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**India, United States and ASEAN:
Consonance and Dissonance**

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India, United States and ASEAN: Consonance and Dissonance

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1. Introduction

The subject “India, United States and ASEAN” needs to be approached from a broader perspective of the Asia-Pacific strategic environment in which the triangular relationship is an integral part.¹ This broader context involves an examination of three different dimensions: (a) the bilateral India-US relations and particularly the role of the changing strategic environment in South and Southeast Asia as driver in their policy calculations; (b) India’s growing engagement with East Asia through its ‘Look East Policy’(LEP); and (c) the consonance and dissonance in the triangular relationship between India, United States and East Asian countries. The three are undoubtedly inter-related, as each of these relationships impinge on the other, yet a separate treatment is necessary to get a holistic picture and to capture the intricacies and complexities of their relationships.

2. India-United States Relations

India-U.S. relations have always been very complex and witnessed numerous ups and downs. From ‘estranged democracies’ to President Bush’s characterization of ‘India: a natural strategic partner’, Indo-American relations have passed through many vicissitudes and crises reflecting geo-political and strategic imperatives of both, as well as America’s misreading of the ground realities in Asia’s politico-security environment. The pattern of Indo-American relations, particularly during the period of the Cold War, swung between periods of cooperation and antagonism reflecting the often emotional character of the relationships between the two major democracies of the world with commitment towards values of freedom and rule of law.² When Junior Bush took over the mantles of administration from President Clinton he held on to the latter’s perceptions of changing power balances in South Asia. The major determinants had been new concerns around China and international terrorism in which Pakistan’s role has been too obvious much to the dislike of Washington. There was an acceptance in Washington of New Delhi’s emerging role as a balancer in the regional power politics of Asia.³ Given the amount of attention that India got from

Washington's new administration in the first 100 days in office, a situation which happened never before, there was an obvious move towards convergence of New Delhi's and Washington's interests on a variety of issues. The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 have proved to be a defining event in U.S. relations with the rest of the world, including India. It had shifted the dynamic of U.S. foreign policy discourse and reinforced the growing solidarity and understanding between India and the United States as both suffered the scourge and jointly strove to combat the menace of international terrorism.⁴ The pace of bilateral engagement in the first two years of office of President Bush had been unprecedented and reflected the growing warmth between the two countries.

President Bush was personally focused on improving relations with India. As the complexities in Iraq and Afghanistan grew over the years with the Administration coming for censure at home and abroad, Bush required India as a success story. Some of the statistics of India also helped shape his attitude towards India, a country with more than a billion citizens and constituting one-sixth of the world's population. More than half of all Indians are under 25. India at the time had enjoyed economic growth rates of nine percent, and its economy had emerged as the world's third-largest, in terms of purchasing power parity. India's middle class exceeded almost a quarter-billion people. The lure of the Indian marketplace was complemented by the attraction of its politics. India is the world's largest democracy, and since Independence more than 60 years ago, it has enjoyed a history of freedom and liberty all but unique in the post-colonial world. The overwhelming bipartisan support for the U.S.-India Civilian Nuclear Agreement that Bush signed in 2007 reflected the consensus of American foreign policy strategists that India would be one of America's most crucial partners in the 21st century. In his visit to India in January 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell had talked about India's potential for maintaining peace and stability in the Indian Ocean and its vast periphery and the importance of the U.S. supporting such a role.⁵ In the post-Cold War era, India also views the American navy in the Indian Ocean as an ally rather than as a threat, as it maintains that security in the Indian Ocean region is best maintained by a coalition of powers, including India and the U.S. New Delhi is aware that both countries share similar political objectives such as sustaining political and economic moderation and regional stability. This is evident from the series of joint naval exercises⁶ held in the last fifteen

years as well as from the joint search, rescue and reconstruction operations carried out by the navies of India and the U.S. during the tsunami of December 2004.

After a glorious period under Bush, Indo-American relations again plunged into uncertainties, for even before he assumed office, there was uneasiness arising from his record as a Senator initiating a killer amendment to restrict nuclear fuel supply to India during consideration of the civilian-nuclear agreement, which Bush and India's supporters in Congress had to work hard to defeat.⁷ His reference during the presidential campaign, asking Bill Clinton to consider serving as a special envoy for Kashmir in an Obama administration, alarmed Indians. He also pledged, if elected, to push for U.S. ratification and global entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. This issue, more than any other, divided the United States and India in the 1990s, especially when the United States and China -- which had helped sponsor Pakistan's nuclear and missile programmes targeting India -- ganged up on India at the United Nations to press it to accept the test ban. Following Obama's election, Indian officials lobbied hard to exclude India from inclusion in Richard Holbrooke's mandate as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. India strongly criticized the Obama Administration's decision to limit H-1B visas and his policy of outsourcing jobs to India. Disarmament was another sticky issue between India and the United States, for Obama wanted India to sign both Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty [FMCT] and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty [CTBT]. India, on the other hand, wanted these to be universal and non-discriminatory.

