



India's growing maritime opportunities with Indonesia: Room for development in diplomacy and capability building

Japish S. Gill and Ryan Mitra 

School of Liberal Studies, Pandit Deendayal Petroleum University, Gujarat, India

ABSTRACT

India's maritime philosophy has been clearly outlined in both literature, and practice. From a defensive realist perspective, India's approach to the high seas has brought home various advantages and elevated the country to the status of a major naval power in its region. Despite this prowess, in view of the globalised times and dynamically changing geopolitical scenarios unfolding to its East, India's interpretation, methods of evaluation, and implementation of its policies, all need to evolve. This paper sheds light on the growing strategic importance-of the South East Asian Regional Complex, as also on the developmental vacuum in this Regional Complex, with specific focus upon Indonesia. The authors aim to address two fundamental questions —“How should India's relations with Indonesia evolve?”, and, “In what manner should it evolve?”. Indonesia's role in India's maritime objectives is a central one and the evolving variables in India's defensive realist approach places this South East Asian country right at the core of New Delhi's interests.

KEYWORDS

India; Indonesia; South East Asia; maritime diplomacy; maritime Strategy

Introduction

The maritime domain in Asia is becoming increasingly dynamic from a geopolitical standpoint, forcing significant policy changes by most States of the region. India is an Asian powerhouse with a considerable but varying amount of influence in a number of spheres, beginning with its littoral regions and extending all the way to the farthest reaches of the Indo-Pacific. In view of the latest developments in the South China Sea (SCS), especially the recent activities being undertaken by China vis-à-vis other countries within the South East Asian Regional Complex (also South Asian nations), and, the sharp increase in non-traditional concerns, it is imperative for India to re-evaluate her mechanisms of maritime diplomacy and the methods of projecting her interests and objectives. A fresh approach in undertaking a rejuvenated diplomatic operation would benefit from a compartmentalisation of India's circles of influence into three separate spheres — (1) its own immediate littoral and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as a whole, (2) the South East Asian Regional Complex, and (3) the larger Indo-Pacific.¹ Driven by a defensive realist school of thought, India's policy making has always worked towards

CONTACT Ryan Mitra  ryanmitra17@gmail.com  34, Milan Park, Opp. Ahmedabad Hatt, Vastrapur, Ahmedabad, Gujarat-380015

maximising security, mainly in her own immediate littoral. The latest developments and emerging opportunities in South East Asia present strong incentives for India to capitalise and re-evaluate these policies while still retaining their fundamental value in her primary areas of interest.² Indonesia, specifically, is a country that has always been of high strategic value to India; one that has presented immense avenues of growth and cooperation.³ This archipelagic State has shown a growing interest in maritime cooperation in this decade, and it has been observed that there are several partners other than India that might appear to be more suitable to Indonesia. China has, in the recent past, certainly been one of these. However, given China's current behaviour, Indonesia continues to be apprehensive of stronger maritime relations with this East Asian powerhouse.⁴ This nexus of interest and dispute places India in a unique position — as an alternative and appealing partner with a versatile range of capabilities in multiple areas of bilateral development.

The Jokowi-administration-endorsed “Global Maritime Fulcrum” (GMF) saw definite action and upgradation to a ground breaking and comprehensive Ocean Policy, which extends the original ambit of the GMF to include seven pillars — (1) marine and human resource development, (2) maritime security, (3) law enforcement and safety at sea, (4) ocean space management and marine protection, (5) ocean governance and institutions, (6) development of maritime economy, maritime culture, and, (7) maritime diplomacy.⁵

This meticulously drawn-up ocean policy acts as a roadmap for future policy makers by breaking down the ocean policy into “plans of action”, with the first plan-of-action (2016–2019) assigning priority to five specific areas, viz., (1) maritime boundaries, ocean spaces and maritime diplomacy; (2) maritime industry and sea-connectivity; (3) services and industries relevant to marine natural resources and the management of the marine environment; (4) maritime defence and security; and, (5) maritime culture.⁶

India's own capabilities and interests align with several of these priorities, thereby enabling the creation of a conducive environment of cooperation through the targeting of various aspects of the GMF and the ocean policy in which Indonesia has not yet found self-sustenance, as well as those in which it has not yet found concrete mechanisms for cooperation with other States. Two of the most prominent areas of alignment are:

- Defence Diplomacy, incorporating collaborative measures to tackle maritime issues of mutual concern.
- Infrastructure and capacity-building

With reference to these two areas, India's past practices and precedents, her current developments, and New Delhi's strategic interests, need to be given specific focus, and juxtaposed upon Indonesia's own willingness and national restrictions.

