

Conceptions of Security in The Regional Economic Cooperation Paradigm: The Curious Case of The Indo-Pacific

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the complex globalised world that we live in today, more than ever before in the history of international relations, what immediately and most particularly strikes research in the field of international politics is how economic relations highlight as well as underscore the relationship between and amongst nations. Economic ties have strung together the far reaches of the globe into an intricate web of interdependence via trade, investment, infrastructure, technology, and intellectual property transfers. In contemporary times, this multilateral and nuanced connect has become imperative to understanding how global systems work and fail – both at the theoretical and pragmatic levels.

It may be observed that while the idea of security is the very basis of international relations theory (Sheehan 2005), formal linkages with the domain of economics find space mostly in context rather than separate specificity until very recent forays in studying International Political Economy. IPE theory in itself is a crucial yet established subset of the wider study of the field. The interdisciplinary nature of international relations allows for a multiplicity of ideas to co-exist, question, and influence its dynamic progression. It is with this postulation, then, that this paper seeks to define, understand, analyse and assess the relationship between security and cooperation amongst countries vis-à-vis formal and informal economic linkages.

The contention of this piece are three-fold: that comprehensive and sustained financial advancement is a cardinal pillar of a nation's security

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framework; that economic relations, today, can be identified as a decisive mechanism of establishing peaceful relations between and amongst nations; and that multilateral diplomacy can be advanced using economic integration with an objective of institutionalising security interests against prospective threats to state, regional, and/or global stability.

By connecting debates on security with the idea of regional economic cooperation, the paper ultimately seeks to create a dialogue on how state-power theory (Krasner 1976) defines economic ties both within and outside of formalised geographical blocs. Using an unconventional example of the Indo-Pacific, which is in itself still an ideational rather than an institutional structure, it has been stipulated that it is actually security interests (of several stakeholders implying countries and international institutions) that have increasingly underscored trade relations in key geographical zones of the world that hold the potential – by the sheer virtue of the geopolitical space they take up on the world map – to either impede or insulate individual and collective power and security.

In conclusion, it is observed that regional economic cooperation goes beyond the empirical idea of financial ties it envisages and therefore, must also be assessed from a security lens to fully understand its objective, scope, and significance. Further, regional economic integration might not necessarily be defined within the realm of an institutionalised bloc and hence must incorporate the idea of economic ties built on interests defined by the geopolitics of security. Using the Indo-Pacific as a case study to understand the contemporary narrative of security as the primary end-goal of regional economic cooperation, the paper signs off with a short reflection on the security-regionalism paradigm with special reference to India.

2. INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND SECURITY, REGIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION, AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: DEFINING THE SUBJECT MATTER

It is imperative to begin the paper with a section purely focussed on defining the very tenets of the argument that it further goes on to propound. In this vein, the three terms that are central to the thesis have been separately delved upon in the following paragraphs.

GLOBAL SECURITY AND DEMOCRATIC PEACE

International security, as it were within the domain of the English and constructivist schools of International Relations, encompasses the idea of mutual survival and safety based on sovereign identity and institutional cooperation. The mechanisms employed to guarantee its perpetuity, according

to realist and liberal perspectives, broadly revolve around military action and diplomatic agreements such as treaties and conventions taken through legally ratified multilateral organisations. In this sense, then, international and national security become mutually associated wherein international security comes to imply national or state security in the global arena.

But what does security mean in a definitional structure? As the basic tenet continues to grow across realms of understanding within IR theory whilst concurrently playing out in international politics, at its very core security is a normative term. By this centrality in its ideation, it continues to evolve as more perspectives are brought into consideration. According to Buzan (2000), the study of international security is more than a study of threats, but also a study of which threats can be tolerated and which require immediate action. He sees the concept of security as ‘not either power or peace, but something in between’. Security has been widely applied to “justify suspending civil liberties, making war, and massively reallocating resources during the last fifty years” (Baldwin 1997). An interesting and perhaps most enlightening take on the matter comes by way of Richard Ullman (1983) suggesting that a decrease in vulnerability is security. Wolfers (1952) continues that security is applied by nations “in order to be either expedient—a rational means toward an accepted end—or moral, the best or least evil course of action”. Moving toward a liberal constructivist approach, Wolfers alludes that differences in conceptions of security arise based on the social polity of a state being a definitive factor in assessing the forbearance of threats. These differences of opinions arising amongst national policies are further exacerbated by nations facing diversified levels of threats owing to their unique geographical, economic, ecological, and political environments.

