

Project Mausam – A Preliminary Assessment of India’s Grand Maritime Strategy from a Southeast Asian Perspective

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21 July 2015

Onset of ‘Maritime Asia’

Maritime travel, trade and even conquest have historically been part and parcel of the interaction among different communities, states and civilisations from South to East Asia. Control of key maritime routes by the ancient Asian kingdoms and subsequent European colonial powers meant control of trade and influence throughout the wider region. Hence, the announcement by several regional powers of new maritime centric initiatives to revitalise their ‘maritime legacy’ and that of the region have regional observers sitting up and taking notice.

China got the ball rolling with its Maritime Silk Route (MSR), a strategic initiative to increase trade and foster collaborations across a range of fields leveraging on sea routes which was announced in late 2013 during President Xi Jinping’s visit to Indonesia and Malaysia. In 2014, then newly elected Indonesian President Joko Widodo also outlined his vision for Indonesia as a ‘Global Maritime Axis’ which aimed to capitalise on Indonesia’s vast maritime geography.

Not to be left behind, India responded with a maritime initiative of its own – Project Mausam. Much of the chatter in late 2014 focused on Prime Minister Modi’s much heralded initiative, its aims and implications for India and the wider region. This essay has two aims. First, to explore the nature of Project Mausam – its background,

scope, aims and possible motivations behind its impending implementation, and second, to examine its impact on ASEAN and Malaysia in particular.

Project Mausam

At its face value, Project Mausam can best be described as a foreign policy initiative that is being developed by the Modi administration which aims to revive India's ancient maritime routes, cultural and trade linkages with a diverse group of states and regions that are connected to the Indian Ocean. The name 'Mausam' itself is derived from a myriad of regional dialects for the monsoon winds that were used by early maritime navigators to travel across the Indian Ocean – travel which ultimately shaped early interactions between communities and nations connected by the Indian Ocean¹.

However, despite being discussed and written on for almost a year, the specifics of Project Mausam have yet to be officially released with only several general aims being cited by bureaucrats and analysts. Nonetheless, indications are that this could be a major feature in India's engagement with the Indian Ocean region for the foreseeable future. It will likely complement contemporary initiatives like the 'Act East' policy – itself a proactive enhancement of India's nearly quarter century old Look East policy – which is geared specifically towards ASEAN and more generally towards East Asia. This action oriented approach aims to further forge economic, cultural, strategic and security cooperation with states in the region.

Ranging from East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula to Southeast Asia, Project Mausam is not just about examining and historical ties of the past but more importantly, also seeks to enhance trade, diplomatic and security ties around the region with India as its central nexus. Project Mausam also involves a cultural aspect that aims to complement its trade and diplomatic emphasis. As it stands, India's Ministry of Culture has already started preliminary work on several initiatives aimed at fostering an enhanced understanding of values and concerns of natural and cultural heritage among Indian Ocean countries².

Project Mausam as a Counterbalance to China?

Unlike Indonesia's Maritime Axis – which focuses as much attention to domestic concerns as it does to external policies – the general consensus among regional observers is that diplomatic and cooperative platitudes aside, Project Mausam is in fact India's direct response in countering and confronting China's MSR.

Originally intended to boost cooperation and goodwill between China and ASEAN states, China's MSR has expanded significantly, and now sets South Asia, East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and even Europe in its sights. Through maritime trade and infrastructure development, China proposes to strengthen trade and relations with all these regions. In fact, during his visit to New Delhi in September 2014, President Xi promoted the MSR to India urging it to join the initiative, while emphasising the benefits to all parties due to India's strategic and influential position in the Indian Ocean³. Unlike its neighbours who have welcomed the initiative and the prospects of Chinese driven development it entails, India was more circumspect about the extent of its participation in this latest Chinese initiative primarily for what it might mean for the future of the Indian Ocean region. India, like most of China's competitors sees the MSR as a major plan to expand China's sphere of influence from its traditional hub of East Asia.

