

COMPARATIVE

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INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

WELCOMED BY WASHINGTON, CONTESTED BY CHINA, ENGAGED WITH EAST ASIA

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Progress was not dramatic, but the combination of a US-India relationship strengthened and networked in the context of the Indo-Pacific, ongoing China-India tensions, and India's continued incremental advances in regional ties is consolidating India-East Asia relations. The Trump administration, in its first year in office, welcomed Prime Minister Modi and articulated India's importance to both its South Asia and Indo-Pacific policies, including trilateral and quadrilateral arrangements among the US, Japan, India, and Australia. Mid-year, India and China engaged in a tense two-month standoff on the Doklam Plateau, highlighting yet another element of longstanding territorial and border disputes and adding to the list of accumulated grievances. India's relations with other East Asian countries, however, advanced on the diplomatic and defense fronts. India's own emphases in its East Asia outreach included maritime cooperation, seeking to engage East Asian partners in India's states, building new bilateral mechanisms to harness relations, and participating in regional multilateral groupings to institutionalize regional relationships and engagements.

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India-China: dirty dancing and weird arithmetic

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his end of year report on international developments and his country's foreign relations, [characterized](#) China-India relations as the "prospect of the Dragon [China] and the Elephant [India] Dancing Together and '1+1=11' effect..." This was an overly optimistic outlook given what occurred the [in 2016](#) and during 2017.

The literal peak of contestation was the standoff on the high Himalayan Doklam Plateau from late-June until a disengagement was announced at the end of August. India's first official statement on the matter came on [June 30](#) in response to a Chinese statement on June 26 "alleging that Indian border troops crossed the boundary line in the Sikkim sector of the China-India boundary and entered Chinese territory." India's retort was to focus on Bhutan's protests against a Chinese construction party and "express deep concern that such construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India." For the next three months, military deployments on both sides faced off in the area and included a [rock and fist-throwing melee](#) that was captured on video. Luckily, this was the height and extent of military conflict. A disengagement agreement was achieved Aug. 28. India's [statement](#) was terse, saying that based on diplomatic communication "expeditious disengagement of border personnel at the face-off site at Doklam has been agreed to and is on-going."

China's media and official statements generally characterized the disengagement as more unilateral on the part of India, though a Chinese Foreign Ministry official appeared to indicate that China would also "adjust" its military deployments in the area. By yearend, China's official position was reflected in Foreign Minister Wang Yi's [statement](#) that "[w]e handled the Indian border troops' trespass into China's Dong Lang area in our national interest,..." – i.e., India was at fault and the territory continues to belong to China.

Based on the Doklam incident and the "framing" of its resolution, it is entirely possible that future flare-ups and face-offs among security personnel in the same vicinity will be forthcoming. The key question will be how such developments will be handled. Despite

the tense and difficult Doklam events, each side appears to have worked through diplomatic channels for a workable, face-saving – even if temporary – resolution of the crisis. This bodes well for the future. A smaller incident that provides evidence of the ability to handle differences occurred late in the year. In this incident, according to an [official Indian statement](#), an Indian UAV crossed the line of actual control (LAC) in the Sikkim Sector "due to some technical problem" and the "matter [was] dealt with in accordance with the established protocols through institutional mechanisms to deal with situations along India-China border areas." The fundamental territorial and border disputes, as opposed to incident de-escalation, show no signs of resolution and hang like a weight around the China-India relationship despite decades of fruitless border talks.

While the Doklam face-off was the key event in China-India relations in 2017, the incident did not derail other interactions. Indeed, the incident may have been defused partly to facilitate other activity. Just a week after the Doklam disengagement, in early September, Prime Minister Narendra Modi traveled to Xiamen for the ninth BRICS Summit and a bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping. Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar [characterized the state of relations carefully](#), highlighting efforts to "not let differences become disputes," making sure that "India-China relations were a factor of stability," but insisting that "peace and tranquility in the border areas was a prerequisite for the further development of our relationships and that there should be more efforts made to really enhance and strengthen the level of mutual trust between the two sides."

Foreign Secretary Jaishankar's hope during the same remarks that inter-governmental mechanisms that exist between the two countries such as a joint economic group, defense and security group, and strategic dialogue as well as cross-membership organizations such as BRICS and AIIB "can be used to build a relationship" seems optimistic. Notwithstanding meetings of these mechanisms during the year, a major face-off was not prevented. At best, these mechanisms may have put a brake on the faceoff becoming open military conflict.

