



## Strategic Partnerships and Regional Security Architectures under Modi Regime (2014-2019)

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### Abstract:

How has Indian Prime Minister Modi's domestic policies of Act East and Neighbourhood First Policy fared in consonance with his foreign policy objectives in the Indian Ocean Region and Indo-Pacific at the end of his first tenure? To answer this question, this paper presents empirical research that reviews the role and scope of the maritime component in India's policy approach from 2014 till 2019 under Modi government towards regional peace and security. A reading of maritime trends informs the research that New Delhi has been taking a two-pronged, parallel approach to achieve its goals: India is establishing strategic partnerships at the bilateral level with countries through military exercises and defence-related trade. Simultaneously, at the multilateral, regional level New Delhi has shown an increasing interest in developing regional security architectures for engagement with like-minded countries having common regional interests and objectives. The research concludes that even though bilateral engagements are moving to delivering its aims of fostering cooperation, it is under the larger ambit of multilateralism that India needs to develop normative and operational maritime security frameworks /arrangements in the coming years.

**Keywords:** Asian Security Architectures, bilateralism, joint maritime exercises, Look East Policy, multilateralism

### INTRODUCTION

As Indo-Pacific is taking shape as a strategic geopolitical space in the recent discourse, taking an overview of New Delhi's own approach towards the Indian Ocean and larger Indo-Pacific domain using maritime engagements provides a crucial insight into this. New Delhi has reinvigorated its domestic policy of Look East and combined it with Modi's vision of Neighbourhood First Policy. These domestic events are required to be looked from the vantage point of the emerging geopolitical developments and security issues have their imprint on the development of Asian maritime security architecture. The efficacy of a policy can be evaluated from the efforts, activities and procedures that it undertakes and the end result of shaping the final outcome. It is in this context this paper reviews India's evolving maritime vision and objectives and conducts an empirical research of studying the activities under Modi's leadership in his first term from 2014-2019. The paper finds that new Delhi's maritime approach is a manifestation of the following recognitions: its shift from territorial approach towards security, opportunities provided by maritime domain and thereby the need to secure it as well as an extension of its domestic policies

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for growth and development that aligns with the regional peace and stability. The paper highlights the two approaches that Modi leadership followed in achieving this vision: first, harnessing the potential of maritime domain among IOR littoral states and strengthening the bilateral relations through connecting via several avenues of common interests. Second, the utilizing oceans for development of the region in terms of infrastructure- building, connectivity, and addressing common threats to peace and development at the regional multilateral level through various sub regional security institutions.

Alignment of Act East Policy with India's Neighbourhood First Policy has been one of the focal points of Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's foreign policy engagement since his first tenure in 2014. There has been a fresh and vocal political stance on Indian Ocean related policies like Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) in the Indian Ocean Region as well as the larger Indo-Pacific geostrategic domain in the quest for a revival of Act East policies along with the historic ties with southeast Asian neighbour that continued in his second term since 2019 onwards. However, while taking stock of this particular foreign policy approach amongst several others in his first term of prime-ministership, it raises a crucial question- how have India's maritime engagements with the South East Asian countries shaped up eventually towards the end of five years as a matter of its efficacy for its foreign policy goals? To answer this question, this paper examines New Delhi's Act East Policy (a component of its Neighbourhood First Policy) and its 'maritime approach' as the basis of engagement from 2014 till 2019. This provides a progress report on India's maritime approach with respect to its South East Asian (SEA) neighbours. For achieving its objective of expanding its area of influence by converting words into actions, the Indian government has attempted to utilize the existing ideas and tools that were available to it in addition to some fresh influx to their optimal potential. It has been followed by a proactive maritime approach in a two-fold manner: to increase its engagements with its neighbouring states under LEP as well as for securing the waters of the Indian Ocean for the holistic growth and development of regional economies.

The paper further describes the *two-pronged approach* that India has extended its regional relations in the maritime domain - building bilateral strategic partnerships and developing multilateral regional strategic architectures. While the bilateral strategic partnerships are based upon defence ties and military training and exercises with these countries with an excessive focus on naval cooperation; the regional engagements have focused on addressing the issues of regional security threats such as piracy, Humanitarian Assistance, and Disaster Relief (HADR) activities, transnational crimes, maritime domain awareness (MDA) and so on, at a formal collective level for the regional peace, security and growth. New Delhi's increasing role in building common consensus for peace, stability, and prosperity at the regional level has also led to its involvement with the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific security architecture formation.

The objective of this paper is to provide a context to New Delhi's renewed focus on its neighbours through maritime engagements to achieve peace, security, and development of the region as a whole. The threats originating in the maritime domain are transnational in their character and therefore, impact the region more than any specific nation. India recognizes its position in the region as a crucial player to take the responsibility of 'security provider'. However, this recognition also comes with an appreciation of the fact that most regional countries face challenges in terms of

capacity and capabilities to address the threats emanating from the maritime domain. Therefore, attempts have been made for the extension of India's own maritime vision at the regional level to bring cooperation with like-minded neighbours through capacity and capability-building exercises both at the bilateral and multilateral levels.