Obama, however, tried to allay some of the fears by expressing his clear support for strengthening America's relationship with India,⁸ and corrected his earlier mistake of ignoring India by inviting Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to be the first foreign leader to be received in the White House in November 2009. He has stated without reservation that Pakistan's main threat is not India, but the growing Taliban/Al-Qaeda axis spreading in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Kashmiri terrorists. India expressed its concern that the Obama Administration's non-military aid to Pakistan would not be used for counter-insurgency, but for building up its military against India.⁹ However, Robert Blake, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, said that the Pakistani Government was increasingly focused at fighting the Taliban insurgency and expressed hope that the people of India would "support and agree with what we are trying to do". He also dismissed any concerns over a rift with India regarding United States' Af-Pak

(Afghanistan-Pakistan) policy. Referring to India and the United States as "natural allies", Blake said that the United States cannot afford to meet the strategic priorities in Pakistan and Afghanistan at "the expense of India".¹⁰ Indians generally also detected a 'tilt' towards China by the Obama team, with suggestions of a nascent G-2, comprising the United States and China, taking shape. The Administration including Secretary of State Clinton, had in the initial years shown more interest in relations with China in the hope that it would provide the financial stimulus for an economic recovery. This idea of China being part of a new global duumvirate obviously disturbed New Delhi given the history of strained relations between the two neighbours.

The scenario of bilateral relations, however, began to change within two years of the Obama Administration and with it American perspectives on Asia. China's economic strength and its contribution to the health of the international economy gave Beijing a sense of a confidence in itself and a feeling that the U.S. might be already on a decline. That led cash-rich China to flex its muscles in Asia on a number of issues resulting in tensions between Beijing and other claimants of the South China Sea, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines. It was against this backdrop of Chinese assertiveness that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched her "America is back" in Asia slogan. China's spats with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and its support for North Korea's aggressive behaviour have prompted its neighbours to ask for a greater American commitment. In July 2011, Clinton provoked a sharp Chinese response when she offered Washington's good offices for a peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute. Ever since 2010 when China began flexing its muscle the U.S., through a number of diplomatic and symbolic military steps, has begun signalling Beijing not to believe the talk of American decline. In July 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton showed up in Hanoi, China's historic rival, to tell the Chinese and ASEAN diplomats that the U.S. was back in Southeast Asia. This was followed by President Obama's visit in November 2011 to Australia, where 2,500 marines will soon be deployed to ensure Asian security. Clinton's ice-breaker visit to Beijing's long-time ally Myanmar, and Washington's strategic consultations with its old ally the Philippines following its spat with China, were other signals of this change in the American position on China.

U.S. priorities have also changed with the proposed withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan by 2014 and the growing rift with Pakistan on the issue of Islamic

terrorism as a foreign policy weapon by Islamabad, and U.S. drone attacks on the suspected Taliban that killed a number of Pakistani soldiers. As a retaliatory measure, Pakistan stopped U.S. military supplies to Afghanistan through its territory and asked for an apology, which the U.S. refused to give for quite some time and even suggested that Washington has already reached its limits of patience with Islamabad. The U.S. has now come closer to that of India's position on the issue of terrorism and the difficulties both countries face in dealing with that country- "our respective- and often deep-differences with Pakistan" --as Leon Panetta, the new U.S. Defence Secretary, remarked during his recent visit to Delhi. Not too long ago, while expressing support for India on the issue of terrorism, President Bush unfailingly lauded Pakistan as a front-line ally of the U.S. in the war on terror. Secretary Clinton apologized to Pakistan over the NATO attack on a Pakistani checkpoint near the Afghan border killing 24 Pakistani soldiers.¹¹ (CNN, 6 July 2011). Although U.S. logistical and military supplies to Afghanistan have been restored in exchange for another round of American aid, the relations between Washington and Islamabad still remain quite uneasy. As a consequence, to quote Kanwal Sibal, former foreign secretary and now a strategic analyst: "Today, both Panetta and Clinton extol India's role in Afghanistan and want India to be more active there, even in training the Afghan national security forces, an area which was considered out of bounds by Defence Secretary Gates as recently as January 2010".¹²

The U.S.-Pakistani relationship remains challenging for both despite the re-opening of Pakistani land routes to re-supply U.S. troops in Afghanistan, to quote U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.¹³ The supply route deal removed one headache, but ties are likely to remain strained by other differences. These include Pakistan's opposition to U.S. drone strikes aimed at militants on its territory and Washington's allegations that Islamabad condones, or even assists, anti-American militants. Speaking after she met Pakistan Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar, Clinton said both were encouraged they had "put the recent difficulties behind us" but she acknowledged the difficulties in the relationship in blunt terms: "I have said many times that this is a challenging but essential relationship. It remains so. And I have no reason to believe it will not continue to raise hard questions for us both," Clinton told a news conference in Tokyo, where both officials attended an Afghan donors conference.¹⁴ The United States has pressed Pakistan to pursue the Taliban and its allies, especially the Haqqani network, which it blames for a series of attacks on U.S.

targets in Afghanistan. Pakistan, in the meantime, chafes at U.S. drone strikes inside Pakistan and has long complained that the United States has overlooked its contribution to the fight against militants (scores of al Qaeda fighters were apprehended in Pakistan with American help), and the threat Pakistanis themselves face. U.S. officials view the supply routes as particularly important as the United States and its NATO partners plan to withdraw the bulk of the 128,000 soldiers they have deployed in Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

