



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

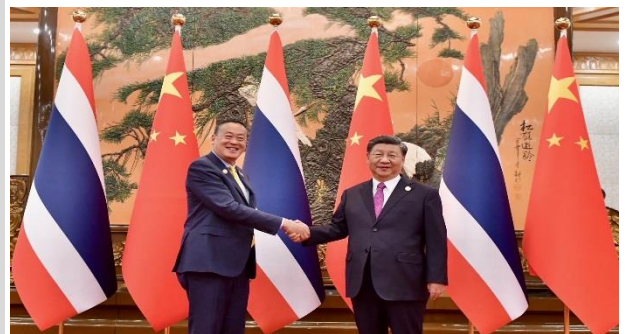


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Cover Image:

President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. at the Bagong Pilipinas kick-off Rally at the Quirino Grandstand in Manila on January 29, 2024. (Source: [Presidential Communications Office of the Philippines](#))

Chinese President Xi Jinping meeting the Prime Minister of Thailand Srettha Thavisin who was in China to attend the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) on October 19, 2023. (Source: [X/@Thavisin](#))

PM Narendra Modi meets with the President of Indonesia, Mr. Joko Widodo during the 20th ASEAN-India Summit, in Jakarta, Indonesia on September 07, 2023. (Source: [Prime Minister's Office/Official Website](#))

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A Clash of Dynasties in the Philippines: Marcos Versus Duterte

by

Anshita Shukla

A hotspot of geopolitical competition in Southeast Asia, the Philippines, is currently embroiled in a domestic battle of words between former President Rodrigo Duterte and serving President Bongbong Marcos. As the Marcos administration gears for the 2025 midterm elections, the emerging fault lines between the two most prominent political dynasties of the Philippines could upend domestic stability. The public rift that initially began with the two leaders hurling accusations of drug abuse has now snowballed into demands for secession, rewriting of the constitution, and an investigation on the use of confidential funds. The repercussions will spread far beyond the borders of the Philippines to impact the growing great power rivalry in the region.

On the late evening of January 28, former President Rodrigo Duterte during a prayer rally in Davao City, accused Bongbong Marcos of being a “drug addict”. The ex-president alleged that the Marcos administration is plotting to amend the 1987 constitution to extend the President’s term beyond six years. He further warned the new leader of meeting the same fate as his father, Ferdinand Marcos, who imposed martial law for fourteen years and was later ousted by a public uprising. While President Marcos Jr. refused to comment initially, he later retaliated by stating that fentanyl consumption by Duterte over the years had resulted in such erratic behaviour. This exchange of allegations exhumed the underlying fissures in the Marcos-Duterte alliance.

In the run-up to the 2022 elections, Marcos Jr. formed an unlikely alliance with Sara Duterte, daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte. The so-called ‘UniTeam’ was able to secure a landslide victory in the general elections. Sara Duterte won the vice-presidential elections with 32.21 million votes or 61.5% of the votes cast—more than Marcos Jr., who won the presidency with 31.62 million votes or 58.7% of the total votes cast¹. Prior to Sara Duterte’s entering into an alliance with Marcos Jr., Rodrigo Duterte was noted calling Bongbong a “weak leader” and a “spoiled child”². Many analysts were sceptical about the

¹ In Philippine Presidential Polls Looking to 2028, Duterte’s Daughter Is Already the Frontrunner, [Times Magazine](#), January 26, 2024.

² Duterte calls Bongbong Marcos a ‘weak leader,’ ‘spoiled child’, [PTV News](#), November 19, 2021.

future of this alliance given the history of alliances in the Philippines, characterising the Marcos-Duterte partnership as a 'marriage of convenience'.

The cracks in this marriage were soon revealed. Ms Duterte held a separate swearing-in ceremony, eleven days ahead of Marcos Jr.'s oath-taking ceremony, going against the traditional practice of being sworn in a few minutes before the president-elect³. Upon coming to office, VP Duterte's budget was three times that of her predecessor, Leni Robredo⁴. The newly elected VP had publicly expressed her willingness to assume the role of Defence Secretary of the Philippines. However, Marcos handed Sara the cabinet portfolio of the Education Secretary⁵. Despite these initial differences, the team attempted to portray a united front with Sara Duterte defending the textbooks downplaying the brutal dictatorship under F. Marcos and Marcos Jr. refusing to aid the International Criminal Court (ICC) with its investigation of Rodrigo Duterte's drug war⁶.