#### **Evolution of Act East in the Indian Ocean to Indo-Pacific since 2014**

PM Modi's 2014 policy of 'Act East' can be called re-engagement with the SEA countries under Look East Policy (LEP) that had seen little progress since its inception in 1991. India's foreign policy processes experienced a revival, post-Soviet collapse in the late 1980s. For its economic revival, India like several other countries, was envisaging a global system where the liberalized domestic economies can be aligned with the other global economies hence established a liberal economic order. There was an attempt for the revitalization of historical and cultural ties with its South East Asian neighbours named Act East Policy in 1992 under former PM PV Narasimha Rao's leadership. Originally, Look East Policy was conceived as an economic and strategic initiative to reconnect India with its SEA neighbours after the loss of historic, trade, and cultural ties in the post-colonial invasion in most of South and South East Asia. The lack of connectivity and infrastructure development along with the dialogue deficit between India and SE Asian countries became the hindrance for any real and considerable success of the LEP under the successive Indian governments of Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Dr. Manmohan Singh. For example, India and ASEAN had signed the goods Free Trade Agreement in 2009 that was implemented in 2010. Despite the FTA, the region did not experience any significant jump in trade exchange due to physical and political structural hindrances, therefore, largely missing the objective of the agreement. Under Modi's leadership, the LEP was evolved as the policy of 'Act East' addressed existing issues of missing cooperation and dialogue through engagements in political, strategic, and cultural dimensions by focusing on action-driven approaches. In other words, the Act East Policy is seen as a corrective measure to expand the scope of engagements that came to be centered around strengthening cooperation in maritime domain.

In regard of expanding the regional cooperation, another striking foreign policy feature that was exhibited in 2014 under India's new Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi was related to the 'Neighbourhood First' Policy that added to his Act East Policy vision. The approach was seen as a corrective step to transform New Delhi's perception as the Big Brother in South Asia that was reflected by the country's position as the largest regional country, holding the world's largest demographics, third-largest economy ( India became third largest economy in 2011: World Ban, 2014), and equipped with the world's fourth most powerful militaries in the world (These are the 25 most powerful militaries in the world, 2019). As the South Asian milieu continues to remain unstable due to historical territorial reasons, India was compelled to engage itself with these countries with an objective to bring peace and stability to the region. However, the diplomatic and political tools of its engagement with its neighbours led to some unfruitful as well as unfortunate outcomes, gaining this tag for India over the decades. The neighbourhood became wary of India's regional approach over the decades. However, Modi's invitation to all the leaders of the SAARC nations including Pakistan for his swearing-in ceremony and their reciprocity demonstrated by full attendance (Nawaz Sharif arrives in India for Modi's swearing-in ceremony, 2014) (including Pakistan's prime minister) in May 2014 was seen as a diplomatic victory for Indian leadership. This

was observed as a new beginning of India's engagement with its neighbours. Similarly, the presence of all the heads of ASEAN nations for Indian Republic Day on 26th January 2018 and attendance made by all BIMSTEC nation heads for Modi's swearing-in ceremony for his second tenure in May 2019 demonstrated India's recognition as a regional partner in peace and development (Roche, 2018).

Modi connected the dots for his foreign policy objectives which eventually required a strong maritime presence. He outlaid his vision for the maritime domain as the basis of furthering India's domestic development (SAGAR) as well regional growth and stability (Indo-Pacific) as explained further. Indo-Pacific has come as the evolving geo-strategic concept since Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's "Confluence of the Seas" speech in 2007. In 2017, several regional Asian (India and Japan) and extra-regional countries (especially Australia the USA) (India-Australia-Japan-U.S.," 2017), have pronounced the Indo-Pacific concept in their individual foreign policy statements. Modi's vision of the Indo-Pacific at the Shangri-La Dialogue 2017 was based on inclusiveness rather than confrontation as he stated "India does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country ("Prime minister's keynote," 2018).

With that clarity, India has been developing its maritime relations with the Indian Ocean littorals based upon recognition of common interests and transnational threats present in the region.

### **Regional geostrategic scenario**

Speaking of the geopolitical issues in the Asia and Indo Pacific region in a nutshell- the changing scenario in the maritime domain where both India and most of the ASEAN countries stand as stakeholders necessitated a reinvigoration of their policies. Common interests such as connectivity through land and seas for trade and economics, science and technology sharing, green energy, socio-cultural exchange as well as threats such as piracy, terrorism, trafficking, and environmental disasters, etc. in the waters of the Indian Ocean Region became a connecting point for these countries to think beyond purely economic engagements and develop common regional policies. This has been highlighted in the backdrop of wavering American policies especially with regards to South and South East Asia, since 'Pivot to Asia' under the US President Barack Obama in 2009 produced mixed results for the regional strategic environment and compelled the countries to expand their engagement portfolio. At the same time, growing American military presence in the region to counter China's Economic Rise and influence over these economies was seen as a threat by Beijing. Repeated statements and white papers since 2009 from the People's Republic of China quoted American presence in the Asia- Pacific as a threat to China.

