

Paraspara, Encounters, and Confluences: India's Soft Power Objective in the Indo-Pacific Region

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The ties between India and the countries in the Indo-Pacific region go back to the pre-Christian era. Even today, Indian influence on the language, customs, and rituals is visible in Southeast Asia. The Hindu concepts of kingship, administrative institutions, and ceremonies that became deeply embedded in the royal culture of Southeast Asia were disrupted with the arrival of the colonial powers. These traditional linkages have become the key element of India's diplomacy—the “Look East” and the “Act East” policies. This article studies the background of India's sustained public and cultural diplomacy policy in bridging the gap between India, East Asia, and the Indo-Pacific countries in the context of the Act East policy. Using examples from Modi's yoga diplomacy, Bollywood, and Indian cultural festivals, the authors propose that these initiatives should be seen as part of a historical and traditional concept of “paraspara”—mutually sustainable and reciprocal diplomacy that taps into the opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: India, Australia, Public Diplomacy, Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, East Asia, Modi's Yoga Diplomacy, Bollywood, Look East, Act East Policy, Narendra Modi, Confluences, Soft Power.

The politico-economic and socio-cultural ties between India and most of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region—and especially Southeast Asia—go back to the pre-Christian era. That era, dominated by the mercantile links, also brought Hinduism and Buddhism to the region. The Indian influence is quite visible even in today's Southeast Asia, especially in their language, customs,

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and the rituals of the royalty. Hindu concepts of kingship and Hindu administrative institutions and ceremonies became so deeply embedded in the royal culture of Southeast Asia that even after the Islamization of some states, these practices remain (Andaya and Andaya 2015; Feener and Sevea 2009; Pearson 2016; Sarkar 1985; Tarling 1992).

This interrelation can be traced back to the Indian concept of *paraspara*. This Sanskrit word in simple terms means “mutual” or “reciprocal.” At this stage, it is pertinent to comprehend that *paraspara* is, as Squarcini (2011, 20) argues, not just another word or term but a “semantic indicator” used for “many centuries as a legitimizing metaphor.” Squarcini (2011, 21) points out that the word *paraspara* is derived from the reduplication of the word *para*. Turner (1966, 457) explains that the word *para-* from *Rigveda* denotes the act of “bringing across, from one side to another.” This term has been widely used in literature and anecdotes to explain Hindu kings and their relations with neighboring kingdoms. However, it must be remembered that this word meant much more as a social agent. It pointed to the self-reflective nature of diplomatic relations between these ancient kingdoms. The authors of this article argue that *paraspara*, the widely used term in South Asian culture and literature, also denotes the traditional function, concept, and understanding of Indian diplomatic practices as something “mutually sustainable or balancing to one another.” It can be argued that as a closely aligned term to the word *dharma*, meaning “the eternal law of the nature and a ruler’s way of doing things,” this specialized concept of diplomacy shaped Indian knowledge and intellectual history.

However, India’s trade, culture, maritime links, and the traditional mutually sustainable diplomacy with the Southeast Asian kingdoms were disrupted with the arrival of colonial powers to the region. Nonetheless, these traditional linkages and concepts have once again become the key element of India’s “Look East” policy, which was initiated in the 1990s. Since then, New Delhi’s relationship with its eastern neighbors has come a long way. Today, India’s economic and trade engagements have added to the close political, economic, and security interlinkages with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and now with the entire East Asia and the Pacific. Most notably with Narendra Modi’s present government in India, *paraspara* or mutually sustainable diplomacy as a chosen strategy points to the renewal of, or to guaranteeing the legitimacy of, the past tradition in the region.

After setting its South Asia diplomacy into high gear, India’s current government under the leadership of Modi is now looking toward its Eastern neighbors with great expectation. In assessing the geo-strategic importance of the region, the Modi Government has rechristened its more than two-decade-old policy from “Look East” to “Act East.” This recalibration poses new hope for scholars, policy analysts, and political elites of international relations and suggests that New Delhi will rejuvenate and enhance its foreign relations with East Asian and Pacific nations, that is, the Indo-Pacific (Chaulia 2016).

Hence, this research aims to study the background of India's sustained "Look East" policy and analyze the role of India's "Act East" policy in bridging the gap between India, East Asia, and the Indo-Pacific countries. The article begins by setting the context outlining the historic and social foundations of India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific while highlighting the criticality underscoring India's emerging "Act East" policy. We identify nine interlinked policy drivers: the growing influence of China in the region, the potential of Indian diaspora, internal security concerns, the threat of Islamic terrorism, prospects for connectivity, the quest for energy, economic diplomacy, defense and maritime issues, and the Modi factor. Each of these cuts across hard and soft policy issues and each will challenge and present opportunities for the "Act East" policy. The article further argues that together these drivers inform and shape India's diplomatic agenda in the Indo-Pacific region. It also suggests that India is well placed to leverage its cultural diplomacy more actively toward the region. Using examples from Bollywood and cultural festivals organized by the Ministry of External Affairs in the Indo-Pacific region, we argue that India's cultural diplomacy will advance India's political, economic, and security objectives and interest in this region. In conclusion, we propose that India's public and cultural diplomacy initiatives should be seen as part of the traditional Indian concept of *paraspara*—mutually sustainable—that remains at the core of India's soft power initiatives and taps into the socio-political-economic opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region.

