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INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

DOMESTIC DISTRACTIONS DISRUPT, BUT DO NOT DERAIL, INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT

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India's 2019 interactions with the Indo-Pacific were active if measured by diplomatic outreach and defense engagements, but ended with two "whimpers" rather than "bangs." The first was the decision to drop out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), announced at the ASEAN-convened summits in Bangkok in November. Until the announcement, India seemed ready to join the agreement. The second was the postponement of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's scheduled trip to Assam and Manipur states in northeast India for an annual exchange of prime ministerial visits. The postponement was reportedly decided after discussions between the two governments in the wake of violence against the Indian government's controversial citizenship bill. The two unrelated developments did speak to two common themes: the first being the limits of India's East Asia relations, and the second the occasional interruption, by domestic drivers, of India's continued upward (if not steep) trajectory in relations with the Indo-Pacific region.

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India's fitful interactions with the region have been a [recurrent theme of these analyses](#). 2019 provided many distractions for India, including a national election year that returned Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power in May with a historic victory at the polls and his government's emboldened focus on fulfilling key domestic agenda issues around the ideology of a "Hindu-first" India, including a new citizenship bill, which imperiled plans for Modi and Abe to meet. Earlier, in February, a terrorist attack on a convoy of Indian security personnel in Kashmir, followed by a pre-emptive attack in Pakistan and a subsequent change in the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir state, led to Indian concern for stability in the state. This impacted broader India-Pakistan relations, including at the United Nations and in bilateral settings. Meanwhile, India's economic slowdown continued throughout the year, pre-occupying the newly elected government; and partially explaining [India's decision not to move forward on RCEP](#).

While these domestic developments did not derail fairly active diplomatic and defense engagement with the region, they likely did preclude any new major initiatives and important advances, such as signing RCEP. India used presidential and vice presidential visits to the region, in addition to diplomatic and defense engagements at the ministerial and working levels. Modi himself made only one "dedicated" bilateral visit to the region – to Korea in February. His June visit to Japan was to attend the G20 Summit and his November trip to Thailand was to the annual summits convened by ASEAN. He did, however, meet separately with other Indo-Pacific leaders on the sidelines on both occasions.

In keeping with the theme of domestic drivers shaping India's Indo-Pacific relations, Indian officials, especially the president and vice president, paid particular attention to historical, cultural, and diasporic dimensions of relations on each of their visits. This underscored the nationalist and populist elements of India's approach while also seeking to highlight longstanding ties to the region. For example, during Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu's visit to Vietnam in May, he stated "This is an important year for us as we celebrate the 90th Anniversary of the celebrated visit of the Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore to Saigon in 1929. That visit started the intense re-engagement of India with Asia in the modern era and raised the

profile of each country in the public consciousness of the other." And President Ram Nath Kovind [told](#) the Indian community at a Manila ceremony, "In each of the 26 countries that I have visited as President of India so far, I have met with the Indian community and shared my thoughts with them." And during a ceremony with the Indian community in Tokyo, Kovind [stated](#) that "India's external engagement has seen a sea change in the last few years. In this approach, we have brought the [Indian] Diaspora to the center of our action and engagement."

Even as India's domestic priorities' impact on its Indo-Pacific relations are considered, an overall update and assessment of India's "vision" of the Indo-Pacific and its interests and roles are important. This complements [last year's approach](#), which assessed India's involvement and integration with East Asia in terms of diplomacy, defense, trade/investment, and multilateralism.

India's Indo-Pacific visions

Modi [laid out](#) his country's Indo-Pacific policies at the June 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. This remains the key official statement of India's approach to the region even as it jostles with subsequent statements (e.g., "Act East" and SAGAR or "Security and Growth for All in the Region"), new ideas articulated in 2019 (e.g., [Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative announced by Modi at the East Asia Summit](#)), and ongoing initiatives that regularly engage Indo-Pacific countries (e.g., the Delhi Dialogue with ASEAN member countries, the Indian Ocean Dialogue, and the quite new [Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue](#)). The prime minister's 2018 statement can be seen as India's official response to the United States' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and other regional pronouncements relating to the Indo-Pacific from ASEAN, Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and others. It is significant that India has issued such a comprehensive and clear conception of its interests and approach to the region; an articulated synergy, but not identity, with the US and its allies.