This had a visible regional impact with China's increasing belligerence in terms of its activities in the South China Sea (SCS) region that forms the crucial geostrategic and geo-economic location between Indian and Pacific Oceans. The SCS due to its geographical location provides a maritime buffer zone to Beijing to strengthen its military presence as the reaction to the lessons learned in its maritime defeats that the country faced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to poor focus on naval strength.

As a result, the increased but aggressive posturing of China in the SCS irritated several ASEAN countries that share their maritime claims and interests in the region. The inability of these countries to match China's military during any unwarranted scenario combined with subdued

American responses as well as their inadequate infrastructure to address the non-traditional security challenges which as mentioned earlier has led the region to experience an increasing defence expenditure as a part of their internal balancing against any security threats to enhance their capability and capacity building such as arms purchase, joint defence exercises and so on. Therefore, India and ASEAN policies have also shown convergence in bilateral defence trade and joint exercises to address various traditional and non-traditional security threats. The next section highlights the bilateral and multilateral level joint defence exercises that the Indian navy conducted with its SEA neighbours to enhance interoperability and capability building among militaries while addressing challenges in the maritime domain.

### **Bilateral naval exercises**

India has been working towards military engagements and maritime cooperation as a part of its larger Indian Ocean Region and Indo-Pacific policy. This section lists down the countries with whom the Indian Navy has been participating in bilateral exercises as a part of maritime engagements with the Indian Ocean littoral states. Indian Navy has been engaged with other littoral navies in the past several decades in conducting joint exercises in the field of anti-piracy, anti-narcotics, HADR, etc for the secure maritime region. The detailed look of these exercises highlights that some of the essential elements of maritime cooperation include capability and capacity building among defence forces, interoperability between navies, joint exercises to address a transnational non-traditional security threat, training, as well as the exchange of intelligence-related information, assistance in hydro-graphic requirements for increasing Maritime Domain Awareness, and port visits by ships for refuelling of supplies that underscores mutual trust and cooperation among the nations.

There has been a substantial increase in these arrangements with certain countries in terms of exchanges and bilateral agreements. On the other hand, the brief atrophy in the bilateral relations with some countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives, etc. was a manifestation of their individual domestic, political, and economic upheaval. The domestic stability brought back normality in both sets of bilateral relations.

### **India- Indonesia**

India and Indonesia share the common maritime goal in the waters of the Indo-Pacific, i.e., peaceful presence and solidarity with friendly countries towards ensuring good order in the maritime domain and strengthening existing bonds between India and Indonesia. The Indonesian Navy and the Indian Navy have been participating in the coordinated patrol (CORPAT) twice a year since 2002 ("27th India-Indonesia," 2019) to keep this vital part of the Indian Ocean Region safe and secure for commercial shipping and international trade. In October 2018, the 32nd edition of India – Indonesia CORPAT took place from Andaman and Nicobar command and entered Belawan harbour, Indonesia. The exercise continues to remain a regular feature of their bilateral relationship.

Additionally, India has been participating in multinational HADR exercises-KOMODO organized by Indonesia since 2002. It aims to enhance mutual understanding of maritime security and involves

boarding operations as well as the establishment of medical camps ashore. The Indian participation of INS Sumedha and Maritime Patrol Aircraft aims to bolster bilateral ties and enhance maritime inter-operability in particular between the two navies to further strengthen the strong bilateral ties and extensive maritime interaction between India and Jakarta.

### **India-Maldives**

Located just 700 km from the southern tip of India in the Indian Ocean, Maldives is a neighbour of India that shares historical, cultural, and linguistic ties. In addition to being the first country to recognize Maldives in 1965, India has always been a prompt responder to assist the country whenever asked for help whether providing HADR assistance during the 2004 Tsunami or resolving their drinking water issues in 2014.

The relationship was intensified with India helping the country with several connectivity and infrastructure projects under Modi's leadership. To address common maritime concerns, India assisted Maldives in setting up Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS) for increasing Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indian Ocean during Modi's visit to the IOR island states in March 2015 (Panda, 2015). In 2017 During EEZ surveillance, a special team consisting of IN divers carried out underwater hull welding onboard. Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) ship *Huravee*, thereby enabled the operational availability of the ship to the MNDF. Politically, there was an intensification of leadership rapport between the two countries. President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih assumed office in November 2018 and Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the inauguration of President Solih and he too reciprocated in kind when he paid his first overseas visit to India in December 2018. During this visit, India offered Maldives a financial assistance package of \$1.4 billion and 1,000 scholarships (India's relations with Maldives," 2020).