3. India as the Lynchpin in America's Asia Pivot

It is in this context of the changing priorities of U.S. foreign policy in Asia that the recent tour of its defence secretary to Singapore, Vietnam and India gains salience. Panetta described enhanced defence cooperation with India as "a linchpin" of the new strategy, and offered much closer defence cooperation (as in joint development of weapons, which India already does with Russia and Israel) -- an American embrace that went beyond all previous offers, and tied in with the "re-balancing" of U.S. forces in Asia: putting 60 per cent of U.S. naval assets in the Asia-Pacific region as against the current level of 50 per cent. According to some observers, the U.S. now sees India as having the potential to become its most important partner in a developing Asian security scenario that looks increasingly like a China containment policy.¹⁵ To quote Nayan Chanda, the renowned Indian journalist and now the Director of Yale Center for Globalization: "Panetta's maiden visit to India to promote New Delhi as playing "a decisive role in shaping the security and prosperity of the 21st century" too has an unmistakable subtext of countering China".¹⁶ The new strategy aims to restore a U.S. military presence across the Asia-Pacific region, but not by building permanent bases or deploying large forces. Instead, Panetta emphasized, the United seeks to build up the militaries of friendly governments with arms sales and joint training with U.S. forces deployed on short rotations. The message was meant to reassure Indian officials, who are eager to modernize their armed forces but not to appear too cosy with Washington. Panetta remarked in a speech at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA, New Delhi): "Our vision is a peaceful Indian Ocean region supported by growing Indian capabilities. America will do its part ... but the fundamental challenge is to develop India's capabilities so it can respond to challenges".¹⁷

U.S. officials have said publicly that the new strategy is not aimed at confronting China, but Panetta's trip took him to India and Vietnam, two of China's historic rivals. Both nations have border and territorial disputes with Beijing and concerns about its expanding military might. Senior officials travelling with Panetta said they hoped India would assume a greater role in training Afghan army and police forces as the U.S. and its allies withdraw combat troops from Afghanistan over the next 2 1/2 years. India brings a small number of Afghan officers to its military academies for instruction, but it has refrained from sending Indian troops to Afghanistan, even as trainers. The overall message Panetta brought to Asia is that the so-called U.S. "pivot to Asia" is not an empty promise. At the annual Shangri-La Dialogue (defence ministers' meeting in Singapore), he announced the planned boost to U.S. naval presence in Asia to 60% (including six aircraft carriers) of the entire fleet by 2020. He offered the usual assurances that the increase had nothing to do with China, but the Chinese were not buying it. Beijing kept its senior military officers away from the meeting and derided the claim that China was not the target of America's military expansion. The third India-U.S. strategic dialogue took place in Washington, D.C. within a few days of Panetta's visit to India and generated a multi-dimensional array of bilateral cooperation agreements, favourable atmospherics and genuine mutual understanding. On the eve of the talks, the Obama administration exempted India from the unilateral sanctions against Iran, thus skirting a major irritant between the two countries. Delhi, for its part, addressed Washington's concern that American companies are being left out of the expanding civilian nuclear energy market in India, by facilitating formal negotiations between the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd.(NPCIL) and Westinghouse on building a nuclear power station in Gujarat. The two sides also explored prospects for reducing trade barriers and strengthening cooperation on counter-terrorism, intelligence-sharing, non-proliferation, science and technology, agriculture and education, among others. Despite having serious concerns about China's hegemonic ambitions and actions in Asia, India will not gang up against China by allying with the U.S. India and the United States do share some strategic goals but not all, and sometimes are at variance with each other owing to different geographies. India, however, shares U.S. concerns about China's neo-colonial stance to deny access to sea lanes in the South China Sea. India and the United States need to have a mature strategic relationship with mutual understanding, shared interest and respect for each other's concerns.

U.S. Defence Secretary Leon Panetta's visit to India on June 5-6 and the third round of the India-U.S. Strategic Dialogue in Washington on June 13, 2011 have received much commentary on the direction of India-U.S. relations reflecting the preferences of the Indian strategic thinkers, which can be divided into three different categories. Those strongly supportive of close India-U.S. ties not only see in these two exchanges the re-assertion of the will of both governments to deepen their strategic partnership and remove the growing impression that the relationship is adrift, but also feel that engagements with the United States need to be upgraded to convey a message to China, the principal threat to India's security and territorial integrity. This kind of thinking is reflected in a recent commentary by a former senior naval admiral, Premvir Das, who suggested that "India does not really mind a unipolar world in which the U.S. is the principal actor but, in Asia, it definitely needs to be a player. Yet, to get there, it needs a helping hand and the country best placed to provide it, in every way, military, political and economic, is the U.S. China may be our largest trading partner but the quality of that trade bears no comparison with what we have with countries of the western hemisphere. In military technology, China lags way behind the U.S. Politically, America is far ahead in its ability to influence the conduct of others, which is what power is all about. This scenario is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Our strategy should be to see how we can exploit this environment to our advantage without compromising on our goal of becoming one of the major powers in Asia as also one capable of playing a legitimate role in global affairs".¹⁸

Strategic thinkers who belong to the second category are those who are extremely suspicious of U.S. intentions and policies in South and Southeast Asia, for ideological or other reasons, and are opposed to U.S. efforts to enlist India as a partner in furthering its new Asia-Pacific strategy aimed at countering a potential threat from China.¹⁹ Their feeling is that, in response to U.S. overtures, India has shown unwillingness to become a pawn in America's anti-China strategy and has indicated it will preserve its strategic autonomy, as evident from the response of senior Indian officials, including Defence Minister A.K. Antony. In two days of talks, Antony made it clear that India will continue to set its own course on U.S. national security priorities, including isolating Iran and building up Afghanistan's military forces, sometimes in tandem with Washington and sometimes not. Panetta urged India to build a closer military relationship with the United States, but Indian leaders appeared more interested in buying U.S. weapons than in aligning strategically with

