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East Asian Security: India's Rising Profile

*C. Raja Mohan**

30 July 2007

AS THE 14th conclave of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) convenes in Manila this week, its search for a collective security framework is being rapidly overtaken by a series of new bilateral and multilateral security arrangements. India is a surprising new actor in the unfolding security politics in East Asia, marked by China's growing power, Japan's new assertiveness, and the revitalisation of United States military alliances. The rise of India is no longer an abstract notion, but is beginning to manifest itself in the redefinition of Asian geopolitics.

India's return to the mainstream

India is simultaneously expanding its participation in multilateral security initiatives as well as deepening its bilateral defence cooperation with great powers like the US and Japan as well as key regional actors like Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore. Long viewed as marginal to the region, India, since the mid 1990s, has focused on returning to the East Asian mainstream. New Delhi's much talked about Look East policy focused initially on expanding economic cooperation and becoming part of the region's dynamic multilateralism. With the exception of the forum for Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), India is now a member of all the region's institutions including the East Asia Summit (EAS).

If security initiatives were conspicuous by their absence in the first phase of India's Look East policy, they have begun to acquire a new importance in the second phase that had begun in the middle of this decade. Although India initiated a range of bilateral and multilateral military exercises with global and regional players from the early 1990s, it was the conclusion of a bilateral defence cooperation agreement with Singapore in 2004 that launched vigorous security diplomacy in the region. At the end of 2004, Indian Navy was quick to respond, on its own, to the tsunami disaster and later joined the navies of the US, Japan and Australia to provide relief in Southeast Asia. In 2005, the Indian Aircraft carrier, *INS Viraat*, arrived for the first time in the ports of Southeast Asia — Singapore, Jakarta in Indonesia and Klang in Malaysia.

India's military diplomacy

The intensity of India's current military diplomacy can be gauged from the range of initiatives since the last annual ARF meeting in Kuala Lumpur in July 2006. At the end of 2006, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh travelled to Tokyo to proclaim "a strategic partnership", with a strong defence component, with Japan. Mr. Singh also endorsed the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's initiative for political consultations among "like-minded" countries in Asia-Pacific (read the US, Japan, Australia and India.)

Few observers, however, had expected this initiative to gather momentum. In April 2007, India conducted its first trilateral naval exercises with the US and Japan. That this exercise took place off

Guam suggested India's increasing naval profile in the East Asian waters. New Delhi, however, took care to reassure China that its expanding military diplomacy was not targeted at China. Within days after the trilateral exercise with the US and Japan, an Indian naval contingent travelled to China and Russia for separate bilateral exercises.

In May 2007, senior officials from the US, Japan, Australia and India met for the first time, on the margins of an ARF meeting in Manila, to formally launch the so-called "democratic quad" in Asia. As Beijing lodged formal protests, all the four capitals reaffirmed that the consultations were not directed against China and were limited to a few issues of common concern.

In June 2007, India completed its first-ever purchase of a naval ship from the US, the *USS Trenton*. Renamed *INS Jalashwa*, the ship is now the second largest in the Indian Navy. It is no secret that the landing platform dock (LPD) ship increases India's ability to conduct amphibious operations far from its shores. India now plans to acquire a second ship in the same class from the US. Although the Indian Navy has always been among the strongest in the region, its ability to project power has begun to acquire a new edge. In the same month, the Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee was in Indonesia to reaffirm New Delhi's strong commitment for an expansion of security cooperation with Jakarta. The Indonesian Parliament has already approved a bilateral defence cooperation agreement that envisages arms acquisition from India as well as joint production of weapons.

Earlier this month, the Amnesty International criticised India (as well as China) for plans to sell a wide-range of armaments, including light helicopters, to Myanmar. New Delhi, however, insists that its sales to Yangon are limited to defensive equipment. In the last few years, New Delhi has stepped up its defence cooperation with Yangon, as part of its effort to deepen strategic ties as well as limit Beijing's growing influence in Myanmar.

India's grand strategy ?

July 2007 also saw the unveiling of a strategic partnership between India and Vietnam during Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to New Delhi. The joint declaration issued by Singh and Dung on July 7, "welcomed the steady development of bilateral defence and security ties" and "pledged themselves to strengthen cooperation in defence supplies, joint projects, training cooperation and intelligence exchanges". Another visitor to New Delhi in July was Brendan Nelson, the defence minister of Australia. He signed a new agreement with India to enhance bilateral cooperation in maritime security and exchange of intelligence information.

Come September, India will host the largest multilateral naval exercises ever in the Bay of Bengal. Participating in these exercises are navies from the US, Japan, Australia and Singapore. Is there a grand strategy behind the frenetic pace of India's military diplomacy? India argues it has no desire to align with any one power against another and that its interest lies in contributing to a stable balance of power in a "multipolar Asia".

As Indian troops contributed to the reversal of the Japanese occupation in Southeast Asia during the Second World War, the well-known diplomat-historian K.M. Panikkar argued that a "free and stable" India, "conscious of its responsibilities and capable of playing its part in Southeast Asia" is the "essential prerequisite" of any credible regional security mechanism. Until recently India seemed either unwilling or incapable of measuring up to its own power potential. Now, as it delivers annual economic growth rates of 9 per cent, undertakes a significant military modernisation, reorders its relations with the great powers, and deepens its cooperation with the regional actors, India is poised to reclaim its role in shaping Asian security.

* C. Raja Mohan is a Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.