The ICC initiated an investigation in 2019 on extrajudicial killings under Duterte's campaign- "war on drugs", which was resumed in 2023⁷. The investigations implicate both Rodrigo and Sara Duterte, who served as mayor of Davao City during the period of investigation. In 2023, President Marcos reported that the Philippines is studying the possibility of re-joining the ICC, four years after the country formally cut ties with the international tribunal under Duterte⁸. The former leaders' remarks came a few days after news emerged that ICC investigators had visited the country and concluded their investigation. However, Marcos continues to reinstate his commitment to "not lift a finger" in aiding the ICC investigation into the drug war. The Dutertes maintain that the investigation is illegal.

Another latent concern emerged on the matter of confidential and intelligence funds (CIFs) that have manifested in the current feud between the leaders. The funds are lump sum allocations in the national budget for expenses that involve surveillance and intelligence information-gathering activities⁹. In 2023, lawmakers questioned the approval of P125 million designated for the

³ Should Philippines' Marcos be 'on guard' as Sara Duterte is sworn in early, meets China envoy?, [South China Morning Post](#), June 22, 2022.

⁴ Under Sara Duterte, OVP seeks three-fold increase in 2023 budget, [Rappler](#), August 26, 2022.

⁵ Sara agrees to take charge of Department of Education, [The Filipino Times](#), May 12, 2022.

⁶ 'Philippines has no intention of rejoining the ICC': Marcos Jr, [Aljazeera](#), August 1, 2022.

⁷ Where the ICC Probe Into Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's Drug War Stands, [Time](#), November 27, 2023

⁸ PBBM: Rejoining with ICC is under study, [Presidential Communications Office of Philippines](#), November 24, 2023.

⁹ Guidelines On The Entitlement, Release, Use, Reporting And Audit Of Confidential And/Or Intelligence Funds, [Philippine's Governance Commission for GOCCs](#), January 8, 2015.

confidential funds to the Office of the Vice President (OVP). The funds were allocated by President Marcos Jr. through a transfer initiated directly by Marcos' office without necessary congressional authorization. The lawmakers argued that possession of confidential and intelligence funds is outside the mandate of all civilian or non-security agencies, including the Office of the Vice President (OVP) and the Department of Education headed by Sara Duterte. The Vice President, in addition, requested P500 million in confidential funds for OVP and P150 million for the Department of Education in the proposed budget for 2024.

Duterte's request drew widespread concerns regarding the transparency, legality, and accountability within the government in the Philippines. The Vice President retaliated strongly to the initial inquiries stating that "whoever is against confidential funds is against peace. Whoever is against peace is an enemy of the state"¹⁰. The initiation of a parliamentary investigation into the use of the funds by the Office of the Vice President was denied in 2023 by House Speaker Martin Romualdez, a close ally and cousin of Marcos. However, as criticism mounted, Sara Duterte withdrew her request for confidential funds in the 2024 budget citing the issue as "divisive". In the meantime, Marcos' own discretionary funds remained untouched. The issue triggered strong condemnation from senior Duterte who accused the House of Representatives of being the "most corrupt institution" in the country¹¹.

The primary catalyst turning up current tensions between the predecessor and the incumbent President appears to be the plans to amend the constitution of the Philippines. Duterte claims that the current political disposition aims to revise the constitution to extend the term of the President beyond six years, limited by the current constitution. This comes after President Marcos supported measures to amend the constitution for a "globalized world". However, Marcos has clarified that the planned amendments to the 1987 Constitution would only be limited to economic provisions with an aim "to attract more foreign investments to significantly help us achieve our ambition of an upper-middle-class income status by 2025"¹². This is in line with Marcos's manifesto of making the Philippines "open for business" and opening up one of the most protectionist economies in Southeast Asia. Duterte explicitly stated

¹⁰ Sara says critics of confidential fund are 'enemies of the nation' for obstructing peace, [Philstar](#), October 5, 2023.