India-Japan: bonhomie and [bromance](#)

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's mid-September visit to India for an annual summit – the fourth between Modi and Abe – to review their “Special Strategic and Global Partnership” was the key event of 2017 in India-Japan relations. The two leaders also met on the sidelines of other international events during the year such as the G20 and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The September summit 2017 was [warm and friendly](#) but there were no major announcements despite 15 Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) [being signed](#). In a break from protocol, the 12th annual summit was not in the capital city of New Delhi, but in Ahmedabad/Gandhinagar in India's Gujarat state, which PM Modi previously headed as chief minister.



1 Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Abe; 3 Monkeys

The [sixty-point joint statement](#) highlighted the scope of ambitions between the two countries – most notably, aligning Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy with India's Act East Policy. “Reinforcing Defense and Security Cooperation” was the first item of the joint statement. There was also a commitment to strengthen trilateral cooperation frameworks with the United States, Australia, and other countries. The two prime ministers “expressed satisfaction” about the [entry into force](#) of an Agreement for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy (this actually occurred in July).

Earlier in September, India's then Defense Minister Arun Jaitley visited Tokyo for the annual defense ministerial dialogue. Service-to-service ties were highlighted in the [joint statement of the visit](#). For example, the two countries' armies agreed to develop exchanges in the fields of peacekeeping, counter-terrorism and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief

(HA/DR). On navy-to-navy ties, Tokyo and New Delhi plan to deepen and expand the objectives of the *Malabar* exercise – including plans to involve Japan's *P-1* aircraft and anti-submarine warfare training and mine-countermeasures training held by Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Forces. Air force ties remain comparatively less developed, though plans were announced to increase mutual visits to air bases. The two sides also agreed to have a first-ever visit of the Japanese chief of staff, Joint Staff Japan Self-Defense Forces to India in the first half of 2018. Initial efforts to create defense industry cooperation also have begun. Yet, little progress was made on key [defense deals](#) such as *US-2* aircraft and possibly *Soryu* diesel submarines. The September defense discussions statement simply “noted the effort made by both countries regarding the cooperation on *US-2* amphibious aircraft.” The joint statement of the two prime ministers was a little more expressive, reiterating “Japan's readiness to provide its state-of-the-art *US-2* amphibian aircraft” which “was appreciated [by India] as symbolizing the high degree of trust between the two countries.”

A notable MoU signed during Abe's visit was the [establishment](#) of a Coordination Forum on Development of Northeast Region. The forum was officially launched in December when Foreign Secretary Jaishankar [hosted](#) the first meeting. India has been making efforts to get Japan and other East Asian countries to engage at the state level in India, especially in providing capacity-building and infrastructure in the under-developed northeast region of the country. Whether significant development projects will be launched remains to be seen. Japan so far has been careful not to make commitments in territory contested between China and India.



2 Prime Minister Abe visit to India arrival summit. Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Beyond strictly bilateral relations, another element of emerging India-Japan relations is their coordination and cooperation with third countries and regions. For example, Japan and India participated in the [Nov. 12 India-Australia-Japan-US consultations](#) on the Indo-Pacific held on the sidelines of the Manila-hosted East Asia Summit. And, when India [hosted](#) a mid-December connectivity summit with ASEAN, Japan was the only non-ASEAN country with official representation at the summit.

India-Southeast Asia: 25 years of dialogue

India played up ties with Southeast Asia during 2017. Prime Minister Modi, for example, reminded his fellow leaders at the [15th India-ASEAN Summit held in Manila in November](#) that ASEAN's 50th anniversary also marked the 25th year of the India-ASEAN dialogue partnership. He went on to say, "India's Act East Policy is shaped around the ASEAN, and its centrality in the regional security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region...." He also highlighted maritime links – but in trade rather than security terms. Earlier, in October, newly appointed Indian Defense Minister Nirmala Seetharaman made her first overseas trip after taking office to attend the fourth ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus gathering in Manila where she focused on counterterrorism rather than maritime issues. Modi reiterated the focus on terrorism in his own November remarks. On a symbolic note, he concluded his address to the ASEAN leaders by formally inviting all the ASEAN leaders to a January 2018 summit in India saying, "The 1.25 billion people of India are keen to welcome the ASEAN Leaders as our Chief Guests at India's 69th Republic Day Celebrations." This will be the first time that multiple leaders from a region will be chief guests at an Indian Republic Day parade.

India-Myanmar relations

The major event of India-Myanmar relations in 2017 was the [state visit](#) of Prime Minister Modi in early September. This was his first bilateral engagement in the neighboring country, though he had attend the ASEAN Summit and the EAS there in November 2014. Modi's visit builds on the 2016 visits to India of Myanmar President Htin Kyaw and of State Councilor Aung San Suu Kyi. During the visit, [11 MoUs were signed](#), including three on maritime cooperation.