The key facets of India's Indo-Pacific vision are:

- [A "big" Indo-Pacific](#): India's geographic approach naturally begins with a focus on the Indian Ocean to the contiguous east coast of Africa and

extends across the Pacific to all the Americas, not just the United States. While Southeast Asia is acknowledged as the Indo-Pacific's center, by including "all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it," the net effect of India's "big Indo-Pacific" conception is to highlight the focus on the Indian Ocean, which encompasses India's core interests and realistic capabilities, diplomatically acknowledge ASEAN centrality, and frame geography so broadly as to make a strategic element inchoate.

- A vision, not a strategy: Modi directly stated that "India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy," elaborating that an "Asia of rivalry will hold us all back." In making the distinction in favor of a "vision" rather than a "strategy," India's approach is more in line with Japan and ASEAN than with the US.
- Inclusive Indo-Pacific, not a club: Modi states that India "stands for a free, open, inclusive region" and "does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a...club of limited members." Such a statement tracks with India's geographic conception but also seeks to mitigate the focus on the simultaneous engagement with US-based trilaterals and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and thus reassure Southeast Asia while calibrating relations with China and the US. The net effect is to buttress strategic autonomy while pursuing more robust relations with the US, as well as its allies and partners in the region.
- Call for revised rules, norms and institutions: While calling for a "common rules-based order for the region..." Modi also stated that "rules and norms should be based on the *consent of all*, not on the *power of the few* [emphasis added]"—directly appealing for a revision of the Permanent Five (P5) members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). And Modi took the chance to foot-stomp India's autonomy saying it would be "on the side of principles, not behind one power or the other..."
- Connectivity and infrastructure: India has begun cooperating with Japan and other countries on infrastructure and its attitude toward China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains unchanged due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. Modi said "we must not only build infrastructure, we must also build bridges of trust" and that "initiatives must be based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability. They must empower nations, not place them under impossible debt burden. They must promote trade, not strategic competition." In rejecting the CPEC while remaining vice president of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and calling for a set of best practices and principles, India's formulation on Indo-Pacific connectivity and infrastructure is quite consistent with that of the US (and Japan and Australia), but includes a pragmatic basis for opposing CPEC as well. The challenge for India is connectivity in its own neighborhood, not to mention across the Indo-Pacific, where its relative resources are limited.
- Mixed multilateralism, ASEAN centrality acknowledged: Regarding the Indo-Pacific's regional security architecture, India acknowledges ASEAN centrality while pursuing a set of memberships that include non-ASEAN convened groupings such as the Quad, trilaterals, and groupings that do not include the US such as the RICs (Russia, India, China) and the BRICs. Modi explained that "[w]e will work with them, individually or in formats of three or more, for a stable and peaceful region. But, our *friendships are not alliances of containment* [emphasis added]."
- Sticky trade. While there had been some hopes and hints that India might make a push to join RCEP, ultimately it did not do so. This was in some sense predictable given Modi's clear message that India seeks a "level playing field for all" and that, specifically for RCEP, India wants "balance among trade,

investment and services [for which also read mobility of labor].” Nevertheless, in visits throughout the year, Indian officials emphasized bilateral progress in trade and investment while highlighting the need to further improve commercial ties.

Based on these features of India’s Indo-Pacific conception, one can assess that India very much now has an Indo-Pacific policy that has replaced the “Act East” bumper sticker with something more substantive and delineated. That there are differences with the US is not surprising, but it is symptomatic of the strengthened US-India and India-Indo-Pacific relationship that Modi made the effort to lay out his country’s Indo-Pacific vision, which has more synergies than differences with Washington and its allies in the region, and certainly more practical efforts at cooperation.

India and East Asia’s big three (China, Japan and South Korea)

India-China

India’s engagement with China began in 2019 began with then-External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj’s February visit there for the 16th meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, India and China (RIC). This was the [first such gathering](#) following the attack on a convoy of Indian security forces in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir on Feb. 11, 2019 and India’s subsequent attack in Pakistan. Throughout the year, Indian officials pounded the counterterrorism theme. And India’s External Affairs Ministry [issued a statement](#) expressing disappointment with China’s refusal to identify Massood Azhar as a terrorist, even after the terrorist group he leads claimed responsibility for the February attacks. China, for its part, insisted on bringing the Kashmir issue to the Security Council for deliberations, although this was [delayed in December](#).