Not only has China grown its footprint in its 'traditional' East Asia, it is also making waves in South Asia and the Indian Ocean – India's front yard. Besides long standing ally Pakistan, China has shown and received huge interest in Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh – investing heavily via economic aid and infrastructure development⁴. Most notable of these are the developments of Chinese funded and built deep-water ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and possibly the Maldives which could, theoretically, be accessed by assets of the Chinese Navy. A similar project in Bangladesh was shelved in favour of one undertaken by a more multinational consortium after protests by India while reports of another Chinese driven port in East Africa – despite ultimately proven to be untrue – caused concern in New Delhi.

The Indian defence establishment also has growing reservations about the expansion of Chinese naval activities to the Indian Ocean⁵. Visits by Chinese naval ships to neighbouring states are on the rise alongside Chinese naval traffic as it continues to participate in anti-piracy efforts off the Horn of Africa. However, multiple visits by Chinese submarines to Sri Lanka in late 2014 – berthed at ports developed by China – and reports that the PLA and PLAAF have been offered access to several military facilities in that country for joint training purposes have especially upset India and given ammunition to those who advocate that China does indeed have growing ambitions for its presence in the Indian Ocean region. Interestingly, much of this concern and indeed the perceived growing Chinese presence and influence in the Indian Ocean reflects the ‘String of Pearls’ strategy that was bandied about during previous decade – an approach that some then dismissed and criticised as too grandiose⁶.

The last few years have seen China make huge strides in strengthening its presence and influence in the Asia Pacific – a position that it is now apparently building in the Indian Ocean. A possible speed bump though could come in the form of the defeat of the Rajapaksa administration in Sri Lankan national elections held in early January 2015 which could see an adjustment of its pro-China policies. Newly elected President Sirisena has vowed to decrease the country’s dependence on Beijing, though such talk – given the extent of Chinese driven development in Sri Lanka – is easier said than done⁷.

The Challenge to Regain Influence

Naturally, India does have some cause for concern. The rhetoric about a rising India claiming its place alongside China as co-leaders in a bipolar ‘Asian century’ has largely remained just that – rhetoric. While India has moved forward on many fronts – its attempts to successfully combine soft and hard power with a concentrated, sustained diplomatic strategy in order to cement its place in the new Asian order has fallen short.

Given the spike in high profile international engagements and his reputation as a “man of action”, Mr. Modi will be expected to deliver on foreign policy as well. Obstacles

however, remain – especially internal challenges from competing domestic priorities and a foreign service that has been criticised as lacklustre and reactionary⁸.

Psychologically, this comes at an important time for India with analysts arguing that the current political leadership in New Delhi isn't one that indulges in half-hearted initiatives. India is playing a catch-up game in the wider region and it must move fast to set up the necessary bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to expedite further cooperation that it aims to achieve. In this light, the development of Project Mausam, or at least some strategic elements of it, can be seen as India's attempt to address the imbalance and pre-emptively reassert its dominance over a region that it sees as its natural sphere of influence.

Project Mausam – Winds of Change towards ASEAN?

It would be reasonable to expect that any rollout of Project Mausam will take into consideration the strategic importance of ASEAN. Several of its members – Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand – share borders with the eastern Indian Ocean while Malaysia and Singapore are key stakeholders. The India-ASEAN relationship itself has grown significantly since initial sectoral and full dialogue partnership talks in 1992 and 1995 respectively. Elevated to a strategic partnership in 2012, the relationship now covers a wide spectrum of fields including political and security cooperation, economics and socio-cultural issues⁹. Generally, India has good relations with the organisation as a whole and its individual members, with varying degrees of economic and security engagement with different members.

