

# Associate Paper

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## India's Role in the Indian Ocean and East Asian Regions

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### Key Points

- India should enhance its diplomatic presence and soft power in the region.
- The Indian Navy should increase its activities in the region by conducting more frequent port calls and joint naval exercises.
- Closer co-operation with Australia and India would enable Indonesia to enhance its naval capability in the shortest time possible and improve its ability to secure freedom of navigation through the Indonesian "chokepoints".

*This article is based on the speech delivered by the writer at the India/ASEAN Delhi Dialogue III, 'Beyond the First Twenty Years of India-ASEAN Engagement' in New Delhi, hosted by the Indian Council for World Affairs in March 2011.*

I attended the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus meeting in Hanoi in October 2010 as advisor to Indonesian Defence Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro. It was quite a colourful sight to see the uniforms of various officers from so many countries.

Both the ADMM and ADMM Plus are currently at a stage of mutual familiarisation and trust-building — by adopting non-controversial joint programmes, such as peacekeeping, disaster management, military medical programmes and maritime security.

The East Asia Summit (EAS), initiated by the ten ASEAN members, is attended by the leaders (preferably the heads of government) of the United States, China, India, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan.

If we link the heading of this session and the overall theme of this Delhi Dialogue III, 'Beyond the First Twenty Years of India-ASEAN Engagement', it should be obvious that, in the years to come, we will be dealing with a changing geopolitical map, both in the East Asia/Pacific area and in the Indian Ocean area.

It is also obvious that, with the impressive economic and technological achievements, including the growing military capabilities, of China and India, these two major Asian powers have a dominating presence on the geopolitical map of East Asia, and the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.

Today's India is not the same as the India of twenty years ago. Similarly, the geopolitical setting within which ASEAN existed twenty years ago in East Asia is, with the dramatic rise of China, totally different today.

ASEAN too, after twenty years, in all modesty, is now more cohesively equipped with a clearly formulated vision in coping with the future.

Again, in all modesty, ASEAN has remained cohesive thanks to Indonesia's achievement as the largest member state since the critical year of 1998 — critical, because of the Asian financial crisis and the resignation of then president Soeharto. The subsequent reformation movement pushed Indonesia into a new era of participatory democracy.

The large archipelagic state did not disintegrate. As a matter of fact, Indonesia has managed to achieve constant economic growth during the last years, albeit more modest when compared to India's success, while consolidating its democratic institutions.

It is in this context of a fluid geopolitical map that Indonesian Foreign Minister Dr Marty Natalegawa has called for the establishment of a 'dynamic equilibrium' between the new geopolitical actors in Asia.

I do not believe that, from the outset, the two Asian big powers, India and China, are locked in a confrontational trajectory.

It is true, however, that in order to protect and secure the extensive supply lines underpinning their respective high economic growth rates, each must enhance their naval capabilities. Both have to import a large percentage of their energy needs.

Robert Kaplan, in an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2009, which he expanded in his recently published book, *Monsoon: The Future of American Power in the Indian Ocean*, describes the unintended naval competition between India and China that could cause unnecessary destabilising consequences in the wider Indian Ocean region.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Kaplan, R., 'Rivalry in the Indian Ocean' *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2009 and *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, Random House: New York, 2010.

It is very advisable indeed for ASEAN and its dialogue partners, probably by maximising the East Asia Summit process, to keep in constant touch with each other to sort out whatever misunderstandings or conflicts may arise.

The journey toward reaching a new, mutually acceptable strategic balance – you may wish to call it a “dynamic equilibrium” venture – will certainly not be an easy path to tread.

Within the context of this piece, I interpret the theme of our dialogue and the heading of this session as an indirect invitation to request our views regarding India’s role, given the emergence of a new geopolitical map in the Indian Ocean region and the East Asia/West Pacific region.

For what it’s worth, this Indonesian advice to our host country covers the following points:

- India should enhance its diplomatic presence in the East Asian countries: beef-up your embassies with quality staffing and adequate operational funding.
- Activities related to public diplomacy should be expanded, including spreading the richness of Indian culture, particularly in its modern forms. The magic of Bollywood is one of India’s most effective communication channels.
- The Indian Navy should increase its activities in East Asia by frequent port calls and various joint naval exercises. Whatever joint programmes ADMM Plus states are planning, India should offer its active participation. In July 2005, India’s Naval Chief Admiral Arun Prakash made a port call to Tanjung Priok in Jakarta, with the carrier INS *Viraat*, accompanied by two guided missile destroyers. When the *Jakarta Post* interviewed him, his impressive personality and his informative interview was one effective example of India’s effective naval diplomacy.<sup>2</sup>
- In looking at the map of the Indian Ocean region, especially the eastern part, it is clear that broader and deeper naval co-operation is indeed necessary between the three littoral countries: India, Indonesia and Australia. Indonesia’s naval capability is still modest, but the strategic sea lanes are located in the Indonesian archipelago: the Malacca Strait, the Sunda Strait, the Lombok Strait and the Makassar Strait.

Closer co-operation with Australia and India would enable Indonesia to enhance its naval capability in the shortest time possible. Thus, the Indonesian Navy will be in a better position to carry out its responsibility to secure passage through the abovementioned strategic straits.

- Finally, it is interesting to observe China’s increasing presence in East Timor, displaying its generosity in constructing public buildings, including the presidential palace.

China is also apparently keen to secure passage through the Wetar Strait off Timor-Leste, as a possible alternative, since the above mentioned Indonesian straits are potential

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Admiral confident of India’s future role’, *Jakarta Post*, 29 July 2005.

“chokepoints”. After all, Chinese President Hu Jintao has bemoaned that the Malacca Strait is “China’s dilemma”.

Thank you.

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