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**ADVANCING INDIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA
QUEST FOR MIDDLE-POWER COOPERATION**

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Introduction

The security environment in the Asia-Pacific region is undergoing significant changes. The rise of China as a dominant power is seriously undermining US paramountcy in the region. Further, the competition between the US and China is only bound to grow as China seeks to expand its military and economic strength. The US' pivot to Asia and its strengthening of partnerships with key regional allies has not deterred China from increasingly aggressive postures. In the wake of this turmoil, India's relations with Japan and South Korea have assumed salience, with the possibility of middle power cooperative balancing in the region. As middle powers, India, Japan and South Korea have limited influence upon the international system, but through a more constructive multilateral mechanism, it could generate a huge influence on the affairs of the Asia-Pacific. India enjoys a strategic relationship with both Japan and South Korea, which can be expanded to address both global and regional challenges.

In international relations, a middle power is generally referred to as those nations "which by reason of their size, their material resources, their willingness and ability to accept responsibility, their influence and stability are close to being great power"¹. However, in the present global order, the concept of middle powers is interpreted or recognised not through "constitutive features of middle-power states or by their positions in the world system, but by their foreign policy behaviour"². The potential of being a middle power can be magnified through pervasive and complex interdependence. On this basis, India, Japan and South Korea qualify as middle powers by virtue of their economic capability and by the ability to influence global affair. The combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the three countries alone

¹ Bernard Wood (1987), "Middle Powers in the International System: A Preliminary Assessment of Potential," June 1987, URL: http://www.wider.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/previous/en_GB/wp-11/_files/82530817520633193/default/WP11.pdf

² Jordan Eduard (2010), "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing Between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers," *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*, 30: 1, 165-181.

stands at around 8.06 trillion US dollars³. The three countries are also the major spenders on defence. Moreover, India's relation with Japan and South Korea have now expanded to a wide range of areas including foreign policy, defence, trade and investment, science and technology, cultural and people-to-people exchanges. The growing economic interdependence and strategic partnership between three middle powers have the potential to mitigate economic and security disparity in the region.

This paper analyses India's engagements with Japan and South Korea in the wake of increasing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and the East China Sea as it poses significant challenges to New Delhi's interest in the region.

India: Risks Associated with the Rise of China

India has set its foreign policy course so as to strengthen its relationship with its neighbours⁴ and to play a constructive role in the Asia-Pacific region⁵. But, the region is in flux, as most foreign policy analysts agree that China emerging as a dominant power upsets the balance in Asia. This is complicated by frequently hostile relations between India and China. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is massing troops in the Tibet plateau⁶ while buttressing its infrastructure there and the incursions into Indian territory across the border are frequent enough to remain a major security threat to India's sovereignty⁷. Boundary talks between India-China continue without any tangible outcome⁸. Prof Srikanth Kondapalli explains that China seals the deals on border disputes with other countries only after the power differential overwhelmingly favours China leading to significant concessions by the

³ See, associated data from World Bank, URL: <http://data.worldbank.org/country>

⁴ Dhruva Jaishankar, "India's Five Foreign Policy Goals: Great Strides, Steep Challenges," The Wire, 26 May 2016, URL: <http://thewire.in/38708/indias-five-foreign-policy-goals-great-strides-steep-challenges/>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ See, "China has deployed more troops near Indian border: Pentagon," The Indian Express, 14 May 2016, URL: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/china-has-deployed-more-troops-near-indian-border-pentagon-2799965/>

⁷ See, Jayadeva Ranade, "China's Focus on Military Activities in Tibet," Vivekananda International Foundation, 18 September 2015, URL: <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2015/september/18/china-s-focus-on-military-activities-in-tibet>

⁸ Stephen Westcott, "The Ongoing Saga of the China-India Border Talks," The Diplomat, 02 May 2016, URL: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/the-ongoing-saga-of-the-china-india-border-talks/>

weaker state⁹. He also goes on to explain the impossibility of such a power differential in the India-China equation due to India's rising GDP resulting in a reduced possibility of the resolution of the border conflict¹⁰. Therefore, for India, the risk associated with the rise of China can be broadly classified into two categories; China thwarting India's rise and the geopolitical risks.