Prime Minister Modi's visit occurred just after the outbreak of violence in Rakhine State following the Aug. 25 attack on Myanmar security forces and subsequent violence against the Rohingya minority leading to the exodus of almost 650,000 to neighboring Bangladesh. Indian policy has been to respond by preventing their migration into India, treating the issue largely from a security perspective and by maintaining close ties with the Myanmar government and security forces. Over the past few years, closer security ties have developed between the Indian and Myanmar military forces – largely but not only in connection with insurgencies in northeast India. The May visit of Gen. Bipin Rawat, chief of India's Army Staff, to Myanmar should be seen in this context of ongoing talks and cooperation along the shared border between northeast India and Myanmar. Rawat's visit was followed by the commander-in-chief of Myanmar's Defense Forces, coming to India in August 2017. Such interaction is leading to new forms of cooperation such as the Nov. 20-25 "[IMBAX-2017 exercise](#), the first-ever military training exercise on United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) between the two nations, being conducted on the Indian soil."

India-Myanmar maritime cooperation is also advancing. In May, the Indian Navy's front-line guided missile destroyer, *INS Rajput*, entered Yangon for an Operational Turn around (OTR). Following Prime Minister Modi's September visit, the Commander-in-Chief, Myanmar Navy, Adm. Tin Aung San, visited India's naval facilities in Mumbai and Kochi before arriving in New Delhi for calls with all three chiefs of India's military services and Ministry of Defense officials. As the three maritime-related agreements signed during Modi's visit indicate, Myanmar has emerged as a partner in India's maritime outreach to neighbors in East Asia.

India-Philippines relations



3Prime Minister Modi and President Duterte, Manila, November 2017

In 2017, Prime Minister Modi became the first Indian leader to visit the Philippines for a bilateral visit in 36 years. (Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Cebu in 1996, but not for a bilateral visit). Modi of course also was in the country to attend the various ASEAN and East Asia Summit meetings the Philippines was hosting. During the visit, four agreements were signed. One focused on defense cooperation and logistics including in the area of HA/DR. There were also agreements on agriculture; micro-, small-, and medium-size enterprises; and finally on cooperation between the Indian Council of World Affairs and the Philippines Foreign Service Institute. Modi and President Duterte also acknowledged the importance of cooperation in terrorism but no bilateral agreement on the subject was signed during the visit. During a press conference an Indian official explained the [MoU](#) on defense cooperation and logistics as “intended to permit logistics cooperation between armed forces for HDR purposes.”

India-Malaysia relations

Prime Minister Najib Razak’s early-April visit to India, including to the two states of Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, was the key event in bilateral relations and marked the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations. Prime Minister Modi, in his remarks to the press, [referred](#) several times to a bilateral “strategic partnership,” though no new defense cooperation agreements were among the seven MoUs signed. Modi stated that a “wide-ranging defense partnership has already brought our armed forces together in areas such as training and capacity-building, maintenance of equipment and military

hardware, maritime security, and disaster response.”

Defense cooperation has included training on *Sukhoi-30s* in Malaysia, but not since 2010 according to an Indian official. The two countries also held their first military exercises in 2012 and their first naval exercises in 2016, which was only a tabletop exercise. According to the [joint statement of the visit](#), additional cooperative activities are being planned. For example, the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) and Indian Air Force (IAF) are working on the terms of reference for setting up an Aircraft Safety and Maintenance Forum; there are plans for Navy-to-Navy field exercises, and increased defense exchanges and dialogues. The Indian director general of the Defense Intelligence Agency visited Malaysia in February 2017, during which [a mechanism](#) for operationalizing information sharing for HA/DR and white shipping was reportedly completed. Earlier in the year, in April, Adm. Sunil Lamba, chief of the Naval Staff and chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) visited Malaysia to expand maritime cooperation. Two Indian Navy ships subsequently visited Malaysia in May – reinforcing India’s naval diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

India-Vietnam relations

India-Vietnam relations featured a [visit](#) by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh to India in July to mark 45 years of diplomatic relations. The visit was notable in specifically referring to the Arbitral Tribunal Award decision of July 2016 on the South China Sea. There was also reference to the [signing](#) of a “Plan of Action to implement the comprehensive strategic partnership for the period 2017-2020...” though no additional public details were provided about the elements of this plan. Therefore, it is not clear what if any commitments the two countries have made to defense purchases and the utilization of lines of credit for such purposes that India has extended over the past few years. Other notable visits during 2017 included visits to Vietnam by Adm. Sunil Lamba, India’s chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee and chief of the Naval Staff in early October and Air Chief Marshal Birender Singh Dhanoa, chief of the Air Staff, in early November.

