



# NEED TO REBUILD STRATEGIC UNDERSTANDING

The evolution of India's Look East policy (LEP) in early 1990s and the advent of democracy in Indonesia melted the three decades freeze in relations. In terms of geopolitical understanding, it is increasingly acknowledged within India that Indonesia is important for India's strategic interests and also for building confidence at a time when India is planning to expand its Joint Command in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

India and Indonesia have witnessed identical past in terms of multi-religious tolerant society and similar traditional and cultural traits. Importantly, the ancient civilisation links between the two nations were promoted through traders, religious scholars and cultural exchanges which became common points of reference. This created a bilateral bridge between the two countries separated by vast Indian Ocean. Even in historical past, *Bali Yatra*, religious and cultural artefacts and Hindu and Buddhist temples in Parambanan and Borobodur in Indonesia highlight the influence of Indic civilisation.

## Confluence Of Commerce

For Indian traders, Indonesia was the rendezvous junction with southeast Asian trading communities. Subsequently, with the industrial revolution in Europe and evolution of factories, the trade and commerce activities were dominated by European nations. After independence from the colonial occupation, India and Indonesia shaped the world politics through the Non-Aligned Movement

in which the two countries were the founding members. The personal equation between Jawaharlal Nehru and President Sukarno created trust and understanding between the two nations. However, the contrasting position of the two leaders about the formation of communist China created unbridgeable chasm. Subsequently, India's support to Malaysia during the period of *Konfrontasi* with Indonesia led to prolonged estrangement and chill in ties. Subsequently, the power bloc inclinations have estranged the two neighbours.

The evolution of India's Look East policy (LEP) in early 1990s and the advent of democracy in Indonesia melted the three decades freeze in relations. A need was expressed that India should recreate and rebuild the understanding which was existent at the time of Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru advocated cooperative security architecture, regional understanding and sharing of global commons which is seen as a prerequisite for promoting regional peace and security.

## Guards Of The Ocean

In the more contemporary discourse, India and Indonesia have been seen as guards of the Indian Ocean. More importantly, the two countries have been engaged in, Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (which is now rechristened as Indian Ocean Rim Association), G-20 processes and also informal mechanisms like East Asia Summit. In terms of geopolitical understanding, it is increasingly acknowledged within India that Indonesia is important for India's strategic interests and also for building confidence at a time when India is planning to expand its Joint Command in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It is the geographical land mass which is seen as cradle to Malacca Straits, a very critical Sea Line of Communications (SLOC).

## Tolerant Ethos

Indonesia also gains significance because of being the home to the largest Muslim population (about 220 million) in the world. Indonesia comprises of more than 17,000 islands, tolerant religious ethos and multiethnic society. While India is espousing a greater understanding with the ASEAN nations through the establishment of an ASEAN Ambassador in Jakarta, Indonesia gains significance for India's approach towards this region which is vital for its trade and services industry. Moreover, its benign image and its role in regional security have been well documented. Therefore, it must engage countries like Indonesia, so as to have comprehensive understanding on regional security as well as multilateral forums like East Asian Summit (EAS). Among the diverse reasons for cooperation, maritime security and counter-terrorism figures prominently in the bilateral cooperation list of the two countries. With Indonesia being strategically placed in Indo-Pacific construct, a reference to which was made in Australian Defence White Paper in 2013, India needs to engage this vital nation.

For reasons like energy security, anti-piracy and humanitarian and disaster relief the Indian Ocean region and Indo-Pacific construct has assumed tremendous strategic importance. Political and military developments might hinder the flow of crude oil, exploitation of offshore mineral exploration and merchandise trade could adversely impact the world's major economies. The importance of choke points has also been amplified as strategic tools. The tactical importance of Malacca Straits was magnified even prior to India's independence. KM Panikkar in his book *India and Indian Ocean: An Essay on Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* had stated, "The Gulf of Malacca is like the mouth of a crocodile, the peninsula of Malaya being the upper and the jutting end of Sumatra being the lower jaw. The entry to the Gulf can be controlled by the Nicobars and the narrow end is dominated by the island of Singapore".

## Key Strategic Partner

Subsequently, the then Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh remarked in 2003 that India's strategic interests lie from Persian Gulf to Straits of Malacca and beyond. This formed the edifice of India's defence and strategic engagement with its eastern seaboard. It also helped in articulating India's Maritime Doctrine of 2004. The second edition of India's Maritime Doctrine, released

in August 2009, specified the role of Indian Navy in protecting Indian Ocean. It also highlighted the strategic interest of India from Malacca Straits to Straits of Hormuz. Interestingly, Sunda and Lombok Straits (Indonesian sea lanes) were cited as vital sea lanes of communication, thereby making Indonesia as a country indispensable for maritime security. Lately, India has proclaimed its intention to emerge as the net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. Given these ambitious objectives, Indonesia stands out as the key strategic partner.

KM Panikkar had advocated controlling the maritime periphery for securing India's national interests. India's activism in protecting its maritime commercial interests was seen when India deployed its latest frigates for the protection of its maritime cargo as well as thwarting any pirate attack in Gulf of Aden. With India having received second aircraft carrier *Vikramaditya* (better known as *Admiral Gorshkov*), nuclear submarine *Arihant* attaining criticality, India's indigenous carrier *Vikrant* programme progressing at a faster pace, advanced stealth frigates programme and formation of three different versions of *BrahMos* shows that Indian armed forces are keen for larger geostrategic role. Lately India has projected its naval capabilities in protecting its national interests and on its western stretch it is trying to build affable relations with its littoral neighbours.