Historical Background

De Santis (2013) points out that most contemporary diplomatic practices are Euro-centric—a product of "post-Renaissance thinking" and "the Westphalian European State system." We propose that the present form of cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies that India is using are part and parcel of its ancient civilization and management of relations with neighboring kingdoms. As a key adviser to the Indian king Chandragupta Maurya (c. 317-293 B.C.E.), Kautilya (also known as Chanakya) laid the foundation of Indian diplomatic practices in his *Arthashastra* (see Boesche 2003). D. B. Mathur (1962, 398) notes that the core of ancient Indian diplomacy "was a civil state and paramountcy of law and ethics, as opposed to military aggrandizement and expansionism." For Kautilya, diplomacy was a weapon meant for avoiding war. This was either because war was not convenient or because there was an interest in collaboration with neighboring kingdoms. Another ancient Indian text, *Manusmriti*, notes that: "[n]one knows the outcome of war. It is, therefore, wise to avoid such a catastrophe" (Mathur 1962, 402; see also De Santis 2013). For Kautilya, diplomacy occurred in a mandala under mutually reciprocal conditions. Mandala, a Sanskrit term, denotes a dynamic circle of allies and enemies where a center point—say, the kingdom—is the locus of relationships (Mathur 1962; Zimmer 1951). The ruler should strive in strengthening his central position and

keep peace with neighbors ethically. Although Mathur (1962, 399) observes that kings were aware of the science of war, ancient India became known for its “intellectual and cultural impacts.”

India’s empire and its influence gradually spread across Southeast Asia, starting from 200 B.C. until fifteenth century (Hall 1968). In his various writings, Arab historian Al-Biruni testifies that, historically, the Indians termed the entire Southeast Asian region as *Suvarndib* (*Suvarnavdipa*) (Bhattacharjee 1981, 2-3). It is only since World War II that the term “Southeast Asia” been used to describe the area to the east of India and to the south of China, which includes the Indo-Chinese Peninsula, Malay Archipelago, Philippines, and roughly forming a circle from Myanmar through Indonesia to Vietnam. Before the term “Southeast Asia” became common, the region was often described as “Further” or “Greater India,” and it was common to describe the Indonesian region or Malay Archipelago as “the East Indies.” Prior to Western dominance, the entire Southeast Asia was closely allied with India, culturally and commercially. The history of Indian expansion covers a period of more than 1,500 years (Londhe 2008).

The “Indianization” of Southeast Asia was entirely peaceful, never resorting to physical force or coercion to subvert local cultures or identities, or to engage in economic or political exploitation of the host cultures and societies. Its worldviews were based on compassion and mutual (*paraspara*) exchange, and not on the principle of conquest and domination (Van Leur 1955, 357). The unique feature of India’s contacts and relationships with other countries and peoples of the world is that cultural expansion was never confused with colonial domination or commercial dynamism—and far less with economic exploitation (Bhattacharjee 1981).

The first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, who served in office from 1945 to 1967, echoed these sentiments in a special article in *The Hindu* on January 4, 1946.

In the veins of every one of my people flows the blood of Indian ancestors and the culture that we possess is steeped through and through with Indian influences. Two thousand years ago, people from your country came to Jawadvipa and Suvarnavdipa in the spirit of brotherly love. They gave the initiative to found powerful kingdoms such as those of Sri Vijaya, Mataram and Majapahit. We then learnt to worship the very Gods that you now worship still and we fashioned a culture that even today is largely identical with your own. Later, we turned to Islam but that religion too was brought by people coming from both sides of India. (Sukarno quoted in Suryanarayan 2016)

New Delhi’s interaction with the Southeast Asian region, after its independence in 1947, was more visible in bilateral relations with individual countries: namely, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Nehru’s experience of nonalignment influenced the entire Southeast Asian bloc. In the hour of crisis,

New Delhi received support from some Southeast Asian nations, especially Malaysia during the 1962 Sino-India war and the 1965 India-Pakistan war, and some of them supported India's stand on Kashmir. Southeast Asian nations also came out openly to extend help and cooperation to India during the 1971 Bangladesh crisis and were among the first few countries to recognize Bangladesh. Interestingly, India was the only non-Southeast Asian nation invited to become a full member of the ASEAN grouping even before it formed. Nevertheless, it declined the offer in the 1960s. The scholars of this region therefore underscored that, despite having historical linkages with the region and support from the ASEAN countries on the above-mentioned critical issues, India-Southeast Asian relations can be summarized as a "missed opportunity" (Singh 2014a).

Southeast Asia did not play a major part in India's foreign policy calculations during the 1960s, a period when India was facing major security threats from Pakistan and China. The exigencies of the Cold War, as well as political and economic considerations at home, had a hand in shaping India's policy toward the region. This preoccupation with its immediate neighborhood held India back from formulating a policy toward the region (Singh 2010, 443-7).

India's outlook toward its eastern neighbors changed when New Delhi initiated its "Look East" policy under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao in the 1990s. The prime minister's proposal had instant and successful results, with India becoming a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in January 1992, and full dialogue partner in December 1995. In July 1996, India became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum. As a result, it interacts with ASEAN in various bodies and meetings, which now include ten countries of Southeast Asia (Kaul 2001). Since 2002, New Delhi has held annual Summits with ASEAN. ASEAN and India commemorated the twentieth anniversary of dialogue-level partnership and the tenth anniversary of Summit-level partnership with a Commemorative Summit in New Delhi under the theme "ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace and Shared Prosperity" on December 20-21, 2012. The Commemorative Summit attended by the leaders of all ten ASEAN countries endorsed elevating the relationship with India to the level of "Strategic Partnership." The leaders also adopted the "ASEAN-India Vision Statement," which charts the future of ASEAN-India cooperation (ASEAN 2012).