¹¹ After Congress pushback, Sara withdraws confidential funds request, [Philstar](#), November 9, 2023.

¹² Marcos on Cha-cha: Just economic provisions, nothing more, [GMA News](#), February 8, 2024.

that if Marcos withdraws support for the amendment to the constitution, ties will stabilise.

As tensions between the two simmered, Duterte called for the independence of his hometown in Mindanao from the Philippines "through a process based on gathering signatures"¹³. The demand has garnered opposition from various political factions in the Philippines. President Marcos characterised the demand as a "sheer constitutional travesty" which is "doomed to fail"¹⁴. In response to the calls for secession, National Security Adviser Eduardo Ano stated that "the national government will not hesitate to use its authority and forces to quell and stop any and all attempts to dismember the Republic"¹⁵. Even officials that previously served under Duterte or have been viewed as his allies like Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr and presidential peace adviser Carlito Galvez Jr expressed strong opposition to the secession demands of Duterte¹⁶.

Domestically, the escalating Marcos-Duterte feud has far-reaching implications. For decades the Mindanao Island has been plagued by violence perpetuated by the extremists and the domestic insurgents. The calls for secession of the island could threaten the peace brokered by an agreement between the government and the largest rebel group in the region. In addition, the rising domestic uncertainty and instability could dissuade foreign investors and derail the government's efforts to liberalise the economy. The divergences between the two families could prove to be the most detrimental to Marcos Jr and Sara Duterte in the 2025 mid-term elections. An absence of a unified front and tumbling popularity ratings would prevent the 'UniTeam' to secure a majority in Congress for future policy support.

The domestic dispute also bears implications internationally. The Philippines is a security partner and a treaty ally of the United States of America. It is at the forefront of the USA's strategy to counter China's growing assertiveness in the region. Under Marcos, Manila has moved away from the country's alignment with Beijing pursued by Duterte to solidify closer relations with Washington. However, political instability poses the potential to weaken the US strategy of alliance networks in East and Southeast Asia. It could distract the Marcos

¹³ Philippine president says call for secession of Mindanao 'doomed to fail', [Anadolu Agency](#), February 9, 2024.

¹⁴ Philippines' Marcos says secessionist threats 'doomed to fail', [The Times of India](#), February 8, 2024.

¹⁵ Philippines ready to use 'forces' to quell any secession attempt, official says, [Reuters](#), February 4, 2024.

¹⁶ Marcos-Duterte feud a reflection of the New Cold War, [Asia Times](#), February 6, 2024.

administration from strategically navigating regional geopolitical threats to focusing on maintaining power domestically.

The Marcos and Duterte families are deeply embedded in the political landscape of the country. Currently, President Marcos's eldest sister "Imee" Romualdez Marcos, his son Alexander Araneta Marcos, and his cousin Ferdinand Martin Romualdez all hold positions in the Philippines government. As calls for Marcos's resignation are raised by Sebastian Duterte, Rodrigo Duterte's eldest son, these entrenched familial ties in the political system might likely polarise the country. The contestation between the two families is expected to persist and escalate in the near future. Whatever be the outcome of the situation, the feud will impact domestic stability and divert attention away from critical economic concerns of the nation.

'Swaying of the Bamboo': Thailand Navigating the US-China Competition

by

Jayantika Rao T.V.

Thailand's foreign policy has been frequently been likened to the bamboo for its flexibility and pragmatism, which has served to safeguard the country's national interests and independence. However, this policy faces a litmus test as it contends with the escalating rivalry between the United States and China. The strategic location of Thailand as a vital critical conduit for controlling the Straits of Malacca has made it a focal point for both great powers. The fate of Asian middle powers like Thailand rests on their ability to devise an effective strategy to balance the rivalry between the United States and China. Failure to accomplish this objective could result in these two powers dividing the region, leaving the rest with no option but to compromise their national interests for the sake of the major powers.

