

THREE DECADES OF INDIA'S EASTWARD ENGAGEMENT: CHINA'S PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES

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This issue brief looks into China's perceptions and responses to India's Act East Policy. It argues that China sees India's Act East Policy in three phases – the first two correspond to a period when both managed to establish an equilibrium and understanding, and when India desired to strike a balance between the US and China. The third phase corresponds to the ascendance of Prime Minister Modi to the Indian political scene – the time when the equilibrium was lost owing to the power shift favoring China, and China's malevolent relations with India following frequent standoffs resulting in the Doklam and Galwan conflicts. India realigning its Act East Policy and sub-regional and multilateral mechanisms like BIMSTEC, SAGAR, IORA, and Quad, etc., have been pronounced as part and parcel of India's Act East Policy serving the unstated goals of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Since China views the Indo-Pacific strategy essentially as containment of China by the US and its allies, India's broader geopolitical ambitions have to an extent been held in check by its rivalry with China and Pakistan, according to the Chinese scholarship. It is for this reason they believe that India's strategic vision is governed by its thinking on South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Nonetheless, they are apprehensive that the Indo-Pacific strategy does give it levers to intervene in the South China Sea, diminish ASEAN centrality, and oppose China's connectivity projects.

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China sees India's Look/Act East Policy (AEP), sometimes also pronounced as "March Eastward Policy" (东进政策) in three stages – strategic layout (1991-2002), strategic expansion (2002-2013), and strategic partnership with the US, Japan and Australia (2013-till date). Reasons for India's eastward

engagement during the first phase are cited as – India's economic crisis, pressure of globalization and China's gradual economic integration with Southeast Asia.¹ Some of the accomplishments have been enumerated as: India becoming a sectoral partner of the ASEAN in 1992 and full dialogue partner in

1995; India joining the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996; formation of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1998; India initiating the “Mekong-Ganges River Cooperation Project” with five ASEAN countries (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand); and India’s joint naval exercises with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore near the Andaman Islands; and MILAN, the annual naval exercises of the Bay of Bengal navies in 1995.

During the second phase, security cooperation, especially naval exercises with countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore along with increased arms exports to these countries have been cited.² Dialogue mechanisms like ASEAN+1 in 2002 and ASEAN+4 in 2004, India participating in the East Asia Summit as a founding member, and the India-ASEAN FTA of 2009 have been listed as some other achievements, enabling India to secure a place in the ASEAN-led Asia-Pacific multilateral framework.

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It is the third phase that China finds problematic and has reacted sharply to. The formation of a “strategic arch” in the Indo-Pacific with Japan, the US and Australia as “three poles” since 2014 on the one hand, and mechanisms such as “Security and Growth for All in the Region” (SAGAR), the (BIMSTEC), and the Indian Ocean Rim Alliance (IORA) on the other, have been pronounced as serving the objectives of the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US. According to Wang,³ India has been “setting the agenda” of these groupings aimed at shaping its leadership and expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean region, thus attempting to create a “unified Indian Ocean identity” and “Indian Ocean Region Community.”

Strategic Goals and Limitations

China believes that the intent behind India’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific is owing to a number of factors. The foremost goal, is to make India a “great power”, for “seeking great power status” (寻求大国地位) and extending influence beyond the Indian Ocean has been the priority of the Indian leadership right from Nehru to Modi.⁴ Therefore, India’s “March Eastward Strategy” that aims at forging close economic and defense partnership with the ASEAN,

US and its allies has been seen in this context. Unique geo-economic conditions “will inject vitality into the rapid development of the Indian economy”, India’s close economic ties with the East and South Asia will be conducive to build the “Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor” (印太经济走廊) as envisaged by the Quad countries.⁵ The same has materialized in the form of the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum and has invited lot of criticism from the Chinese leadership and scholars alike.⁶ India realigning its Act East Policy and sub-regional and multilateral mechanisms like BIMSTEC, SAGAR, IORA, and Quad, etc., are said to be serving the unstated goals of India’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Therefore, Ning views India “dwarfing” (矮化) the AEP and making it subservient to the Indo-Pacific strategy,⁷ which according to Chinese scholars will make it difficult for India to achieve substantial progress in its relations with ASEAN. India’s engagement with ASEAN has also been seen through the prism of a “multipolar regional order” (多极化地区秩序) aimed at reshaping the international order by India. It is India’s advocacy for multipolarity where China sees an opportunity to engage India in mechanisms such as BRICS, SCO and AIIB, often bracketed within the “concept of “True multilateralism” (真正的多边主义) pitched against the “selective” (

有选择的多边主义), “small clique” (小圈子多边主义) or “pseudo- multilateralism” (伪多边主义) of the US,⁸ a reference to the Quad and AUKUS.

Nevertheless, China holds the view that “India is still relatively weak in terms of economic and political power” and argues that India’s broader geopolitical ambitions have to an extent been held in check by its rivalry with Pakistan and China.⁹ China is quick to refer to the massive China-ASEAN trade (US\$878.2 billion in 2021) against India’s US\$78 billion with ASEAN. Chinese scholars argue that it is owing to “India’s limited financial capacity” and “complex multinational construction procedures” that projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) project, “Project Mausam”, SAGAR, BIMSTEC, Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, are progressing rather slowly. According to them, India and ASEAN “seriously lack endogenous motivation for economic and trade cooperation” notwithstanding the FTA both have signed. Internal and external drivers in terms of opening up, business environment, labor force have been compared. Rising tariffs, “self-reliance” and “Swadeshi” have been regarded as anti-free trade, and also cited as reasons for India not signing the ASEAN-led RCEP.¹⁰

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China’s India Dilemma and Responses