Yet the outlook for India's Look East policy has not always been so bright, and as C. Raja Mohan (2003) points out, there was some skepticism within India and the nations of Southeast Asia about what it might achieve. During the Cold War, India and ASEAN had drifted apart. The Look East policy sought to reconnect the two economically. As India's economic reforms unfolded, there was no let-up in the pace of diplomacy toward the region, which saw steady gains. Neither the controversial Indian nuclear tests of 1998 nor the economic crisis in East Asia in the late 1990s came in the way of rapid expansion of India's relations with the region. Trade between India and ASEAN multiplied fourfold—from \$3.1 billion in 1991 to about \$12 billion in 2002 and stood at approximately US\$76.53 billion in 2014-15 (Hunt 2014; Ministry of

External Affairs 2016). Yashwant Sinha, the Indian Foreign Minister during the Vajpayee Government, pointed out at Harvard University that India had quietly moved into the second phase of its Look East policy. Phase-I of the policy was characterized by trade and investment linkages. Phase-II, according to Sinha, is marked by “arrangements for FTAs and establishing of institutional economic linkages with the ASEAN countries” (quoted by Mohan 2003). Sudhir Devare (2006) pointed out that initially, India’s “Look East” policy was directed only toward Southeast Asia but during the second phase, it also included China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and other Asia-Pacific nations.

At present, New Delhi’s Look East policy is in its third phase. In the first phase (1991-2000), India concentrated on the economic aspect of bilateral relations with the ASEAN countries. In the second phase (2001-10), New Delhi extended the horizon of its Look East policy across all of the East Asian and Pacific nations. With rapid geo-political and geo-strategic changes in the Indo-Pacific region including China’s military and economic assertiveness, India has reoriented its focus toward strategic aspects (defense, security, capacity-building, and maritime) of bilateral as well as multilateral relations in the third phase (2011-20) of its Look East policy. Therefore, in an effort to address these concerns and increase India’s profile in the region, the new Indian Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, rechristened its more than two-decade old policy from “Look East” to “Act East.”

India’s Act East Policy: Driving Factors

We identify nine factors driving India’s Act East policy. As noted previously, these include: (i) the growing Chinese influence in the region, (ii) the potential of the Indian diaspora, (iii) internal security concerns, (iv) the threat of Islamic terrorism, (v) prospects for connectivity, (vi) the quest for energy, (vii) the potential of economic diplomacy, (viii) defense and maritime issues, and (ix) the Modi factor. After analyzing more than 20 years of New Delhi’s Look East policy, it seems that these factors may have long been in the minds of political elites. Yet, to date, New Delhi has had limited success in achieving its desired foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific. However, there is a high possibility that if India can focus on the above-mentioned driving factors, relations with its Eastern neighbors will improve significantly. It is worth noting that these factors pose significant challenges as well as opportunities for India’s Act East policy and each demands India’s consideration of both hard and soft power strategies. These drivers are addressed briefly in turn below.

The China Factor

The socio-cultural ties between India and China go back over two millennia with the Silk Road and Buddhism. The 1940s saw the birth of an independent India and the People’s Republic of China. China recognized India as a sovereign

state and Indian diplomats reciprocated this at the United Nations. In 1950s, the popular Hindi slogan, “*Hindi-Chini, Bhai-Bhai*” (Indo-Chinese brothers) and the Panchsheel Agreement reflected a congenial relationship between the two nations (Guha 2012). Despite the obvious historical connections, differences between India and China soon followed with multiple border disputes. India’s closeness to Pakistan and the potential rivalry as an economic and political power in the region drove Beijing’s close proximity to its East Asian courtiers, China’s *paraspara*.

China’s historical influence in the region, its huge investment, and its active foreign policy in East Asia alongside its expanding influence in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian regions provided the impetus for New Delhi to engage strategically in the wider Indo-Pacific. China has strengthened its naval presence in the South China Sea and is endeavoring to do the same in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). It has reportedly installed a listening post in the Burmese territory of the Coco Islands and, thus, is aiming to establish its strategic presence in the IOR purportedly through the “String of Pearls” strategy. China is also contesting the possessions of Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, and others in the South China Sea. From the ASEAN perspective, India is seen as a possible counterweight to China, and it is therefore unsurprising that ASEAN has urged New Delhi to play a pivotal role in balancing Beijing’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region (Singh 2012b). Nonetheless, as the Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar noted, “the relationship between India and China is definitely complicated but not a zero sum game” (PTI 2016a). He argued that if the two nations approach each other with strategic maturity, then the “collaborative and convergent” side of this relationship can be further developed (PTI 2016a).

China’s soft power influence is similarly expanding through the region. In particular, China’s proactive engagement of diaspora communities, which are concentrated in Southeast Asia (Dalpino and Steinberg 2003; Liu and van Dongen 2016), boosts its strategic soft power profile. The presence and influence of the Chinese diaspora makes it difficult for ASEAN nations to oppose Beijing’s overarching behavior, especially in the South China Sea (Larin 2014), while also delivering substantial economic benefits to Beijing through remittances (Cheow 2004; Malakunas 2004). New Delhi might learn from Beijing with regard to their proactive diaspora policy as the presence of the sizeable Indian diaspora in the region could act as a lynchpin in fulfilling India’s strategic dreams in the Indo-Pacific.

Indian Diaspora

Diasporas have emerged as a powerful factor in developing relations between nation states. The Indian diaspora has notably acted as a catalyst in strengthening bilateral relations between India and their host nations. The Indo-U.S. Civil Nuclear Deal is a case in point, as ethnic Indians in the United

States successfully lobbied for the deal (Mishra 2009; Singh 2013). However, recent incidents of maltreatment of ethnic Indians in Australia and Malaysia seem to have gone against the general trend of having contributed to the strengthening of relations between India and the host countries. Relations with Southeast Asia, which has a significant number of ethnic Indians and diaspora, too can go either way. New Delhi should use the presence of the ethnic Indians in the region as an asset, not as a liability. This is therefore an opportune time for India to substantially, rather than symbolically, recalibrate its diaspora policy; a recalibration that could pay rich dividends to its on-going Act East policy (Singh 2012a, 2013).