Moving forward, post the Cold War period, the concept of an international security actor in IRT has extended from nation states to groups, individuals, international systems, NGOs, and local governments, thus expanding the content and scope of international security widely. Today, it covers a variety of interconnected issues in the world that affect survival: from conventional modes of military power, the causes and consequences of war between states, and economic strength, to ethnic, religious and ideological conflicts, trade and economic conflicts, energy supplies, science and technology, food, threats to human security, environmental degradation and climate change, infectious diseases, and the acceding roles of non-state actors. (Buzan, Wæver, et al. 1998)

Moving into these growing dynamics in the idea of security, the interests and power of states, according to the state-power theory, determines the structure international trade assumes on the premise that nations act

in accordance with maximising their aggregate national income, social stability, political power and economic growth (Krasner 1976). These state interests, as Krasner (1976) further explains, can be achieved under free trade. He further adds that:

The relationship between these interests and the level of openness depends upon the economic power of states. Power is dependent upon a state's size and level of economic development. Distributions of potential power may vary from multipolar to hegemonic; and different international trading structures are made of either of these. A hegemonic distribution of potential economic power is likely to result in an open trading system. Since states act to maximize their aggregate economic utility, maximum global welfare is achieved under free trade. The greater the degree of openness in the international trading system, the greater the level of aggregate economic income (Krasner 1976).

Liberal theorists suggest that the state-power model of trade facilitates states to work together and cooperatively, reinforcing peaceful relations among trading partners. (Xhang and Keteku, 2007) Their analysis furthers that these relations are based on the expected utility model of trade and conflict, which emphasises the potential economic consequences of a disruption in trade. States are thus deterred from initiating conflict against a trading partner for fear of losing the welfare gains associated with trade. (Aydin 2010).

The classical liberals postulate that democracy, economic interdependence, and international organizations have strong and statistically significant effects on reducing the probability that states will be involved in militarized disputes (*Oneal and Russett 1999*). *Building upon the Kantian philosophy of reaching perpetual democratic peace through "republican constitutions", a "commercial spirit" of international trade, and a federation of independent republics*, geographical distance and power predominance, also reduce the likelihood of interstate conflict. *Oneal and Russett explained that the character of the international system affects the probability of dyadic disputes. This is because whilst the consequences of having a strong hegemonic power vary, having high levels of democracy and interdependence in the international system reduce the probability of conflict for all dyads, and not just for those that are democratic or trade-dependent in nature.*

REGIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION

One of the most important developments in the world trade system in the 1990s, post the Cold War, has been the emergence of regional cooperation.

Regional economic cooperation or integration is the process through which states “voluntarily mingle, merge and mix with their neighbours so as to lose the factual attributes of sovereignty while acquiring new techniques for resolving conflicts among themselves” (Haas 1971). It is a worldwide phenomenon of territorial systems that increases the interactions between their components and creates new forms of organization, co-existing with traditional forms of state-led organisation at the national level (Lombaerde and Langenhove, 2007). Ginkel and Langenhove (2007) view regional integration as a process by which states within a particular region increase their level of interaction with regard to economic, security, political, or social and cultural issues. In summation, regional integration is the joining of individual states within a region into a larger whole. The degree of integration depends upon the willingness and commitment of independent sovereign states to share their sovereignty (Claar and Andreas 2010).

Initiatives for regional integration, by means of a trade bloc or Free Trade Agreement, according to Lombaerde and Langenhove (2007), must fulfil at least eight important functions in order to gain success in its primary objective of economic stability and security; including the strengthening of trade integration in the region, the creation of an appropriate enabling environment for private sector development, the development of infrastructure programmes in support of economic growth and regional integration, the development of strong public sector institutions and good governance, the reduction of social exclusion and the development of an inclusive civil society, contribution to peace and security in the region, the building of environment programmes at the regional level, and the strengthening of the region’s interaction with other regions of the world.

Regional integration comprises of several levels of cooperation, and it is here that the question of need-based objectives comes into play whilst laying out this paradigm. Amongst the four clearly demarcated aspects of regional cooperation, free trade areas (FTAs) are the most basic form, wherein member countries remove all barriers to trade between themselves whilst remaining independent in determining their trade policies with non-member states. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is a prime example of this model. At the second level Customs Union, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), come into play where economic cooperation is as is in FTAs except that trade policies of member states with non-member states are maintained on similar lines. At the third stage the common market regime incorporates the first two models along with the additional removal of restrictions on movements of labour and capital between member countries thus allowing for the creation of economically integrated markets amongst member countries, as in the case of the

Common Market for Eastern and South Africa (COMESA). At the final stage, as member countries enter into a formal economic agreement to remove barriers to trade by adopting common economic policies, an economic union emerges such as the like of the European Union (EU).