Washington. Antony indirectly conveyed to Panetta that the U.S. needed to recalibrate or rethink the policy. He emphasized there was a "need to strengthen the multilateral security architecture" in the Asia-Pacific and that it must "move at a pace comfortable to all countries concerned".²⁰ He, however, did say India fully supported "unhindered freedom of navigation in international waters for all", given its own bitter experience of being needled by China in the contentious South China Sea. But in another indication of India not being supportive of the U.S. actively jumping into the fray in the South China Sea where China is jostling with the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei on territorial claims, Antony said it was "desirable" that the "parties concerned themselves should settle contentious matters in accordance with international laws".²¹ India faces a choice: be a cog in the wheel of the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy or be a wheel by itself with its own dynamics. The choice is going to be rather easy for the Indian policy-makers to make. American offer can work to India's advantage in many respects – military modernization, liberalization of the regime for transfer of military technology to India, the possibility of advanced forms of defence cooperation in terms of joint design and co-production of weapons, and finally of the intensification of military exercises with the U.S.²²

There is the third category of strategic analysts who favour improved ties with the U.S., but who are also cautious against "taking the U.S. rhetoric about India -- overblown at times -- at its face value".²³ They believe that Panetta's visit and the Clinton-Krishna dialogue are part of a desirable process of drawing the two countries closer through engagement in diverse domains. India, in their view, is right to want to preserve its strategic autonomy as much as possible, but it should leverage a stronger India-U.S. entente in the making to its geopolitical advantage. According to this group of thinkers, it is necessary to take a balanced, pragmatic view of India's relationship with the U.S., neither be burdened too much by past distrust nor feel unduly that it can now be fully trusted in the future. All countries act primarily in their own interest, and the United States and India are no different. There are good reasons to welcome the U.S. initiatives, but also to throw cold water on excessive expectations. First, no Asian country (India included) will want to get into a U.S. embrace that risks annoying China. India's primary dispute with China is with regard to the land border. While Washington can sell India its weapons (light howitzers and heavy transport aircraft are already on order) and in general help to bolster its defence capabilities, it can do little if fighting erupts in Ladakh or Arunachal Pradesh; India will be on its

own, and will, therefore, consider it important to avoid risking conflict by continuing to project a policy of strategic autonomy. India should cooperate with the U.S. by all means and in every way possible, but not at the expense of the relationship with China. Kanwal Sibal puts it succinctly: “We should, of course, continue our engagement with China bilaterally and in regional and international forums. Our relationship with the U.S. and China are not exclusive. We should, however, not forget that our real adversary is China not the U.S. China claims our territory, the U.S. our partnership. We can tactically send reassuring signals to China, even as we become “enlightened” partners with the U.S., but we need not equate our relations with the U.S. with those with China to preserve our strategic autonomy”.²⁴

With the Asia-Pacific region emerging as the theatre of escalating U.S.-China rivalry, India at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in the same week of Panetta’ visit to India found itself in a rare and enviable situation: of being a swing state and wooed by the competing giants. Chinese Vice-Premier Li Keqiang told Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna that Sino-Indian ties would be the most important bilateral relationship in the 21st century.²⁵ Li’s remark to Krishna, on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Beijing, is significant not just because he is slated to take over as China’s premier from Wen Jiabao after the transition process commencing in July 2012 is completed. Significantly, it also virtually echoed U.S. President Barack Obama’s statement earlier to the Indian Parliament terming the ties between the two democracies as the “defining partnership of the 21st century”. China, which after the over 5,000-km Agni-V missile test had sniggered at India for harbouring super-power ambitions, seems to have switched to a conciliatory tone and, suddenly, respectful of New Delhi’s strategic autonomy. The tactic found expression in the People’s Daily which gushingly proclaimed that India with an independent foreign policy could not be manipulated, even as it slammed the new U.S. strategy. New Delhi also received a tantalizing overture from China.²⁶ According to the Indian briefings, the Chinese Vice-Premier Le Keqiang pledged to the visiting Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna in Beijing to “work together with India to maintain strategic communication, improve political mutual trust, and appropriately address disputes and safeguard the peace and tranquillity in border areas to advance the bilateral relationship to a new phase”. The two sides also explored prospects for reducing trade barriers and strengthening cooperation on counter-terrorism, intelligence-sharing, non-proliferation, science and technology, agriculture and education, among others.

Krishna on his part made a strong pitch for India's full membership in the resource-rich SCO in return. He also took advantage of the situation and reciprocated China's gestures by pointing out the importance of SCO as a regional platform for addressing regional issues, and in the process asserting India's own strategic autonomy. Addressing the SCO summit meeting on 7th June 2012, Krishna said, "The most important security challenge we face today relates to Afghanistan, which lies in the heart of Asia and is a bridge, connecting not just central and South Asia but also Eurasia and the Middle East. The SCO provides a promising alternative regional platform to discuss the rapidly changing Afghan situation".²⁷ Demonstrating intelligent diplomacy, India is trying to strategically place itself between the regional competition of the United States and China, rather than overtly aligning with either side. India has to find the middle ground between its prosperous relationship with the United States and the growing threat of China's regional power.