Internal Security

Since the 1960s, India's northeastern states have experienced insurgency with demands ranging from anti-foreigner agitation to independence or autonomy by various insurgent groups. Estimates indicate that the number of insurgent groups operating in this region could be as high as 130. While the number of insurgencies has declined over the past decade, they continue to influence the internal security and integrity of the region. The remoteness of the northeastern region and years of neglect and apathy by New Delhi have led to a feeling of alienation among the people of this region, which constantly feeds these armed movements (Routray 2011).

India's internal security interests, including the maintenance of peace in the northeast, rely on the maintenance of a positive diplomatic relationship with Myanmar. The reason being that insurgent groups active in India's northeast are known to use the bordering areas of Myanmar for safe haven. There have been joint military efforts between India and Myanmar to counter insurgency across the border, but such efforts need to be intensified (Gupta 2011).

New Delhi continues to refer to Myanmar as a gateway to ASEAN for India, underscoring its importance for the Act East policy. While hosting Myanmar's President U. Htin Kyaw at Rashtrapati Bhavan in August 2016, Indian President Pranab Mukherjee noted that:

India sees Myanmar as a key partner in its Neighbourhood First and Act East policy. As the government of India looks eastward to rejuvenate historical, cultural and commercial links between India and Southeast Asia, Myanmar is first on the horizon. India attaches high value to Myanmar's contribution and further role in achieving our shared vision of stability, peace and progress in the region. (PTI 2016d)

Clearly then, Myanmar plays a pivotal role in India's internal security and its foreign policy endeavor in the Indo-Pacific region.

Islamic Terrorism

India and Southeast Asia are not immune from the global menace of terrorism arising primarily from Islamic fundamentalism across the region. Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim population in the world and India follows closely behind. The presence of the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines, recent terrorist activities in Thailand, clashes between Buddhist and Muslims in Myanmar, the rise of Wahhabi forms of Islam, and ISIS and their growing networks are of concern for most nations of Southeast Asia and for India. As Pant (2015) notes, during his visit to Malaysia, Narendra Modi, together with Najib Razak, prioritized the combating of terrorism, extremism, and radicalization in the region for better Indo-Malaysian bilateral ties. India's soft power strategy aims to build on cooperation with Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific to address these issues and, in doing so, enhance regional peace and stability.

Connectivity

India sees physical connectivity (land, air, and maritime) through bordering Myanmar as crucial to its Act East policy and for the development of stronger ties with the ASEAN countries. At present, both India and Myanmar are jointly working on several projects both in infrastructural and non-infrastructural areas, including the upgrade and resurfacing of the 160 km long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo Road, and construction and upgrade of the Rhi-Tiddim Road in Myanmar. India is also implementing the Kaladan multimodal transport project that involves upgrading the Sittwe Port in Myanmar and constructing a highway to connect the town of Paletwa in Chin State to the Indian border in Mizoram state. This flagship project will revitalize the economy of the area and link it with important commercial and shipping arteries. The chief secretary of Manipur also announced the long-awaited luxury bus service between Imphal and Mandalay, which when launched will be the first major link between India and Myanmar (Roy 2012; Singh 2012a).

During his visit to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for the thirteenth ASEAN-India Summit and tenth East Asia Summit in November 2015, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed a \$1 billion line of credit to promote projects that support physical and digital connectivity between India and ASEAN. He has also announced that the 3,200-km Trilateral Highway project, which connects India with Myanmar and Thailand, is "making good progress and should be completed by 2018" (Laskar 2015).

According to retired Ambassador Ashok Sajjanhar (2016b, 3), "[c]onnectivity forms an indispensable element of the 3Cs of culture, commerce, and connectivity, which will promote economic engagement and strengthen people-to-people, cultural and civilizational contacts between the two regions." This connectivity holds the potential to integrate India's northeastern region with the broader ASEAN interconnectivity effort in future, with consequential benefits for both India and ASEAN.

India's Quest for Energy

India's economy is growing rapidly, and an uninterrupted energy supply is essential if the rate of growth is to be maintained. India depends heavily upon West Asian oil, especially from Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq. But the region is not politically stable and has a history of American influence; a cause for worry in New Delhi (Aravind 2017). For instance, U.S. sanctions against Iran have negatively impacted on Iran's oil imports to India. While Southeast Asia has only a limited potential to satisfy India's energy needs, as compared to West Asia (which enjoys an advantage because of its geographical proximity and the availability of natural gas), Myanmar and Vietnam remain attractive targets for India's energy diplomacy. There is thus an immense possibility for energy co-operation between India, Vietnam, and Myanmar, both in the hydropower and the hydro-carbon sectors (see Prakash 2015).

India is also dependent on the Southeast Asian region for its energy security as it ships oil from Sakhalin (Russia) to Mangalore through the Straits of Malacca. Additionally, New Delhi imports a significant amount of coal from the South China Sea littorals, namely Indonesia and the Philippines, through this maritime channel. India's oil and natural gas corporation Videsh Limited is eyeing stakes in one of the three joint ventures announced in the Arctic region by the Russian state oil company, Rosneft. If successful, New Delhi will ship oil through the South China Sea, as it is the shortest maritime route for India to transport oil from the Arctic region. If China controls these waters, it will be difficult for India to continue its unencumbered economic and energy ventures through this region (Singh 2014b).

Economic Diplomacy

As the previous driving factors suggest, economic diplomacy is of rising significance for India. Kripa Sridharan (2008, 75) argues that:

When the world begins to predict the dawn of an 'Asia-Pacific century' and East and Southeast Asia were beginning to be regarded as the 'new engines' of global economic growth, India could hardly afford to ignore the lessons of these countries outward orientation. Therefore, since 1991, albeit at a pace slower than what many expected, it has begun to integrate itself into the world economy. The result is that today the Indian economy is amongst the most open in the world and it perceived as a global player. . . An important consequence of this has been that while 15 years ago, India was pushing its Look East Policy, now Southeast Asia is pushing its Look West stances.

