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India Looks East: Encircling China or Enlightened National Interest?

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Abstract

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's recent visit to Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam saw not only comprehensive trade pacts being inked but also forging of a more intimate security role for India in the region, giving a fillip to India's 'Look East' Policy. The Prime Minister's visit was at a time when China's relationship with Japan is strained. The warming of Indo-Japanese ties has been attributed to the recent frosting in Sino-Japanese relations. There is a growing perception that India with its economic and military prowess can be a counterweight to an assertive China. This paper analyses India's strategy in engaging with the region more closely, which is in its interests, while refraining from striking an adverse posture against China.

The 'China' factor loomed large in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's recent trip to Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam that aimed to integrate and engage more closely with India's Asian neighbours. New Delhi's attempt to give a fillip to its 'Look East' Policy (LEP) comes at a time when China is increasingly entangled in skirmishes in the East and South China Sea. The burgeoning ties between India and the East and Southeast Asian countries have been interpreted by some as efforts to 'encircle' China. India's keen on ensuring peace and stability in the region and providing security to the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC). New Delhi's interests are similar to those in the region, especially the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members that want India, the United States (US) and

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Russia to have stakes in the security of the region.

India's LEP, which was enunciated in the 1990s by former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, focused on economic initiatives with ASEAN. It has evolved over the years to cover political, military and regional security dimensions as well. Given the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)'s inability to enhance intra-regional trade or hedge against China's influence, New Delhi is keen on integrating more closely with the ASEAN and East Asia.² This was the primary objective behind Dr Manmohan Singh's visits to Japan and Malaysia and attending the 8th ASEAN-India Summit and the 5th East Asia Summit (EAS) in Vietnam.

In the bilateral meetings, Tokyo not only saw a significant trade pact being finalised but also growth of intimate security ties between Tokyo and New Delhi. Both sides agreed to accelerate negotiations on the civilian nuclear deal, which has been the biggest impediment in more robust bilateral ties.³ Japan was insistent on India signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) for moving forward on bilateral civil nuclear cooperation. India had maintained that its nuclear pact with the US would be the basis of its pact with Tokyo. Japan's demand was perceived as hypocritical, given India's security concerns emanating from a nuclear Pakistan aided by China, while Japan enjoyed the nuclear security umbrage of the US.⁴ The nuclear pact is crucial for India given the involvement of Japanese firms in both the US and French civilian nuclear industry.⁵ The Prime Ministers of both countries also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to simplify visa procedures, which would supplement the bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and agreed to expedite discussions on reforms in the United Nations Security Council as part of which both aspire for permanent membership.

India-Malaysia relations were on high gear as well, as Dr Singh and his Malaysian counterpart Najib Razak signed six pacts in Kuala Lumpur. Apart from the comprehensive trade agreement inked, both countries pledged to strengthen their strategic partnership in an effort to promote military ties and fight terrorism.⁶ The highlights of the joint statement on the Framework for India-Malaysia Strategic Partnership included exchange of defence ministers and military officials, joint collaboration in defence projects, supporting each other's defence exhibition, co-operation in counter-terrorism through information sharing and

² Panchali Saikia, 'Manmohan Singh in Southeast Asia', Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, www.ipcs.org/article/india/manmohan-singh-in-southeast-asia-3267.html. Accessed on 30 October 2010.

³ 'India, Japan to speed up nuclear deal talks', *Times of India* (25 October 2010), <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/6810516.cms?prtpage=1>. Accessed on 1 November 2010.

⁴ Harsh V. Pant, 'The Japan Roadblock to Nuclear Cooperation', *Wall Street Journal* (28 October 2010).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 'Joint statement on the framework for the India-Malaysia Strategic Partnership', *The Hindu* (27 October 2010), www.thehindu.com/news/national/article852420.ece. Accessed on 1 November 2010.

establishment of a bilateral Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism.