Despite a new administration, the appointment of Srettha Thavisin as Prime Minister represents the continuation of Thai foreign policy rather than the new era. It is the same old circus, but with a new ringmaster. However, it is up to Srettha to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy that considers Thailand's intricate domestic complexities while managing the requirements of its economic partnerships and security alliances. This task is not novel, as previous administrations have encountered similar challenges. While Srettha plans to recalibrate Thailand's foreign policy by emphasising the need to pursue "proactive economic diplomacy"¹⁷, it is essential to grasp Thailand's unique relationship with the United States and China to understand the complex situation that Thailand must navigate fully.

Thailand as United States' Oldest Ally

Thailand, widely regarded as the United States' "oldest ally in Asia", has experienced a notable lack of progress, especially in recent years. Following World War II, the United States assumed the role of Thailand's primary security partner, defending the country against the communist threat during the Cold War through the Thanat-Rusk Agreement of 1962.¹⁸ In return, Thailand assisted

¹⁷ Chongkittavorn, Kavi. "First Look at New Thai Diplomatic Tactics". Bangkok Post. October 10, 2023. Accessed from, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2660963/>

¹⁸ Sato, Jack and Yaacob, Rahman. "Is China Replacing the US as Thailand's Main Security Partner?" Lowy Institute. (December 2, 2023). Accessed from, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/>

the United States in their fight against communism in Asia by sending 37,000 troops to support them in the Vietnam War between 1965 to 1972. Thailand also opened its air bases, with the Utapao Airbase serving as a critical base for the US offence during the Vietnam War. Despite the continued defence relations after the end of the Cold War, with the United States designating Thailand as a 'major non-NATO ally' in 2003 and continuing the Cobra Gold military exercises (Southeast Asia's largest multinational military exercise), the intensity of the relationship has steadily declined.

The relationship flourished during the Cold War as their ties served Thai and American interests, with the primary strategic interest of keeping communism at bay. However, when the Cold War ended, the strategic interests of the two nations began to diverge, significantly impacting their relationship. Since the early 2000s, many Thai political elites voiced their dissatisfaction towards the United States, contending that not only had the scope of engagement narrowed down, but also that Thailand was not being treated as an ally. In their view, the United States' behaviour towards Thailand, during the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis, wherein, Washington offered minimal support, exemplified the United States' unreliability.

The downward trajectory of US-Thai relations was made more prominent during the military coups of 2006 and 2014, which ousted Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Yingluck Shinawatra's governments from power, respectively. The US's firm reaction to the coups, primarily through its security alliance, which included cutting defence assistance to Thailand, was regarded by several Thai officials as an assault on their nation's sovereignty and an attempt to interfere in domestic affairs. While the United States had no choice but to suspend military assistance in compliance with American law, John Kerry, US Secretary of State's open criticism in 2014, impacted the relationship further. John Kerry said, "While we value our long friendship with the Thai people, this act (coup) will have negative implications for the US-Thai relationship, especially for our relationship with Thai military".¹⁹

Following the 2014 military coup led by Gen. Prayut Chan-o-Cha, Thailand was "ostracised by the Western democracies"²⁰, particularly the United States, forcing the Thai government to seek out other options and subsequently leading to Thailand establishing closer ties with China out of necessity. Although Washington initially distanced itself from the Thai military

¹⁹ Kerry, John. "Coup in Thailand". US Embassy & Consulate in Thailand. (May 22, 2014). Accessed from, <https://th.usembassy.gov/coup-in-thailand/>

²⁰ Walker, Tommy. "Thailand's New Government Rebalances Its Relationship With China" The Diplomat. (February 6, 2024). Accessed from, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/thailands-new-government-rebalances-its-relationship-with-china/>

government, there were some signs of progress over time, culminating in the meeting between Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin III and Gen. Prayut on June 12, 2022. Nonetheless, despite President Biden's pledge to deepen and revitalise the United States' alliance with Thailand in the United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022), this goal has not been effectively achieved in practice. The United States' approach to Thailand has essentially been one of strategic neglect.