New Delhi has in recent years acquired substantive economic and strategic weight globally, especially in East Asia. In December 2012, the leaders of India and the ASEAN gathered in the Indian capital to celebrate two defining

milestones in their relationship: the twentieth anniversary of India's sectoral dialogue partnership with the ASEAN and the tenth anniversary of their annual summits (Chand 2016). Trade between India and ASEAN amounted to \$76.52 billion in 2014-15, with India's exports worth \$31.8 billion and imports \$44.7 billion (Express News Service 2016). The signing of a FTA in goods in 2009 was a game-changer of sorts, and in 2015, the two sides have also signed the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on Services and Investment. India is also a part of the group named Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which is negotiating a mega FTA. The 16-member RCEP comprises ten ASEAN members and its six FTA partners: namely, India, China, Japan, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The 16 economies account for over a quarter of the world economy (PTI 2016c). New Delhi's engagement in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) RCEP FTA bodes well for its possible future engagement in the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Therefore, engaging constructively in the region will create a significant opportunity for India to establish itself as a global and reliable economic power.

Defense and Maritime Security

In his recent article, Robert D. Kaplan (2016) underscored that most of the contested areas of the globe in the last century lay on dry land but, over the span of the decades, the demographic and economic axis of the earth shifted measurably toward the opposite end—that is, the maritime milieu and the South China Sea will be a major focal point of future conflict (see also Kaplan 2011). India and Southeast Asia share waterways that are vital for the economic and strategic well-being of the region and, in part, the entire world. India shares maritime boundaries with three Southeast Asian neighbors: Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia. A significant amount of India's trade crosses this region. With one of the world's busiest trade routes lying in this area, and the presence of choke points in such routes (in particular, the Straits of Malacca), the safety surrounding sea-lanes of communication is vital for New Delhi.

India cannot isolate itself from the ongoing South China Sea dispute, especially after Beijing denounced plans by an Indian company to develop oil fields in the South China Sea. However, China insists on building strategic projects in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir—the \$51 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor under its flagship “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative. India's main objection to this corridor has been that it runs through Gilgit-Baltistan, a part of Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. This means deploying Chinese troops there and, as reported by Indian media, in April 2013, Chinese forces intruded 19 km deep into Indian Territory in the Depsang region of Ladakh (later withdrawn) but still protests Indian oil exploration in South China Sea. Speaking recently at the United Service Institution in New Delhi, the Chinese ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, argued that China had “no intention to get involved in the sovereignty and territorial disputes between India and Pakistan”

and the two Asian giants could “actively explore the feasibility of aligning” China’s OBOR and India’s “Act East” policy (Mitra 2017). A few days later, the Chinese Government removed all references to the Zhaohui offer to allay India’s concerns (Patranobis 2017).

The Indian Navy’s *Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy*, highlights that India’s area of interest “extends from the north of the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea” (Ministry of Defence 2007, 59-60). In his 2011 address to the National Maritime Foundation in New Delhi, Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao (2011) reiterated India’s stand on the South China Sea dispute, emphasized the South China Sea as an important shipping route, and supported the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Significantly, on November 23, 2011, during an address on *Security Dimensions of India’s Foreign Policy* at the National Defense College, Ranjan Mathai (2011), Foreign Secretary of India underscored that “the South China Sea remains crucial to our foreign trade, energy and national security interests.”

The issue at stake here is that if India truly supports freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, then it will be necessary for the nation to assert, back up, and safeguard its own interests in the region. The South China Sea is not only a strategic maritime link between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, but it is also a vital gateway for shipping in East Asia. Almost 55 percent of India’s trade with the Asia-Pacific transits through the South China Sea (Singh 2012b). Therefore, it is quite evident that India derives considerable economic benefits from the South China Sea being an area where all actors enjoy a level playing field. The recent upsurge in tensions in the South China Sea represents a security flashpoint with global consequences. The dispute has the potential to turn into a military conflict that could end up affecting the peace and security of the entire region and any disruption or conflict relating to Sea Lines of Communications will hurt India’s energy and economic outlook severely. It may compel New Delhi to adopt some alternative routes to channel their economic activities in the region, which could force time constraints, increase overheads, and consume more energy.

Therefore, keeping in mind the volatile situation in the South China Sea and India’s energy interests, New Delhi is deliberately increasing its maritime profile in the region. Indian naval warships frequently visit this region and engage the South China Sea littorals in maritime exercises. India has stepped up its strategic partnership with ASEAN in the recent months. Following his 2014 election, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi prioritized visits to some of the Southeast/East Asian countries and emphasized maritime security and safety to his counterparts (Pant 2015).

Given China’s claims (nine or ten dash lines) over the South China Sea and rejection of the judgment by an international tribunal in The Hague, Southeast Asian countries are preparing themselves for the possibility of further Chinese aggression (Phillips, Holmes, and Bowcott 2016). As noted earlier, from the ASEAN perspective, India is seen as a possible counterweight to China in the

region (PTI 2016b; Wagner 2006). India continues to hold and participate in joint maritime exercises with key nations in the region. The seventh iteration of “Exercise Milan” held in 2010 against the backdrop of India’s Look East policy involved naval ships from Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar, with naval representatives from of Brunei, Philippines, and Vietnam (PTI 2010). Significantly, most of the navies of the region, especially ASEAN countries, also participated in the Milan 2012 and the recent Milan 2014 exercises hosted by the Indian Navy in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Press Information Bureau 2014).

At the same time, China does not welcome ASEAN moves to interact with major powers (Ba 2003; Lai To 2001). However, the Indian Navy has conducted joint exercises with the Singaporean, Vietnamese, Japanese, and South Korean navies in the South and East China Seas. The Indian Navy has also conducted exercises with the PLA Navy whenever Indian ships have visited the region (Yahya 2005).

