

India Pivots to Asia... Again

Written by Manjeet Singh Pardesi

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MANJEET SINGH PARDESI, DEC 4 2013

Addressing the senior-most Indian military leadership in late November, the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh noted that the Asia-Pacific was fast becoming the “arena for shaping the behavior of major powers”. Given that economic power and consequent strategic focus was shifting from the west to the east, Singh told the country’s top military brass that India must be able to “institutionally” grapple with these dramatic transformations especially given the rising tensions in the “seas to our [India’s] east and the related ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalancing’ by the US in this area.”

This is the first time that the Indian government has openly asked the military to factor in America’s “pivot” to Asia in its planning.

To be sure, Indian diplomats have taken America’s presence in East Asia for Indian diplomacy in the region seriously for many years now. Even before the United States formally announced its pivot to Asia in 2011, Ronen Sen, who was serving as India’s Ambassador to the United States in 2005, mentioned that given the rapidly expanding relations between India and the United States, it was “only natural that the Pacific facet of the United States should correspondingly be factored into India’s Look East policy.”

Importantly, India now sees itself as an important part of the larger Asian strategic theater stretching from the Indian Ocean region into the western Pacific, the so-called Indo-Pacific region. In fact, the term is also slowly entering the lexicon of the Indian leadership, including Singh’s.

But India’s own pivot to Asia is not exactly a new dimension in India’s foreign policy. Soon after its independence, India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru asserted India’s centrality in Asia by arguing that “the future of Asia will be powerfully determined by the future of India” as India was becoming “*the pivot of Asia*”.[1]

More importantly, India also played the role of a major power in Asia commensurate with this idea. India organized the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi – the first conference of Asian states and colonial territories – even before its own independence in March-April 1947. In 1949, India organized conferences on Indonesia and Burma – the first two conferences organized by an Asian state in the postwar world to deal with issues affecting specific Asian countries. The Conference on Indonesia had an important impact on Indonesia’s independence from the Dutch, while Burma became the first country to receive military assistance from India following the Conference on Burma. Later, as a result of India’s active diplomatic role in Indo-China, each of the three International Commissions of Supervision and Control for Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that were created in Geneva in 1954 was headed by an Indian chairman.

At the same time, India also played an important role in Northeast Asia. India acted as an interlocutor between China and the United States during the Korean War given the absence of direct diplomatic links between the two. Later, India’s active diplomacy at the United Nations contributed towards the postwar Korean settlement. Notably, 6,000 Indian troops and administrative personnel led by Indian officers landed in South Korea and actually implemented the exchange of some 23,000 prisoners of war which finally brought the Korean War to an end.

Given the absence of historical tensions between India and Japan, India helped bring Japan back into Asia in the early 1950s. India not only renounced claims to war reparations from Japan, but also concluded a separate peace

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treaty with Japan in 1952 – Tokyo's first peace treaty after the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty.[2] Indian diplomacy also led to Japan's invitation to and participation in the 1955 Bandung Conference even though Japan was not yet a member of the United Nations. At Bandung, India also introduced Communist China to Asia and the wider world given China's pariah status in large parts of Asia after 1949.

The global media effusively praised India and Nehru during this period with the *Manchester Guardian* even saying that Delhi had become the "school of Asia" just as "Athens was the school of Hellas." [3]

However, military, diplomatic, and economic issues led to India's isolation from Asia in the following decade. At the military level, India's disastrous defeat at the hands of China during the 1962 Sino-Indian War made India marginal to Asian strategic affairs. India's policy of non-alignment (and its 'tilt' towards the Soviet Union after 1971) also made India a less desirable partner for many pro-Western Asian states, especially in Southeast Asia. Finally, India's adoption of socialist and autarchic economic policies meant that there was no meaningful interaction even at this level between India and East Asia during the remainder of the Cold War.

It was only after the end of the Cold War when India began to implement structural economic reforms in its gradual embrace of the market that India re-entered the larger Asian geopolitical arena.

However, there is one crucial distinction between India's post-Cold War approach to Asia when compared with its approach to this region in the years following its independence. While India saw itself as "the" pivot of Asia during the Nehru years, Singh (who together with then-Prime Minister Narasimha Rao was the architect of India's "Look East" policy), realized that India had much to learn from Asia's economic powerhouses such as Japan and tiger economies such as Singapore and South Korea, as they had taken a huge lead over India economically (and technologically).

At the same time, India understands that it is the weakest of the Asian great powers and cannot "lead" the region like it had hoped to during the Nehru years. Furthermore, most of Asia is unwilling to recognize the leadership of its other two great powers either. Japan's historical legacy in East Asia limits its role in this regard as does China's rapidly rising power and its unresolved disputes in the East and South China Seas. Therefore, it is not surprising that India believes that "ASEAN centrality is essential in the evolving regional architecture for peace, stability, development, and prosperity."

While not claiming to be the central player in Asia anymore, New Delhi does think that it is indispensable to the emerging balance of power in the region. In 2005, Pranab Mukherjee, India's Minister of Defence stated that India's Look East policy was based on the principle of "the maintenance of an equitable strategic balance" in the region,[4] while Shyam Saran, PM Singh's Special Envoy (and a former Foreign Secretary) has forcefully argued that "no regional architecture [in Asia] ... can have credibility without India's active participation."

So what are we to make of India's emergent bonhomie with the United States in Asia as noted above as well as its rapidly developing relations with Japan and other countries wary of China's growing power? India and the United States have already begun a dialogue on East Asia (including a trilateral one with Japan), while India holds its only "2+2" dialogue (including foreign and defense secretaries from both sides) with Japan.

To be sure, given the growing power differential between China and India, India's links with the United States and Japan do have a balance of power element. However, none of these states is interested in containing China, and Singh has said on more than one occasion that "the world has enough space to accommodate ... the rise of China and India."

While, the United States and Japan are going to be important pillars of India's Look East policy, India's pivot to Asia must be understood as India's own vision of itself as an Asian great power as opposed to a regional power in South Asia alone. More importantly, it should not be perceived merely as an attempt to balance China. After all, Singh has noted that India's Look East policy is "a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy." Through its pivot to Asia, India wishes to reclaim its status as a great power in Asia – a role that it

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had once attempted to play in those early post-independence years.

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[1] Nehru's Address to India's Chief Ministers on 2 October 1949. Quoted in Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Volume Two: 1947-1956* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), 59. *Emphasis added*.

[2] Japan had actually signed a "sham" treaty with the Nationalists in Taipei to officially end its state of war with China before signing the treaty with India (but the Nationalists were no longer in control of the mainland by this time).

[3] *Manchester Guardian*, 26 May 1954, quoted in Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, 193.

[4] Pranab Mukherjee, "Valedictory Address" at the 7th Asian Security Conference, New Delhi, in N. S. Sisodia and G. V. C. Naidu, eds., *Changing Security Dynamic in Eastern Asia: Focus on Japan* (New Delhi: Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, 2005), 24.

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