India-Singapore relations

At the end of October, Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan traveled to India for the Joint Ministerial Committee meeting. He also traveled to Assam State in India's northeast to sign a MoU to establish a Skills Development Center with assistance from Singapore. Singapore has been one of the countries that India has sought to engage in state-level relations within India and especially in the northeast.

A significant defense ministers' meeting occurred on Nov. 29, following the foreign ministers' discussions. A key outcome was the signing of an India-Singapore Bilateral Agreement for Navy Cooperation, which according to an Indian statement, "...will lead to increased cooperation in maritime security, joint exercises, *temporary deployments from each other's naval facilities* [emphasis added] and mutual logistics support." Some media reports and analyses speculated that India might seek access Singapore's Changi naval facility. A statement following the visit indicated Singapore was receptive to "...India's proposal for continuous and institutionalized naval engagements in their shared maritime space, including establishing maritime exercises with like-minded regional/ ASEAN partners." In addition to watching whether India seeks regular access to the Changi facility, it will also be worth watching if India-Singapore maritime engagements are "networked" with other East Asian countries. India's chief of Naval Staff visited Singapore in May for Singapore's International Maritime Review (IMR) and was reported to have met several Southeast Asian navy chiefs. In 2018, the countries will mark the 25th anniversary of the *Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX)*.

India-South Korea relations

Though there were no leader-to-leader meetings in 2017, India-Korea relations were notable for two reasons. First, newly-elected President Moon Jae-in dispatched a special envoy, Chung Dongchea, to New Delhi for a meeting with Prime Minister Modi on June 17, 2017. Second, India and Korea appear to have made progress on defense industry cooperation by signing an [inter-governmental MoU](#) for defense industry cooperation on shipbuilding. The MoU reportedly "was conceived under the overall umbrella of the 'Special Strategic

Partnership' between both sides as declared in the Joint Statement of the Prime Minister of India and the President of RoK in May 2015." According to [Ashok Kumar Gupta, secretary \(defence production\), in India's Ministry of Defense](#), "The cooperation with the Korean Shipyard would enable HSL to upgrade and modernize its facilities and execute naval shipbuilding projects in a timely and cost effective manner. HSL would be able to imbibe best practices in shipbuilding leading to effective project management." There were also press [reports](#) that an Indian and Korean shipyard would collaborate on the construction of Mine Counter Measure Vessels (MCMCs) for the Indian Navy.

India-Australia relations

During Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull's April visit to Delhi, his first visit to India, Modi gave a plug to security relations [saying](#), "Our cooperation in the area of defense and security has reached new heights. Our maritime exercises and exchanges have been productive. Our bilateral mechanisms on counter-terrorism and trans-national crimes are functioning well. I am particularly pleased that we have been able to conclude an MOU on Security Cooperation during this visit." However, there is no public evidence the two countries signed a new agreement to supersede a Framework for Security Cooperation signed in 2014, which appears to still guide mutual defense and security ties. As a sign of deepening ties, the first India-Australia "2 + 2" between foreign and defense secretaries was held in New Delhi in December.

India-East Asia relations and US-India relations

The Trump administration's strong bilateral support for India plus its advocacy for trilateral and quadrilateral arrangements with India, Japan, and Australia in the context of its "Indo-Pacific" policy provided the connective tissue between US-India and India-East Asia relations in 2017. The trend toward overlapping US-India and India-East Asia ties has been ongoing for years and mapped in [previous iterations of this article](#). The Trump administration has used the framing of the "Indo-Pacific" to pursue essentially the same convergence that the Obama administration [termed](#) a US-India *Joint Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region*.



↳Prime Minister Modi and President Trump, Washington DC, June 2017

How receptive India will be to this convergence remains uncertain. Despite excitement in some circles about the “revival” of the “Quad,” Foreign Secretary Jaishankar was notably cool, [describing](#) it as “really [a] meeting of middle level officials...,” saying US-India discussions on it during the meeting between Trump and Modi could be described as “just a very passing mention.” Anyway, the quadrilateral was “not much different from other we do [sic] many pluri-lateral, multilateral meetings with a number of countries.”

While India’s East Asia relations are increasingly part of US-India relations and the US and India are beginning to think and act in the region with greater convergence, it would be a mistake to think that India’s East Asia relations are a function of US-India ties. India remains a modest player when compared to the US, China, Japan, and other countries in East Asia. However, it now is a multilateral and bilateral partner of many countries in the vast Indo-Pacific region. It will likely remain so – separate but parallel from the trajectory of US-India relations.

