India and Indonesia: Converging Maritime Interests in the Confluence of the Oceans

Surbhi Moudgil

As the 'rise' of Asia gathers momentum, the geopolitical interplay amongst the regional powers is likely to become more vigorous. India and Indonesia are amongst these powers whose interface is likely to be guided by strong convergent interests due to a variety of reasons. First, with the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' gaining traction leading to a changing geopolitical landscape in Asia, both countries are now required to formulate appropriate geo-strategies so as cut out a major role for themselves in the region.

Second, since coming to power in their respective countries in 2014, the apex political leaders of India and Indonesia have enunciated their visions. While Prime Minister Modi has enunciated his revitalized Act East Policy (AEP) to give thrust to India's geopolitical approach towards Southeast Asia and beyond, President Jokiwi has articulated Indonesia's desire to achieve maritime resurgence for his country through his 'Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) vision, which finds resonance with India's AEP.[1] Towards this end, the collaborative efforts of the two countries—being major powers and stakeholders in the region—can be mutually reinforcing.

Third, given that India and Indonesia are immediate maritime neighbours with contiguous maritime zones, they can collaborate to forge a strong partnership in the domain of maritime safety and security. This can translate into major opportunities for the two countries to meet their respective national objectives through a collaborative approach.

This issue brief examines the opportunities and challenges for India and Indonesia to optimize the potential of maritime cooperation between the two countries. Such cooperation is considered necessary for the fulfilment of the geopolitical objectives of the two countries in the Indo-Pacific region, specifically in terms of their respective interests pertaining to geo-economics, maritime security, and the favourable regional order.

Geo-economics

India has trade relations with various East Asian and South East Asian economies, and also has established comprehensive economic cooperation agreements (CEPA) with Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN.[2] In 2016, about 30.6 per cent of India's seaborne merchandise trade transited the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea (SCS) (Figure 1).[3] This makes the key waterways like the Malacca Strait highly strategic trade routes, not only for India, but also for the countries of Southeast Asia and East Asia. Consequently, India's major geo-economic interests lie in the safety of shipping, and the security of the ISLs leading to SCS and beyond.

Figure 1. India and Indonesia: Converging Sea-born Trade Flows

With its increasing sea trade dependence on the Malacca Strait, India's maritime security interests are expanding in the region. However, maritime threats like collisions, groundings, and piracy/armed robberies at sea can disrupt trade in the Malacca Strait, the Sunda, the Lombok, and

the Ombai-Wetar straits, as shown in Figure 2. With the growing reliance on the Malacca Strait for the flow of goods, geo-economics is increasingly gaining prominence in India's geostrategic calculus in the Indo-Pacific region. This is the primary reason why India has been looking to contribute to security in the Malacca Strait, including in partnership with Indonesia which has a crucial role in the security of the Strait.[4] Accordingly, India seeks to accord high priority to its relations with Indonesia. However, there are other reasons as well. For instance, the SCS is considered Indonesia's backyard, wherein a benign maritime environment is becoming increasingly important for India's growing sea-trade with its extended eastern neighbourhood.[5]

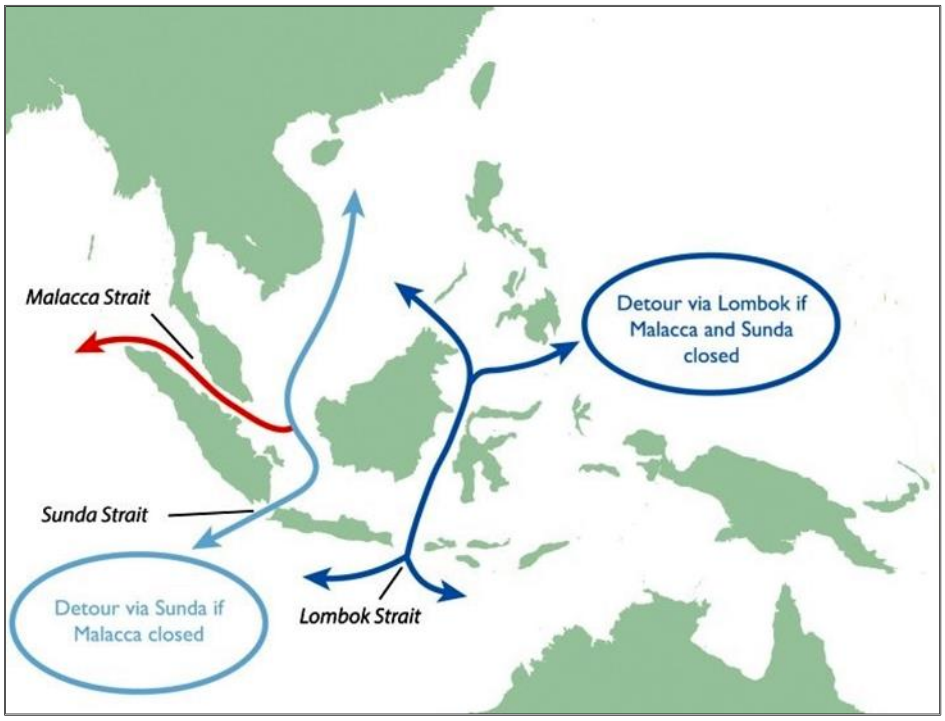

Figure 2. Entry of International Shipping Lanes (ISL) into the South China Sea

Source: CSIS China Power Project

Conversely, Indonesia also has major economic interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which plays a vital role in Indonesia's comprehensive national development. Notably, about 40 per cent (approximately US$ 11.67 billion) of Indonesia's total foreign investment is sourced from IOR countries.[6] In 2016, the trade between Indonesia and the other IOR countries was about US$ 89.8 billion.[7] Indonesia's increasing interest in the IOR is evident from the country's