4. India's Growing Engagement with ASEAN and East Asia

The interactions between India and ASEAN have resulted in considerably greater integration with the rest of Asia than is commonly realized or acknowledged. Beginning with its sectoral dialogue partnership with ASEAN, it has graduated itself first to full dialogue partnership with its attendant membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), to the status of ASEAN+1 (India) summit, founding membership of East Asia Summit (EAS), and finally participation in the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM)+8. The free trade agreements with Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia, Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and one more in the offing with Thailand, now provide substantive economic linkages to India with the region. A major manifestation of the growing understanding and the importance of India-ASEAN ties is the number of high level visits that their leaders have undertaken over the last fifteen years. India is going to celebrate at the end of this year (2012) its 20-year engagement with ASEAN. Its participation in different mechanisms of ASEAN has enabled India not only to initiate greater economic interactions with the region, but also provided its political leadership opportunity to regularly interact with ASEAN leaders and policy-makers and to develop common approaches to many issues of regional and international importance.

As a result, the collaboration between India and ASEAN has transcended the realm of functional cooperation to cover political and security dimensions. India now participates in a series of consultative meetings with ASEAN under the ASEAN-India dialogue relations, which include summits, ministerial meetings, senior officials meetings and meetings at experts level, as well as through dialogue and cooperation frameworks initiated by ASEAN, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMCs) 10+1, the East Asia Summit (EAS), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) – all of which help contribute to enhancing regional dialogue and accelerating regional integration. The relationship was further elevated with the convening of the ASEAN-India Summit in 2002 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.²⁸ It was considered an acknowledgement of India's emergence as a key player in the Asia-Pacific Region and the strong commitment and valuable contribution India has made and is making to regional peace, stability and prosperity.²⁹ Since then the ASEAN-India Summit has been held annually. All these took place in a decade, which clearly signifies the importance of the dialogue partnership to ASEAN and India, and the progress made to date.

In October 2003 during the 2nd ASEAN-India Summit in Bali, Indonesia, India acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) and demonstrated its commitment to the organization and their shared interest in ensuring peace, security, stability and development in Southeast Asia. On the same occasion, India and ASEAN also signed a Joint Declaration for Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, symbolising concrete initiatives to step up cooperation in the fight against terrorism. As a next step, the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity was signed in November 2004, envisaging strengthening of “cooperation in the UN and multilateral fora” and focusing on “the development of regional infrastructure and intra-regional communication links to facilitate greater movement of goods and people, and cooperation in science and technology”. The declaration was a demonstration of the will and readiness of both sides to elevate the partnership to a higher strategic level to include social, cultural and development cooperation, besides the political, economic and security aspects. A number of actions have already been taken to implement the Declaration in the light of the global financial crisis and evolving political and economic landscape. India has been assisting ASEAN in bridging the development gaps among its lesser developed

members of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) through various projects such as Entrepreneurship Development Centres (EDC) and Centres for English Language Training (CELT). India's leadership in the ICT, pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and traditional medicines sectors has been put to use for greater engagement and collaboration through technology transfer and know-how. In December 2005, India attended the first East Asia Summit (EAS, namely, ASEAN Plus Six) held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, along with the ASEAN countries and regional powers including China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

5. India's Naval Diplomacy in Asia Pacific

India's growing naval activities in the Indian Ocean, cited as a "legitimate area of interest" in the Indian Maritime Doctrine of 2004 and further developed in December 2006 by then-Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Suresh Mehta, expanded the conceptual construct of India's "greater strategic neighbourhood" to include potential sources of oil and gas imports located across the globe—from Venezuela to the Sakhalin Islands. This new framework underscored the priorities the Indian Navy places on energy security and sea-lane protection. The 2007 Indian Maritime Strategy identified the northern Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, the sea lanes criss-crossing the ocean, and the 'narrow seas' providing access to it as 'primary areas' of interest. India considers the South China Sea (alongside other bodies of water) an outer, or 'secondary', theatre for the exercise of sea power. Areas of secondary interest as stated in the Maritime Strategy "will come in where there is a direct connection with areas of primary interest, or where they impinge on the deployment of future maritime forces".³⁰ The South China Sea, therefore, is naturally a part of its maritime sphere and strategy. It adjoins primary zones of interest in the Malacca Straits and the Bay of Bengal. India's Look East thrust involving ASEAN and the 'rimland' states farther a field – like Japan and South Korea – has been a part and parcel of the maritime strategy and naval diplomacy. India's naval flotillas streaming into Asian ports -- dropping anchor at Limpopo to showcase Indian-designed missile destroyers, holding annual joint exercises in the Andaman Sea with the smaller littoral navies, exercising offshore during extended "goodwill" tours with the host country's naval vessels and, generally, establishing a presence in proximal as well as distant seas -- has been a phenomenon in recent years. In combating piracy in the Malacca Straits, the Indian navy has been taking an active role along with the navies of the littoral states.³¹