CHRONOLOGY OF INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2017

Feb. 22, 2017: A “restructured” India-China [strategic dialogue](#) is held in Beijing.

March 6-7, 2017: Vice President Hamid Ansari [visits Jakarta](#) to participate in the first-ever leaders summit of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) on its 20th anniversary. He also meets President of Indonesia Joko Widodo separately.

March 30-April 4, 2017: Malaysia’s Prime Minister Najib Razak [visits India](#) for the 60th anniversary of bilateral relations.

April 9-12, 2017: Australia’s Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull makes a state visit to India.

May 2, 2017: PM Modi [telephones](#) PM Turnbull to express “concern about the possible impact of the recent changes in Australian regulations for the skilled professionals’ visa programme.”

May 13, 2017: India’s Ministry of External Affairs [explains](#) its policy on China’s Belt and Road Initiative Forum.

May 29, 2017: Fiji’s Minister of Defense and National Security Ratu Inoke Kubuabola visits India and [meets](#) Minister of Defense, Finance and Corporate Affairs Arun Jaitley to discuss an expanded defense partnership in maritime security and naval cooperation. They sign an MoU on defense cooperation.

June 12-15, 2017: *INS Sahyadri* makes a port visit to Port Moresby Papua New Guinea.

June 17, 2017: Special South Korean Envoy Chung Dongchea visits India and meets PM Modi.

June 25-27: PM Modi visits Washington and meets President Donald Trump.

July 3-6, 2017: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam Pham Binh Minh visits India.

July 7, 2017: PM Modi joins Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Hamburg, Germany.

July 8, 2017: PM Modi meets PM Abe for a 35-minute bilateral on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Hamburg, Germany.

July 10-17, 2017: The 21st edition of the naval exercise, *MALABAR-17*, is conducted in the Bay of Bengal with participation by the US, Japan, and India.

July 18-19, 2017: Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop visits India for the 11th India-Australia Foreign Ministers Framework Dialogue (FMFD) described as the “main institutional bilateral mechanism between the two countries.” A notable development is Australia joining the India-initiated International Solar Alliance.

July 20, 2017: India-Japan agreement on Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy enters into force.

Aug. 28, 2017: India’s Ministry of External Affairs releases Press Statement of Doklam [disengagement understanding](#).

Sept. 3-5, 2017: PM Modi travels to Xiamen for ninth BRICS Summit and meets President Xi Jinping separately.

Sept. 5-7, 2017: India’s Defense Minister Shri Arun Jaitley visits Japan for annual defense ministerial dialogue with Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera.

Sept. 5-7, 2017: PM Modi makes a state visit to Myanmar.

Sept. 13-14, 2017: PM Abe visits India to review the “Special Strategic and Global Partnership.”

Oct 24, 2017: India's Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman makes first overseas visit since assuming office to participate in the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus in Manila.

Oct. 24-26, 2017: US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visits India after giving a major [speech](#) on US-India relations in Washington.

Oct. 31-Nov. 1, 2017: Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan visits India for the Joint Ministerial Committee meeting.

Nov. 12-14, 2017: PM Modi travels to Manila to attend the 15th ASEAN-India Summit, the East Asia Summit, and meets Philippine President Duterte separately.

Nov. 12, 2017: India-Australia-Japan-US [consultations](#) on the Indo-Pacific are held on sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Manila.

Nov. 27-29: Singapore's Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen visits India for the second iteration of a new defense minister's dialogue.

Dec. 5, 2017: India's Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar hosts first meeting of the Coordination Forum on Development of Northeast Region.

Dec. 7, 2017: India's MEA issues an explanation of a lost drone along the Sino-Indian border.

Dec. 11-12, 2017: India-ASEAN Connectivity Summit is held in New Delhi. Japan is only non-ASEAN country with official representation at the summit.

Dec. 11, 2017: India hosts the 15th Russia-India-China (RIC) Foreign Ministers Dialogue.

Dec. 12, 2017: Inaugural India-Australia "2+2" Foreign Secretaries and Defense Secretaries Dialogue is held in New Delhi

Dec. 13, 2017: Fourth India-Japan-Australia Trilateral Dialogue is held in New Delhi.

Dec. 22, 2017: Yang Jiechi, state councilor of the People's Republic of China and special representative of China on the boundary question, meets PM Modi following the 20th round of Talks between Special Representatives of China and India on the Boundary Question.