Defence diplomacy

India, being the most dominant naval force in her littoral regions, now sees herself as a Net Security Provider (NSP), in the Indian Ocean and beyond.⁷ This symbolically pre-sets India's role under a vague and vast umbrella that in reality, lacks any concrete structure and therefore does not provide any guidance, obligations or guarantees to any State of what such a promise of net security might encompass in a crisis.⁸ The lack of binding

literature, on a bilateral or multilateral level, has left a significant vacuum in terms of what India's role as a guarantor of security in the maritime expanses of the region actually is meant to be. This aspect needs to be tackled with a reinvigorated approach to maritime diplomacy; one that functions on "penning-down" diplomacy, and looks to clearly outline India's obligations in the same. The implementation of such an approach in all avenues of maritime diplomacy, (well beyond India's immediate littoral spaces), is extremely vital.

India's naval capabilities serve as a significant threat to any opposing entity, and yet, at the same time, as the biggest boon that a cooperative State can acquire in terms of deterring and countering any conflicting forces. These capabilities are in concert with India's will — to govern the narrative in its littorals — but are diminished once the area of focus shifts beyond this. Therefore, in terms of the South East Asian Regional Complex, India needs to explore the possibility of working as a collaborative NSP along with interested parties such as the United States or certain ASEAN countries.⁹ It is also crucial that while addressing the structuring of the concept of NSP, India bifurcates its roles according to traditional and non-traditional issues:

- Grade 1-State driven, traditional issues: Direct conflict by foreign or alien elements in the region of promised security.
- Grade 2-Non-traditional issues: Non-state actors, piracy, smuggling and trafficking, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.¹⁰

Furthermore, a vivid estimation of this role as the NSP would allow a firm grasp of the same, through methodical, academic comprehension of the concepts of maritime security and maritime safety. Here, maritime security is "the combination of preventive and responsive measures to protect the maritime domain against threats and intentional unlawful acts."¹¹ Whereas, maritime safety is "the combination of preventive and responsive measures intended to protect the maritime domain against, and limit the effect of, accidental or natural danger, harm, and damage to environment, risks or loss."¹² The fundamental differences between maritime safety and security are applicable in both, traditional, and non-traditional grades, and therefore need to be considered strongly while drafting future policies as an NSP.

Addressing Grade 2 first, Indonesia has seen a significant amount of maritime security and maritime safety issues in recent times. The straits running through Indonesia act as a maritime passageway for a majority of international trade and therefore, are prone to acts of maritime terrorism and piracy, along with trafficking and illegal smuggling. Despite the significant decrease in the number and sophistication of such incidents since 2013, Indonesia continues to see the highest number of actual and attempted piracy attacks, clearly highlighting the prolonged nature of this issue.¹³ The decrease and severe strangulation of these unlawful activities are purely an outcome of international cooperation and national initiatives. The number of attacks in the Malacca Strait has dropped substantially, (no attacks reported in 2016 & 2017), due to increased and aggressive patrols by the littoral States' authorities since July 2005.¹⁴ Despite such significant improvements, ships are still being advised to maintain strict anti-piracy/robbery watches, as the lack of concrete agreements or indications adds to the ambiguity of how long these anti-piracy patrols will continue to take place.¹⁵ In consideration of maintaining this momentum against