China as an Alternative

As the relationship between the US and Thailand experienced a regression, a vacuum was created, which China was able to fill. Sino-Thai relations have come a long way. The two nations were adversaries during the Cold War and the Thai government did not recognise the government of the People's Republic of China till July 1, 1975. US President Nixon's foreign policy of détente' referred to as the 'Nixon Doctrine' was marked by the withdrawal of US troops from the Vietnam War and the US's efforts to improve its relations with China. In response to these developments, many US allies altered their foreign policies towards China. Despite the official recognition of China, many Thai security elites still viewed China as a threat, fearing that 'leftism' would intensify. On the other hand, Thai Prime Minister MR Kurkit (1975-76) believed that establishing diplomatic ties with China would keep communism at bay, especially in light of the regional changes and the US's withdrawal from mainland Southeast Asia.²¹ However, the initial years of establishing diplomatic relations did not go smoothly because of a fear of communism.

A significant change came after the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, when Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping announced that China was shifting its focus to 'socialist modernisation', ushering in a new era of reform in China.²² Another reason for the normalisation of relations with China was based on economic factors. Thailand hoped to export more agricultural products like rubber, sugar and rice to China and to import oil and machine tools. On the other hand, China recognised Thailand's regional strategic importance early on.

The strategic cooperation between China and Thailand strengthened during the 1990s, as China's economy boomed, allowing for increasing economic interactions between the two countries, shifting to economic partnership. During the 1997 Financial crisis, China contributed US \$1 billion to the IMF-led

²¹ Chinwanno, Chulacheeb. "Rising China and Thailand's policy of strategic engagement." *The Rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan* 4 (2009).

²² "A Bumpy Start to 48 Years of Chinese Relations". *Bangkok Post*. Accessed from, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/specials/china-thailand-diplomatic-relations/>

rescue plan, which was appreciated by Thailand, softening many sceptics' opinions of China.²³ At the time there was a narrative regarding the 'rise of China' and the potential Chinese threat, in Thailand. Soon the discourse changed, as many perceived China's rise as an opportunity for economic growth and an avenue for investment opportunities. While the United States and its allies viewed China as a potential threat that could upset the regional balance of power, Thai leaders believed that China wanted to be recognised and respected as a major power and would play a constructive role in Asia as well as the world. Obviously, some Thai commentators warned about the potential threat and spillover effect of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, which would involve Thailand's security ally.

The relationship between Thailand and China has taken on a deeper meaning in recent years, extending beyond political and economic cooperation to shared strategic interests in the security and military areas. Since the 2014 coup, the level of interaction between Thailand and China has increased significantly as the United States withdrew its support. As a result, China slowly became Thailand's primary source of armaments, and the two countries broadened their bilateral Joint Military Operations (JMEs).²⁴ The Falcon Strike exercise, which began in 2015 and featured combat manoeuvres between Chinese J-10C/S, JH-7 A/AII, J11B/S, and KJ-500 fighters, and Thai Gripen 39 C/D Alpha Jets and Saab 340 AEW Fighters, is a prime example of this collaboration. China has taken the outcome of the exercises seriously and sends various types of aircraft to participate each year. With the deepening of ties between these two countries, it is clear that Thailand will not be able to distance itself from Beijing like Washington might hope for.

Conclusion

The principle of 'equidistance' behind Thailand's foreign policy under Srettha remains largely unchanged. As former Thai foreign minister Thanat Khoman emphasised, Thailand will not lean too much towards anyone as it will tie them up and suffocate them. Therefore, it will continue to maintain a balanced relationship with every country based on their strategic interest. However, depending on the issue or situation, Thailand will be more inclined to sway towards one nation or the other. That said, Washington's attempt to use its security alliance with Thailand to counter China's growing assertiveness in the region will not likely be productive as Thailand and the United States differ in

²³ Chinwanno, Chulacheeb. "Rising China and Thailand's policy of strategic engagement." *The Rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan* 4 (2009).

²⁴ Sato, Jack and Yaacob, Rahman. "Is China Replacing the US as Thailand's Main Security Partner?" Lowy Institute. (December 2, 2023). Accessed from, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/>

their perception of China. While Washington views China as an adversary and threat to the regional order, Thailand does not see China in a similar way. Thailand will choose to prioritise its own strategic interests of keeping Beijing close, to help boost the country's economy. Thus, Thailand will continue to navigate the US-China power competition very carefully, given their economic and security interests are at stake.