India, together with Japan and other ASEAN countries have a high stake in the safety of the sea lanes of communication, as a major part of their trade passes through them and any disturbance will affect their economies to a considerable extent. India has a significant naval build up at the Andaman and Nicobar islands, and has created a special Far Eastern Naval Command (FENC) based on these Islands, as they are India's door to the East and "to the Malacca Strait which is a 'throat channel' for our neighbouring Southeast Asia as well as Far East Asia". Chinese scholars note that India has repeatedly declared that it has security interests in the Malacca Straits, and its naval strategy stresses on maintaining its 'legitimate interests' from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Straits". In 2000, the Indian Navy had sent warships, tankers and submarines to Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam for bilateral exercises and as gestures of goodwill.³² The holding of these exercises in the South China Sea, which China claims to be its territory, added a different dimension to India's naval activism. Not surprisingly, Beijing was wary of India's Look East policy and has protested India's joint naval exercises with the United States, Japan, Vietnam and Singapore in the East China and South China Seas. Beijing believed all this had been encouraged by Japan and the U.S. to contain China. Whereas the declared strategic goal of the Indian naval force in the South China Sea is to "secure the peace and stability in Southeast Asia, ensuring that this region will not be under the influence and control of any big power",³³ some Chinese strategic analysts believed this to be India's strategy of regional deterrence seeking to play a greater role beyond South Asia. Zhang Guihong claims that "one of the main motives for Indian navy force entering into Southeast Asia and South China Sea is to curb China's growing military influence in this region, containing China in terms of security, so as to raise its own international status and strengthen the negotiating position in its competition with China".³⁴

Beijing is decidedly uncomfortable with India's growing engagement in Asia Pacific and the role the countries in the region are willing to offer it in regional economic and strategic issues. It has derided U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's calls to India, made in Chennai last year (2011), to play a greater role in East Asia, when she said: "India's leadership has the potential to positively shape the future of the Asia-Pacific... and we encourage you not just to look east, but continue to engage and act east as well".³⁵ The Chinese took objections to the 2010 "Quadrennial Defense Review," published by the Pentagon, which described India "as a net

provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond". Much to China's chagrin, India's naval activism has encouraged countries ranging from South Korea and Japan to Vietnam and Indonesia to view India as a possible counterweight to future China in Southeast Asia. It is this common concern over China's military growth, supported by a strong economy that provides a common ground for security cooperation between Japan and India. Tokyo and new Delhi have undertaken aggressive diplomatic initiatives to win over medium and small states in Asia and to neutralize Chinese influence by way of engagement. Indian engagement with Myanmar is directed towards that objective. The strategic understanding that is in the making between India and the United States reflects Washington's willingness to accord India a role to emerge as a proactive player in the Asian balance of power for checkmating China. The U.S. strategic partners and allies such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and in future perhaps Vietnam too, are evolving a special relationship with India in conformity with the overall U.S. strategic interests in Asia. China is therefore clawing for influence, just as India is. For Beijing, this means ensuring a Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean; and for New Delhi, an Indian naval presence in the Pacific Ocean becomes critical for strategic deterrence against Beijing.

6. India, United States and ASEAN: Consonance and Dissonance

The United States has a shared interest with ASEAN in promoting balance, peace, and prosperity in Asia, and considers ASEAN-India relations a "linchpin" in its rebalancing toward Asia. Secretary Clinton has called India's Look East policy "essential for the integration of the Asia-Pacific region" and expressed faith that Indian leadership, democratic values, and economic prosperity will produce positive spillover effects that extend into Southeast Asia. To that end, the United States has become more proactive and serious about regional architecture, deepening ties with allies, expanding new strategic partnerships and seeing India more engaged. Encouraging India to focus on Asia has now become a shared interest of the United States, ASEAN, and other Asian powers. In addition, U.S. officials have repeatedly encouraged New Delhi in recent years "not just to look East, but to engage East and act East" amid the uncertainty surrounding China's rise. Southeast Asia has also figured prominently in discussions between the United States and India in the annual regional dialogue on the Asia Pacific set up in 2008. In the fifth dialogue held in April 2012, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Asia and the Pacific, Kurt Campbell and

Joint Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, Gautam Bambawale had detailed discussions on the South China Sea, Myanmar, and ASEAN-led institutions like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The United States and India intend to deepen cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, including in multilateral forums such as ARF, EAS, and the ADMM+. They also reaffirmed their support for a balanced and inclusive regional architecture and to pursue trilateral dialogue between Japan, India, and the United States, which they view as a valuable forum to discuss issues of mutual interest. From managing counter-piracy and natural disasters to fostering trade and commerce, the strategic congruity enjoyed by the United States and India in the Asia-Pacific will contribute to peace and stability of the region. India clearly understands the benefits of deeper engagement in Asia via its “Look East” policy. India wants to engage the Asia-Pacific region and does share some interests with the United States and ASEAN countries—such as preserving freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, constructing a norms-based framework of regional cooperation in Asia, and ensuring a more connected and capable ASEAN. India’s history of non-alignment and its growing economic dependence on China means it is wary of being dragged into any sort of Sino-American rivalry. Events such as India’s sudden withdrawal from joint oil exploration with Vietnam in the South China Sea in June 2012, after previously boldly asserting its legal claims there, shows India’s caution in taking a role as a major balancing power in the Asia-Pacific.