Witnessing overarching Chinese claims over the South China Sea, there is significant scope for the Indian and Southeast Asian navies to engage constructively. India has helped Malaysia in building up its Coast Guard in the past and it has the expertise to help the other ASEAN countries. However, maritime cooperation between India and ASEAN is still in its nascent stages. Cooperation with regard to capacity building and patrolling piracy-infested areas or jointly facing nontraditional threats at sea like drug-trafficking, human-trafficking, and possible maritime terrorism remain inadequate. India has a strong navy with technological credibility that could be leveraged by ASEAN. Frequent joint naval exercises similar to the India-Singapore exercises and deeper cooperation in training and the exchange of defense personnel could form additional and viable confidence-building measures. Collaboration on missile technology, radar systems, defense component systems, and supporting hardware are, again, areas where ASEAN countries can work in partnership with India (Singh 2011).

India has provided training to Malaysia’s Air Force pilots on MiG-29s in the past and has offered training on the Sukhoi. It has also shown keenness to sell BrahMos missiles to friendly countries, including neighboring Southeast Asian countries (Press Information Bureau 2010). At present, most of the ASEAN countries are engaged in defense modernization programs and would like to obtain assistance in weapons upgrades and systems integration. Like India, most of the Southeast Asian countries also rely on Russia for their defense procurements. India—with its long experience in using Russian product—has developed the technological capabilities for low-cost servicing and hence could be a potential ally for ASEAN in this field. Assisting ASEAN will also improve India’s relations with Southeast Asian countries bilaterally and multilaterally and it will boost India’s image/standing in the region as having the potential to being capable of balancing China in the IOR.

The Modi Factor

The arrival of Modi Government in 2014 has given new impetus to India's ties with Southeast Asian nations. The latter see New Delhi as balancing the role of Beijing in the region. Prime Minister Modi has impressed the entire world with his various initiatives on India's foreign policy and related diplomacy (Z. Singh 2016). Since forming government, several bilateral and multilateral interactions between India and East Asian nations have taken place. Many suggest that Prime Minister Modi's dynamism and enthusiasm has enabled New Delhi to rejuvenate the aging Look East policy into its Act East incarnation (Mohan 2015b, 133).

Since taking office, Modi and key government officials have visited several Southeast and East Asian nations, including Australia, Japan, China, South Korea, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Malaysia and signed a range of agreements of mutual interest, while keeping an eye on the future developments of the entire region. These agreements span significant interest areas including maritime transport and logistics, national security, road policies, transmission and distribution of electric power, renewable energy, and youth matters (Pant 2015; PTI 2015).

Significantly, Modi also visited the United States and President Obama subsequently visited New Delhi as a chief guest at India's Republic Day celebration (notably Modi, a prolific user of social media, broke the news of Obama's invitation via Twitter). During the visit, both India and the United States announced a joint strategic vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region highlighting "a closer partnership between the U.S. and India as indispensable to promoting peace, prosperity and stability in those regions" (Press Information Bureau 2015). More specifically, the *Joint Strategic Vision* states, "regional prosperity depends on security; we affirm the importance of safeguarding the maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea" (Ministry of External Affairs 2015). Furthermore, it urges "all parties to avoid the threat or use of force and pursue resolution of territorial and maritime disputes through all peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea" (Ministry of External Affairs 2015). The language and intent of the strategic vision signifies that the Modi Government is more proactive and vigilant with regard to the Indian Ocean Asia Pacific region—including the South China Sea—as compared to the previous Manmohan Singh Government (Prakash 2015).

Narendra Modi is described as "a masterful salesman" (The Economist 2016). With his foreign tours and meetings with counterparts, Modi has changed the Indian diplomacy thinking from being "nonaligned" to *paraspara*. It reflects a reordering of India's relations with its neighbors. With mutual benefit in mind and the wooing spirit of a "salesman," the Indian Government under Modi is setting its strategic objectives with a clearer focus (A. Singh

2016). Nalin Mehta (2016), a veteran Indian journalist, has labeled this new diplomacy style “Modi’s whirlwind diplomacy.” Since coming to power in May 2014, Modi has traveled extensively and conveyed India’s message of confidence in its future, strong position on strategic issues—including a push for a permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council—promoted diplomatic dialogue, (including the “Raisina Dialogue” series modeled on the annual “Shangri-La dialogue” held in Singapore), offered economic opportunities and attractive foreign investment opportunities (such as “Make in India” campaign), and also wooed Indian diaspora communities abroad (such as in his New York, Dubai, and Sydney rallies).

Yet, by the end of 2016, India’s relations with Pakistan, the Maldives, and China had soured (Chaudhari 2016; Sajjanhar 2016a). Bhatia (2016) notes the widening concern that India’s foreign policy was losing momentum. Delhi, it appeared, was behaving like the “Modern-day Raj” and Modi’s activism and enthusiasm had put the Ministry of External Affairs “in the shade.” In addition, many critics have questioned Modi’s foreign policy style as “reckless and unduly personalized.” Yet as Malik (2016) argues, even his predecessors—including Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh—took risks in some matters of foreign policy such as the nuclear deal and tests. Marlow (2016) argues that Modi wants to showcase an aggressive foreign policy and his achievements in foreign policy to date have been to increase India’s strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific region. Kabir (2016) notes that from day one of his swearing-in as India’s fifteenth prime minister, Modi invited and extended the hand of friendship to all South Asian neighboring countries. Sibal (2015), highlighting criticism of Modi’s excessive traveling, especially to foreign countries, notes that he has indeed “expanded the political, security, and economic reach of Indian diplomacy.” Pant (2016) argues that Modi through his dynamic leadership has also managed to “energize a risk-averse ossified bureaucracy” at home. Furthermore, he has made an unprecedented international impact by influencing the United Nations declare June 21 as International Yoga Day. With a penchant for taking selfies, aptly named as “selfie diplomacy” or “yoga diplomacy” by critics, Modi is not only raising awareness of India’s market potential, but also its traditional and historical linkages with the world (Mohan 2015a; Singh 2017).