In July 2018, India-Maldivian Action Plan for defence was concluded keeping the focus on defence cooperation as being an important component of the bilateral relationship and the shared strategic and security interests of the two countries in the Indian Ocean region. The main elements of the security cooperation consisted of the development of ports, continuous training, capacity building, supply of equipment, and maritime surveillance (India, Maldives sign pact to expand defence cooperation, 2016). The two countries have found convergence and mutual trust in their interests in the maritime domain over these years.

### **India- Malaysia**

India-Malaysia maritime ties can be traced back to the ancient and medieval texts that were found in both countries (Indian Ocean: The maritime links of India-Malaysia, 2021). The natural proximity, strategic location for trade in the oceans as well as availability of natural resources shaped the maritime bond that continued during colonial days when troops of Madras Native Infantry served in Malacca, Singapore, and Penang ("Indian warships visit Port Kelang," 2019) In continuance to the bilateral cultural, economic, and commercial ties, India's Act East Policy revisited its ties and the two countries elevated their relations to a new high by adding the security of maritime domain as a promising angle of mutual interest.

Under Modi's leadership, the two countries have been seeking newer avenues for partnership in the maritime peace and security of the Indian Ocean region where interests of both the countries converge. For example, IN ship Komorta participated in the biennial maritime cooperation exhibition organized by the Malaysian Navy, Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) in March 2015. It is aimed at improving maritime cooperation and bringing together military and civil industrial partnerships. IN has been participating regularly in LIMA. In March 2017, IN ship Kora participated in the LIMA exercises. This cooperation translated into the first-ever bilateral army exercise Op Harimau Shakti addressing issues of counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism in 2018 (Armies of India, Malaysia start their first-ever bilateral exercise, 2018). In 2019 the two navies conducted joint exercises to increase their interoperability in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific oceans (India, Malaysia undertake joint naval exercise, 1970). During the second term of his Prime Ministership, he did face difficult political and diplomatic terms with the new Malaysian counterpart PM Mahathir over issues of domestic importance in 2020 due to which the bilateral relationship between the countries suffered.

### **India- Mauritius**

It would be a truism to state that India's relationship with another of its maritime neighbour has only intensified since Modi came into power. In 2014, Defence cooperation between the two countries has been strengthened through training, exchange visits, hydrography, port calls by Indian ships, deployment of defence assets, etc.

Prime Minister Modi was the Chief Guest at the Mauritius National Day in 2015 celebrations and commissioning ceremony of MCGS Barracuda. The MoU on Hydrography with Mauritius has been renewed till October 2020. In 2015, the Chief of Naval Staff inaugurated the White Shipping<sup>2</sup> Data Fusion Centre, commemorated the Accord of Producer Nation status, and visited the site for the new Mauritius Coast Guard Dockyard. Additionally, Inaugural Coast Guard Staff Talks were held in October 2015. India further helped Mauritius with its INS Darshak that was deployed for 31 days in Dec 2016 to Mauritius for the conduct of hydrographic surveys based on requests received from the government. In 2017, Mauritian PM visited India and signed four new agreements that had a strong maritime cooperation imprint for both countries. At a more granular level, India assisted its Island partner nation with several infrastructure developments, capacity building as well as capability enhancement projects during these years that have taken their bilateral relationship to the next level (Padmaja, 2017). In 2017, for example, New Delhi [extended](#) half a billion US dollars of credit to Mauritius. In late 2018, it gave [US\\$1.4 billion](#) to the Maldives, partly to help it repay Chinese debt. The bilateral cooperation remained to grow in the coming years as India and Mauritius signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA) in 2021 that was under talks since 2005. In addition to economic and military relationships, India has been seeking its larger involvement in the issues that impact tourism, wildlife, water supply, food security, people's health, and actual livelihoods of the country as well as capacity building in disaster risk reduction. At the multilateral level, India has been a proactive member in IORA, a regional

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<sup>2</sup> "White Shipping" information refers to improve data sharing on non-classified merchant navy ships or cargo ships.

institution dedicated to the security and development of Indian Ocean Rim countries whose headquarter is located in Mauritius.

### **India- Seychelles**

Seychelles is another crucial island nation partner of India in the Southern Indian Ocean. The bilateral diplomatic ties were established with Seychelles after its independence in 1976, but the historic and cultural links date back even earlier as the island has a significant population of Indian origin.

The two countries have inked several bilateral agreements/MOUs ranging from culture, healthcare, science and technology, coastal surveillance, and so on over the past decades. As a part of his Island nation diplomacy, PM Modis' March 2015 visit to Seychelles and the reciprocal visit of Seychelles President James Alix Michel's to India in August later that year saw six out of nine total agreements<sup>3</sup> signed on the maritime cooperation.