The basis of formalising these levels of cooperation differ based on the individual and collective aspirations of a geographic region. Do these unifying steps demonstrate the pre-eminence of national security concerns, the power of federalist ideals, the skill of political entrepreneurs, or the triumph of technocratic planning? On what principles or compulsions do states individually choose to give up part of their sovereignty on comprehensive levels of economic cooperation? In Moravcsik's (1998) view, economic interdependence has been the primary force compelling democracies with regional integration ideations to move in this direction. Politicians rationally pursued national economic advantage through the exploitation of asymmetrical interdependence and the manipulation of institutional commitments. He hints that a historical study of a region within theoretical inquiry could lead to a comprehensive understanding of the sources and objects of international cooperation.

THE INDO-PACIFIC

Originally defined as a biogeographic region of the Earth's seas, the Indo-Pacific although yet to find an official space in the lexicon of International Relations Theory, has been widely used in the domain of real-time international politics over the last five years, both as a means of analysis and discourse. Whilst maritime Indo-Pacific biogeographically encompasses the western, eastern and central portions of the Indo-Pacific, in the geo-strategically enshrined 'Pivot to East Asia' context of US foreign policy formulated in 2011, the term refers to a maritime subset comprising the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific; littoral to which, are the states of Asia, including West Asia, the Middle East and eastern Africa.

The term was first brought to use as a realist aspiration in an article authored by Gurpreet Khurana (2007). In the article, the term 'Indo-Pacific' refers to the maritime space stretching from the littorals of East Africa and West Asia from a sheer security point of view, across the Indian Ocean and western Pacific Ocean, to the littorals of East Asia (Khurana 2007). Adding an aspect of cultural flavour to the debate, the terminology was then used by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in a speech to the Indian Parliament in August 2007, where he reflected that "the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans is a dynamic coupling as the seas of freedom and of prosperity in the broader Asia" (Abe 2007). From 2010 onwards,

the term also found traction within the Indian government and has since been used often by India's apex political leadership (Scott 2012). These indigenous calls to a constructivist view in understanding the security of the region later found traction in liberal narratives as well. Since 2011, the Indo-Pacific has continued to be frequently referred to in political discourse by strategic analysts and high-level government and military leadership in Australia, Japan, and the US in describing the particular geopolitical region. It was only in 2013, that the term found official documentation in Australia's Defence White Paper of 2013. From a liberal standpoint, it has been argued that the concept of the Indo-Pacific may lead to a change in popular "mental maps" of how the world is understood in strategic terms (Brewster 2014). Perhaps most crucially, according to Miles (2013) the increasing usage of the term by the US has been said to allow it to maintain its geographic inclusiveness in the new coinage of 'Indo-Pacific' in line with its 'pivot to East Asia' strategy – a hard-core realist perspective in itself.

For the Indian subcontinent what with the not-so-peaceful rise of China as an Asian superpower and subsequent threats to land and economic security, and the India-Pakistan conflict remaining in status quo, the idea of the Indo-Pacific has been a natural progression of regional politics in the past decade. It has at once become a force to forge forward an attempt to rationalise peaceful democratic exchanges in the region as its political economies surge (that of India, China, and ASEAN) whilst simultaneously ensuring the securitisation of individual state interests viz-a-viz physical and economic aspirations and that of developed heavyweights such as Australia, Japan, and the US.

3. SECURITY IN ECONOMIC COOPERATION: LINKING THE DEBATE

In the 21st century, free trade arrangements are important tools of foreign policy that are intended to solidify partnerships, as military pacts did years ago (Feinberg, 2003).

Increasingly, foreign policy and regionalism almost appear to be one in the same now.... Game Theory could possibly explain the push to regionalism... Unlike 60 years ago, wars between developed nations are not practical today. Game Theory has proved that cooperation can have equal benefits for both sides. Pre World War II, the only way to increase national wealth was to either maintain a colony in a native land or commandeer resources from other neighbouring nation-states via war. These principles are an all or nothing strategy, which is much different from Game Theory. It is unique that both

Game Theory and regionalism both came to fruition during or right at the end of World War II. (Gordon and Venkataramany, 2011).

