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Project Mausam: India's Grand Maritime Strategy (Part II)

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This paper is the second part of an essay on India's Project Mausam. While Part 1 focused on the nature of Project Mausam, this paper seeks to examine its impact on ASEAN and Malaysia in particular.

A recap: Project Mausam

The previous essay on India's Project Mausam examined the potential nature of the Indian maritime initiative that aims to revive the country's ancient maritime links across the Indian Ocean. It should be noted that the project is still in the early stages of cultivation. Beyond its official mention by Prime Minister Modi, there have been only several general indications by bureaucrats, indicating the still vague scope of the



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initiative. Indeed, the opacity associated with the project has led to speculation by the media and analysts that Project Mausam could be India's response to China's growing maritime influence — a counterbalance to the latter's Maritime Silk Route (MSR) and increasing presence in the Indian Ocean.

Despite no official confirmation either way, Project Mausam looks set to be a major tool in India's foreign and trade policies for the wider Indian Ocean region, expanding and conceivably regaining what India sees as its rightful influence. Should such an initiative come to pass, it would undoubtedly have an impact on the ASEAN region that borders the Indian Ocean and sits in the middle of various maritime trade schemes. How will Project Mausam impact India-ASEAN relations? More specifically, how would key members, like Malaysia, engage with the initiative while keeping in mind wider national and regional interests and sensitivities?

Winds of change towards ASEAN?

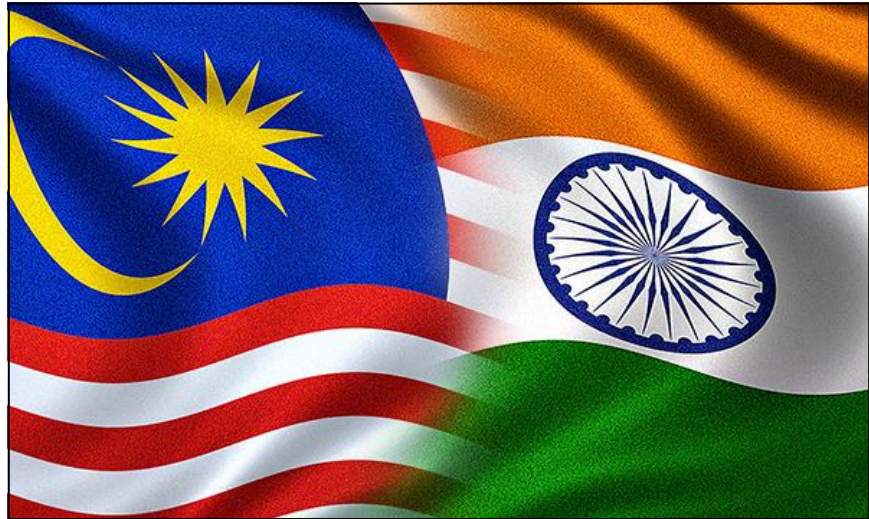
It would be safe to say that any rollout of Project Mausam will take into consideration the strategic importance of ASEAN. Several ASEAN member countries — Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand — share borders with the eastern Indian Ocean while Malaysia and Singapore are key stakeholders. The India-ASEAN relationship itself has grown significantly since initial sectoral and full dialogue partnership talks in 1992 and 1995 respectively. Elevated to a strategic partnership in 2012, the relationship now covers a wide spectrum of fields including political and security cooperation, economics and socio-cultural issuesⁱ. Generally, India has good relations with the organisation as a whole and its individual members, with varying degrees of economic and security engagement with different members.

Nevertheless, when compared to some of ASEAN's other partners like China, the European Union, Japan and even Taiwan, the depth of India's relationship with ASEAN, especially in economics and trade has been rather dismalⁱⁱ. There has always been a gap between India's strategic promise and its performance. As is often the case with grand initiatives from New Delhi — and to a lesser degree ASEAN — the problem is not the lack of ideas but the inability to follow through on them. The new proactive administration in Delhi however seems keen to boost cooperation and achieve substantial results. At the 2014 ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Modi himself stressed that a new, rising India which is serious in engaging the wider East Asia, was keen to deepen its relationship with ASEAN, advancing balance, peace and stability in the wider regionⁱⁱⁱ.

Project Mausam, with its action oriented aims to further forge economic, cultural, strategic and security cooperation with states in the region, represents a significant opportunity to add further depth and substance to the India-ASEAN relationship. The project can and should complement contemporary initiatives like the Act East policy — itself a proactive enhancement of India's nearly quarter century old Look East policy — which is geared specifically towards ASEAN and more generally towards East Asia. As Project Mausam rolls out, India will likely engage with ASEAN, bringing new opportunities for collaboration in economic, security and possibly cultural sectors.