Why does India believe that China is attempting to thwart India's rise? Indian Air Force Chief Arup Raha views China as the single major security challenge to India's growing interest in the Asia-Pacific region¹¹. He also points out that China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and particularly in South Asia is a dangerous trend. On similar lines, Harsh Pant views the rise of China as a major concern to India because it is not just seeking great power status in Asia, but also, on a parallel track, trying to thwart the rise of India¹². Additionally, China's growing influence in South Asia suggests its strategy is to contain India and "encircle her within the geographical coordinates of the region"¹³. This standpoint logically points towards China's strategy of improving trade and investment in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh for marginalising India. Therefore, India faces a dual task – protecting its land border with China and playing a perpetual balancing game against China among its neighbours.

The South and East China Seas are important arteries of the Asia-Pacific region. These maritime commons serve as a vital link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Nearly 55 per cent of India's trade passes through these crucial waterways¹⁴. Japan and South Korea's energy and commerce are also heavily dependent on sea routes. Consequently, the buttressing of Chinese territorial claims by building artificial islands in the South China Sea poses a significant threat to the freedom of navigation. Moreover, the militarisation of the South and East China Seas magnifies the threat that these Chinese

⁹ See, Elizabeth Roche "Rising Chinese nationalist sentiments may hinder China, India in solving border dispute," Live Mint, 13 July 2016, URL: <http://www.livemint.com/Industry/Ood9fEF40HUOIVo7AULTeP/Rising-Chinese-nationalist-sentiments-may-hinder-China-Indi.html>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Sushant Singh, "Air chief warns 'China making moves to contain India,'" The Indian Express, 10 November 2015, URL: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/air-chief-warns-china-making-moves-to-contain-india/>

¹² Harsh V Pant (ed), "The Rise of China: Implications for India," Cambridge University Press: New Delhi (2012)

¹³ Harsh V Pant, "India and China slugging it out in South Asia," The Japan Times, 21 Dec 2014, URL: <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2014/12/21/commentary/world-commentary/india-china-slugging-south-asia/#.V33ynPI97IU>

¹⁴ Srikanth Kondapalli, "India must change course in the South China Sea," Rediff.com, 08 March 2016, URL: <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/india-must-change-course-in-the-south-china-sea/20160308.htm>

claims pose to the security of the Asia-Pacific region. Experts fear that these overstated claims would “disrupt pre-existing order in Asia and significantly raising the risk of military confrontation”¹⁵. Brahma Chellaney also makes similar claims that the balance of power in Asia will be determined principally based on the events in East Asia and the India Ocean¹⁶.

It is logical, therefore, to conclude that while India's power differential with China is not as vast, it is not enough in itself to be able to balance China individually either. However, India's relationship with other East Asian countries, with similar power differentials to China, may in combination hold the potential to shape the future of China's ascent and determine the success of America's Pivot to Asia¹⁷. This offers an incentive for India to broaden its bilateral relationship with the US, Japan and South Korea.

¹⁵Xenia W, John Nilsson-Wright and Tim S, “The Asia-Pacific Power Balance Beyond the US-China Narrative,” Chatham House, September 2015, URL:https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150924AsiaPacificWickettNilssonWrightSummersFinal.pdf

¹⁶ Brahma Chellaney, “Japan and India: A transformative entente,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, 23 January 2014, URL: <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Geopolitico/Japan-and-India-a-transformative-entente>

¹⁷ Ibid

Chinese Maritime Assertiveness in the South China Sea and the East China Sea

China's maritime strategy is almost universally seen as a challenge to the present *status quo* in the Asia-Pacific region. Chinese activism; such as the declaration of an Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) extending towards the Senkaku Islands¹⁸, new fishing rules implemented on the Hainan coast¹⁹, building runways and radar facilities on new islets in the South China Sea²⁰ and, the PLA-Navy shadowing of passing naval vessels²¹, are but a few of the methods Beijing has used to impose its will on the region. Moreover, China's naval modernisation has transformed its navy into one of the most formidable forces in the region²². Skirmishes in the South China Sea are increasing in quantum and frequency and are making routine activity on the high seas (guaranteed under United Nation Convention on Law of the Sea UNCLOS) a fraught proposition²³.