Nation-states post the Cold War have increasingly become dependent on garnering their prosperity based on memberships in regional trade blocs. In light of this, as also in the wisdom of Gordon and Venkataramany's words (2011), the result of this co-dependence will mostly likely lead to a natural deepening of the the relationship, with the possible creation of a security alliance at the peak of this connect. The EU and ASEAN, although distinct in their levels of economic cooperation, are prime examples of this probability with signs of an increasingly nuanced relationship being observed as emergent in their multi-national affairs. The use of trade with military or treaty partners is not a new concept either. Take for example the dealings of member-nations of the NATO.

Stakeholders in business and trade across the world have begun to observe the dynamics of strategic, sequential bargaining in multiple forums and its consequences on international power relations. This change in the global climate has further translated into governments reassessing normative definitions of trade, growing to understand it as much more than simply the exchange of goods and services. Indeed, as Feinberg (2002) puts it, "trade is an instrument for influencing the balance of power within states and affecting processes of political and economic change". This, then, has resulted in FTAs playing critical roles in dictating foreign policy. They are, as Gordon and Venkataramany (2011) further add:

slowly filling the role that foreign policy treaties played in the past. Why not negotiate trade with a potential ally when you already maintain a security agreement. As the world continues to break into regions, regional trade agreements will continue to be the fuel that fires the global economy.

It thus becomes clear that security no longer is seen as extraneous to regional economic cooperation. In fact, in the aftermath of the politics of the 20th century, it has become the basic tenet to establishing trade ties between states. The converse of this also appears to be true. As in the case of NATO, where nations find their security aspirations converging and have thus allied as security partners, the relationship does not seem to only remain confined to all matters military as the stakeholders engage in business and trade deals with one another.

The implications of this intensified linkage is clear: where ties amongst nations once held ground either on a security or economic footing, these definitions are growing obscure in relations that are becoming more multifarious and dynamic in terms of their objective. Essentially,

diplomacy today has nuanced overtones that no longer remain at one end of the stick. Instead, they find meaning and purpose in ideas that span across political aspirations, economic needs, and security goals. Although highly contested by many theorists, regional trade is also widely believed to have assured continued peace and timely intervention to curb conflict in the modern world. From a constructivist standpoint ASEAN, for example, has been able to stem several internal tensions in the region vis-à-vis strong trade ties that underscore the intense cultural linkages and histories of the region. Furthering this view, it has been concurred that maintaining peace in highly tempestuous zones, particularly in the developing world, finds much favour since it assures the sustained flow of foreign investment for welfare, domestic production and growth, global markets for indigenous products and services, and protection against sanctions that can heavily injure the financial health of a state relying on international cash flows and the global market economy for its survival and growth.

4. THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

It has been concurred that free trade can promote and assist with the elimination of common political barriers between nation-states. Gordon and Venkataramany (2011) continue that:

FTAs are essentially the first step to a regional trade arrangement. Eventually, through evolution, a region could act, talk, and resemble a supranational country. Proximity is a key factor when looking at regionalism. From the beginning of human history, geographical proximity has been a primary condition for intersocietal commodity exchange, because distance acted as a barrier to trade (Sangmoon & Eui-Hang, 2002). Geographical closeness provides a means for trade. The status of a regional partner creates avenues for trade within and between the regional trade arrangements.

The Indo-Pacific is an interesting geopolitical terminology adapted to counter the not-so-peaceful rise of China with an ‘arc of democracy’ surrounding its borders from the South West to the far East. What was once merely a theoretical idea to study, analyse, and assess developments in the region has now gained traction as a pragmatic political play of not just emerging regional powers such as India, Japan, and Australia; but also that of the US for whom it provides a more integrated approach to a region that is fast gaining prominence on the global map. Maintaining influence in the Indo-Pacific forms a central part of the US grand strategy given the rise of Asian powers leading to a huge economic and human resource

potential as well as it serving as a crucial transport lane between the Middle East and North Africa's vast oil and gas supplies.

The Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical strategy holds a key space in US grand strategy, which involves preventing external hegemonic control over critical geopolitical areas of the world and preventing the rise of other threats to the global commons; to expand the liberal political order internationally; and to sustain an open economic regime. In light of this, the Future Directions International (2011) went on to define the grand strategy with regard to the Indo-Pacific. Preventing extremist groups from threatening US interests and those of its allies; employing diplomatic relations network for influencing military and trade relations; ensuring access to natural resources and markets and ensuring the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and maritime checkpoints. The US has always remained focused to prevent the rise of any power that can control critical geopolitical areas of the world and until recently the Indian Ocean was considered only as a thoroughfare through which warships passed. Today, however, the US wants the region to have a multilateral structure erect on the web of agreements and alliances. It is working on building a relationship with countries in the region to give shape to a regional architecture in order to manage the Indo-Pacific (Cronin et al 2013).