piracy and maritime terrorism, Indonesia's Ocean Policy comes at an opportune time for India, as the archipelagic State has opened doors for international cooperation against these non-State actors, thereby allowing mutual confidence and trust building exercises that are facilitating the growth of stronger bilateral relations between the two States.¹⁶ India already has a history of substantial collaborations with Indonesia; the two navies conduct annual India-Indonesia coordinated patrols in the Six Degree Channel in the Andaman Sea, and have a longstanding working relationship fostered through exercises and regular coordinated patrols conducted twice a year for two to three weeks. The two navies also engage in intelligence sharing on matters pertaining to maritime security, particularly with regard to antipiracy operations. Counterterrorism remains a security priority for both countries, with a weakened Jemaah Islamiyah far from the only potential threat, and the two countries having signed an MoU establishing a joint working group on counterterrorism in 2004.¹⁷ In spite of such initiatives, maritime security cooperation between the two States remain stunted, and unexplored. Some would argue that China or the United States are perhaps more suitable allies for Indonesia in terms of maritime security, but the outstanding maritime disputes the State has with the former, and the well-founded hesitance it retains in strengthening relations with the latter are favourable geopolitical scenarios for India.

The Jokowi administration, in the past has shown resistance to anti-piracy multilateralism, but it has shown interest in maritime safety and maritime cooperation through joint training, exercises, and material transfer.¹⁸ These areas are well within India's capabilities and interests for pushing greater cooperation and a larger scope of bilateral relations with the South East Asian nation. The government of India has already shown its willingness to combat maritime piracy unilaterally, and has even established a Committee of Secretaries on Anti-Piracy and Hijacking at sea (COSAPH) with specific guidelines to prevent/mitigate instances of sea piracy.¹⁹ Anti-piracy capabilities have also been on display during multiples incidents in the Gulf of Aden, where the Indian navy responded to various incidents of distress calls of Indian and foreign origin merchant ships in 2017.²⁰ Further, in terms of maritime safety, India continues to be one of the most efficient HADR responsive countries in the region. Indonesia itself was privy to India's rapid responsiveness after the 2004 Tsunami, where India spent as low as 1% of USA's much larger and expensive response to the same crisis, and managed to provide a cost-effective approach to the entire operation.²¹ India is already seen as a net provider of HADR in the IOR, and ever since the 2004 operation, has also achieved significant progress in the same role in the South East Asian regional complex. It is also believed that an agreement for routine refuelling and refitting of Indian vessels with six ASEAN countries is a direct result of India's initiatives in ensuring maritime safety.²² Thus, India's HADR responsiveness adds to its benign image as a benevolent operator of the sea is clearly evident, and can be used as a foundation on which her maritime diplomacy can operate. The decrease in maritime terrorism in Indonesia is a good sign of the improving conditions in the region, but the fact that it still remains the most piracy prone region highlights room for improvement.²³

Indonesia sits on the Pacific Ring of Fire, and is therefore a regular victim of devastating earthquakes. The earthquake at the latter end of 2018 in Lombok has left the region in a dire state, where thousands have been rendered homeless and in desperate need of clean water, food, medicine and shelter.²⁴ This omnipresent shadow of a looming humanitarian

crisis goes on to show the chronic travesty the government and people face, and illustrates how international aid and response are extremely crucial for the State in such dire times. This is an opportunity for India to demonstrate its role as the primary HADR-response State in the region, along with its willingness and readiness to provide aid to Indonesia through these recurring times of disaster and tragedy. Indonesia faces a series of issues stemming from natural disasters which consequently lead to poor living conditions and an overall state of constant chaos; India as a Grade 2 NSP in the region can significantly help in improving the country's capabilities and response to such circumstances, by having a continued or permanent, consensual presence in Indonesian waters, training of all applicable and relevant personnel and volunteers, investing in greater infrastructure, and facilitating private sector interaction in the region. Some of these agreements may seem ideal but far from coming to fruition, and some of them may even lie in direct contradiction to current Indonesian policies; for instance, Indonesia has repeatedly shown immense opposition to India's continuous presence in its littorals, and has legally issued objections to certain Indian diplomatic initiatives.²⁵ Fortunately, it seems like the dialogue for joint development has been initiated, as the "Shared Vision for Indo-Indonesian Maritime Cooperation" emphasises expanding cooperation in the same, paying close attention to aspects such as infrastructure development, geodetic data sharing, development of early warning systems, and strengthening overall disaster preparedness and risk management, especially in the form of aid.²⁶