China and ASEAN had in 2002 signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) to resolve the issue peacefully²⁴. However, increasing Chinese bellicosity has resulted in many skirmishes and has cast doubt on the validity of the DOC. Despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruling against China, the issue remains far from over. For example, when Chinese vessels confronted USNS *Impeccable* in 2009 the confrontation flared up the issue of the freedom of navigation and exposed the ambiguity in UNCLOS,²⁵ where both the US and China invoked UNCLOS to claim that their actions were based on international law. The different interpretations of peaceful activity in

¹⁸ "China establishes 'air-defence zone' over East China Sea," BBC News, 23 November 2013, URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25062525>

¹⁹ M Taylor Fravel, "Hainan's New Fishing Rules: A Preliminary Analysis," The Diplomat, 10 January 2014, URL: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/01/hainans-new-fishing-rules-a-preliminary-analysis/>

²⁰ Chun Han Wong, "China Appears to Have Built Radar Facilities on Disputed South China Sea Islands," The Wall Street Journal, 23 February 2016, URL: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-appears-to-have-built-radar-gear-in-disputed-waters-1456198634>

²¹ Nobuhiro Kubo, "China spy ship shadows U.S., Japanese, Indian naval drill in Western Pacific," Reuters, 15 June 2016., URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pacific-exercises-idUSKCN0Z10B8>

²² Timothy R Heath, "China's naval Modernization: Where is it headed," World Political Review, 10 February 2016, URL: <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/17909/china-s-naval-modernization-where-is-it-headed>

²³ Howard W. F, "China's Dangerous Game," The Atlantic, November 2014, URL: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/11/chinas-dangerous-game/380789/>

²⁴ See, "Declaration on the Conduct Of Parties In The South China Sea," ASEAN, 17 October 2012, URL: http://asean.org/?static_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2

²⁵ Jing Geng, "The Legality of Foreign Military Activities in the Exclusive Economic Zone Under UNCLOS," Merkourios 2012 – Volume 28/Issue 74, Article, pp. 22-30

Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) is likely to remain one of the major bones of legal contention in the region.

The US claims that its primary interest in the body of water is about the freedom of navigation. To buttress this claim a US warship ignored Chinese warnings and passed within 12 nautical miles off an artificial islet created by China in the South China Sea²⁶. This reflects the deep worry within the US strategic establishment about China's 'sea-face and space-face strategy' to counter the US presence²⁷. Under the Obama administration, the US has also expanded the scope of the "rebalance" to build strategic alliances and partnerships with other nations in the region²⁸.

The Chinese moves are not just restricted to the US and the South China Sea. Japan too has its own litany of complaints. These involve Chinese attempts to stake claim over the Senkaku Islands through military means. Chinese naval vessels trespassing into Senkaku waters have triggered the scrambling of jets by both sides and the aiming of weapons radars²⁹ have only escalated the potential for conflict. Japan, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, adopted a pro-active security relationship with the US, India and Australia as the result of Chinese maritime assertiveness³⁰. The 2016 Japanese Upper House election bolstered Mr Shinzo Abe's long-held goal to revise the constitution. The constitutional revision included removing limits on Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) and would allow Japan to boost military ties with friendly countries to pressurise China³¹.

²⁶ Brand L and Jim S, "U.S. destroyer sails near disputed Chinese island," CNN Politics, 10 May 2016, URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/10/politics/us-china-destroyer-sails-by-disputed-island/>

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Mark E M, Stephen D, Ben D, Susan V.L, Michael E.M, Ronald O and Bruce V, "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" towards Asia," CRS Report for Congress, 28 March 2012, URL: <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>

²⁹ Linda Sieg and Kiyoshi Takenaka, "Japan protests to China after radar pointed at vessel," Reuters, 5 February 2013, URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-japan-idUSBRE91410Q20130205>

³⁰ See, Yuki Tatsumi, "Abe's Visit Takes Japan-India Security Relations to the Next Level," The Diplomat, 14 December 2015, URL: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/abes-visit-takes-japan-india-security-relations-to-the-next-level/>

³¹ Mitsuru Obe, "Japan Election Boosts Shinzo Abe's Bid to Revise Constitution," The Wall Street Journal, 10 July 2016, URL: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/japanese-voters-to-render-a-verdict-on-abenomics-national-security-policy-1468111220>

For South Korea too, the freedom of movement in the Asia-Pacific region is crucial in sustaining export-led economic growth. It has a huge economic stake in the region being a major trading partner and has massive dependence on overseas oil, much of which transits through the region. In 2015, speaking to the general session of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), South Korea's Defence Minister said, "The stance of the Republic of Korea is that a peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute and the freedom of navigation and flight should be guaranteed"³². It is the first time high ranking South Korean officials referred to the South China Sea as a disputed area and articulated a position on the same.