Even as differences over Pakistan, Kashmir, and terrorism persisted, India’s diplomatic engagement with China continued. Speaking during his August visit to China, the first after being named external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar [said in a speech](#) that “The future of the India-China relationship will obviously depend on mutual sensitivity to each other’s core concerns. It is natural, both as neighbors and large developing economies that there

would be issues in our ties. Properly managing differences is therefore vital. As our leaders agreed in Astana, differences should not become disputes. That is how India-China relations can remain a factor of stability in an uncertain world. The positive direction of ties after the Wuhan Summit has opened up a world of new convergences.”

The main India-China event of the year was the October visit of President Xi Jinping visit to Chennai for the [Second Informal Summit](#) with Modi. Despite calls for deepening the so-called India-China Closer Development Partnership, they made no progress on the longstanding boundary question, simply reiterating continued efforts based on agreements reached in 2005. There was, however, a call for deepening exchanges at all levels, including militaries.



Figure 1 Chairman Xi Jinping meets Prime Minister Modi in Chennai. Photo: SCMP

2020 marks the 70th anniversary of India-China diplomatic relations, but any breakthroughs on diplomatic and security relations appear highly unlikely.

India-Japan

India and Japan had many high-level interactions during 2019, even though Abe’s planned December visit of to India was postponed. The two prime ministers met at the June G20 Summit in Osaka (and also in a trilateral with US President Donald Trump) and then again at the September Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok. According to a readout of the G20 sidelines bilateral by India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Abe insisted on the “importance of preparing for the [Annual Bilateral] Summit properly, including through various Ministerial Meetings...” The [readout](#)

also said “the two leaders sought to ensure that we were able to deliver both [the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high speed railway and Varanasi Convention Center] on time.” Both statements appeared to speak to well-known frustrations on the Japanese side with India’s follow-through on joint projects and agreements; though surely India has its own frustrations with Japan’s consensus-based approach to decision making. On the positive side, the two prime ministers welcomed plans to hold the first-ever 2+2 ministerial meeting. At the September meeting the two prime ministers discussed the negotiations on an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and reiterated commitment to the 2+2 and defense cooperation.

In defense cooperation, India’s Defense Minister Rajnath Singh went to Japan to co-chair the annual defense ministerial dialogue in early September. The [joint statement](#) highlighted six focus areas for further cooperation: exchanges between the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces (JGSDF) and the Indian Army; exchanges between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) and the Indian Navy; exchanges between the Japan Air Self-Defense Forces (JASDF) and the Indian Air Force; education and research exchanges between defense institutions; cooperation on third countries (“shared the view to explore cooperation”); and cooperation in defense equipment and technology. Singh had an additional meeting with his Japanese counterpart, Kono Taro, on the sidelines of the mid-November ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus (ADMM+) meeting in Bangkok.

Overall foreign and defense cooperation discussions were taken further in the first ministerial-level 2+2 held in Delhi. The [joint statement](#) highlighted numerous accomplishments and ongoing efforts at cooperation, including the start of bilateral exercises between all three components of their defense forces and “significant progress” on an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). The two countries agreed to focus on capacity building in maritime security and maritime domain awareness, including through cooperation with other countries, and India looked forward to a Japanese liaison officer being assigned to the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in the near term. Commencement of “exchange of information” under the Implementing

Arrangement for Deeper Cooperation between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Indian Navy was pending and both sides agreed to “further strengthen” defense equipment and technology cooperation.”

An important element of India-Japan relations during the year was the trilateral element including the United States. As noted, Modi and Abe joined Trump for the first-ever heads of government US-Japan-India trilateral on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Osaka and the three countries’ foreign ministers followed up with another trilateral in September on the sidelines of the UNGA. On that occasion, the three ministers expressed satisfaction with trilateral cooperation represented by the *MALABAR 2019* held off the coast of Japan in September-October, a mine-countermeasures exercise (*MINEX*) held in Japan in July 2019, and *Cope India 2018*, in which Japan participated as an observer in December 2018.