Beyond Grade 2, there exists ground for mutual benefit in the form of counter deterrence and strategic posturing against any State-driven, Grade 1 activity in and around the region. Indonesia has been overt and vocal about its territorial sovereignty, however being the largest State in the South East Asian regional complex, it actively seeks to fortify the autonomy of ASEAN countries, and ensure regional security and stability.²⁷ Even though the possibility of facing a Grade 1 use of force directly is a distant one, the security dilemma each of these countries face vis-à-vis foreign forces is very real and tangible. In the current geopolitical scenario, the most prominent figure in that regard is China. The fact that most of these States have outstanding disputes with China illustrates just how much the regional security complex requires a potent balancer to oppose the economic and military superiority of the East Asian giant. The United States is an able counter-balancing force, but Indonesia's hesitance in allowing a maritime super power, such as the United States, is due to the loss of control that may occur over time in Indonesia's own littorals. India's benign image coupled with competent versatile capabilities corrects that shortcoming. India on various occasions has proven her commitment to international law, freedom of navigation, and most importantly, territorial sovereignty. Clearly highlighting its intent of safeguarding mutual interests by strategically strengthening the capabilities present in various straits in Indonesia, mainly Lombok, is perhaps the method by which such a dialogue should be initiated. Jakarta, itself has previously recognised the growth of China, and has also noted India as one of the potential balancers in the region it can align itself with.²⁸ The balance of tensions between India and China has escalated horizontally in recent times, but has not tipped the paired-minority conflict in any one State's favour. However, in consideration of the recent Chinese activity and exchanges with Indonesia, it can clearly be seen how the East Asian nation is working towards clearer and more substantial relations with this strategically valuable State. If successful, this could tip the balance in China's favour.²⁹

India finds itself capable at an opportune time, where China does not hold the same kind of military influence as it does in other regions in Asia, and the long-standing dispute of the South China Sea complicates the discourse that the Chinese would have ideally wanted to establish and control. However, the inherent flaw in India's entire approach is that in the past, she has operated on a purely constructivist basis, where everything was decided on a case-to-case basis. Even in times of disaster, India operated under a similar *realpolitik* philosophy, assessing the benefit to be gained and responding appropriately. Times have changed; and India can no longer afford the luxury of being linear and be accommodating of other countries' policies and acting through this constructivist method. Strengthening and formalising the bilateral relations with Indonesia presents a clear advantage, allowing India to achieving a larger portion of its contemporary interests, and do so at a time when the region in question is not completely aligned or in favour of a single power. This allows India to project its influence alongside that of Indonesia, consequently leading other countries to refocus their interest in consideration of India's actions.

India's intensive approach with regards to its AEP is commendable; the SAGAR initiative offers itself as a grand idea and a foreign policy tool of immense utility should it be implemented effectively. New Delhi has also made sure that it actively participates in the fora established in the SEARC. Considering this, it is only natural for India to want to engage with her non-aligned ally of the past more actively. Indonesia's vision of itself as a Global Maritime Fulcrum and her recent articulation of an extensive Ocean Policy offers the two States a significant segue towards greater maritime cooperation. The utility of the confluence in their independently developed foreign policy apparatuses is not lost on either State.³⁰ It would be in the interest of both States to capitalise on this confluence while the fickle tides of the world order remain in their favour. High level diplomatic exchanges have yielded vague MoUs and promises that have either been encumbered by the bureaucratic machinery in the two respective States, or have failed to materialise entirely. The likely frustration for the Southeast Asian nations in seeking to partner with India on HADR is that the Indian government does not have a structured mechanism for government action in a disaster.³¹ This unfortunately is in vein with India's anachronistic approach to diplomacy; a better diplomatic effort that focuses on penning down any and all substantial agreements in detailed articulations on the bilateral level with Indonesia will not only correct this flaw, but also serve a greater purpose in creating an environment of mutual compassion, cooperation, and understanding, thereby paving the path for greater diplomatic interactions on various issues across multiple levels through the already established structures for dialogue between the two States.