Later, President Park Geun-hye at the East Asian Summit re-emphasised the need for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the South China Sea. President Park also pointed out that "Korea has a strategic interest in the disputed region as the South China Sea is a key shipping lane through which more than 90 per cent of Korea's energy shipments and 30 percent of its overall exports pass"³³. In addition, South Korea has expanded its defence cooperation with key South China Sea littoral states; especially the Philippines and Vietnam³⁴. There were already strains in the Korea-China relationship due to Seoul's decision to host the US theatre missile defence system called Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) to counter the North Korean ballistic missile test. This is particularly telling as nuclear and ballistic missile proliferation is a common concern for India, Japan and South Korea.

India's interest in the region is well articulated by Dr C Raja Mohan in his book *Samudra Manthan*³⁵. According to him these are: increasing trade with East Asian countries; reducing dependence on major powers to protect India's maritime interest; Chinese maritime assertiveness; to maintain an Indian presence to keep track of potential developments in the region and an Indian navy forward presence in the region to build partnerships with the navies of East and Southeast Asia. India is not reluctant to

³² See, "Freedom of navigation should be guaranteed in disputed South China Sea: S. Korean defense minister," *Yonhap News*, 04 November 2015, URL: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2015/11/04/0200000000AEN20151104008751315.html>

³³ Wi Tack-whan, Sohn Jiae, "President calls ASEAN driving force for regional integration," *Korea.net*, 23 November 2015, URL: <http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Policies/view?articleId=131062>

³⁴ Ann Song, "Where Does South Korea Stand on the South China Sea Disputes," *International Policy Digest*, 02 July 2014, URL: <http://intpolicydigest.org/2014/07/02/south-korea-stand-south-china-sea-dispute/>

³⁵ Raja Mohan, "Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Washington, DC, 2012, pp. 184–185.

highlight the importance of the region to New Delhi in international forums. Speaking at the 10th East Asian Summit in Malaysia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, “India hopes that all parties to the disputes in the South China Sea will abide by the Declaration on the Conduct on South China Sea and the guidelines on the implementation”³⁶.

The Indian Navy is at the forefront of India's Look East Policy. India's latest naval strategy document for 2016 - “Ensuring Secure Seas: India’s maritime Security Strategy” - envisages a greater role in the Asia-Pacific region. The document has not directly referred to China as a potential security threat to India but pointed out that “the likely sources of traditional threat would be from states with a history of aggression against India”³⁷. It is well beyond doubt that India, the US, Japan, South Korean and ASEAN are apprehensive about Chinese maritime assertiveness. At the same time, India is extremely cautious not to turn a potential threat into an active one. Such risk aversion is voiced frequently by top Indian government officials³⁸. As the military establishment is also aware, India is no match for Chinese military might, and India’s obvious response is to build bilateral/trilateral cooperation with East and Southeast Asian countries to deter potential adversaries.

India, the US, Japan and South Korea are major countries willing to contribute to the stability and security of the region. Despite a plethora of differences on international issues, India-US defence cooperation seems to be going from strength to strength. The India-US relationship has also achieved new possibilities by bringing Japan into the fold³⁹. The primary objective of the India-US-Japan trilateral cooperation is to ensure peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region⁴⁰. The success so far of this

³⁶See, Q NO.2090 South China Sea Dispute, Rajya Sabha discussion, Ministry of External Affairs, 18 December 2015, URL: http://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/26205/Q_NO2090_SOUTH_CHINA_SEA_DISPUTE

³⁷ See, “Ensuring Secure Seas: India’s maritime Security Strategy,” Ministry of Defence (Indian Navy), 2015, URL: http://indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf

³⁸ Jonah B, Jennifer D.P.M, Angel R, Bonny L, “Look East, Cross Black Waters: India’s Interest in Southeast Asia,” CA: Rand 2015, URL: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1000/RR1021/RAND_RR1021.pdf

³⁹ Joint Statement on “India and Japan Vision 2025: Special Strategic and Global Partnership Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World” Ministry of External Affairs, India, 12 December 2015, URL: http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26176/Joint_Statement_on_India_and_Japan_Vision_2025_Special_Strategic_and_Global_Partnership_Working_Together_for_Peace_and_Prosperty_of_the_IndoPacific_R

⁴⁰ Ibid

trilateral cooperation gives India a template to explore a new triangle with Japan and South Korea, where New Delhi shares a wide range of interests.