## Controlling Piracy

The Malacca Straits Security Initiative helped in curtailing piracy which declined from a triple digit figures to a mere couple of incidents shows that the threat has subsided in the Malacca Straits. India harping on the role in the Malacca Straits Initiative and escorting US ships in Malacca Straits in the past has now subscribed to the fact that its presence might trigger other powers to participate in the security initiative. India had deputed a naval officer in Singapore for liaison and coordinating movement of high value cargo with the littoral countries of Southeast Asia.

From strategic point of view, engaging Indonesia is important for developing Andaman as the Joint Command centre and for promoting maritime security. It is essential to strengthen joint command to take care of bilateral ties with littoral countries of the region. India has been conducting weekly coordinated patrols along the Eight degree channel with Indonesia. India should organise more frequent joint patrols with Indonesian Navy and make it a more regular feature. Humanitarian aid and disaster relief are the areas of cooperation and this was accepted when the multinational exercises were conducted near the Indonesian waters this year. The visit by Indian Prime Minister to Indonesia in October 2013 highlighted the need for better coordination and strategic understanding. With Indonesia, India had signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2005 but



**DR PANKAJ JHA**  
The writer is Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi.

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the lack of initiative and official inertia from both sides has put the strategic understanding on the back burner. It was only when Indonesia cajoled Indian foreign ministry to create better strategic and defence understanding and India also recognising Indonesia's growing stature in southeast Asia that the bilateral ties have gained some momentum. There is need for naval exercises, sharing of intelligence and information and cooperation in anti-piracy and humanitarian missions.

**Proactive Role**

Further, India must enhance its presence in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India must deploy two corvettes and one tanker at Andamans for patrols as well as coordinating rescue efforts. India could look for possibility for deploying coast guard ships along the mouth of Malacca Straits for coordinating anti-piracy operations as well as interdiction of harmful cargo. Lately, reports have suggested that there is again a spurt in piracy incidents near the Straits of Malacca. India could undertake naval liaison visits to Sunda, Lombok and Makassar Straits. *INS Sudarshini* expedition commemorating two decades of Look East policy has provided the necessary impetus to this objective. The two countries should work out possibilities for cooperation in defence research and technology even at a small scale. Intent was shown from the two sides during the Indian Prime Minister's visit. The two countries can also work on the joint shipbuilding programme, especially when there is an MoU already in place for this purpose. India could sell radars, communication equipment and non-lethal military equipment to Indonesia. Cooperation related to network centric warfare and joint hydrographic surveys should be initiated so as to plot the maritime terrain. Technical cooperation in maintenance and joint production of defence equipment should be done with mutual consent. Given the necessary impetus already achieved after the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, Indonesia should work towards building mutually beneficial ties.

**Aceh Al Qaeda**

One more important issue which has been gaining traction in the bilateral context is counter-terrorism. With maritime borders of the two nations being very close to each other (nearly 80 nautical miles), the counter-terrorism cooperation has been embedded in the bilateral ties. More importantly, there are increasing references to the maritime terrorism in Southeast Asia. Indonesian experience in containing terrorism and eliminating Jemaah Islamiyah leaders like Noordin Top, Azhari Bin Husin, Dulmatin to name a few, India can draw lessons from Indonesian example. India and Indonesia have been signatories to the Counter Terrorism Convention held in Cebu in Philippines in 2007 and the common agenda for both nations is to help in counter-terrorism initiatives through sharing of intelligence and coordinated action to apprehend any such individuals and organisations having malafide intentions. Developments in Aceh with reports of formation of Al Qaeda of Aceh and increasing religious radicalisation in the recent past had perturbed India's security agencies. These developments closer to its maritime boundary in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, have caused concerns with regard to security of India's cargo and trade.

**Pakistan Connection**

Another concern is the visit of many of the southeast Asian students in Pakistani madrasas having radical leanings. The Ahle Hadith Madarsas which were run by Hafeez Saeed (prime suspect in Mumbai blasts of 26/11) has seen the arrest and deportation of Indonesian religious radicals in the past. Even the arrest of Umar Patek (early in 2012) who had visited Abbottabad to meet Al Qaeda operative (primarily Osama bin Laden, just few months prior to his death) showcases how Pakistan conveniently ignored the existence of Osama bin Laden. The coordination between the radical elements of south Asia and southeast Asia would be one area which would have serious implications for the security of both nations because of the porous borders and the lack of integrated intelligence network between the south and southeast Asian nations; it would be very difficult to apprehend the terrorist elements. Therefore, there is urgent need for intelligence and information sharing in this context.

Indonesia, with its increasing international clout and better economic growth is likely to gain importance in regional and global politics. India with its increasing strategic footprints needs to engage Indonesia, not only to safeguard its sphere of influence but also to calibrate its maritime expansion plans. In the past plans for building the Andaman Command were met with fierce diplomatic resistance from many southeast Asian nations. The modernisation of navy and the increasing responsibility towards safeguarding Indian EEZ means that India will have to build greater trust and understanding with its maritime neighbours. Indonesia being the largest democracy in southeast Asia and also a close strategic partner, India needs to build cooperative structures in maritime security, anti-piracy and counter-terrorism cooperation. 