Situating India's "Act East Policy" in India's National Security Concerns and Policies

by
Biren Nanda

When we talk of India's Foreign and Security policies they must encompass the totality of India's military, diplomatic, economic and social policies that will protect and promote our national security interests.

What is the significance of India's geographical location to her national security?

India is strategically located vis-a-vis the Gulf, Central Asia, the Indian Ocean Region, and East Asia. India's land frontiers extend more than 15,500 kms. India shares borders with seven countries. These borders are geographically and topographically diverse, posing unique challenges to our defense and security. The delineation and demarcation of some sections of the land borders have to be resolved and this is a factor in our security calculus.

India's maritime boundaries sit astride three major shipping lanes. India's EEZ stretches from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca. India's primary maritime area of interest is, therefore, from the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal in the west, to the Straits of Malacca in the east, and the Cape of Good Hope in the South. India has two long coastlines to defend and its island territories to the West – the Lakshadweep and Minicoy islands - and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the East which are at a distance of 450 km and 1300 km from the mainland respectively.

In terms of trade, India is an island nation. The overwhelming majority of our imports and exports including crucial energy and commodity supplies are carried through the sea routes.

How are India's economic goals shaping her foreign and security policy?

India is in the midst of an era of rapid GDP growth rates and closer integration with the global economy. Our growing strengths now allow us to address what risks there might be in greater engagement. The emphasis on expanding foreign trade and attracting greater foreign investment flows has required a refocusing of our energies. Indeed, the inter se importance of relationships itself changed, taking these priorities into account. We had to take note, for example, of the shift in economic weight towards the Asia-Pacific region.

Energy cooperation has acquired a greater salience in our thinking. Other key sectors like agriculture, education, skills and science, and technology have also benefitted from greater international cooperation.

What are the priorities and strategic objectives of the Modi government's foreign policy?

1. Prioritizing an integrated neighborhood; "Neighborhood First."

The pursuit of this objective has four elements. First, the Indian Government gives diplomatic and political priority to neighbors and Indian Ocean Island States. The second is to provide neighbors with support, as needed, in the form of resources, equipment, and training. The third, and perhaps most important, is to pursue greater connectivity and integration, so as to improve the free flow of goods, people, energy, capital, and information. The fourth is to promote a model of India-led regionalism with which its neighbors are comfortable.

2. Bridging diplomacy and development

A second major objective of India's foreign relations has been to leverage international partnerships to advance India's domestic development. This includes improving technological access, sourcing capital, adopting best practices, gaining market access, and securing natural resources.

3. Acting East as China rises

When Prime Minister Modi rhetorically replaced two decades of India's 'Look East' policy with 'Act East,' the purpose was to show greater intent in realizing what had long been an aspiration for India: to become better integrated with East Asia. The greater urgency implicit in the shift in terminology is largely an outgrowth of Indian concerns regarding China's rise and the upsetting of Asia's delicate balance of power. In addition to the development of military and dual-use Chinese infrastructure in India's neighborhood and the Indian Ocean, India's concerns are three-fold: the risk of Chinese assertiveness on the disputed border, the possibility of Chinese primacy in the Indo-Pacific region, and an uneven economic playing field.

4. India as a leading power: Raising ambitions

India is rising in a world system that has been largely favorable to its rise, but one that India was not involved in creating. The contemporary international environment represents a rare opportunity for India, which it must use to

"position itself in a leading role, rather than just a balancing force, globally." India is not yet fully in a position to lead or set the rules of the international order, but it is taking steps to seek full membership in the most important global governance platforms.

What are the key challenges that confront India's national security policies?

Very few countries in the world are surrounded by as many hostile or uncomfortable neighbors as India. With its two neighbors China and Pakistan, it has a post-independence history of wars and the relations with them continue to be adversarial. The strategic collusion between Pakistan and China in terms of military and nuclear cooperation has further vitiated India's external security environment. To the credit of Indian policymakers, India has been able to meet the challenge posed by the two nuclear-capable countries, both at military and diplomatic levels.

