India and Indonesia: an Important Partnership for the Indo-Pacific

Recently, the Indo-Pacific has become a battleground for a confrontation between the two world powers: China and the United States. In fact, other nations in the region, such as India, Japan and Australia, have taken a back seat. Since these countries are PRC’s rivals and USA’s partners, they are often primarily viewed as the United States’ allies, and their own stories and interests are frequently not covered by international media outlets. Only by focusing on each of the nations located in the Indo-Pacific could one help create a more or less accurate portrait of what is happening in the region.

Similarly, efforts made by many countries in this part of the world to counteract PRC’s continuously growing clout should also be publicized. The United States has been portrayed as playing a leading role in the aforementioned confrontation. In the meantime, other regional players, such as India, which also wish to counter China’s ever increasing influence, are depicted by global media outlets as nations that are barely capable of resolving their own issues with the PRC, and that are in desperate need not only in US support but also its leadership.

However, leaders of any normal country understand that it is futile to solely rely on the help of partners, particularly only on a single ally, in all of its conflicts. Politicians in India, China’s main rival in Asia, are also well aware of this.

In the course of modern history, it has been difficult for India and the PRC to establish a healthy relationship as two independent nations. Both of these large countries with their enormous populations and rapidly growing economies were bound to become rivals. Territorial disputes between the two have also played their role. These disagreements, on more than one occasion, have resulted in armed conflicts between India and China. In fact, the most recent flare-up in tensions occurred in May-June 2020 in the disputed area of Aksai Chin-Ladakh, where dozens of servicemen from both sides lost their lives.

Hence, India needs to strengthen its defenses by all means at its disposal, for instance, by pursuing a well-thought-out foreign policy course. As mentioned earlier, the United States, with its considerable military presence in the Indian and Pacific oceans, is viewed as New Delhi’s key strategic partner. India’s collaboration with Russia has also been equally successful. In fact, the Russian Federation has been equipping India’s armed forces with numerous products from its military industrial complex for a number of decades.

In addition to cooperation with these powerful, yet far away nations, such as the United States and Russia, it has also been just as important for India to collaborate in the military sphere with regional players with access to the Indian and Pacific oceans. In fact, Indonesia occupies a prominent place among such countries. It is located along the border of the two oceans, and flanks the strategically important Indo-Pacific corridor, i.e. the Strait of Malacca, whose maritime routes are used by practically all the ships travelling between East Asia and Europe as well as Africa.

Ensuring freedom of navigation in this strait is extremely important for the entire region. Still, a blockade of these shipping lanes during some sort of a crisis will probably affect China the most, since its economy and energy security depend, in large part, on deliveries of fossil fuels from the Middle East, which are transported via the Strait of Malacca. Other industrial powerhouses in East Asia, like Japan and South Korea, also rely on the aforementioned maritime routes used by oil tankers. Still, they can also count on deliveries of fossil fuels from the United States.

Clearly, such a radical step as preventing Chinese vessels from accessing the strait would only be taken in the worst case scenario. Considering how powerful China’s modern naval forces are, the aforementioned move could have
unpredictable consequences for the entire region. Still, India, as well as the United States, can not afford to discount this option while developing suitable strategies to ensure their security. In addition, the opposite scenario should also be taken into account. Due to the important role played by the Strait of Malacca in China’s economy and the might of People’s Liberation Army, the PRC could, in theory, also consider the option of taking control of this corridor by military means. Clearly, such a move would also be a radical step that might only be taken in the worst case scenario. Still, the constant presence near the strait of China’s armed forces patrolling disputed ares of the South China Sea (SCS), as well as PRC’s creation of artificial islands in the SCS, where landing strips that could be used by its air force are located, all point to the possibility of the Asian giant making the aforementioned move if necessary.

All in all, it is strategically important for India to have a good relationship with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, the three countries that essentially flank the Strait of Malacca.

India and Indonesia have enjoyed friendly relations with each other for quite some time. According to statements made by Indian politicians, these two nations are the ones that ought to join the ranks of the most prominent players during the upcoming Asian Century. It is worth pointing out that Indonesia is also concerned about China’s actions, especially about its aforementioned activities in the South China Sea. It is well known that the PRC is engaged in territorial disputes with many neighboring countries over substantial areas of this sea. The Paracel Islands, which China occupied after an armed conflict with South Vietnam, are located in the SCS. So is the Spratly archipelago, which China, the Philippines and other nations have made claims over. The entire region in the South China Sea that the former Celestial Empire has set its sights on is delineated by the nine-dash line on the map by the PRC and Taiwan. Parts of this territory overlap Indonesia’s exclusive economic zone whose depths may be rich in useful resources. Beijing has justified its claims to this area “on the grounds that its fishermen have long been active there”.

Thus Indonesia is quite appreciative of its cooperation with New Delhi and tries to foster this partnership in every possible way. After all, the two nations share a maritime border and India has one of the most powerful naval forces in the Indian Ocean.

In May 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Indonesia, where he met the leader of this nation, President Joko Widodo. According to a joint statement issued afterwards, the leaders agreed to enhance the two countries’ strategic partnership and welcomed the adoption of the “Shared Vision on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific between India and Indonesia”. They also “reiterated the importance of achieving” peace and prosperity in this region “where sovereignty, international law, freedom of navigation and overflight, sustainable development and an open and fair trade and investment system” would be respected.

In summary, India has a powerful military while Indonesia controls majority of sea lanes running along the Strait of Malacca. In addition, both nations share a maritime border. Owing to the good relationship between the two, they could establish a joint security zone stretching along the entire coast of India and encompassing a part of the Strait of Malacca, one of the most important shipping routes in the world. This can have an enormous impact on the power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. Such partnerships also show that countries other than China and the United States are important regional players and have a say in the future of the Indo-Pacific.

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