India and Seychelles have a close defence relationship marked by high-level visits, training exchanges, supply of defence assets, hydrography, etc. For effective patrolling of its EEZ, India has gifted a Coast Guard Fast Interceptor Boat and other associated items to Seychelles in January 2016. INS Sunayna visited Seychelles in June 2017 to participate in Seychelles National Day celebrations. IN ship Tarkash was deployed for EEZ surveillance and provided Outer Island Support to Seychelles (and Mauritius) in 2017. Further, INS Mumbai visited Victoria in November 2017 to undertake bi-annual EEZ and anti-narcotics patrol with Seychelles. Officials from the Anti-Narcotics Bureau of the Seychelles Police Force, Seychelles Fishing Authority, and Maritime Police participated in the joint patrol.

### **India- Singapore**

India and Singapore share historical, cultural, and diaspora ties that are translated into political and economic ties in the past decades. The air forces of the two countries had signed a bilateral agreement in 2007, followed by an agreement by the two armies in 2008. In 2017, the two countries completed the trinity by signing the agreement between the navies. However, the bilateral naval exercise, SIMBEX has been held annually since 1994 and has grown in tactical and operational complexity. It has transcended the traditional emphasis on Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) to more complex maritime exercises, such as Air Defence, Air, and Surface practice firing, Maritime Security, and Search and Rescue Operations.

The bilateral relationship gained new momentum with the upgrading of their Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Partnership to Strategic Partnership that was signed during Modi's visit to Singapore in 2015 to celebrate 50 years of their diplomatic relationship. This was followed by the signing of several significant agreements and MoUs between the two countries on wide-ranging

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<sup>3</sup> (i) MoU on Renewable Energy Cooperation; (ii) MoU for Cooperation in the field of Hydrography; (iii) Protocol on Sale of Navigational Charts / Electronic Navigational Charts; (iv) Agreement on the Development of facilities on Assumption Island; (v) bilateral air services; (vi) agricultural cooperation; (vii) blue economy; (viii) tax information Exchange; (ix) and gifting of a second Dornier aircraft to Seychelles.



issues. On a similar note of cooperation, there was an upsurge of joint military training exercises and related exchanges (India-Singapore Relations, 2018) . A Technical Agreement on 'Sharing of White Shipping Information' was concluded during the visit of the Chief of Naval Staff to Singapore in July 2015. INS Satpura, an indigenously built guided missile stealth frigate and INS Kamorta, the latest and indigenous Anti-Submarine Warfare Corvette was operationally deployed to carry out exercises in the Southern Indian Ocean and the South China Sea in May 2015. These ships participated in IMDEX-15 and later conducted bilateral naval exercise SIMBEX-15 with the Singapore Navy in May 2015. SIMBEX 2016 held in the Bay of Bengal region as 23<sup>rd</sup> in the series, was aimed to increase interoperability as well as develop common understanding and procedures for maritime security operations.

Singapore Minister for Defence Dr. Ng Eng Hen during his November 2017 visit to India addressed shared maritime values and interests between India and Singapore. He stated that "... both countries strongly advocate adherence to international law and norms, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. " The concern to address maritime security threats was reflected in the nature of bilateral exercises in the coming years. IN ships Shivalik, Sahyadri, Kamorta, and Jyoti participated in the exercise in SIMBEX 2017 conducted in Singapore. The focus of the SIMBEX-17 was on Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), integrated operations with Surface, Air, and Sub-surface forces, Air Defence, and Surface Encounter Exercises (Republic of Singapore naval ship formidable at Visakhapatnam, 2016) . SIMBEX 2018 that was held at Vishakhapatnam was a landmark event to celebrate the 25th edition of the longest uninterrupted bilateral maritime exercise that India has had with any navy. It also saw the largest ever participation by the Singapore Navy in any bilateral exercise (Silver jubilee commemoration ceremony of SIMBEX- 2018, 2018).

### **India- Sri Lanka**

India is the only country with which Sri Lanka shares its maritime borders and the two are separated by only 85 miles wide Palk Bay. This proximity has compounded their historical, linguistic, cultural, and people-to-people ties over centuries. The political and diplomatic relations have been marked by numerous high-level visits and exchanges by both countries over the years and shown its impact on improved military ties as well. India and Sri Lankan navies participated in the bilateral maritime exercises SLINEX in 2005. After hiatus of seven years, the exercises resumed in 2013 and since then three exercises have been conducted in- 2015, 2017, and 2018 marking it as a regular event (In ships at Trincomalee, Sri Lanka for slinex-18., 2018) SLINEX is aimed at further enhancing the capability of the two navies to work together at sea and contribute towards maritime security in the region. These exercises are focused on fleet work, seamanship, communication, replenishment at sea, Visit Board Search and Seize (VBSS) operations and helicopter operations.

