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THE ISSUE: Maritime Asia and India's Role

Along the lines of Shangri-La Dialogue on security that is held annually in Singapore, the recently concluded Raisina Dialogue was organized by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India and the Observer Research Foundation under the theme “[Asia: Regional and Global Connectivity](#)” with the aim to explore key issues that are of common interest to the countries of the region. Among other issues deliberated at the conference, one of the important subjects that emerged in the discussions was India's maritime role and the sharp prominence of maritime politics in the Asian region in recent years. Speaking at the opening session, [India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj](#) observed that India is committed to “safe, secure, stable and shared maritime space.”

The Dialogue acknowledged the growing geopolitical and geo-strategic congruence of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, both of which were for long regarded as separate maritime spaces. Together with this, the fact that the littoral countries of Asia were increasingly becoming more aware of their maritime identities highlighted the vitality of the Indo-Pacific maritime space. In the recent years, the assertions by China in its immediate maritime area and also farther in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific has thrown up new challenges for countries like India, Australia, Vietnam and the Philippines to name a few. Some of these countries are locked in a perpetual diplomatic and at times legal battle over issues of sovereignty and utilization of maritime resources with China. For others, it has brought forth contests, the



resolution of which would shape much of regional and world politics in the years to come. Two factors can be witnessed as a response to these developments. First, countries of the region have begun to increase investments into bolstering their naval capabilities, and second, the importance of multilateral cooperative frameworks has increased as countries attempt to seek a way to address their concerns about China while at the same time reinforcing their own regional maritime positions. Participating in the Dialogue in New Delhi, [Admiral Harry B. Harris, Jr. Commander of the US Pacific Command](#) welcomed the notion of quadrilateral dialogue between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia.

In this backdrop, divergent opinions have emerged on how to respond to China's maritime connectivity initiatives. The first advocates for engagement with China and China-led initiatives like the One Belt One Road project and the other cautions against Chinese advances. India needs to develop dual facilities that serve both civilian and military purposes as China has been doing in order to strengthen its maritime capabilities, said former foreign secretary [Shyam Saran at the Dialogue](#). The [Raisina Files](#) observes that “India must balance ‘benefit and risk’ to find a middle path, a compromise that allows it to pursue two seemingly conflicting goals: ensure strategic primacy in the Indian Ocean, and regional development through economic integration of the maritime-Asia.” No matter how the maritime geopolitics of Asia unfolds, the need for India to articulate its stance strongly has become ever more critical today.

MEDIA WATCH

U.S. says it will not recognise South China Sea exclusion zone

The United States has told China it will not recognize an exclusion zone in the South China Sea and would view such a move as "destabilizing," U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work said on March 30. U.S. officials have expressed concern that an international court ruling expected in the coming weeks on a case brought by the Philippines against China over its South China Sea claims could prompt Beijing to declare an air defense identification zone, or ADIZ, in the region, as it did in the East China Sea in 2013. ([Reuters](#))

GSDF brings Yonaguni radar station online to keep closer eye on China

In a move expected to further ratchet up tensions with Beijing in the East China Sea, Tokyo brought its new radar station on Yonaguni Island in Okinawa Prefecture online March 28. The listening post on the nation's westernmost inhabited island is just over 100 km east of Taiwan and nearly 150 km south of the flash point Senkaku Islands. The permanent surveillance installation will be manned by a contingent of about 160 Ground Self-Defense Force soldiers. ([The Japan Times](#))

Philippines creates new South China Sea Task Force

On March 23, the Philippine government said that it had created a new task force to coordinate its policy on the South China Sea – which Manila calls the West Philippine Sea – amid rising tensions with China and ahead of a verdict on a case which it has filed against Beijing. The National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) will be chaired by the national security adviser and consist of undersecretaries from 15 different agencies. ([The Diplomat](#))

China sets up joint research centre on South China Sea to assert claims

China launched a joint research centre on the South China Sea in a bid to consolidate its hold over the disputed waters amid mounting pressure from the US and competing claims from a host of maritime

neighbours. The China-Southeast Asia Research Centre on the South China Sea (CSARC) is aimed at strengthening academic and institutional exchanges and promote countries in the region to jointly maintain peace and stability in the sea. ([The Economic Times](#))