Dr Manmohan Singh finalised a civilian nuclear deal with South Korea in Hanoi, while Singapore reaffirmed economic and political ties with both Tokyo and New Delhi. At the EAS, which saw the inclusion of Russia and the US, the Indian Prime Minister hailed the first ASEAN Defense Ministers-plus-eight meeting as it contributed to building an open and transparent security architecture while calling for cooperation on various fronts to forge a wider Asian community. Dr Singh also discussed various issues with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabo, including the row over the stapled visas for Kashmiris, on the sidelines of the EAS.

India's embrace of East and Southeast Asian countries and its growing role in the EAS is seen as hedging against China's growing clout. Former Foreign Secretary of India, Shyam Saran, speaking at a seminar on 'India's Perspectives on Recent Developments in Asia-Pacific' in Singapore said 'China containment' is not a realistic option as there are areas of cooperation that are juxtaposed with the irritants in Indo-Sino relations.⁷ However, he pointed out that there is a difference in perception with regard to how the two Asian powers perceive their neighbourhood. China sees the regional powers in concentric circles of cooperation. ASEAN +3 (which functions as a coordinator between ASEAN countries and East Asian nations of China, South Korea and Japan), makes the core inner circle, which is of greater importance followed by the EAS in the outer circle. India does not accept the argument about core and periphery but seeks a more open, inclusive, loosely structured security structure, rather than a hierarchical one, he added.

Despite Dr Singh and Premier Wen Jiabao reiterating that the world is large enough for both countries to develop, China's state run newspaper, 'The People's Daily' suggested that India's LEP is possibly 'Look to encircle China policy'. India's National Security Advisor, Shivshankar Menon, had earlier stated that just as China had a presence in South Asia, India has a presence in East Asia. Implying, just as China had formed close links with Pakistan and Sri Lanka in India's neighbourhood, India sought to counter-balance Chinese presence in Southeast Asia.

Beijing's military expansion, assertive trade policies and renewed claims of strategically placed islands in the South China Sea has many countries mulling about the consequences of China's rise. The strained relations between Tokyo and Beijing over the boat collision near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea is the latest instance of the East Asian countries chafing with rising China. South Korea was frustrated earlier this year when China blocked an international condemnation of North Korea for sinking *Cheonan*-a South Korean warship. Japan sees India as the only potential regional power to act as a possible counterbalance to China. Its interest in India has also to do with India's naval capabilities as

⁷ Former Foreign Secretary of India, Shyam Saran gave a talk on 'India's Perspectives on Recent Developments in the Asia-Pacific' at the MFA Diplomatic Academy, Singapore, on 1 November 2010.

it is linked to their economic welfare, according to Ambassador Saran.

However, India's interest in the region is in building an Asian order in a way that diminishes potential confrontations with China.⁸ India will do a soft balancing between China and Southeast Asia.⁹ While it does not want to be seen as ganging up on China, it wants to forge closer ties with East and Southeast Asia. China's territorial claims in the South China Sea has also lead to warming of ties in large part between Vietnam and the US and has persuaded Japan, South Korea and Singapore to reaffirm their enthusiasm for the US security umbrella.¹⁰ Recently, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signaled clearly that US is unwilling to accept China's push for regional hegemony. To this effect, it is expected that when President Obama visits India he will envisage a bigger role for India in East Asia while maintaining a positive role with Beijing.

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⁸ 'Big on Japan', *Indian Express* (27 October 2010), www.indianexpress.com/story-print/703048. Accessed on 29 October 2010.

⁹ Pranay Sharma, 'Eastward Ho', *Outlook* magazine (25 October 2010), www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?267490. Accessed on 1 November 2010.

¹⁰ Mark Landler, Jim Yardley, Micheal Wines, 'China's Fast Rise Leads Neighbors to Join Forces', *The New York Times* (30 October 2010), www.nytimes.com/2010/10/31/world/asia/31china.html. Accessed on 1 November 2010.