While India's territorial interest does not extend beyond its land border, its maritime boundary has a strategic extension encompassing the Indian Ocean region. India's policy is to keep the Indian Ocean free from the dominating presence of any hostile power or power bloc and increase its maritime presence in the region.

India is a victim of the global network of terrorism. In fighting international terrorism, India in cooperation with other nations seeks to evolve joint mechanisms to fight terrorism within the framework of UN resolutions and conventions.

India faced a relatively stable international security environment in the period after 9/11 on account of the following reasons: There was a lack of great power competition in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. Second, the threat from terrorism united great powers and focused their attention on the security situation in Asia and Africa. The "shock and awe" generated by the assertion of US power in Afghanistan and Iraq meant that no power was willing to challenge US hegemony.

After the global financial crisis of 2007-08, American dominance of world affairs was an immediate casualty. China began testing the limits of American strategic presence in Asia and the national security environment for India underwent a change. Chinese troops made aggressive incursions across the LAC and began creeping aggression and occupation of land features in the Spratlys in the South China Sea.

Two major trends are defining the future of Asia in this century – the economic and the geopolitical. At the core of both trends is the relationship between the United States and China. China's assertive behavior has created a new environment for neighboring Asian countries. The US has conveyed through its pivot to Asia and the notion of rebalancing that it intends to retain a key role in Asia.

The potential danger of these developments is demonstrated by the tension that arises periodically over territorial disputes between the Philippines and China and between China and Japan. Whether the US will be drawn into these conflicts by its allies or whether it will renege on its alliance commitments to maintain a viable relationship with China heightens insecurities amongst its allies in Asia.

The gradual but steady rise of India, a revitalized Japan, and the US rebalance to Asia are major strategic developments which are presently shaping responses to the challenge posed by China to the status quo and the post-World War II order in the region.

Despite the US rebalancing strategy and the pivot to Asia, the will of the US to confront China has been questioned ushering in an atmosphere of geopolitical uncertainty.

For a majority of the countries in East Asia, however, there remains the belief that the US and its alliance system as well as its new security relationships with regional powers are here to stay, thereby checking the tendency of regional nations to capitulate under Chinese pressure for the present

There is a growing sense that forces of extremism and terrorism have bounced back in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. The US retreat from Afghanistan and the failure of the US to persuade the Pakistan army to give up support for cross-border terrorism against Afghanistan and India remains a source of concern.

Dealing with the threat from Pakistan is a serious security challenge for India. Efforts at normalizing relations between the two countries have failed and the problem is that the changing regional balance of power has allowed Pakistan new freedom to pursue cross-border terrorism against India. The shift of the power balance in favor of India after the liberation of Bangladesh has been neutralized by the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent by Pakistan.

The expanding strategic gap with China has begun to pose multiple security challenges for India in a number of areas. These include the disputed border, the military balance with China, and the creation of border infrastructure. Beijing has stuck to a policy of arming Islamabad and blocking India's rise through measures like its opposition to India joining NSG. Beijing has also expanded its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and established security partnerships with countries, which were once part of India's traditional sphere of influence.

India's Act East Policy

In 1991, the year the Cold War ended, India adopted a program of economic reforms and announced her 'Look East Policy', which sought greater engagement and integration with Southeast Asia. India's converging interests with Southeast Asian countries were the major driver behind India's 'Look East Policy'. The warming of India-US ties particularly after the conclusion of the India-US civil nuclear cooperation agreement in 2005 also contributed to closer relations with the countries in the region.

How did 'Look East' become 'Act East'? To properly appreciate the transition, it may be pertinent to begin by tracing the evolution of India's policy towards the region. India looked to deepen relations with Southeast Asian countries in the immediate aftermath of adopting economic reforms in 1991. As India opened its economy to foreign investment and focused on export-led growth, it was but natural that it would look towards a region that had experienced an "economic miracle" and high growth rates after pursuing similar policies.