India's Bilateral Cooperation with Japan and South Korea

India's Look East Policy was initiated in 1992 to deepen its relationship with Southeast Asia. The policy was basically devised as a strategy to boost trade and economic cooperation with the Southeast Asian nations⁴¹. This multi-pronged strategy helped India economically integrate with the ASEAN countries. In the subsequent years, ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) accepted India as a dialogue partner. Over the years, India's relationship with East Asia – especially Japan and South Korea – also gained momentum in the post-liberalisation phase. However, a more much focused approach to deepen India's engagement with East Asia only began after 2000⁴². Since then, both in economic and defence terms, India's relations with Japan and South Korea have blossomed. India signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) first with South Korea in 2010 and then with Japan in 2011. India's total trade with Japan has increased from USD 13.72 billion in 2010 to USD 15.51 billion dollars in 2014-2015⁴³. India is a major recipient of Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) and has also attracted significant investment from Japan. The number of Japanese companies operating in India has also increased from 627 in 2009 to 1,229 in 2016, indicating a significant diversification and deepening of the economic relationship⁴⁴. Under "Make in India" Japan is committed to increasing investment in India by USD 35 billion in the next five years to boost bilateral trade relations⁴⁵. The two nations intend to focus much of this expansion in crucial areas such as science, technology and infrastructure⁴⁶. A committee of experts from both sides has been set up and meets regularly⁴⁷ to fix the targets set by the leadership of the two countries.

⁴¹ Abhijit Singh, "India's 'Look East' Policy Takes on Maritime Edge," *World Political Review*, 9 July 2012, URL: <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12139/indias-look-east-policy-takes-on-maritime-edge>

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ See, "Export-Import Data Bank," Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, URL: <http://commerce.nic.in/eidb/iecmt.asp>

⁴⁴ See, "Japanese Business Establishment," Japan Embassy in India, URL: http://www.in.emb-japan.go.jp/PDF/2016_j_cos_list.pdf

⁴⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India received \$19.78 billion in FDI in 2014-15 from countries that PM Narendra Modi visited," *The Economic Times*, 21 Sept 2015, URL: http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-09-21/news/66761100_1_pm-narendra-modi-india-programme-fdi

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

The India-South Korea trade relationship is also growing significantly. In 2014-15, India's total trade with South Korea stood at USD 18.13 billion⁴⁸. The two countries have also started work to intensify cooperation in economic and trade related fields. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also believes that such growth would enable the two countries "to impart further substance, greater content and new momentum to the strategic partnership"⁴⁹.

India's strategic cooperation with Japan and South Korea also seems to be expanding. For India, this strategic cooperation with Japan was the centrepiece of its Look East Policy. India and Japan have institutionalised the cooperation by signing a strategic cooperation agreement in 2006⁵⁰. The India-Japan annual summit placed a structural framework for dialogue and cooperation in the security field. Maritime security was one of the major areas of strategic cooperation and both Coast Guards have regularly engaged in exercises since 2000⁵¹. From 2012, the Indian Navy and the Japan Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF) commenced joint exercises as part of the ongoing maritime security cooperation⁵². Apart from bilateral exercises, the Japanese and Indian navies have also participated in multilateral exercises along with the Australian, Singapore and US navies⁵³. Japanese willingness to supply the Indian navy with the US-2 amphibious aircraft would further open new avenues of joint development in defence systems.

India's defence cooperation with South Korea is equally important. In 2005, the two sides signed an agreement to cooperate in defence and logistics and another Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation between the two Coast Guards in 2006⁵⁴. So far, the Indian and South Korean Coast Guards have conducted five exercises with an aim to enhance interoperability. The most recent of these

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ "PM's statement to the media during the State Visit of the President of Republic of Korea," Press Information Bureau, 16 January 2014, URL: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=121821>

⁵⁰ See, "Joint Statement Towards Japan-India Strategic and Global partnership," Ministry of External Affairs, India, 15 December 2006, URL: <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6368/Joint+Statement+Towards+IndiaJapan+Strategic+and+Global+Partnership>

⁵¹ Prakash Panneerselvam, "India-Japan Maritime Security Cooperation (1999-2009): A Report," JMSDF Staff College review, URL: http://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/SSG/review/eng_2/2-4.pdf