Furthering its aim for securing the Indian Ocean waters by cooperation with other littorals, India has been conducting defense and other related maritime exercises with the Sri Lankan forces not just at bilateral but at a trilateral level too. Trilateral exercise 'DOSTI' involving the Indian Coast Guard, Sri Lankan Coast Guard, and Maldives National Defence Forces was conducted in the Maldives in October 2014. Similarly, INS Darshak was deployed for 56 days from March 2017 whilst INS Sutlej has been deployed for 59 days from October 2017 to Sri Lanka for the conduct of hydrographic surveys based on the request received from the Government of Sri Lanka.

**India- Thailand**

The two navies conducted bi-annual Coordinated Patrol [CORPAT] exercises since 2005. The 26<sup>th</sup> Coordinated Patrol [CORPAT] between the Indian Navy [IN] and the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) was held in November, 2018. The objective of these exercises is to keep a vigil in the Indian Ocean Region and to enhance mutual understanding and interoperability between the two navies. It further facilitates as a bilateral institution of measures to prevent unlawful activities at sea as well as conduct of Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. Most importantly, the exercises bolster the already strong bilateral relationship between the two nations besides contributing to enhancing maritime security in the region.

**India- Vietnam**

India and Vietnam had signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2007 that was graduated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016. The countries have seen an exchange of several high-level visits in recent years. As a part of the defence and security cooperation, the Indian Navy has also been involved in assisting with EEZ surveillance, Search and Rescue, HADR, and other capacity-building and capability-enhancement activities for addressing the non-traditional threats emanating in the Indian Ocean Region.

Further to deepen its defence-related ties with Vietnam, India has offered a line of credit, provides training of Kilo-class submarine training, Sukhoi fighter aircraft to the Vietnamese Navy and Airforce in addition to conducting joint armed forces exercises. New Delhi has offered to supply Brahmos supersonic cruise missile and Akash area defence missile to Hanoi. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Indian Coast Guard and Vietnam Coast Guard to combat transnational crime and develop mutual cooperation was signed during the visit of Vietnam President H.E. Mr. Tran Dai Quang in March 2018.

**Analysis of the above overview**

The section above presents a comprehensive though not the exhaustive list of India's cooperative policies and exercises with its neighbouring littorals from 2014 to 2019. Even though several of the policies, programs, and activities were carried out before this period, the above facts highlight an intensification in the efforts backed by the domestic vision towards maritime domain. There has been an increasing realization about the potential that the domain presents. Furthermore, there is a need to secure the vast maritime territory of the Indian Ocean Region and beyond that requires a collective effort of the regional countries. The same approach has been enunciated in Modi's SAGAR policy for the IOR. It attempts to build peaceful and secure maritime region for the growth and development of the countries and provides opportunities for connecting India and its regional neighbours as envisaged under the Act East and Neighbourhood Policies. The focus on the maritime domain as the key to regional peace, growth and development had led Indian Ministry of External Affairs dedicate a new division for Indo-Pacific region that subsumes ASEAN (multilateral) division, Indian Ocean Rim Association as well as the Quad. It also bring together all major island states in the Western and Southern Indian Ocean, such as Madagascar, Comoros islands etc. within this division. In other words, there has been proactive efforts by New Delhi to develop secure and peaceful IOR and it has added the maritime security as a dimension of its bilateral relations with the regional neighbours.

The next section overviews India's regional and multilateral approach towards the security and development maritime domain where it has been taken proactive steps to increase its fruitful participation since 2014.

### **Building of Security Architectures at the regional level**

Security Architectures can be defined as “a system of norms, practices, relationships, alliances and institutions constructed or developed by nations to address, enhance or ensure international and/or regional security that are often based on sub-regional basis.”

In addition to carrying out bilateral naval exercises, New Delhi has remained proactive in formulating the maritime blueprint for the IOR and the Indo-Pacific at the multilateral level. This has promoted a vision to build regional institutions based upon common and mutually agreed objectives amongst the IOR littoral states. Indian approach can be seen to have built upon existing international norms of free, open, inclusive, and sustainable development of the maritime order. Good maritime governance, peaceful resolution of disputes, and rules-based order has been repeatedly stressed upon. There has been a visible development in the conceptual framework as well as functional aspects in the regional maritime regimes, as detailed below.

### **SAGAR –AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK IN INDIAN OCEAN REGION**

The Indian Ocean Region is home to one-third of humanity and a cultural hotspot of several communities connected directly and indirectly to seas over centuries. It is the key to our future, connects regions and its people, and is a zone of peace and prosperity. The IOR is connected to the rest of the maritime world through crucial chokepoints located at its ends that are prone to vulnerable situations, both natural and manmade. Ships of several countries pass through the region, hence, raising the concerns of stability and contest. India's own maritime goals and objectives as delineated under PM Modi's SAGAR speech connect and extend to the country's Neighbourhood First as its maritime approach. PM Modi at International Fleet Review 2016 held at Vishakhapatnam enunciated the term SAGAR (SAGAR stands for security and growth for all in the region: PM Modi at international fleet review in Vishakhapatnam, 2016).