China is cognizant about “an emerging India becoming a “strong competitor of China” in the Indo-Pacific and apprehensive that India may become a drag in developing Sino-ASEAN relations in future. Therefore, it has been questioning as to “what interests India has to defend in the region.” From this perspective, though the Chinese scholars accept the presence of Indic culture in Southeast Asia, they are, however, quick to posit that the region has been within the orbit of Sinosphere. It is for this reason that China perceives India as an Indian Ocean power rather than an Asia-Pacific power, and hence an “external power” (外部势力) in East Asia. China

and Malaysia preferring to use “10+3” (ASEAN, +China, Japan and the ROK) as a vehicle to shape the region into a desired economic community, and exclude the US and India in the region has similar undertones.¹¹

There is a general belief in China that India’s AEP has widened in scope; it is no longer limited to ASEAN but encompasses the entire East Asia to start with, and now the entire Indo-Pacific. Chinese scholars view that the widening security boundary of India’s AEP “provides an opportunity for India to intervene in Asia-Pacific affairs; act as a “balancer” (平衡者); engage in “strategic balancing” (战略制衡) of China by way of India-Japan-US-Australia strategic arc, and weaken China’s influence in the Asia-Pacific.¹² Therefore, China has denounced the Indo-Pacific strategy as a containment theory aimed at diminishing China’s geopolitical and economic influence.

Even though China has all along harped that India is very low in the Chinese foreign policy calculus, however, India’s policy of multi-alignment, especially in the Indo-Pacific, has belied that thinking. Chinese scholars have recognized the fact that the US no longer treats India from a “US’ regional policy framework of South Asia” but from a “global perspective”, dubbing it as a “natural strategic partner”, the “net security provider in the Indian Ocean”, the “bulwark of democracy”, the “strategic offshore counterweight”, etc., and has clearly supported India as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.” It is perhaps owing to this cognition that the Chinese scholarship talks about “cognitive asymmetry” (认知不对称) between China and India, generally held responsible for not pushing India-China relations in a “positive direction”.⁸

China holds the view that since India’s AEP is in “cahoots with” US’ “rebalancing to Asia” or the Indo-Pacific strategy, it has resulted in a situation where the US and India are unitedly balancing (联

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合制衡) or countering China. This along with its “small cliques” like AUKUS, the Quad, Five Eyes Alliance and G7 are “attempting to reconstruct the network of alliances and partners of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.” However, they also believe that owing to the US policy of “saying one thing and doing another” (表里不一), it is unlikely that the ASEAN is pulled over to the US.⁹ As regards India, Bao believes that India in recent years has been deviating from the principle of “ASEAN centrality” and accelerating its shift to the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” of the United States; however, he posits that ASEAN countries are looking for “real money”(真金白银) not “empty promises” (空头许诺). Sun Xihui in a commentary argues that the US committing US\$150 million during the recent US-ASEAN Special Summit 2022 is “almost negligible.”¹⁰

Furthermore, China believes that India’s AEP “will allow India to intervene (插手) in the South China Sea issue, which will have an impact on some of China’s core interests. This apprehension of China arises out of the fact that China has a very troubled relationship with ASEAN countries owing to the South China Sea issue. No wonder, the “ASEAN ‘Indo-Pacific’ Outlook” (2019) and “ASEAN-India

Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region” (2021) all have emphasized on the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and open, inclusive and rules-based regional architecture. China is apprehensive that India, by strengthening political, economic and diplomatic relations with Asia-Pacific countries, will make it easy for India to “warm up” (抱团取暖) to other countries on the South China Sea issue and put its weight behind them. China believes that this will further add unfavorable factors to the settlement of the South China Sea issue. India’s recent US\$375 million anti-ship BrahMos missile deal with the Philippines¹¹ and India’s close defense cooperation with Vietnam is likely to be cited by China as one of the examples. India’s intervention in disputes by one way or another, is to enhance its so-called “presence” (存在) in the region “out of strategic consideration” and its “global power ambitions,” posits Zhao.¹²

Conclusion

The writings of the Chinese scholarship reveal that their understanding of India’s LEP/AEP and engagement in the Indo-Pacific has undergone a

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fundamental change. From an Indian perspective, this could be attributed to a power shift with the rise of China and widening asymmetries with India, its belligerence along Line of Actual Control and the Indo-Pacific. As a result, the kind of equilibrium and understanding that existed between India and China has been lost, and the ambiguity and the nature of India being a “swing state” between the US and China has been addressed.¹³ At present, it is obvious from the assertions of the Chinese scholars that whether it is India’s Act East policy, sub-regional mechanisms or Quad, one and all have been considered active tools of US’ Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at containing China and diminishing its influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, China still holds the view that irrespective of “grand strategic goals” in the “Indo-Pacific” region, India’s strategic vision is governed by its thinking on South Asia and the Indian Ocean, for the want of economic heft as well as its adversarial relations with both China and Pakistan. This, however, is not to say that India is not seeking to play a strategic role in the Indo-Pacific region, it certainly is, but India has not yet “publicly stated” its strategic goals in the Asia-Pacific region, according to the Chinese. Though the Chinese scholars acknowledge the fact that the Southeast Asian countries are positively inclined towards India’s engagement in the Asia-Pacific region, most of them have not expressed their support for India’s role as a “net security provider” in the Western Pacific. They also admit the fact that at present the “informal alliance” or the “strategic consensus” between US-India and its allies is purely due the China factor, and that if India desires China to “recognize its role in the Asia-Pacific region, then India must cede a certain role in the Indian Ocean region to China”.¹⁴ Will India become an Indo-Pacific power? It will depend upon India’s economic, technological, military drivers along with soft power, diplomatic and leadership skills, argues Shi.¹⁵

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Endnotes

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