India-Korea

As already noted, Modi’s only bilateral outgoing visit to the Indo-Pacific in 2019 was to South Korea in February to strengthen the special strategic partnership. On that occasion, [six agreements](#) were signed ranging from the release of a commemorative historical postage stamp to an agreement between India’s Ministry of Home Affairs and Korea’s National Police on transnational crime cooperation.



Figure 2 Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets President Moon Jae-in. Photo: Tehelka

In early September, the defense minister [traveled to Seoul](#) to meet his counterpart. They agreed to further defense educational exchanges and extend mutual logistical support to the respective navies. They also “discussed the

ongoing co-operation at the Service-to-Service level and prospects for enhanced co-operation between defense industries of India and Korea.” Singh also invited South Korean defense manufacturing companies to invest in India and assured them of all necessary assistance to facilitate investment and joint ventures. They reportedly also [formulated](#) a “roadmap” to take bilateral defense industry cooperation forward. So far, it appears that actual defense cooperation is limited. One [example](#) of joint coproduction cited by Indian officials is a joint venture between Larsen & Toubro and a Korean company to produce 100 artillery guns.

India–Southeast Asia

India’s momentum in developing ties with Southeast Asia grew in 2019 following the January 2018 joint visit of all ASEAN leaders to India and the November 2018 first-ever India-ASEAN Informal Summit. However, the year did not produce any major new initiatives and established targets for relations remain a stretch. For example, Kovind [said in a Manila speech](#) that “ASEAN-India trade has jumped significantly in the past few years. Last year alone, the trade increased by 19 per cent to reach [\$96.79 billion]. However, we still have a long distance to cover to reach the target of [\$200 billion] by 2022.” And a \$1 billion credit line extended by India to the region [has so far been underused](#).

During Modi’s three-paragraph [address](#) at the November 2019 India-ASEAN Summit (his seventh such summit) he highlighted the “mutual coordination of the Indo-Pacific Outlook between India and ASEAN.” He went on to say that “India’s Act East Policy is an important part of our Indo-Pacific vision. ASEAN is and always will be the heart of our Act East Policy. Integrated, organized and economically developing ASEAN is in India’s basic interest.”

On security ties, Modi said “We also want to strengthen our partnership in the areas of maritime security...” During the November 2019 Bangkok ASEAN Summit, an MEA official took pains to [point out](#) that of the “total three bilateral meetings [Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar] and it would be noted that *all the three are maritime neighbors of India* [emphasis added].” Overall, with ASEAN, India appears no longer to be on the defensive regarding the

Quad; both by re-emphasizing the centrality India accords ASEAN in its “Act East” policy and Indo-Pacific vision. In reply to a press query, an Indian MEA spokesperson noted that “ASEAN countries appreciated India’s growing role and that India’s growing role is a factor of peace and stability in the region.”

There were active relations with several ASEAN member states as well.

India-Philippines



Figure 3 President Kovind meets President Duterte in Manila. Photo: News 18

In October, Kovind [made a state visit](#) to the Philippines to mark the 70th anniversary of bilateral relations. He noted a 17% increase of trade and Indian investments of about \$600 million. On the defense side, officials noted the “exchange of visits of delegations, visits by naval ships and also training cooperation...[with] 30-40 slots every year for the Philippines armed forces to be trained for various courses in India. And...an MoU on defense, industry and logistics that was signed in 2017 and that has given the opportunity for the two countries to look at new areas of cooperation in defense, trade and cooperation.” On the South China Sea, “President [Rodrigo] Duterte referred to India’s commitment to the rule of law when it had accepted the arbiter award in its maritime dispute with Bangladesh. So this issue of adherence to rule of law was emphasized.” Officials noted that “[t]here was also discussion between the two sides on terrorism because both the countries have seen terrorism and been victims of terrorism and there was agreement that we need to continue to talk to each other, exchange experiences.” And “it was agreed that we would work bilaterally under the joint working group and also that we would continue to exchange

information and capacity building whether it is in terms of cyber security or it is in terms of even drugs or in terms of urban terrorism.” Finally, four MoUs were concluded on white shipping exchange of information, science and technology, a cultural exchange program and on tourism cooperation.”