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Rajaram Panda, "India-Republic of Korea Military Diplomacy: Past and Future Projections," *Journal of Defence Studies*, (2011) Vol.5 No.1

exercises was held off the coast of Chennai, named Sahyog-Hyeoblyeog 2016⁵⁵. In 2010, India's Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh visited South Korea, followed by Defence Minister AK Antony, leading to the signing of two landmark MoUs⁵⁶ to boost defence cooperation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited South Korea and requested President Park to support the participation of Korean companies in the Indian defence sector⁵⁷. In 2015, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar visited Seoul to review the entire gamut of bilateral defence ties. The visit also helped the two sides reach an agreement on defence technology and the manufacturing of defence equipment in India⁵⁸. South Korea's Kangnam Corporation lost out on a deal to make eight Mine Counter-Measure Vessels (MCMVs) for the Indian navy due to alleged malpractice in 2014. However, in 2015, Kangnam again resurfaced as a strong contender to produce twelve MCMVs vessels jointly with the Goa Shipyard Limited (GSL) with a heavy technology transfer element⁵⁹.

India, Japan and South Korea, as democracies, share common values and has been seen above convergent interests in the region. The real question is, how does one kick start the strong bilateral relationships as a trilateral? Track 1.5 trilateral dialogues between India, Japan and South Korea have been progressing for the past four years⁶⁰. The idea of trilateral cooperation between the three was first conceived at an interaction in 2012 in New Delhi⁶¹. The main objective of the track 1.5 dialogues is to generate "ideas that will influence the wider relationship existing amongst the partners at the governmental level or at the people-to-people level and how we view our region and emerging Asian

⁵⁵See, "Coast Guards of India, South Korea hold joint exercises," The Economic Times, 10 June 2016, URL: <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/coast-guards-of-india-south-korea-hold-joint-exercises/articleshow/52690949.cms>

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ See, "Narendra Modi visit: South Korea to provide \$10 bn for infrastructure development in India," The Financial Express, 18 March 2015, URL: <http://www.financialexpress.com/article/economy/narendra-modis-south-korea-visit-inks-10-bn-for-infrastructure-development-in-india/73648/>

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹See, "South Korea's Kangnam Corp key contender for MCMV tender," Business Standard, 25 June 2015, URL: http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/south-korea-s-kangnam-corp-key-contender-for-mcmv-tender-115062501199_1.html

⁶⁰ See, "India-Japan-ROK Trilateral Dialogue - Inaugural Address by Shri Sanjay Singh, Secretary (East)," Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), 29 June 2012, URL: <http://www.idsa.in/event/IndiaJapanROKTrilateralDialogueInauguralAddress>

⁶¹ Ibid

architecture,” said Sanjay Singh, the then Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs⁶². The success of this process can transform the track 1.5 dialogues into full inter-governmental dialogues.

⁶² Ibid

India-Japan-South Korea: Quest for Middle-Power Cooperation

At present, the trilateral dialogue focuses on the key security issues like maritime politics in East Asia and the Indian Ocean, non-traditional security threats, regional politics covering China, North Korea, and Afghanistan etc⁶³. This trilateral cooperation tends to focus on the “balance of power” equation that can institutionalise structural frameworks in the Asia-Pacific region. Such cooperation mitigates the uncertainties arising out of the regional issues like Chinese assertiveness and the purported US decline. The US is still a formidable force in the Asia-Pacific with a huge naval presence in the region. At the same time, experts believe that the “the US is becoming more ambivalent about providing strong commitments to its allies in the region, and these allies are facing a dilemma that will grow ever more serious”⁶⁴. Therefore, middle power cooperation is quite possibly the only viable strategy to counter Chinese assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region and can provide an alternative to the US rebalancing in the region.

Conclusion

India’s partnerships with Japan and South Korea are poised to grow deeper in the 21st century, specifically fostering greater interdependence in the security arena. The regional security factor that binds the three nations into a single common interest group is the rise of China. At the same time, all three nations share a close strategic relationship with the US and complement American efforts to maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific. These factors make India, Japan and South Korea eminently suitable for ensuring peace and stability through institutionalised middle power cooperation, as the region heads for a power transition.

⁶³ See, “Asia’s Aspirations and Interests Discussed at India-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Dialogue,” IDSA Press Release, 29 November 2013, URL: <http://www.idsa.in/pressrelease/IndiaJapanSouthKoreaTrilateralDialogue>

⁶⁴ See the discussion “Middle-power Cooperation between South Korea and India: hedging the Dominance of great power,” Pacific Forum, CSIS, 3 February 2014, URL: https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/Pac1410R.pdf

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