The vision became a template for the maritime policies and connectivity for India in the coming years. His speech at Shangrila Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018 coupled India Act East policy with the SAGAR vision. PM Modi further stated, “Indian Forces, especially Navy, are building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region for peace and security, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.”

The Indian External Minister Sushma Swaraj built over the template during her visit to Vietnam in August 2018. The minister elucidated the all-encompassing concept of security that includes traditional, non-traditional, and newly emerging threats. The maritime domain is a function of both economic prosperity and maritime security. She, therefore, called for India and ASEAN countries to work together to build up ‘regional security architectures’ based upon universally recognized international norms, transparency, openness, financial responsibility, and promoting a sense of local ownership for better and sustainable development (Tribune, 2017).

### **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)-As a Governing/legislative Framework**

Established in 1997 with the aim of promoting economic and technical cooperation, the forum works to achieve mutually beneficial cooperation through a consensus-based, evolutionary and non-intrusive approach. The IORA is an inter-governmental organization comprised 22 IOR nations as member states<sup>4</sup> and 9 observer states. The highest authority of the Association rests with the Council of (Foreign) Ministers (COM), which meets annually and reflects the institutional strength at the regional level. One of the flagship projects of IORA, the 'Indian Ocean Dialogue' was first held in Kerala in 2014, followed by Australia in 2015 and Indonesia in 2016 to discuss range of topics such as economic cooperation, maritime safety and security, blue economy, human assistance, and disaster relief, etc.

The IORA Summit 2017 was a landmark event as the countries commemorated the 20th anniversary of IORA and concluded the First ever leader's summit with the attendance of the Heads of all the member states. Furthermore, the IORA secretariat statement issued a strategic vision document, known as the Jakarta Concord, that "sets out a vision for a revitalized and sustainable regional architecture". From an organization that had a low impact over the years, the IORA transformed into a vehicle of regional maritime cooperation between the Indian Ocean countries.

### **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)- As an Executive body**

The IONS is a voluntary grouping of 36 littoral Indian Ocean navies that conduct biennial meetings. In addition to 24 member's states, the nine states with observer status are - China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Madagascar, Malaysia, Netherlands, Russia, and Spain. IONS is a regional forum to increase maritime security cooperation, discuss regional maritime issues, and promote friendly relationships among the member nations. The objective of IONS is to generate a flow of information between naval professionals necessary for common understanding and possibly cooperative solutions on regional maritime issues.

In 2018, the organization completed its tenth anniversary. The theme for the 2018 IONS symposium held in India was "IONS as a catalyst for SAGAR" thereby underlining the importance of naval cooperation in the overall IOR maritime cooperation. In other words, regional institutions such as IONS have the executive or the functional responsibilities in the IOF apart from agenda-setting at the institution level.

There are other sub-regional maritime security frameworks in the IOR as mentioned below.

### **Goa Maritime Conclave (GMC)**

In November 2017, Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman inaugurated the maiden 'Goa Maritime Conclave (GMC)' conducted at Naval War College, Goa. It is a unique initiative wherein Chiefs of Navy, Heads of Maritime Agency, and the representatives of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Maldives, Malaysia, Mauritius, Myanmar, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand attended

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<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, People's Republic of Bangladesh, Union of Comoros, Republic of India, Republic of Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kenya, Republic of Madagascar, Malaysia, Republic of Mauritius, Republic of Mozambique, Sultanate of Oman, Republic of Seychelles, Republic of Singapore, Federal Republic of Somalia, Republic of South Africa, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, United Republic of Tanzania, Kingdom of Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Republic of Yemen.

the Conclave. It was aimed at 'Addressing Regional Maritime Challenges' such as emerging maritime threats and the need for force structuring, maritime domain awareness, maritime security architecture, and maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

At this conclave, India offered to share intelligence of maritime movements including the movement of commercial traffic as well as intelligence, in the Indian Ocean on a 'real-time basis' with 10 Indian Ocean littoral States (Peri, 2017).

### **MILAN Exercises at Sea (MILES)**

In March 2018, the 10th edition of Milan concluded with Milan Exercise Sea (MILES), conducted in the Andaman Sea. The MILES 2018 saw the participation of 20 ships<sup>5</sup> from nine countries including India, making it the largest multilateral exercise. The common objective of the exercises was to enhance interoperability between navies of the region and to exchange best practices. The navies carried out exercises such as Weapon firing, Search and Rescue operations, Air Defence exercises, Cross-deck flying, Boarding Operations, and Medical Evacuation drills.