A structured mechanism specially designed to aid Indonesia in its problem of chronic natural disasters is something India should heavily focus on using the current looming crisis in the Lombok region as a spring board to rejuvenate this diplomatic dialogue. Naval presence to aid in times of need, and to provide efficient and swift response as was seen during the 2004 tsunami in the region is something India can negotiate for whilst opening the dialogue on various avenues spanning from infrastructure, food and medical aid, to personnel training, transportation, and rehabilitation. The defence diplomatic approach needs to be reoriented to find incremental, compartmentalised, and micro grounds of agreements within each Grade and each discipline. Identifying mutual grounds of cooperation in both, the public, and private sector, along with mutual initiatives and

exercises to tackle maritime issues must be the first step in this contemporary form of diplomacy. The strategic value of Indonesia to India's interest cannot be overstated, and it is imperative that Indonesia actively pursues projecting these interests devoid of any foreign influence, solely for the goal of maximising her own security.

Maritime cooperation and joint capability building

Warmer Indo-Indonesian relations offer the dual benefit of economic enhancement for both States, and strategic posturing for India. Thus, an appropriate approach to this would be for India and Indonesia to explore congruence in their independent strategies and look for areas that serve for mutual betterment. The first plan of action for the period 2016–2019 highlights the importance awarded to Maritime Industry and Sea Connectivity by Indonesia in its Ocean policy.³² Despite the Djuanda Declaration of *Wawasan Nusantara* enunciating Indonesia's archipelagic outlook, the ASEAN state failed to embrace its archipelagic nature and under President Suharto's regime, the eastern most parts of Indonesia saw stunted growth as the regime focused primarily on the western and more developed parts of Indonesia.³³ The disparity caused by this remains evident to this day. A major contributor to this has been the poor connectivity between the distant islands and provinces of Indonesia. According to a recent World Bank report the cost of transporting a shipment from Padang to Jakarta costs more than three times the amount it would cost to transport the same shipment from Jakarta to Singapore.³⁴ Thus, poor infrastructure has proven to be an impediment in Indonesia's economic growth.

The first step therefore should be the creation of adequate infrastructure investments in the ASEAN nation and its ports. Indonesia has encouraged Indian involvement and participation in helping develop her maritime infrastructure and ship-building.³⁵ President Jokowi also encouraged increased Indian investment in Indonesia's ports.³⁶ The exchange of students and engineers from India to Indonesia and vice-versa would go towards developing healthier ties based in the sharing of culture through their respective diaspora, and technological expertise on either side. The first India-Indonesia Infrastructure Forum saw the relevant Indonesian ministry candidly address and seek to resolve any issues posited by the Indian Business Forum with regard to their ease of conducting business in the ASEAN State which made for a prudent and welcome step to future maritime economic cooperation.³⁷ This has gone towards motivating the IBF, a consortium of Indian businesses in Indonesia, to boost their activities in the region. As the Indonesian market becomes more lucrative and attractive, a higher number of private Indian entities would seek to expand their businesses in the State, thus augmenting local economies and creating jobs.

Development and promotion of a port near the Lombok Strait would bring it into the limelight, where it could serve as the axis upon which domestic maritime trade in Indonesia could rest, as it would help connect the hitherto underdeveloped areas of the east while simultaneously promoting the local economy. Owing to its geographical features, large parts of Indonesia are dependent on the blue economy, so the government naturally puts a lot of emphasis on this as well. In the "Shared Vision" document released by both parties with regard to maritime cooperation, the States mention the importance of the blue economy "as a driver for inclusive and sustainable growth".³⁸ An important aspect here

involves the problem of IUU fishing plaguing Jakarta, due to which it lost an estimate of about 24 billion dollar in revenue in 2014.³⁹ Needless to say, such an amount would be of tremendous value to a developing country such as Indonesia. Management of marine resources through methods developed through scientific and technological exchange would help create jobs and be crucial in helping Indonesia tap its vast maritime potential.

The second step would entail a mutually agreed upon Indian presence in the Indonesian region. India has already begun to establish its presence as a security maximiser and a loyal friend in the SEARC by forging strong ties with Singapore and Vietnam.⁴⁰ India and Indonesia also recently updated their relationship to a Comprehensive Security Partnership. In light of this, it is only organic for the two States to pivot into the development of a comprehensive security structure based on mutual interest.⁴¹ Security and economic progress are not mutually exclusive and, if implemented correctly, a partnership between Jakarta and New Delhi, which is in its adolescent stage, offers enough malleability and manoeuvrability to ease the formulation of a relationship that combines the strategic value of their geographical location and the cumulative strength of two of the world's fastest growing economies. Furthermore, both States are becoming increasingly aware of the prospective Chinese threat and are wary of its effects on their domestic and international environments (if it were to materialise).