India-Vietnam

In May 2019, India’s vice president [visited Vietnam](#) for largely cultural reasons with a brief reference to the doubling of bilateral trade. The only other high-level interaction was a bilateral meeting between Modi and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc on the sidelines of the ASEAN-convened summits in November. A [media statement](#) issued on the exchange highlighted, without details, “enhanced engagement in defense and security fields,” agreement to enhance cooperation in maritime domain, and agreement to work together against the threat of extremism and terrorism.

India-Thailand

Several India-Thailand exchanges occurred during 2019, a year in which Thailand served as country coordinator for the India-ASEAN strategic partnership.

In August, Jaishankar [visited Thailand](#) to attend the ASEAN-India Ministerial Meeting, the 9th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, the 26th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the 10th Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Ministerial Meeting. In October, Thailand’s Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai [visited New Delhi](#) for a senior officials meeting and the 8th India-Thailand Joint Commission Meeting, which emphasized the complementarity of India’s “Act East” and Thailand’s “Look West” policies.

The main India-Thailand bilateral event of the year was the meeting between Modi and Prayut Chan-o-cha in Bangkok [in early November](#). An Indian External Affairs Ministry official noted “enhanced engagement in defense and security fields, [and] agree[ment] to explore opportunities for cooperation in defense industries sector.” Earlier in September, India and Thailand held their 28th edition of the coordinated patrol between the two navies, including maritime patrol aircraft. In the same month they also held the joint military exercise *MAITREE-2019*, focusing on counterterrorism in

jungle and urban environments. India and Thailand, along with Singapore, held the first-ever *SITMEX-19* (Singapore-India-Thailand Maritime Exercise) at Port Blair in the Andaman Sea in mid-September. The ships and long-range maritime patrol aircraft engaged in “gunnery, force protection measures, air defense and communication exercises to enhance maritime interoperability between the participating navies.” The two countries also welcomed 20% growth in bilateral trade. Finally, the two leaders discussed sub-regional cooperation such as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and highlighted “...India’s recent joining as a development partner of the ACMECS initiative which is the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy. So [India is] amongst the first development partners of ACEMECS.”

India-Indonesia

In September, Jaishankar [visited Indonesia](#), the first by a Union Cabinet member since the re-election of President Joko Widodo. The visit was said to reflect the high priority India attaches to its bilateral relationship with Indonesia, including a comprehensive strategic partnership and a Shared Vision on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

In June, Modi and Widodo met on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Osaka just after national elections were completed in both countries. An MEA official noted that with elections over “it was time for both countries to move towards strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership...” Discussions [focused on four areas](#) including sharing of perspective on the Indo-Pacific, how to deepen the maritime cooperation, taking the defense relationship forward, and how to reach the bilateral trade target of \$50 billion by 2025.

In November, Modi had [another bilateral meeting with Jokowi](#), marking the 70th anniversary of bilateral relations. There was some sense of dissatisfaction with commercial relations in the MEA statement that “Prime Minister Modi had a forward-looking discussion on enhancing bilateral trade and highlighted the need for greater market access for Indian commodities including, pharmaceutical, automotive and agricultural products. While noting that Indian companies have made substantial investment in Indonesia, Modi invited Indonesian companies to use the

opportunities presented in India for investment.”

India–Oceania relations

India–Australia

Kovind’s October [visit to Australia](#) focused primarily on commercial relations, engaging the Indian community including students, and the unveiling of a Mahatma Gandhi statue. Kovind noted that while trade in goods and services has doubled between 2013 and 2018 from about \$10 billion to just over \$20 billion, “investment relations, however, comparative to our respective economy size and prospects, are yet to take-off.”

One issue that arose during the visit related to a question about “roadblocks” to Indian imports of uranium for civil nuclear reactors use. Joint Secretary (South) Manish explained that Australia has supported India’s entry into key technology control regimes such as the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Wassenaar Arrangement, the Australia Group and the Nuclear Suppliers Group; the two countries have signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement that entered into force in November 2015; and Australia’s Parliament passed a Civil Nuclear Transfer to India Bill in 2016, which provides a “mechanism under which Australians are supplying uranium to India.” However, when pressed if the supply of uranium had started, the Indian official was less clear, [saying](#) “I think there is a G2G track on this and there are no roadblocks to our cooperation in the civil nuclear sector.”