Taiwan gives tour of disputed South China Sea Island in bid to boost claim

Taiwan flew international media to its largest island holding in the South China Sea on March 23 in a bid to reinforce its territorial claims in the disputed and increasingly tense region. Deputy Foreign Minister Bruce Linghu, who was leading the trip, said he intended to demonstrate that Taiping is an island capable of sustaining human habitation, and not simply a "rock" as the Philippines claims in a case brought before the Permanent Court of Arbitration. ([The Japan Times](#))

These are the new U.S. military bases near the South China Sea

The disputed South China Sea will soon see increased U.S. military activity from five Philippine bases, following the signing of a deal between Manila and Washington that will allow the Pentagon to deploy conventional forces to the Philippines for the first time in decades. The deal — called an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement — was reached on March 18 between State Department officials and the government of the Philippines, and will allow the Pentagon to use parts of five military installations: Antonio Bautista Air Base, Basa Air Base, Fort Magsaysay, Lumbia Air Base, and Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base. ([The Washington Post](#))

Indonesia protests against China in South China Sea fishing dispute

Indonesia on March 21 strongly protested against the Chinese government and demanded it clarify the actions of a Chinese coast guard vessel that reportedly had contravened law enforcement measures being conducted by Indonesian authorities against a China-flagged boat allegedly committing illegal fishing in Indonesian waters. ([The Jakarta Post](#))

China floats plans for international maritime legal centre amid territorial disputes

China will set up an "international maritime judicial centre" as it seeks to project its power at sea and

territorial tensions rise with its neighbours. The move was expected to improve Beijing's expertise in legal issues and raise its profile in international arbitration, observers said. Delivering a work report at the National People's Congress on March 13, Supreme People's Court chief Zhou Qiang said China would improve the work of its maritime courts. ([South China Morning Post](#))

China: U.S. "Pivot to Asia" the root cause of tensions in South China Sea

China has slammed the "Pivot to Asia" doctrine of the United States for the growing tensions the South China Sea, where a trilateral exercise involving New Delhi, Washington, and Tokyo is scheduled later this year. On March 4, the war of words between China and the U.S. escalated when Fu Ying, the spokesperson for the National People's Conference (NPC) countered the U.S. assertion that China was responsible for the militarisation of the South China Sea. She pointed out that instead, it was Washington's naval build up under the "Pivot to Asia" doctrine, which was the root cause of tensions in the Asia-Pacific. ([The Hindu](#))

Navy aircraft carrier group moves into contested South China Sea

The U.S. Navy has dispatched an aircraft carrier and several ships accompanying it into the South China Sea a region increasingly militarized by China. The USS John C. Stennis, the carrier, arrived in the South China Sea on March 1. It is accompanied by the cruiser USS Mobile Bay and the destroyers USS Stockdale and USS Chung-Hoon, said Navy Cmdr. Clay Doss, a spokesman for U.S. Pacific Fleet. Doss said the carrier is carrying out a routine patrol of the South China Sea, where China has in recent weeks moved Chinese fighter jets, military radar and surface-to-air missiles. The Navy will continue to appear in the South China Sea regularly, Doss said. ([The Washington Post](#))

COMMENTARIES

What is India's Policy on Maritime Asia?

- Darshana M. Baruah

Rapid developments in maritime Asia have regional analysts and scholars debating the new emerging security architecture. India and the role it can play seem to dominate much of these considerations. Calls for it to take an active security role are championed by the US, supported by Australia, Japan, Vietnam, Philippines and Singapore, among others.

How exactly is India responding to these developments and what is India's policy on maritime Asia?

South China Sea (SCS)

Although approximately 55 per cent of Indian trade transits through the SCS, it remains an area of secondary concern for the Indian Navy. Additionally, India's commercial collaborations with Vietnam on oil exploration and the Act East policy demand a certain degree of Indian presence in those waters. While the Indian Navy continues to transit through the SCS, India's approach until recently has been to refrain from making any direct comments on the issue. This is in line with its larger foreign policy to not intervene or comment on disputes between other sovereign nations.