Even the small countries of Southeast Asia, which have traditionally welcomed a U.S. security blanket, and which have territorial disputes with China, look over their shoulders at Beijing when they talk to Washington. China has already become their largest trading partner, replacing the United States; it could eventually overtake the U.S. as the leading naval power in the region. The U.S. has about 100 major warships in the region; that number will not climb beyond 110 even after the “re-balancing” that is proposed. China, meanwhile, is expected to go from 86 major warships in 2009 to 106 by 2020, and these will be operating from nearer their bases. One ship can, of course, be very different from another in capability, but no Asian country is going to be immune to the fact of growing Chinese naval power at a time when the U.S. defence budget is shrinking. Indeed, some East Asian countries think the U.S. is making too much of its “re-balancing”. No East Asian country will relish being asked to choose between Beijing and Washington, even though it may be wary of China’s growing power.

There is another reason why neither India nor ASEAN want to join the U.S. bandwagon wholeheartedly. The U.S. remains the leading global power but its economy is in trouble and its military is overstretched. Other powers have risen to contest the domination of the West, economically to begin with and now even militarily. China represents this development most palpably. India's own international profile has changed with economic growth, market size, entrepreneurial talent, advances in the knowledge economy, and human resources. Its role in addressing global challenges such as climate change, energy and food security, financial stability, and international trade negotiations is now considered an important pillar of the global system. While China is decidedly annoyed by Washington's new profile, those in Asia Panetta sought to offer protection wondered if the U.S. would have the means to carry out its projects. Panetta reassured the Singapore audience that the Pentagon did have funds in the five-year budget plan to meet its targets. But most are not convinced. More importantly, the economies of most of the regional countries are so closely tied to China that no one would dare to risk Beijing's wrath by taking sides in a big power conflict — even if only by providing access and services to the U.S. navy. Even Vietnam, which wants to show off its growing warm relations with the U.S., nevertheless, chooses to wink at China over its shoulder. To reassure China that it is not in bed with the Americans, Hanoi strenuously insists that its defence cooperation is in the civilian and humanitarian domain. Even though Cam Ranh Bay is known as a massive former American air-naval base, Vietnam points out that only non-combatant U.S. navy vessels are allowed to call at the civilian side of the port for servicing. Of course, after long insisting on protecting its sovereignty, Vietnam did allow Soviet aircraft and ships to base in Cam Ranh Bay after the Chinese invasion of 1979. Vietnam could similarly change its policy towards the U.S. navy in the event of open hostilities with China.

7. Conclusion

ASEAN countries want to benefit from the growing economic dynamism of their large neighbours China and India, but as their economic interdependence with these regional giants expands, they do not want to be dominated by either of the two. The core of ASEAN's security policy in this region is to maintain its autonomy as an independent regional group, and avoid any big power from dominating the security situation there. With Beijing's growing assertiveness in their 'core interests',

particularly in South China Sea, in which some of their own members have claims, ASEAN is becoming increasingly wary of the longer-term intentions of China. From its strategy of “balance of powers”, ASEAN hopes that big powers from outside this region could play some role on the South China Sea issue. This policy provides India with a good opportunity to take part in the security mechanism in the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN countries perceive India to be benign since they do not have any territorial conflicts with it, but less engaged in Asia and more focused on domestic issues and Pakistan. While desiring engagement, balance, and even commercial competition between the world’s largest economies, ASEAN wants to avoid a paradigm shift in which it finds itself at the centre of great power confrontation. This more desirable scenario accords with the Indian approach to the region.

It is important to point out that neither ASEAN nor India has any interest in containing China, but “are motivated instead to develop a regional framework that can accommodate and provide enough ballast to help smooth the edges of an ascendant China so that it will focus on growth while respecting the sovereignty of its neighbours and vital “public goods” such as the sea lanes of communications (SLOCs)”.³⁶ ASEAN generally views Indian engagement as less strategically focused and more commercial in nature than China’s. This is a posture the region would have been quite comfortable with had it not been concerned about China’s intentions and muscle-flexing since 2010. Given heightened anxieties about China, there is interest among some ASEAN countries in promoting a more proactive Indian engagement in Southeast Asia’s regional architecture.

Notes

¹ This paper was presented at a seminar jointly organized by the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), the Centre for American Studies (KAMERA) in the Institute of Occidental Studies (IKON), and the Malaysian Association for American Studies (MAAS). The Seminar was held in Sudut Wacana, ATMA Building, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi on 19 July 2012.

² For a concise account of Indo-American relations from independence until the beginning of the Obama administration, see, Baladas Ghoshal, “*Swing of the Pendulum: Vicissitudes of India-United States Relations*”, *IKON Occasional Paper Series (IOPS)*: 4/2009, published by the Institute of Occidental Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, November 2009.

³ While some Indians were convinced of India's potential to emerge as a countervailing force in the security calculus of Asia, particularly with the United States promoting it as a major power, others were skeptical. *The Hindu* an influential Indian daily doubted whether at that stage India was capable and equipped either to be a strategic counterpoise to China or be an influential factor in U.S.-Soviet equations. Edit; *The Hindu*, 10 April 2001.

⁴ Following the attack against the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 and the hijacking of an Indian Airlines aircraft to Kandahar in December 1999, India and the United States set up a Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism at the senior officials level.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Apart from the joint naval exercises, India also has institutional arrangement for joint military exercise and training. Analysts say the U.S. is eager to deepen military ties with India to learn some of the counterinsurgency methods India's military has developed during its long battle against separatists in Kashmir. The Americans also want India's large navy to help patrol the seas for terrorists and pirates, analysts say. The troops are on the island for the biggest joint drills the Indian and U.S. armies have had to date, the latest sign of growing military relations between the two nuclear powers. See, Audrey McAvoy, "Indian troops training with U.S. Army in Hawaii :Countries increase military ties," *Associated Press*, 20 September 2006.