The main bilateral engagement of the year was the November meeting between Modi and Prime Minister Scott Morrison in Bangkok. They welcomed the “enhanced engagement in defense and security fields and agreed to further enhance cooperation in the maritime domain.” One defense exchange during the year involved the visit of India’s Chief of Naval Staff Adm. Karambur Singh visit to Australia (and New Zealand) in early September. He was reportedly briefed on the *MH-60R* helicopter and flew on the *MH-90* helicopter. However, the official report of the meeting between the two prime ministers left unclear just how much mutual commitment there was given that Modi had to “[reiterate](#)” his invitation to his Australian counterpart to visit India in January 2020 to deliver a keynote address at the Raisina

Dialogue, Morrison’s apparent lack of commitment to accept, and the fact that “[b]oth leaders underlined the need to have thorough preparation to ensure a successful outcome from the visit.” A subsequent [3rd Edition](#) of the India–Australian Foreign and Defense Secretaries Dialogue or 2+2 also shed few details on ties.

Meanwhile, the Quad meetings continued with declining high-level engagement as the year wore on. In September, the foreign ministers of the US, Japan, Australia, and India met on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York, and later in the year [senior officials from the three countries met](#) on the sidelines of the ASEAN–convened summits in Bangkok.

India–Pacific Islands

One new development was Modi’s Sept. 24, 2019 inauguration of the India–Pacific Islands Developing States (PSIDS) meeting on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York. The meeting was attended by the heads of delegation of Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Modi announced a \$12 million grant (\$1 million to each PSIDS) for implementation of a high impact developmental project in the area of their choice. A concessional \$150 million line of credit for undertaking solar, renewable energy, and climate related projects based on each country’s requirement was also announced. Modi also [invited](#) leaders of PSIDS to join the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) and announced that the next meeting of the Forum for India–Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) would be held in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea in the first half of 2020.

Conclusion

In a year of major Indian domestic distractions including national elections, a terrorist attack and a retaliatory preemptive strike, major constitutional changes to the disputed territory of Kashmir, and a slowing economy India kept up robust diplomatic and defense interactions in the Indo–Pacific even if there were no major innovations or advances (perhaps excepting the meeting with Pacific Islands leaders). The big take-away of the year was India’s decision to not join RCEP and more fleetingly the postponement of Abe’s summit with Modi.

The enduring picture is likely to be continued modest Indian commitment to expanding ties with the countries of the Indo-Pacific. For the evolving Indo-Pacific policies of the US, India will remain a key element but expectations of collaboration and coordination will have to be reasonable about pace, scope, and depth.

CHRONOLOGY OF INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – DECEMBER 2019

Jan. 7-11, 2019: Mongolian Foreign Minister Damdin Tsogtbaatar visits India for consultations with counterpart External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj.

Feb. 21-22, 2019: Prime Minister Narendra Modi makes a [state visit](#) to the Republic of Korea to strengthen the special strategic partnership. Six MoUs are signed ranging from the release of commemorative postage stamp to an agreement between India's Ministry of Home Affairs and Korea's National Police on transnational crime cooperation.

Feb. 27, 2019: Swaraj travels to China for the [16th meeting](#) of the foreign ministers of Russia, India and China.

May 9-12, 2019: Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu visits Vietnam to give a keynote address at the 16th United Nations Day of Vesak Celebration (Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death).

June 27, 2019: Modi meets Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo on the sidelines of G20 Summit in Osaka.

June 28, 2019: Modi [meets](#) President Donald Trump and Abe in a trilateral format called the Japan-India-America Trilateral Summit Meeting (JIA) in Osaka.

June 28, 2019: Modi [meets](#) Trump separately following the JIA Summit.

June 28-29, 2019: Modi [attends](#) 14th G20 Summit in Osaka. India identifies only one security issue in its press release: "countering terrorism."

June 30, 2019: Modi meets Indonesian President Joko Widodo on sidelines of G20 Summit.

June 30, 2019: Modi has [brief "pull aside"](#) meeting with Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on sidelines of G20 Summit.