The 'Look East' Policy initiated in 1992 manifested itself in developing closer relations with ASEAN countries bilaterally, and within ASEAN-led institutions. After Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014, he pursued India's relations with ASEAN countries with renewed vigor and renamed the initiative the 'Act East' Policy. India's 'Act East' Policy is more intense than its predecessor and expansive in geographical scope, bringing within its ambit not only the ASEAN but also other regional stakeholders including Japan, Australia, and South Korea. It has focused on enhancing connectivity, commerce, culture, and security linkages with partners in the region, both bilaterally and through regional groupings like the ASEAN, EAS, IORA, BIMSTEC and the MGC.

From the very beginning, the Modi government made it amply clear that India would focus more and more on improving relations with the ASEAN and other East Asian countries as part of India's 'Look East' policy which was formulated by PM Narasimha Rao's government in 1992 for enhancing economic engagement with India's eastern neighbours and forging strategic

partnerships and security cooperation with countries in that region in general and with Vietnam and Japan. in particular. The "Look East Policy" was replaced by the "Act East Policy" envisaging a more proactive role for India in this region.

The Indian Ocean region (IOR), which is a significant part of India's strategic neighborhood, is steadily turning into a hotspot thanks to the growing Chinese presence in numerous strategically located bases. To counter the moves made by China as part of the Maritime Silk Road and BRI projects, India began to reach out to its maritime neighbors in the IOR with proposals for enhanced economic and security cooperation. On the back of growing Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean region, the Modi government introduced Project Mausam which means weather or season in many South and Southeast Asian languages. This project was highlighted because of its profound historical role in promoting cultural exchanges in the region as in ancient times maritime trade used to depend on seasonal monsoon winds. The project has a cultural focus and focuses on the ancient trade and cultural linkages and emphasizes future maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region.

India's policy on maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is based on the approach of SAGAR – 'Security and Growth for All' in the Region. The vision of SAGAR was articulated by Prime Minister Modi in his address to the Shangri La Dialogue on June 1, 2018, as follows: "Our vision for the Indian Ocean Region is rooted in advancing cooperation in our region and to use our capabilities for the benefit of all in our common maritime home." Prime Minister Modi added that SAGAR "is the creed we follow to our east now even more vigorously through our Act East policy".

India has pursued its Act East Policy and actively participated in ASEAN-centric security platforms like the EAS and ADMM+. These frameworks have, however, failed to tackle hard security issues in East Asia due to the ASEAN reliance on consensus-based decision-making, and the impasse between the United States and China on the key issues in the region. India has addressed its security dilemma by moving closer to the United States while maintaining its existing security partnerships with key powers. India has also forged closer strategic and military ties with major Asian countries including, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined India's concept of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) in his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue on 01 June 2018. The following year, in his speech at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bangkok on 04 November 2019, he proposed "a cooperative effort to translate principles for the Indo-Pacific into measures to secure our shared maritime

environment". This proposal - the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI) was intended to translate India's concept of the Indo-Pacific into practical, actionable and cooperative measures in the maritime domain. The IPOI proposes cooperation in seven sectors (or 'pillars') – maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology and academic cooperation; trade, connectivity and maritime transport.

The imperative of bringing in India, to balance the overwhelming weight of China, in regional affairs, has been a significant strand of strategic thinking amongst some ASEAN countries. It was no surprise therefore, that way back in 2005, on the eve of India's participation in the inaugural East Asia Summit, Singapore Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong had spoken of India and China as two wings of a 'mega jumbo jet' whose fuselage was the ASEAN¹

"I like to think of new Asia as a mega jumbo jet that is being constructed. Northeast Asia, comprising China, Japan and South Korea, forms one wing with a powerful engine. India, the second wing, will also have a powerful engine. The Southeast Asian countries form the fuselage. Even if we lack a powerful engine for growth among the 10 countries, we will be lifted by the two wings."

The importance ASEAN nations have begun to attach to relations with India is reflective of their collective search for ways to balance China's aggressive behavior and territorial assertions in the South China Sea.

¹ Keynote address by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong of the Republic of Singapore at the Singapore Conference, London, 15 March 2005



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