proactive role as the chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and conducting the seminal IORA Concord during the Jakarta Summit on 7 March 2017.[8]

Further, Indonesia's growing interest in the Indian Ocean can also be substantiated from the statement made by President Joko Widodo, which stated that the future of the world economy lies in the Indian Ocean, and Indonesia wants to integrate its "global maritime axis" program with shipping lines.[9] This is best exemplified by the IORA Business Summit held in Jakarta on 6 March 2017, which sought to boost economic cooperation between IORA members.[10] The increasing importance of Indian Ocean in Indonesia's foreign policy would increasingly prompt Jakarta to look towards New Delhi, since Indonesia's Indian Ocean outlook cannot be complete without its engagement with India. Hence, it is not surprising that Indonesian scholars have been writing about developing a 'Look West' policy in consonance with India's 'Act East' policy.[11]

Maritime Security

The Indo-Pacific region is confronted with both traditional and non-traditional maritime security challenges. The traditional challenges include sovereignty issues, maritime disputes, and contradicting positions on international norms, to name a few. These challenges are significant, considering that they can threaten Indonesia's interests in the region, and any unnecessary escalation due to muscle flexing by countries involved in SCS disputes can cause major insecurities for the country. In this regard, India and Indonesia's apprehensions over China's disregard for international law and established norms of conduct lead to converging security concerns. These concerns are enhanced by the fact that both India and Indonesia have disputes with China with regard to territory and maritime sovereignty, respectively.

Both India and Indonesia may have reasons to be circumspect of China's increasing naval presence in the IOR. Under the pretext of anti-piracy operations, the Chinese deployment of submarines in the IOR has raised the possibility of China's increasing military assertiveness in the Indian Ocean in the coming years, akin to that in the SCS.[12] In the recent past, both countries have stood firm against Chinese pressure: for example, India refusing to back off in the Dokhlam standoff, and Indonesia renaming a part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) lying within the

Chinese-claimed 'Nine Dash line' to "North Natuna Sea", as shown below in Figure 3.[13] India and Indonesia have taken a rather bold stance which deserves credit, and sets an example for other regional countries who seek to moderate China's assertiveness in order to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, both countries have also enhanced their defence and security cooperation in the region by implementing initiatives, like the India and Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT). The latest was the 29th CORPAT conducted in May 2017.[14] India and Indonesia will also need to synergise their approaches at regional fora like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM-Plus) that addresses shared security challenges.[15]