Aug. 1-2, 2019: Jaishankar [travels to Thailand](#) to attend ASEAN-India Ministerial Meeting, the 9th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting (EAS FMM), 26th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and 10th Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Ministerial Meeting.

Aug. 11-13, 2019: Jaishankar visits China to co-chair, with State Counselor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the [second meeting](#) of the India-China High Level Mechanism on Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges.

Sept. 2-3, 2019: Defense Minister Rajnath Singh visits Japan to co-chair the annual defense ministerial dialogue. [Joint statement](#) highlights six focus areas for further cooperation.

Sept. 3-4, 2019: Singh meets counterpart in South Korea. They agree to further defense educational exchanges and extend logistical support to each other's navies and [discuss](#) "the ongoing co-operation at Service-to-Service level and prospects for enhanced co-operation between defense industries of India and Korea." Singh [invites](#) South Korean defense manufacturing companies to invest in India.

Sept. 4-6, 2019: Jaishankar visits Indonesia to discuss the two countries' Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and a Shared Vision on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Sept. 5, 2019: Modi and Abe [meet](#) at the Vladivostok Eastern Economic Forum.

Sept. 6-10, 2019: Jaishankar [visits Singapore](#) to co-chair 6th meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) with counterpart Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan.

Sept. 19-21, 2019: Mongolian President Khaltmaagiin Battulga makes a state visit to India.

Sept. 24, 2019: Modi [inaugurates](#) the India-Pacific Islands Developing States (PSIDS) meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York. Modi also invites PSIDS leaders to join Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI).

Sept. 26, 2019: Foreign ministers of the US, Japan, Australia, and India [meet on sidelines](#) of the UNGA in New York. They discuss collective efforts to advance a free, open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

Sept. 26, 2019: Modi [meets](#) New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York.

Oct. 11-12, 2019: Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping [visits Chennai](#) and meets Modi for the Second Informal Summit to “exchange views on deepening India-China Closer Development Partnership.”

Oct. 17-21, 2019: President Ram Nath Kovind [makes a state visit](#) to the Philippines on 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations—the first Indian presidential visit since 2006.

Oct. 21-23, 2019: Kovind [makes a state visit](#) to Japan for the enthronement ceremony of Japan’s new emperor.

Nov. 2-4, 2019: Modi visits Thailand for 14th East Asia Summit (EAS), 16th India-ASEAN Summit, and third RCEP Summit.

Nov. 3, 2019: Modi [meets](#) Thai Prime Minister M Prayut Chan-o-Cha on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meetings in Bangkok.

Nov. 3, 2019: Modi [meets](#) Myanmar State Counselor Aung San Su Kyi on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meetings in Bangkok.

Nov. 3, 2019: Modi [meets](#) Indonesia’s Widodo on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meeting in Bangkok.

Nov. 4, 2019: Modi [meets](#) Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meetings in Bangkok.

Nov. 4, 2019: Modi [meets](#) Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in Bangkok.

Nov. 17, 2019: Singh visits Bangkok to attend the 6thASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM+). On the sidelines, he meets US Secretary of Defense Dr Mark T Esper, Thai Deputy Prime Minister Gen. Prawit Wongsuwan, Japanese Defense Minister Kono Taro, Australian Defense Minister Linda Reynolds, and New Zealand’s Defense Minister Ron Mark.

Nov. 20, 2019: Singh and Singapore’s Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen co-chair the fourth Singapore-India Defense Ministers’ Dialogue in Singapore.

Nov. 22-23, 2019: Jaishankar visits Japan to attend the G20 Foreign Ministers meeting.

Nov. 30, 2019: Japan’s foreign and defense ministers, Motegi Toshimitsu and Kono Taro, visit India for the first India-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting with counterparts Jaishankar and Singh. A [joint statement](#) is issued.

Dec. 9, 2019: India and Australia hold a 2 + 2 Dialogue of their respective foreign and defense secretaries in New Delhi.

Dec. 13, 2019: Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi visits Delhi for a [combined session](#) of the Delhi Dialogue XI and the Indian Ocean Dialogue VI as well as the [sixth meeting](#) of the India-Indonesia Joint Commission.

