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South China Sea: Time for India To Mark Its Presence

By Darshana M. Baruah

Synopsis

India has been overly cautious about increasing its interest in the Western Pacific. Recent developments under the Modi Government, however, hint at a greater political will in playing a part in shaping the changing security architecture.

Commentary

AS TENSION in the South China Sea continues to rise, countries like Vietnam and the Philippines are increasingly looking toward other regional powers to increase and maintain their interest in the Western Pacific. With growing India-Vietnam defence ties, Hanoi in particular is keen on India's presence in the region, be it for economic or strategic reasons.

However, India has been unable to meet the expectations of its ASEAN friends, who more often than not complain about New Delhi not 'doing enough' in the security domain. While India continues to maintain its distance from any 'contain China' strategy, recent developments suggest that New Delhi is more willing to listen to its ASEAN friends. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's maiden presence at the 9th East Asia Summit and the 12th India-ASEAN summit in Myanmar last week provides a glimpse into India's willingness to be involved in regional security issues beyond its shores.

Maritime security

Under the leadership of Modi, the new government has renewed its interest in maritime security and has recognised the need to be involved in shaping the changing security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

In boosting defence ties, India is also focusing on strengthening its maritime partnerships with the navies of the region such as Australia, Japan, Singapore and Vietnam. India offered a US\$ 100 million line of credit to Vietnam, which was re-iterated during the visit of the Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to Delhi in October 2014. Hanoi in turn is looking to use the credit to buy new naval vessels from New Delhi in an effort to strengthen its maritime defence in the South China Sea.

New Delhi must now also look to strengthen its maritime partnership with Jakarta under the leadership of President Joko Widodo -- the new leader in Indonesia paying special attention to the maritime strategy of the country.

Joint statements

One of Modi's first overseas visits was to Japan, an important player in the Indo-Pacific and embroiled in a potentially dangerous dispute with Beijing over the East China Sea. The Tokyo Declaration at the end of the visit on 3 September 2014 "attached importance to the regularisation of bilateral maritime exercises as well as to Japan's continued participation in India - US Malabar series of exercises".

Earlier this year, New Delhi invited Japan to participate in the Malabar Exercises -- the annual U.S.-India joint naval exercises. The trilateral exercises in the Western Pacific have raised some concerns in Beijing. The joint statement at the end of Modi's visit to the US in September 2014 was of great significance both for the reason that for the first time India made a direct comment on dispute resolution in the South China Sea and that it was in a joint statement with Washington.

The statement read that "The leaders expressed concern about rising tensions over maritime territorial disputes, and affirmed the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over-flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea". The statement also urges all parties to resolve the dispute in a peaceful manner in accordance with international law, drawing criticisms from Beijing.

Furthermore, when the Vietnamese Prime Minister paid an official visit to India, the South China Sea was mentioned once again in their joint statement. The statement called for freedom of navigation through the South China Sea and urged all disputing parties to work toward the implementation of the Code of Conduct.

India's repeated mention of the South China Sea in joint statements is definitely a shift from its previous statements on maritime security. Although New Delhi has previously remarked on the need to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation in the region, it has never named any country or an area in dispute.

Time to end timidity of China

Continuing with the trend, Modi again emphasised the need to stabilise the South China Sea in the recently concluded 12th India-ASEAN Summit and the 9th East Asia Summit in Myanmar. At both forums Modi emphasised the need to follow international norms to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea, a comment directed at China.

What is also of significance is India's choice of platforms in making these comments. In the face of a weakening American alliance in Asia, Modi's statement on the South China Sea with Obama signifies an increasing need for New Delhi to play a leadership role in regional security. Perhaps India is finally gathering the political will to play a greater role as a security provider in the region.

Similarly, the joint statement with Vietnam is a re-assurance to one of India's closest friend in the Southeast Asia engaged in a sharp dispute with China. Modi also met with the leaders of the Philippines and Japan -- two other nations in dispute with China in the East China and the South China seas -- signalling a greater willingness to play an active role in regional security.

Beijing is mostly wary of such actions as it opposes the internationalisation of the disputes in the contested waters, continuously warning other nations from engaging in the region. China is staunch in its demand that all disputes in the region be resolved bilaterally, without intervention or mediation from any other nation or multilateral institution.

On the other hand, countries like the Philippines and Vietnam are apprehensive about facing their big neighbour alone at the negotiation table. Moreover, Beijing does not recognise the dispute in the South China Sea and considers the islands within the nine-dash line (now ten-dash) a part of its own territory.

There is no doubt that New Delhi's interest in Southeast and East Asia is growing. India is looking to collaborate with the countries of the region at both economic and defence levels. With the Look East Policy gaining momentum as "Act East", the current government's initiatives point in the right direction.

India has for far too long fought shy of its opportunities in the East trying not to upset China. However, with the changing regional security architecture and an expanding Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean, it is time that India step out of its 'timidity of China' frame and move forward with its collaborations and engagements with key players in the region. It is also important to note that New Delhi is not engaged in any China containment policy and it need not. It is merely being vocal about its concerns which are enough to assure its friends in Southeast Asia -- that India may slowly be ready to play the role of a security provider that the region needs.

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