However, the Modi Government has been vocal in calling for a peaceful resolution on the matter and has engaged interested parties, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, in discussion on the issue. The change in its approach underlines an ongoing shift in maritime policies, which may have encouraged other nations to prod India further. Washington is now encouraging India to carry out patrols to challenge Chinese unilateral claims in and around the islands. Responding to increased media reports on the topic, the Indian Ministry of Defence released a statement calling the reports "speculative" and reiterating that New Delhi will only join an international military operation under the UN flag.

For India to conduct such an operation, it would have to first undergo a stronger and bolder foreign policy shift; second, it would necessitate an inherent boost in capabilities; and third, achieve a favorable position in its border disputes with China and Pakistan. In fact, pushing India publicly to demonstrate its concerns against developments in the SCS is far-fetched with possible consequences in Indo-US maritime ties. This is not to say that India does not worry or follow developments on the issue. It does, and it monitors it carefully. However, India has not yet reached a

position where it can take a lead in challenging Chinese activities in the Western Pacific. As of now, it will continue to recognise these developments through statements, in bilateral dialogue and perhaps through stronger collaborations with Southeast Asian countries.

Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

Increasing Chinese presence in the IOR and Washington's call on its friends and allies to uphold the current security environment in the area is inadvertently increasing expectations from India to share responsibilities. This change in the IOR coincides with India's own renewed interest in playing a stronger role in the region. New Delhi has enjoyed the security arrangement under the US umbrella in the IOR. The environment, however, is changing and India is now taking active steps to reconnect with old friends and establish new relationships with the resident powers. The Modi government has reached out as far as the South Pacific Islands and is establishing a new security framework with Australia. Indonesia too is on its radar, as well as islands such as Sri Lanka, Seychelles and Mauritius.

The new maritime strategy indicates India's political will to take on larger responsibilities and play a credible role in a framework that could potentially be multipolar in nature. This would be in India's interest. In engaging with other nations of the region, it is demonstrating a will to step away from its non-alignment policy.

India continues to be primarily continental in its security strategy and will allocate most of its time and resources to issues along its northern border. Modi has most certainly injected a new level of enthusiasm in India's maritime policy, but New Delhi is still far from being a strong maritime power. However, it is a goal that has been underlined and, should India continue with the same momentum, will be achieved.

In the IOR, India is also taking a lead in non-traditional security issues such as climate change, maritime piracy, HADR and blue economy. For a nation that has been fairly inactive in regional matters under the previous government, the current pace is encouragingly welcomed by other countries in the region. Although it is only a start, India is much more likely to make subtle changes than to take a drastic approach.

The focus on India playing its role to stabilise maritime Asia also worries New Delhi in terms of the expectations it may raise among key actors. India is conscious of being dragged into any form of quasi alliance or a block that might be tasked with targeting a particular set of issues. It will pick and choose the issues it will work on and the engagements it will foster.

Multilateralism

India today is comfortable with multilateral engagements in securing and stabilising the maritime domain. However, it is more willing to engage with powers it considers of its own level with similar interest areas. India is already cooperating with Australia and Japan, with maritime issues dominating the trilateral dialogue. India is more likely to step up its presence and activities through engagements in the form of dialogues, exercises, port visits and training programs. Collaborating with countries like Japan, Australia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia fits well into India's new outlook on maritime security.

Its relationship with the US is a crucial development for the region and has certainly come a long way as appreciated by both sides. However, New Delhi continues to be concerned about moving too fast with the relationship, especially on the maritime domain. While both New Delhi and Washington are keen to develop the relationship on the maritime front, India is hesitant to extend that relationship formally to include a third or fourth party.

India should continue to engage with regional countries and do so under multilateral frameworks. A multipolar world is in New Delhi's best interests and India should demonstrate its political will to play the role of credible leader in tackling regional issues. India should also realise that it can engage without aligning with any country and that non-engagement will do more harm than good to its security interests in maritime Asia.

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Source: Australian Institute of International Affairs.

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