Encounters and Confluences: The Significance of Cultural Diplomacy

While the previous section outlined the core drivers underpinning and challenging India’s Act East policy, this section turns now to the role and relevance of cultural diplomacy within the *paraspara* model. While India’s soft power—resting primarily in cultural engagements—is embedded, to a large degree, within the *paraspara* model, we suggest that it might be leveraged more effectively by India to underpin strategic outcomes.

India is quintessentially everywhere—be it the 25 million-strong Indian diaspora, Indian cuisine, Indian crafts, Indian writing in English, or Indian cinema. Indian Government in the last decade, with the help of Ministry of External Affairs Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), has focused more on the projection of India's soft power diplomacy. Today, the Indian Government can proudly boast that it is not just sending out magnificent Indian classical dancers and writers to festivals abroad, but also Bollywood films and Indi-pop groups.

Looking particularly at the question of what lessons might be drawn from the past as India searches for its place in the Asian Century, the Indian Government has progressively started sponsoring, in full or part, cultural diplomacy initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region. This is primarily conducted through visitors or exchange programs using Indian public figures such as influential artistes, journalists, and writers. Cultural diplomacy, often described as the “linchpin” of public diplomacy, broadly refers to communication from nongovernmental and other diplomatic actors to the general public and/or governments use of cultural practices, of their own or other nation states, to promote strong people-to-people connections; winning the hearts and minds of people (Pigman 2010). As a comprehensive strategy, it primarily works on the exchange of stories, ideas, traditions, perceptions, and other aspects of culture with the intention of fostering mutual understanding. Jan Melissen (2005), Nick Cull (2009), and Brian Hocking and others (2012)—all international experts in contemporary diplomacy—have described the growing importance of public and cultural diplomacy practices in all parts of the world as not only prime examples of the rise of the soft power debate, but also reflecting a broader process of change in traditional diplomatic practices and understanding cultural exchanges.

Central to the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy are well-disseminated images and narratives by agents bridging cultures. Visitors, journalists, writers, students, scholars, and tourists often act as agents of cultural change—willing to share, listen, engage, and report their perceptions about others. Throughout the 1960s and 1980s, as a way of creating slow and steady dialogue, a regular stream of visitors, fellowships, and exchange programs were started by the Indian Government with the help of Commonwealth countries that grew to a peak in the late 1990s and are still continuing. The late 1990s also saw the economic liberalization of India, and the subsequent materialization of many cultural projects between India and its Asian neighbors, especially in the film industry. With a growing Indian diaspora in, and popular demand for, Bollywood movies, both Indian governments and those of neighboring countries (such as Malaysia, China, and Australia) have used this globalized culture industry as a tool of soft power. Film within Indian cultural diplomacy is therefore a two-way proposition. Tourism bodies, in a country like Australia, have also successfully supported Bollywood productions in broadcasting positive messages, particularly targeting students and skilled migrants, in an attempt to build and sustain Australia's reputation as a welcoming nation (Sarwal 2014).

Indian writer, diplomat, and politician Shashi Tharoor (2009) has used Joseph Nye's term "soft power" in relation to Bollywood's global invasion. He stated that: "Bollywood is bringing its brand of glitzy entertainment not just to the Indian diaspora in the US, UK or Canada, but around the globe, to the screens of Syrians and Senegalese alike" (Tharoor 2009). No doubt, India's biggest brand ambassador and export to the world is Mumbai-based commercial Hindi cinema or Bollywood—exported to more than 100 countries, it is today a multi-billion dollar fast-growing industry which churns out over 900 films year with an estimated audience of 23 million per day. Apart from being India's best export, it has been working for the past century as an "image maker." Many people's knowledge, impressions, views, and opinions of India (favorable or otherwise), are based on, or caused by, Bollywood. It is the most significant weapon in the cultural armory of India. As a genre, it is colored by India's cultural and political history, situation, and experience as a nation encompassing the rise of colonialism, anticolonial and nationalist movements, independence, partition, several wars, riots, and the Emergency, all of which contributes to its recreation or representation, almost every day, of modern India through (extra)ordinary situations.

Bollywood has reached and embraced global audiences, while continuously refashioning itself according to the times. Although it should not be overstated (Bollywood's reach is often based on anecdotes rather than hard facts, data, or studies), the significance of Bollywood can, at times, resonate beyond the screen. For example, in 2009 following a series of unrelated attacks against Indian students in Australia, tensions in the bilateral relationship rose. Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan refused to accept an honorary doctorate degree "from a country [Australia] that perpetrates such indignity to my fellow countrymen" (Henderson 2009). Other stars, including Siddharth Anand (from the film *Salaam Namaste*, 2005), Sajid Khan (*Heyy Babyy*, 2007), and Anees Bazmee (*Singh is Kinng*, 2008)—all of whom had filmed productions in Australia—joined in support. The impact, particularly on Australia's international education relationship with India, was significant (see Hassam 2012). In damage control mode, then-Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd turned to mutual ties and understandings as the basis of the solution. Meeting with a delegation of Indian journalists, he made the point that, "[w]e have a deep affection for your country and both of us enjoy Bollywood and cricket" (Hassam 2012, 254).

In October 2011—in a move signaling mutually sustainable diplomacy—Amitabh Bachchan finally accepted the honorary doctorate from Queensland's University of Technology. In doing so, he acknowledged Australia's significant international education sector noting, "I do believe large numbers of Indian students seek education in Australia and I hope that continues to grow" (Iyer 2011). The cultural connections continued. On May 6, 2013, another Australian university (La Trobe), renamed its Agora Cinema as the "Yash Chopra" Cinema after the renowned Indian film director and producer, and launched a

series of Indian film screenings on campus (La Trobe University 2014). La Trobe also recognized Amitabh Bachchan with the inaugural La Trobe University Global Citizenship Award and announced the Sri Amitabh Bachchan Doctoral Scholarship (valued at \$200,000) for an Indian student in addition to screening a retrospective of his films (La Trobe University 2014).