It would be impossible to ignore the issue of maritime security in the South China Sea (SCS) when examining a potential major Indian maritime strategy that will be of importance to ASEAN. Maritime security, territorial disputes and a growing Chinese presence in the SCS are a growing concern for its member states. It would not be conjecture to state that some members of ASEAN might be keener than others in welcoming such an initiative by India, perhaps buying into Project Mausam as a

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counterbalance to China. India's strategic cooperation with Vietnam — including defence cooperation and visits — and interest in pursuing joint resource exploration in the SCS have seen the disapproval of China. More recently, Singapore has urged India, as a 'big and influential country' to play a bigger role in confidence building in the SCS. Officially, India supports the peaceful resolution of the disputes and the implementation of a Code of Conduct in the SCS and has been careful to appear as a neutral party^v.

Malaysia and Mausam — managing engagement

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Sitting smack in the middle of Southeast Asia and straddling the Strait of Malacca and the SCS, Malaysia is likely to see itself involved in some capacity should Project Mausam come to pass. Malaysia has longstanding diplomatic relations with India — especially economic and cultural relations. Due to concerns over its influence and sovereignty in the Strait of Malacca, Malaysia had been somewhat reluctant to see a more prominent Indian security presence in Southeast Asia. Defence relations, however, have always been cordial and are steadily growing^{vi}. There may be indications that this reluctance is changing with increasing contact and training among the defence establishments of both countries. Additionally, as strategic and security realities evolve in the SCS, Malaysia could find itself more accommodating to a more active and maritime focused India.

Concurrently, China's MSR proposal has been well received in Malaysia with both political and business leaders voicing their support of the initiative. Under the MSR umbrella, there is already ongoing development of the Kuantan port on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia to handle larger vessels with more tonnage in collaboration with its 'sister' Qinzhou port in China's Guangxi province^{vii}. Malaysia has always valued its relationship with China and the trade relationship between the two is significant. It is likely that Malaysia will continue in this direction as it could leverage on the MSR, not only for economic benefits, but also as a means of minimising the likelihood of conflicts with China, stemming from ongoing territorial disputes in the SCS.

While it is still early days, one can make an educated guess that the advent of Project Mausam, coupled with China's MSR and Indonesia's Maritime Axis, have given the folks at Wisma Putra something to think about. Three major maritime initiatives by three important states that have longstanding relations with Malaysia — all of which affect Southeast Asia with Malaysia located at its dead centre — are more than

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enough to cause some sleepless nights. Malaysia has long maintained a hedging approach in regard to big power presence in Southeast Asia. Hence the challenge for Malaysia is to not only balance her involvement in these maritime initiatives while looking out for its interests but also keep in mind the larger best interests of a region that Malaysia is inexorably tied to. As Project Mausam and the other maritime initiatives take better shape, Malaysia should work through bilateral and multilateral frameworks to try to ensure that these initiatives do not ultimately compete with each other, risking further tension and polarisation of the wider region, but rather seek to complement each other creating a more peaceful and prosperous outcome for all.

Notes:

i ASEAN (2014), Overview of ASEAN-India dialogue relations (Online), Available at: <http://www.asean.org/asean/external-relations/india/item/overview-of-asean-india-dialogue-relations>

ii ASEAN (2014), External trade statistics, ASEAN trade by partner country/region (Online), Available at: http://www.asean.org/images/2015/January/external_trade_statistic/table24_asof04Dec14.pdf

iii The Hindu (2014), India, ASEAN can be 'great partners': Modi, November (Online), Available at: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-asean-can-be-great-partners-modi/article6590328.ece>

iv Bloomberg (2015), India should play bigger role in South China Sea, says Singapore, 16 March (Online), Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-16/india-should-play-bigger-role-in-south-china-sea-says-singapore>

v Banlaoi, R.C. (2013), Challenges in India-ASEAN security cooperation, Speech delivered at the Delhi Dialogue V, 20 February, pp. 3–5.

vi Brewster, D. (2013), India-ASEAN defence relations, RSIS Monograph No. 28, pp. 144–145 (Online), Available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/india-asean-defence-relations/#.VLY3Xns8o80>

vii Yi, T.X. (2014), Enhancing two-way cooperation, *The Star*, 12 September (Online), Available at: <http://www.thestar.com.my/Opinion/Columnists/Check-In-China/Profile/Articles/2014/09/12/Enhancing-two-way-cooperation/>