

A maritime stretch: Modi in Southeast Asia

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi's visit to Southeast Asia](#) this week has the potential to spark a new period of maritime cooperation between India and Indonesia. An uptick in India-Indonesia relations will be a welcome development for both President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Mr. Modi, who through their respective 'Global Maritime Fulcrum' and 'Act East' policies have envisaged sharper maritime collaboration in the region.

The visit comes against the backdrop of an offer from the Indonesian government to grant India access to its Sabang port for the development of the port and an economic zone. Located at the mouth of the strategically important Strait of Malacca, Sabang is only 100 nautical miles from the southern tip of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India and Indonesia share multiple common concerns, one of which is China's growing maritime footprint in the eastern Indian Ocean. Sabang, with its naval base, naval air station, and maintenance and repair facilities, has the potential to serve as the focal point of a budding strategic partnership between the two countries.

Both countries value the key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that connect the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, and therefore the foundation of any strategic partnership will rest on how they both seek to manage the region's strategically important chokepoints. The strategically important Straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda fall under the Indian Navy's primary area of interest, and access to Indonesian naval bases such as Sabang will significantly enhance the Indian Navy's ability to maintain a forward presence and monitor movements in the Straits of Malacca.

Indonesia too has started recognising the benefits of a closer strategic partnership with India. Like many other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Jakarta remains apprehensive of Chinese intentions in the wider maritime theatre. The territorial dispute between China and Indonesia in the Natuna Sea is an issue that is close to Mr. Jokowi, and a strategic alignment with India will help Jakarta balance some of the security concerns emanating from Beijing's aggressive stance in the South China Sea.

The comprehensive defence cooperation agreement that is expected to be signed between the countries can possibly be a multifaceted logistical agreement — on the lines of the deal which India signed with France earlier in the year. Mutual logistical support and reciprocal berthing rights will facilitate a more intimate maritime security partnership. This will allow India to gain access to naval bases in Lampung on the Sunda Strait, and Denpasar and Banyuwangi on the Lombok Strait, augmenting the Indian Navy's operational breadth in the eastern Indian Ocean.

Indonesia, on its end, will also seek to negotiate the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone shared by the two nations in the Andaman Sea. Additional facets of this partnership can involve information sharing on white shipping, and enabling India to partner Indonesia in tracking commercial cargo ships at choke points such as Malacca which are getting increasingly congested.

In the past, cooperation between India and Indonesia has been limited to anti-piracy patrols, search and rescue exercises and joint hydrographic exploration. It is important for the two countries to move to a more concerted and intensive engagement. India should leverage this opportunity and seek its inclusion in the Malacca Strait Patrols programme. India's inclusion in the programme would augment India's existing maritime domain awareness in the region, while the eyes-in-the-sky component will allow India to jointly patrol the region with its maritime surveillance aircraft. Chinese presence in these SLOCs is well known, and India's ability to monitor Chinese naval movements in the locale will be a great boost to the Indian Navy's security missions. Moreover, access to the Jayapura naval base in West Papua will expand the Indian Navy's

operating capacity in the Western Pacific, and complement Indian access to French naval bases in French Polynesia and New Caledonia in the Southern Pacific.

A strategic confluence between New Delhi and Jakarta needs an economic direction. The development of the port and economic zone in Sabang can serve as blueprint for a connectivity partnership between the two nations, and more importantly, provide an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The proposed cruise tourism circuit between the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Sabang would further enhance such economic linkages. Additionally, a partnership that includes collaboration in defence industries and maritime training and education can ensure a dynamic maritime collaboration.

At a time when countries are realigning themselves to accommodate the growing consensus around an Indo-Pacific strategic framework, India and Indonesia, as members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, need to complement each other's vision of a regional order.

Mr. Modi is due to deliver the keynote at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore after his Jakarta visit, and he needs to use this opportunity to make public the strategic framework of his 'Act East' policy. India needs to supplement efforts in Jakarta and leverage its existing strategic relations with Singapore and other like-minded regional states if it is to cement its position as a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean. A closer logistical partnership with countries such as Singapore, Australia and Indonesia can be the starting point of an extensive strategic linkage that will help establish India as a regional provider of maritime security.

The time has come for India to realise the potential of a strategic alignment with the archipelagic state that is geo-politically positioned at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, and an upgrade in maritime relations is the logical way forward.

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