yet to

27 "English Rendering of the Prime Minister's Media Statement during the visit of Prime Minister of Vietnam to India", Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, 28 October 2014. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=110863>



be realized”.²⁸ Manila has pointed out that New Delhi welcomed its international arbitration bid against Beijing concerning the South China Sea, but India has done so cautiously.²⁹ Bilateral exchanges remain relatively low key, although unimpeded by any significant dispute.³⁰ In terms of naval procurement, GRSE is also competing to sell two corvettes / light frigates to the Philippines.^{31 32} However, the defense relationship is relatively low key, despite regular high-

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- 28 “India-Philippines Relations”, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, December 2014.
http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Philippines__December_2014_.pdf
- 29 Tarra Quismundo, “India backs PH arbitration bid to solve sea dispute”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 24 October 2013.
<http://globalnation.inquirer.net/88541/india-backs-ph-arbitration-bid-to-solve-sea-dispute/>
- 30 “Bilateral relations have remained conspicuously devoid of both any major issue of discord or of any significant scale of engagement during the last six decades or so” Vibhanshu Shekhar, *India-Philippines Relations: An Overview*, (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2007). “The relations between the two countries have been cordial, though the full potential is yet to be realized”, “India-Philippines Relations”, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, December 2013,
http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Philippines__December_2013_.pdf
- 31 Indronil Roychowdhury, “GRSE: Seeking new shores”, *The Financial Express*, 19 May 2015. <http://www.financialexpress.com/article/industry/companies/grse-seeking-new-shores/74164/>
- 32 There are some conflicting reports concerning the exact class being offered to Manila, for a discussion of this and other related issues, including a description of the two most likely candidates, the “Kamorta-class Corvette” and the “Brahmaputra class Frigate”, see “New Frigate Bidding Candidate: Kamorta-Class Variant?”, *rhk111's Military and Arms Page*, 31 December 2014.
<https://rhk111smilitaryandarmspage.wordpress.com/2014/12/31/new-frigate-bidding-candidate-kamorta-class-variant/>



level meetings and port visits by the Indian Navy and Coast Guard and a gradual intensification of exchanges. As evidence of the latter, India's Foreign Affairs Ministry notes that “The participation of officers of the armed forces of both countries in various specialized training courses in each other’s countries has intensified”.³³ The escalation of the Sino-Filipino dispute last year provided a further incentive for Manila to seek closer defence ties with India. The Philippines have not only publicly welcomed greater attention to the region by non-coastal states such as India, but have praised the successful peaceful resolution in July last year of the maritime border dispute between that country and Bangladesh.³⁴ The ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the Bay of Bengal dispute has also been used by Indian authorities to underline New Delhi's different approach to Beijing's, with Ambassador to the Philippines Shri Lalduhthlana Ralte saying that “Our view with that such kind of disputes [is that], the claimant countries should observe international law and norms that disputes are to

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- 33 “India-Philippines Relations”, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, December 2014. http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Philippines__December_2014_.pdf
- 34 “Philippines seeking defence ties with India after China’s moves”, *Gulf News*, 31 August 2014. <http://gulfnews.com/news/asia/philippines/philippines-seeking-defence-ties-with-india-after-china-s-moves-1.1378668>



be settled peacefully. We should allow ourselves to be subjected to international law”.

On Moscow

We should also note that as a country enjoying traditional good relations with Russia, with which India retains a strong defence procurement and coproduction relationship, perhaps New Delhi may facilitate a greater Russian role in the South China Sea. While for years Moscow's position has not attracted much academic attention, this is gradually changing, with a growing number of voices wondering whether the time may have come to play Nixon in the South China Sea, an approach with which many Indians would agree.

Conclusion

To conclude, while we can expect India to keep supporting Hanoi in the latter's quest to develop offshore oil and build up her coastguard, it is likely that India will keep her options open and retain a prudent policy towards China in a bid to prevent the latter's expansion while avoiding provocations. Furthermore, the successful maritime territorial settlement with Bangladesh has increased India's soft power, while the transfer to Vietnam of Brahmos could significantly add to Hanoi's capabilities. While tighter relations with Japan are seen on both



sides as necessary, with both New Delhi and Tokyo looking at each other when envisioning an open South China Sea, overlapping values and interests are not enough in and of themselves to guarantee real progress. This is despite the fact that the political will is clearly there and there is a widespread perception that India's role in the region is destined to grow.

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