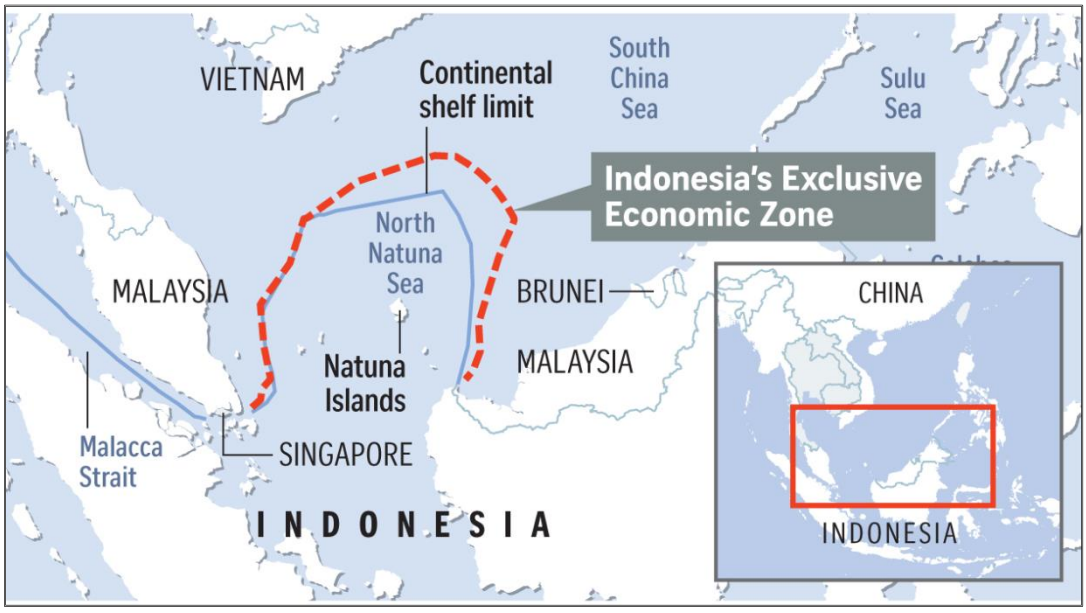

Figure 2. Location of the North Natuna Sea

Source: Straits Times Graphics

Favourable Regional Order

India and Indonesia share a history of bilateral cooperation due to similitude in their ethnicities and cultures. However, today, the challenge for both countries is to rediscover and reshape their partnership in the post-Cold War globalized world order. The most urgent diplomatic foreign policy task before the two countries is to identify their converging geopolitical concerns arising from the evolving balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region—specifically, the behaviour of China as a rising power in the region. One of the most prominent converging geopolitical interests are the freedom of navigation and over-flight based on established international laws and norms of conduct. This was clearly indicated in the December 2016 Joint Statement made during President Jokowi's visit to India, wherein he and Prime Minister Modi reiterated their commitment to respecting the freedom of navigation and over-flight, and unimpeded lawful commerce based on the principles of international law, as reflected notably in the UNCLOS.[16]

The two countries have stated their interests in augmenting closer relations during past ministerial visits. However, they need to substantiate them by implementation. Thus, for a realization of converging visions, the two countries need to achieve more substantive cooperation that goes beyond symbolism. While the two countries aim to maintain peace, progress, and prosperity in the region, they also strive to develop a multi-polar Asia to augment relations with regional countries. Consequently, both India and Indonesia needs to enhance their geostrategic interfaces with other key countries the Indo-Pacific region, including under the ambit of regional multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), to name a few. These avenues increase the capabilities of the two countries to play a positive role towards shaping a regional balance of power which is favourable to them.

Further, to convert the converging geopolitical interests of India and Indonesia into substantive cooperation, it is necessary to engage with each other at all levels. The level of interaction between the two countries ought to increase by facilitating growing people-to-people interaction through tourism which is flourishing between the two countries. Nonetheless, even as more than 183,558 Indians have visited Indonesia in the period between January and May 2017, all flights make it necessary to transit through Singapore, Bangkok, or Kuala Lumpur.[17] In such a case, even if there is a facility of visa on arrival, it has hitherto not served the purpose completely.

Therefore, the exchange of ideas and culture between the two countries is restricted due to constraints of time.

The two countries also have limited bilateral articulation. Under its AEP, India has laid more emphasis on relations with its land neighbours rather than maritime neighbours. Likewise, under its Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF), Indonesia is yet to identify India as a major strategic partner in the region. It has been three years since President Jokowi announced Indonesia's grand maritime vision GMF. Indonesia is yet to undertake more proactive initiatives to strengthen its strategic relations with India, which could begin by its support to Indian initiatives of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), and Project *Mausam*.

Moreover, Indonesia's efforts to reach out to India to promote culture, trade, and investment ties has been limited to New Delhi, rather than also to other parts of India, especially to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which are only about 90 nautical miles away from Indonesia's Sumatra Island. Furthermore, while the current Indonesian President has visited India, his Indian counterpart is yet to make a visit.

However, it is undeniable that India and Indonesia recognise the importance of each other in their respective neighbourhoods. The issue of concern is the slow pace of their developing their converging geopolitical complementarities. India and Indonesia are projected to be the leading economies of Asia in the future, and there are hardly any reservations regarding their collaborative ability to shape the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific. The two countries geographically lie at the heart of Indo-Pacific region, with strong historical linkages across the maritime medium. However, giving due diligence to advancing the momentum of the cooperation is required. When all is said and done, the two countries have interests in each other's backyard. While assisting each other in the region and by trusting their partnership, both countries can achieve a more substantial engagement.

Conclusion

Amidst the promise that the Indo-Pacific concept ushers in prosperity and well-being, India, and Indonesia are attempting to meet their similar overarching national objectives by sharing close geo-economic dependence in each other's backyards. This needs to be given due cognisance by the policy establishments of the two immediate maritime neighbours which share contiguous maritime zones, and have common economic stakes in the region.

To fructify the immense economic opportunities that have come to the fore, both India and Indonesia need a stable and conducive maritime environment, which flows, *inter alia*, from a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. Towards this end, notable strides have been taken by the two countries. However, defence and security cooperation needs to be strengthened further. Also, India and Indonesia would need to synergise their outreach to other regional countries, including through multilateral institutions. The increasing politico-military assertiveness of China in the entire Indo-Pacific swath will possibly be the most defining common factor in the India-Indonesia equation in the coming years and decades.

While the re-invigoration of the relations between India and Indonesia is still tentative, its immense potential is clearly visible. It, therefore, becomes rather exigent for the two countries to synergize their respective maritime visions to achieve their shared visions of maritime resurgence in the Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century. It is not difficult to conceive the moment in the future when the two countries will regard each other as 'strategic partners'. Given the dynamics displayed by the new apex national leaderships, it would be unfortunate if the Indo-Pacific region is made to 'wait and watch'.

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