### **ADMM Plus Exercise on Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism:**

ASEAN Defence Ministers Meetings' Plus (ADMM Plus) as the de facto multilateral security mechanism in the Asia-Pacific is now a regular event. It focuses on seven domains of maritime security, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief, counter-terrorism, military medicine, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian mine action, and cyber security which also provided for military-to-military interactions and cooperation.

The Indian Navy has been a regular participant in maritime exercises conducted by the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meetings' (ADMM) Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism. It is a multinational exercise under the larger aegis of the ADMM Plus consortium. The 2018 edition commenced at Brunei and culminated at Singapore, with various drills and exercises in the South China Sea. During the exercise, the Indian Navy engaged with navies from Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar, China, Japan, Russia, Australia, the Republic of Korea, and the US. Such exercises are held with a common objective of regional security, strengthen and deepen India's relations with the ASEAN countries beyond existing civilisation, economic ties.

### **CONCLUSION**

The paper reviews the Indian leadership's initiatives at the maritime domain while furthering its relations with the neighbouring littorals under the Neighbourhood policy. Five years of a timeframe is indeed not enough for any government to bring structural changes in the seven-decade-old democracy dealing with several domestic, regional, and global issues at various levels and importance. Moreover, it takes years to train ships and forces to build a formidable navy. However, New Delhi has ensured the continuity of the bilateral maritime exercises with most of its littoral neighbours. It has even broadened the scope by adding maritime forces such as Coast Guard exercises as well as the nature of exercises, as detailed above. This highlights a positive trend of

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<sup>5</sup> Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

engagements keeping India's maritime interests in mind in the region. India's maritime vision as well as the bilateral engagements need to be continued in the coming years to achieve the common objective of peace and prosperity in the maritime domain. At the bilateral level, India has taken a proactive role in building several sub-regional security architectures to address the common security concerns based on the common objectives of free and open Indo Pacific and the rule of internationally accepted norms and rules of law.

Nevertheless, India has been unilaterally reorienting itself to the new geo-strategic realities in the region. In 2017, Indian Navy has revised its 'Mission-based deployment concept. This has broadened the scope and responsibilities of the Indian Navy for "deploying mission-ready ships and aircraft along critical sea lanes of communications and choke points in the Indian Ocean Region" (Singh, 2017) . A total of 14-15 of these ships and corvettes and surveillance aircraft are being deployed in the areas that include the Malacca Strait, Andaman Sea, North Andaman Sea, including Bangladesh and Myanmar, Lakshadweep Islands and the Maldives, besides Madagascar and the Persian Gulf (Singh, 2017) . In addition to this, the Indian Navy is focusing on efforts regarding capacity and capability development of other navies in the region.

Deliberations over having a security architecture started as early as in the 1950s Bandung Conference where several Asian leaders came together to share their vision for Asia as a region. Yet, Asia is still seeking regional security architecture/s and frameworks. Given the multitude of actors, their domestic and regional aspirations as well as the prevailing security situations will have to make way for several sub-regional security frameworks instead of one overarching architecture. That will assist in capturing the needs and aspirations of individual Asian countries as well as bring together several congregations or collaborations based upon themes or areas to be addressed. Regional maritime security framework addressing both traditional and non-traditional issues of regional security could be one such initiative.

This study also revealed certain issues that require further research for a nuanced understanding of the efficacy of these undertakings. Firstly, despite the growing participation and regularity of the exercise, one must be reminded that most of the bilateral maritime exercises are only 'ceremonial' in nature and aimed at deepening cooperation between the countries. Secondly, several of these countries carry out similar maritime exercises with other navies (China, US, etc.) as well and therefore, are not just dependent on India for their military training or equipment purchase. Third, there is further scope to analyse the shifts in defence-related trade between India and the neighbouring maritime countries. As most of the ASEAN countries have increased their defence expenditure, it can provide a pointer on the nature of defence-related trade between India and these countries, based upon the threat perception of each country. Fourth, though the joint exercises train the navies together in addressing the non-traditional security issues, more interview-based analysis of the naval officers can provide insight if such exercises can be signalled appropriately to avoid any misunderstanding amongst countries. Last but not the least, at the regional level, most of the regional regimes and institutions are still developing in terms of established norms, practices, and rules of law.

Countries are evolving novel ways to connect with each other at the regional level to recognise the transnational nature of threats and challenges and to promote regional peace and security. India's maritime engagements to strengthen the capacity and capability of its regional neighbours through

naval exercises needs to be seen from this vantage point. The strategic partnerships are a part of building regional architecture within the Indo-Pacific maritime domain. It requires recognition of common issues of interests, challenges as well as threats amongst all the like-minded countries as one of the steps. Once that is established, the regional architecture can be fortified with different levels of engagements such as the joint level naval exercises mentioned in this paper. Such an approach towards regional architecture has immense potential to establish confidence among countries as well as mitigating the threats to establish regional peace and security.

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