⁷ On Indian expectations from the Obama administration, see C. Raja Mohan, "India's Quest for Continuity in the Face of Change," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31. No. 4, pp.143-153.

⁸ "The United States sees India as a global power and a critical partner in helping to deal with the challenges of the 21st century — everything from climate change to poverty to trade to science and innovation," Obama told reporters in London before his meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of the G20 summit April 2. Quoted in *Times of India*, 3 April 2009.

⁹ Meera Shankar, India's Ambassador to the United States, quoted in *The Hindu*, 1 June 2009.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Hindustan Times*, 29 June 2009

¹¹ CNN, 6 July 2011: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/06/world/asia/pakistan-dron-attack>

¹² Kanwal Sibal, "Ties with China, US, not Exclusive," *Mail Today*, 26 June 2012, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2164532/KANWAL-SIBAL-Ties-China-U-S-exclusive.html>

¹³ *Japan Times*, 8 July 2012

¹⁴ Ibid. Clinton delivered the U.S. apology, long sought by Pakistan, in a telephone conversation with Khar this week. The two pledged to improve relations, which took a nosedive after U.S. forces killed Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan on 2nd May 2011.

¹⁵ Quoted in an editorial “An American Embrace: Panetta’s Overtures Welcome, but not at China’s Expense,” *Business Standard*, 11 June 2012

¹⁶ Nayan Chanda, “US Pivot towards Asia not Tenable,” *Times of India*, 9 June 2012

¹⁷ Quoted in “India not Sold on Closer Military Ties with US”, *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 2012, accessed on 15 June 2012.

¹⁸ Premvir Das, “US-India Defence Links: the Next Level,” *Business Standard*, 17 June 2012.

¹⁹ For a specimen of such thinking, see, M.K. Bhadrakumar, “Panetta’s Visit works to India’s Advantage,” *Russia and India Report* 7 June 2012 , available at http://indrus.in/articles/2012/06/07/panettas_visit_works_to_indias_advantage_15929.html; Vijay Prashad, “India: the US doormat into Asia,” *Asia Times Online*, 19 June 2012, accessed on 20 June 2012.

²⁰ *Times of India*, 6 June 2012, accessed on 20 June 2012.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ironically, the doubts about the effectiveness of the U.S. military presence in the region could work to America’s advantage, as countries all the way from Japan to India take greater responsibility for their own security. Across the region, countries are busy rearming and bolstering defence spending, all of them responding to growing Chinese military capability and pressure. The end result could be a more effective containment of China’s territorial expansionism than anything that the U.S. could hope to do on its own. *Business Standard*, 12 June 2012.

²³ Kanwal Sibal, “Ties with China, US not Exclusive”, *Mail Today*, 26 June 2012, accessed on 30 June 2012.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *Times of India*, 8 June 2012, accessed on 20 June 2012. On an excellent analysis on India’s enviable position as a swing state, see, Sandy Gordon, “India: which way will the ‘swing state’ swing?”, *East Asia Forum*, 24 June 2012. Also available at <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/06/24/india-which-way-will-the-swing-state-swing/>

²⁶ Quoted in Ibid., 7 June 2012.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ In early November 2000, during Indian President K.R. Narayanan's visit to Singapore, the first by an Indian president in three decades, Singapore promised to propose that India become one of ASEAN's four summit partners along with Japan, China, and South Korea. The lack of consensus within ASEAN toward the proposal was evident in Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's caveat that he would pursue the matter "without being aggressive". See, Satu Limaye, "India-East Asia Relations: Weakest Link, but not Good Bye", available at csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/0204qindia_easia.pdf

²⁹ While characterizing the first ASEAN-India summit in November 2002 as a 'high point' one analyst says: "However, India is not included in the ASEAN Plus Three grouping that includes China, Japan, and South Korea as ASEAN's partners. Instead India is tacked on to ASEAN in a "Plus One" relationship. This formulation, too, speaks to the "weakest link" characterization of India's role relative to ASEAN's other Asian partners". Ibid.

³⁰ *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* Integrated Headquarters Ministry of Defence (Navy) 2007. pp.59-61

³¹ An example of India's naval activism was the recovery in 1999 of a Japanese ship, MV Alondra Rainbow, from the pirates through its coordinated networking with international maritime agencies. The recovery of the ship supported the idea of joint patrolling in the region to deal effectively with such incidences.

³² Atul Aneja, 'India, Vietnam partners in safeguarding sea lanes': www.thehindu.com/2000/04/15/stories/0215000c

³³ G.V.C. Naidu, *Indian Navy and Southeast Asia*, Knowledge World, New Delhi, 2000, p. 192.

³⁴ Zhang Guihong, "Competition and Cooperation: Sino-India's Relations in Regional Perspectives," *Contemporary Asia-Pacific*, Beijing, December 2006., quoted in Yang Dali & Zhao Hong, "The Rise of India: China's Perspectives and Responses", op. cit.

³⁵ Quoted in *Times of India*, 20 July 2011.

³⁶ Ernest Z. Bower, "Enter the Elephant: India is Part of Asia", *Southeast Asia from the corner of 18th and K Streets*, Vol.2, 9 February 2011, available at: <http://csis.org/publication/enter-elephant-india-part-asia>

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