AS UPADHYAY (2014) SUCCINCTLY PUTS IT:

During her visit to Honolulu in October 2010, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used the phrase "Indo-Pacific" to describe a newly emerged and integrated theatre. The region spans two oceans — the Pacific and the Indian — that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy." (Clinton 2011) During his trip to Australia in November 2011, Obama also talked about Indo-Pacific as he mentioned "new opportunities to train with other allies and partners, from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean." Thus, there has been an American acknowledgement about Indian and Pacific Oceans constituting an inter-linked geopolitical space, not only because it is important to "global trade and commerce" but also because they impact on strategy (Saran 2012).

Given the nautical nature of the Indo-Pacific theatre, the US navy is expected to play a major role in the strategy. The 2010 Quadrennial Defence Review stated seeking alliances and concentrating resources in the Indo-Pacific to serve US' security interests. The US is working towards strengthening traditional alliances with Japan and Australia and is aiming new security partnerships with India. From joint defence production with

Japan and India, to securing bases and increasing rotational presence with Australia, Singapore, Indonesia etc, attempts are being made for an enhanced US presence in the wider Indo-Pacific. It is proposed that by 2020 about 60 per cent of the American naval forces—including six aircraft carrier battle groups as well as a majority of the navy's cruisers, destroyers, Littoral Combat ships and submarines—will be stationed in the region (BBC 2012).

Along with strengthening defence ties, the United States is also trying to integrate economically with the Asian economies. Washington has been launching multinational partnerships with countries in South East Asia and South Asia in areas of agriculture, food security, connectivity, education, energy security, environment etc. Moves like Indo-Pacific Economic corridor and Lower Mekong initiative allow US to enhance its presence in areas where historically it had been under represented (Campbell and Andrews 2013: 6). It is also working on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that seeks to bring together economies from across the Pacific – developed and developing alike – into a single trading community. It aims to move beyond the conventional border-related barriers to free trade, and aspires to promote deeper economic integration and secure US market access for agricultural products, manufacturers and services (English 2012).

There has been a momentous growth in energy and economic flows between the Indian Ocean littoral and East Asia. Alternative energy options, unconventional gas and surging energy demand are reshaping the geopolitical energy space. The efforts by the US to be part of these groupings reflects its broader effort to engage with Indo-Pacific. Washington has also reached out to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to build an Indo-Pacific region. However, ASEAN till now has taken conflicting position regarding the construct and is unable to present a united front in this regard.

Therefore, what once was linked with the idea of geo-strategy has, quite clearly, made a monumental impact in economic cooperation not only within the geographic confines of already-established spaces, but also specifically into the Indo-Pacific with an end-goal of defining it as a geographical region in its own spirited right. One could argue on whether the origins of the term were actually rooted in economic ties or wider security interests, but ultimately it has led to a curious scenario where an ideational term has become a dynamic means of understanding politics in a space that occupies possibly the most significant paradigm in international affairs today.

5. CONCLUSION: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As was presented in the introduction to this essay, observing regional economic cooperation from a security lens gives a fuller scope to understand its objectives and purported significance. Further, regional economic integration might not necessarily be defined within the realm of an institutionalised bloc and hence must incorporate the idea of economic ties built on interests defined by the geopolitics of security, as was perceived in the case of the Indo-Pacific.

But what does regionalism imply for India? For one thing, it has remained a keen participant in the SAARC, BRICS, BCIN, BIMSTEC, and now ASEAN amongst several other regional institutions. If the SAARC has failed as an economic and geopolitical regional institution, it is because until the India-Pakistan issue does not get resolved the stalemate will not allow the regional organisation to succeed. The example of this case study, along with that of the Indo-Pacific, leads us to two broad conclusions that essentially wholly present the case for India's future presence and contribution to regional economic integration – one, that its security is intricately tied to its economic ties with the regions both immediately in its neighbourhood, and beyond; and two, that cultural diplomacy and shared visions for growth with this very neighbourhood could help India ascend its ambitions of being a reasonable Asian Power.