Nevertheless, when compared to some of ASEAN's other partners like China, the European Union, Japan and even Taiwan, the depth of India's relationship with ASEAN, especially in economics and trade has been rather dismal¹⁰. There has always been a gap between India's strategic promise and its performance. As is often the case with grand initiatives from New Delhi – and ASEAN – the problem is not the lack of ideas but the inability to follow through on them. The new proactive administration in Delhi however seems keen to boost cooperation and achieve substantial results. At the 2014 ASEAN

Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Modi himself stressed that a new, rising India which is serious in engaging the wider East Asia, was keen to deepen its relationship with ASEAN, advancing balance, peace and stability in the wider region¹¹. The 27th ASEAN Summit in November this year in Kuala Lumpur – and its related summits – will provide an insight into how things have progressed since then.

Project Mausam, with its action oriented aims to further forge economic, cultural, strategic and security cooperation with states in the region represents a significant opportunity to add further depth and substance to the India-ASEAN relationship. The project can and should complement contemporary initiatives like the 'Act East' policy – itself a proactive enhancement of India's nearly quarter century old Look East policy – which is geared specifically towards ASEAN and more generally towards East Asia. As Project Mausam rolls out, India will likely engage with ASEAN, bringing new opportunities for collaboration in economic, security and possibly cultural sectors.

It would be impossible to ignore the issue of maritime security in the South China Sea (SCS) when examining a potential major Indian maritime strategy that will be of importance to ASEAN. Maritime security, territorial disputes and a growing Chinese presence in the SCS are a growing concern for its member states. It would not be conjecture to state that some members of ASEAN might be more keen than others in welcoming such an initiative by India, perhaps buying into of Project Mausam as a counterbalance to China. India's strategic cooperation with Vietnam – including defence cooperation and visits – and interest in pursuing joint resource exploration in the SCS has seen the disapproval of China. More recently, Singapore has urged India, as a “big and influential country” to play a bigger role in confidence building in the SCS¹². Officially, India supports the peaceful resolution of the disputes and the implementation of a Code of Conduct in the SCS and has been careful to appear as a neutral party¹³.

Malaysia and Mausam – Managing Engagement

Sitting smack in the middle of Southeast Asia and straddling the Straits of Malacca and the SCS, Malaysia is likely to see itself involved in some capacity, should Project

Mausam come to pass. Malaysia has longstanding diplomatic relations with India – especially economic and cultural relations. Due to concerns over its influence and sovereignty in the Straits of Malacca, Malaysia had been somewhat reluctant to see a more prominent Indian security presence in Southeast Asia. Defence relations however, have always been cordial and are steadily growing¹⁴. There may be indications that this reluctance is changing with increasing contact and training among the defence establishments of both countries. Additionally, as strategic and security realities evolve in the SCS, Malaysia could find itself more accommodating to a more active and maritime focused India.

Concurrently, China's MSR proposal has been well received in Malaysia with both political and business leaders voicing their support of the initiative. Under the MSR umbrella, there is already on-going development of the Kuantan Port in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia to handle larger vessels with more tonnage in collaboration with its 'sister' Qinzhou Port in China's Guangxi province¹⁵. Malaysia has always valued its relationship with China and the trade relationship between the two is significant. It is likely that Malaysia will continue in this direction as it could leverage on the MSR not only for economic benefits but also as a means of minimising the likelihood of conflicts with China, stemming from on-going territorial disputes in the SCS.

While it is still early days, one can make an educated guess that the advent of Project Mausam, coupled with China's MSR and Indonesia's Maritime Axis, have given the folks at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs something to think about. Three major maritime initiatives by three important states that have longstanding relations with Malaysia, all of which affects Southeast Asia with Malaysia located at its dead centre is more than enough to cause some sleepless nights. The challenge for Malaysia, which has long maintained a hedging approach in regards to big power presence in Southeast Asia, will not be in just balancing her involvement in these maritime initiatives while looking out for its interests, but to also keep in mind the larger best interests of a region that Malaysia is inexorably tied to. As Project Mausam and the other maritime initiatives take better shape, Malaysia should work through bilateral and multilateral frameworks to try and ensure that these initiatives do not ultimately compete with each other,

risking further tension and polarisation of the wider region but rather seek to complement each other creating a more peaceful and prosperous outcome for all.

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NOTES

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