Further evidence of the *paraspara*, or mutually sustainable diplomacy, occurred through a series of cultural festivals. *Encounters: India* (2013) and *Confluences: Festival of India* (2016), held in the Australian cities of Brisbane and Melbourne, respectively, immersed local public audiences—including Indian diaspora—in an exploration of the many historico-cultural connections between India and its neighbors. *Encounters: India* transformed a part of the city of Brisbane into a bustling mini-India. The festival and symposium, the first of its kind to promote many facets of Indian culture in Australia, brought the various food, dance, and music styles of India to life. Featuring more than 70 leading exponents of Indian music and dance, the festival explored the past, present, and future links between the two nations. In addition to creative performances, the festival had a dedicated stage for discussions and debate on the role of cultural diplomacy between India and Australia by political leaders, academic scholars, media commentators, and artists. Sessions explored the role of cultural, public, and soft diplomacy in Australia-India relations; Indian public attitudes toward Australia; role of Indian cinema; contemporary Indian diaspora and its culture in Australia; and the rise of India as a regional power. Huib Schippers noted at the time that *Encounters: India* was ideally timed with prime minister of Australia's visit to India and made a "resonant contribution to cultural dialogue and diplomacy" (Encounters Festival 2012).

Minor events sponsored by the two governments and Australia's university sector (at the forefront of people-to-people links), maintained ongoing cross-cultural engagement following *Encounters: India*. During his 2014 visit to Australia, India's Prime Minister Modi celebrated the Australia-India cultural connections noting to a sizeable audience of Indian diaspora that the two nations were linked by a "cultural history" alongside shared common values and democracy (TNN 2014). Modi's visit to Australia was followed by the 2016 cultural showcase, *Confluence: Festival of India*. In Indian culture, just like *paraspara*, the word "confluence" holds an important place. It means merging or coming together of two cultures, people, or ideas, like two great rivers. *Confluence* partly supported by the Australian Government, was a six-city festival with exhibitions of traditional, contemporary, and modern Indian arts, music, and culture in Brisbane, Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, and Alice Springs. Indian High Commissioner to Australia at the time, Navdeep Suri underscored the significance of the festival (Travers 2016), noting:

What we're trying to do is use culture as the medium to deepen relationships, to deepen friendships to create more understanding and awareness. Arts don't come with the baggage that comes from government

statements or other directives. That opportunity for people to come and enjoy different cultural experience can often do more than a lot of media and communication efforts can do. There are clearly limitations on what governments can achieve, what government-to-government relations can achieve. Beyond that is the larger picture of people-to-people contact; when we cement those, that's like money in the bank. When your relationship gets buffeted by other unexpected events—which often happens in any relationships—then that understanding, that reservoir of goodwill that is there at a popular level between the average Australian and the average Indian is what is going to stand in good stead.

The Government of India has shown a keen interest in continuing support to such events as an important way to foster diplomatic collaboration and “generate a reservoir of goodwill” with its neighboring countries (Travers 2016). Moving beyond one-off events, in recent years the ICCR has prioritized cultural connectivity through setting up cultural centers to “establish, revive and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding” (Thussu 2013, 175). The centers are particularly prevalent in India's wider neighborhood, the Indo-Pacific (PTI 2009).

Although it has been slow at times, India's cultural diplomacy, a subvariant of its soft power strategy, has largely remained consistent with successive governments. India plans to use its ancient heritage—yoga, religion, and philosophy—and links formed in the Indo-Pacific through indentured migration and Aboriginal connections as part of its cultural diplomacy policy. While the pace may be slow, progress is being made. As former Indian diplomat Paramjit S. Sahai (2015) notes, by 2015, India had signed 126 bilateral cultural agreements and was in the process of implementing more than 58 cultural exchange programs with other countries. Critically though, India's soft power strategies will be effective if kept subtle and indirect—*paraspara* style.

Conclusion

Beijing considers New Delhi's Act East policy as its pivot to the Indo-Pacific region to counterbalance China. However, India's Act East policy is not aiming to counterbalance China in the region. Instead, it is just catching up to China policy in the region or, rather, sees it as a necessity to safeguard its interests from an increasingly assertive Beijing. India looks to increase its engagement with the Indian Ocean-Asia Pacific region in economically stabilizing the region. It is, therefore, beneficial for New Delhi to remain in the area and protect its interests. India must continue to engage and cooperate with the Indo-Pacific countries to realize its desired level of strategic partnership. New Delhi must find the political will to be the stabilizing factor that its ASEAN and other regional friends are seeking. With Narendra Modi at the helm of affairs, this

may be possible. It is, therefore, an opportune time for India to channel its foreign policy with the Indo-Pacific—substantively rather than symbolically.

Well into the third phase of its Look East (now Act East) policy, the time has come for India to lay the groundwork for a fourth phase in which New Delhi must concentrate on the strategic aspects of the bilateral relations with the wider Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, India must interact strategically with its allies in the region. In this context, maritime cooperation, investment in renewable energy, and capacity building between India and the Indo-Pacific countries will be of the utmost importance. In conclusion, the use of traditional *paraspara* diplomacy and the Indian diaspora, along with a recalibration of economic diplomacy and an emphasis on cultural diplomacy, can pay rich dividends to New Delhi's ongoing Act East policy and produce a key paradigm shift in the way in which regional diplomacy, trade, and engagement will be conducted in the future. This should thus ensure that India remains diplomatically, culturally, economically, and militarily engaged in the region.

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