Again, it is vital to put into perspective what has been elaborated upon in (Upadhyay 2014):

India's inclusion in the Indo-Pacific has largely been promoted by a broader network of Australian and American think tanks. Promoters of the concept talk about how countries in the region 'should take a leading role in shaping the economic and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific' and seek to tie India more closely with the US, Australia and Japan (Singh and Inderfurth 2011: 2). The US has talked about India's desired role as a "net security provider" to preserve maritime transportation routes and global commons in the Indian Ocean (Scott 2012: 89).

Steps taken by India over the past decade to expand its presence and enhance its influence throughout the region has made such a prospect more alluring to the US policymakers. With opening of economy, India has been connecting with its Indian Ocean neighbours and major maritime powers of the world. There has been a new reliance on the sea for energy and mineral resources. India has been engaging with regional actors on bilateral as well as multilateral framework. From Look East policy, there

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has been a graduation towards engage East policy with growing economic relations with the ASEAN, China, Japan and Australia.

India is also in the mode of enhancing its maritime presence throughout the Indian Ocean Region. Along with revolutionising its defence procurement by acquisition and construction of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarine and fleet tankers, New Delhi is also developing naval ties with countries like Singapore, Oman etc in the Indian Ocean region. Such agreements allow India's presence from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca. In the last few years there have been annual naval exercises with France (Varuna, since 2002), the United States (Malabar, first in 1992 and again regularly since 2002), Russia (Indra, since 2003) and the United Kingdom (Konkan, since 2004). India and US naval exercises progressed from small-scale basic passing manoeuvres among naval vessels and replenishment-at-sea drills to larger scale anti-submarine exercises in 2003. The mutual deployment of aircraft carriers from both sides in 2005 served as a visible demonstration of mutual combined power projection potentiality. The Malabar-2 exercises in September 2007 also involved Japan, Singapore and Australia pointing towards an 'Indo-Pacific' orientation, much to China's chagrin (Scott 2012: 98). Since then, the exercises have remained bilateral but Malabar Exercise 2014 seeks to register Japanese presence on India's invitation. This has raised questions regarding the larger geopolitics around such a naval exercise in the region. The proponents of the concept among the Indian policy makers defend India's role in 'Indo-Pacific' by stating that it preserves the 'strategic autonomy'. Strategic autonomy is a step ahead from the Non Alignment idea as it talks about giving "maximum options (to India) in its relations with the outside world".

It is believed that the Indo-Pacific construct seeks to establish a plural, inclusive and open security architecture. This allows India to create a web of cooperative relations with all the stakeholders based on mutual interest and benefit (Geraghty 2012). For India, non-traditional security challenges comprise an important part of the 'Indo-Pacific' policy formulation. Problems of regional instability from non-traditional sources, such as weak state capacity in key parts of the Indo-Pacific, pose a significant challenge. This requires that India steps up its role in securing and safeguarding the trade routes crossing the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. The focus remains on securing sea-lanes and maritime governance through regional initiatives such as the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). Indian navy is cooperating with navies of the region to tackle disasters, narcotic smuggling, gun running etc. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is an initiative in this direction. India also contributes to the African Union Mission in Somalia and has

begun bilateral and trilateral naval coordination and patrolling with China, Japan and Kenya, Madagascar and the Seychelles in Africa.

There have also been efforts to strengthen organisations like Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), an institutional set up for enhancing cooperation among 36 littoral and 11 hinterland states of the region. Alongside, India is working with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Nepal for closer trade through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The Mekong-Ganga initiative, launched in 2000 involving India, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam has recently expanded its ambit to include trade, investment, energy, food, health and highway connectivity. India has also associated itself with triangular strategic partnership between India-Russia-China and in the areas of trade, technology transfer and resource sharing. The dynamism of the Asian market has led to emergence of such multilateral and bilateral initiatives, which are more likely to remain fluid rather than structured. It is thus in India's interest to take a more active role in these forums in a way that maximises its own priorities and needs.

In conclusion, India must consistently remind itself that its economic policy is complementarily linked to its national security framework and subsequently to its foreign policy initiatives. New forays for peace and progress may be made in the nuanced usage of regional economic cooperation. India's use of its soft power and forerunning leadership in the exponential growth of its democratic polity, and cultural and economic diplomacy could progressively lead to economic integration initiatives with an objective of institutionalising security interests against possible threats to both its internal as well as regional stability. But for this to materialise, India must first realise and recognise that the ball is in her court as is the onus of taking up this responsibility with rigorous sagacity.

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