Indonesia is party to the South China Sea dispute against China, and Indian scholars seem to be adopting *Realpolitik* in their attitude, due to the prevalence of the String of Pearls Theory. It is neither in the interest of either India or Indonesia to be construed as timid on the world stage in the face of a belligerent China, nor does it serve their interests to adopt a hostile attitude of Clausewitzian proportions as it would send the States into the downward spiral of a security dilemma. It is therefore obvious that the middle path of security maximisation is the one that needs to be adopted. Needless to say, capability building at the junction of the two great oceans- the Indian and the Pacific- is judicious and far-sighted, and the most pragmatic method to adopt this would be through skilful combination of the strengths of Jakarta and New Delhi. The authors prescribe joint military presence at a port of strategic utility; the Tanjung Perak port bordering the Lombok strait would be the most preferable for this as its centrality ensures strategic value for both India, and Indonesia, in a domestic and an international setting. From the Indonesian perspective, aside from the immense economic value that has been mentioned earlier, Lombok's posturing right below Makassar and mid-way between the main island chain could make it an essential hub for patrolling of the busy waters of ASL-II either independently, or jointly, under the aegis of CORPAT.⁴² This would help in curbing the many perils that seem to come hand-in-hand with increased economic activity such as drug trafficking, smuggling, territorial breaches, maritime piracy, and terrorism. The base would offer the Indonesian government, (jointly with New Delhi, if it so desires), the opportunity to exercise jurisdiction and sovereignty over the eastern-most waters of Indonesia. Internationally speaking, the port would be another point of interest on the *Crescent of Cooperation* — a sequence of ports situated on geopolitically significant locations through the joint effort of like-minded States, developed to form a figurative line of defence against threat emanating from India's east.⁴³ While the defence aspect of such an idea is explicit, to reduce it to just that would not be fair as it would distract from its economic incentives and would only seek to bolster security dilemma sensibility. A more accurate understanding of the same would demand a closer look at the capability

building aspect of the Crescent. The Crescent derives from a defensive realist thought; it is not antagonistic in its nature, but benign, preventive, and more importantly collaborative.

Conclusion

The need for stronger, conducive and more structured bilateral relations with Indonesia is quite evident. India's strategic goals in this fast-changing sphere have to be actively pursued with a perception and through mechanisms that stray away from her past practice and understanding. The idea of being a defensive realist State can co-exist with stronger and wider relations in the maritime domain, solely for the benefit of India and her respective partner States. Indonesia has a significant amount to gain in finance, infrastructure, information, and security if it engages with India in a more intensive manner than the two countries have in the past, and, in consideration of Indonesia's Ocean Policy, both countries will be serving each other well for their own benefit, but not at the cost of any other entity.

Ideally, India should focus on a port in the Lombok region due to both, its strategic value, and the looming humanitarian crisis which will demand a quick and efficient response. Furthermore, Indonesia will gain significantly with a multipurpose port in the region as it will facilitate connectivity and employment. However, in order for any these to materialise, a strong channel of dialogue needs to be established with a different and more active form of diplomacy that does not operate on a case-by-case, constructivist basis. India's strength lies in her ability to respond and act when called upon; it is imperative that these capabilities are capitalised on in order to achieve her fundamental objectives in South East Asia.

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Notes on contributors

Japish S. Gill is a Bachelor’s Student at Pandit Deendayal Petroleum University-School of Liberal Studies, majoring in International Relations. His areas of interest are Indian Foreign Policy, Maritime Affairs, Nuclear Policy, and Asian Geopolitics.

Ryan Mitra is a Bachelor’s Student at Pandit Deendayal Petroleum University-School of Liberal Studies, majoring in International Relations. His areas of interest are Indian Foreign Policy, Maritime Affairs, Nuclear Policy, and International Law.

ORCID

Ryan Mitra  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2932-8259>