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Positioning the Indo-Pacific in India's Evolving Maritime Outlook

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This paper attempts to trace the evolution of India's maritime outlook and shows how, over the years, a paradigm shift is evident in India's worldview whereby a continental focus on South Asia has been complemented by a maritime focus. India has come to formally recognise the geo-strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific to its own national security and strategic interests. This is reflected in its naval modernisation efforts as well as in official policy positions and diplomatic manoeuvrings. The paper identifies inclusivity and ASEAN centrality as the main pillars of India's Indo-Pacific approach which, while converging with ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific, is distinct from the US vision for the region. In assessing India's approach to the QUAD, the paper identifies some tension between India's Indo-Pacific approach and the QUAD. However, it also argues that such tensions have been accommodated, and India's maritime moves have to be seen as an extension of the fundamental principles driving its own foreign policy, i.e. ensuring self-sufficiency and independence.

The paper argues that such a position is well suited for the rapidly changing balance of power equations in the region which demand flexible restructuring rather than a formal security "alliance." Moreover, focusing on inclusivity would allow India to allay the fears of smaller South Asian neighbours, such as Sri Lanka, of increasing the securitisation of the region as well as of traditional partners such as Russia who see QUAD as "anti-China." The paper concludes that India's nuanced SAGAR vision is based on an acknowledgment of the unique reality of the dynamic balance of power equations in the region, and reflects its diplomatic exceptionalism.

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Tracing India's Maritime Outlook

India's tryst with the oceans can be traced back to the 11th century when the Indian Chola dynasty built a strong military maritime capability through which they were able to secure crucial trade routes[1]. Although in 1945, K. M. Panikkar wrote that "the importance of the sea came to be recognised by the Indian rulers only when it was too late"[2]— he hoped that independent India would create a naval tradition, and utilise its geopolitical positioning to its advantage. Unfortunately, however, compelled by a preoccupation with continental threats, post-independence leaders largely ignored his vision, and the Indian navy remained underfunded and underutilised. Much of this had to do with India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's own aversion to geopolitical alliances and focus on international global issues. Admittedly, Nehru did recognise the geo-economic potential of the Indian Ocean;[3] but he did not think in terms of securing the region from foreign powers to protect India's own strategic interests. His successor, Indira Gandhi, did not share the same worldview; but compulsions arising from domestic and international politics of the time forced her to prioritise land neighbours, namely Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sikkim. Due to the exclusive focus on establishing India as a powerful force in South Asia, the development of a comprehensive maritime outlook beyond the region suffered.

Speaking almost prophetically, Panikkar predicted that "rivalry is likely to transform the Indian Ocean again into a major strategic theatre"[4], and that managing great power rivalry in the region would be "one of the major problems of the future"[5] for India. Growing out of India's own position of opposing Cold War and Great Power politics, India supported calls for the denuclearisation of the Indian Ocean, and declaring it as a "zone of peace." Although the UNGA declared the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace in 1971 in Resolution 2832, it made no mention of restricting the movement or presence of nuclear weapons in the region. Thus, it did little to stop great power rivalry in the region effectively. In fact, following the 1973 oil crisis, the shipment of oil through the Indian Ocean and the region's own oil resources became strategically important questions for Western nations[6].

Meanwhile, during the same period, Soviet naval deployment in the region soared, and it became the principal supplier of arms to nine countries on the Indian Ocean periphery[7]. This was done mainly to counter increasing American presence in the region. India's own posture in the region could not be insulated from the larger Cold War dynamics. Since the 1971 war with Pakistan and closer US-Pakistan ties, India aligned itself more closely with the Soviets, and

deliberately downplayed Soviet military presence in the region, describing Western accounts of the same as a "deliberate exaggeration"[8]. New Delhi even defended Soviet presence to be of a "defensive nature"[9] in view of America's strategic presence in the region. Nevertheless, even Indo-Soviet convergence had its limits as is evident from the Naval Arms Limitation Talks (NALT) negotiations in which New Delhi complained that the Soviets were deliberately trying to keep India out of the loop during the negotiations[10]. Differences between the Indian and Soviet positions over NALT negotiations – which came to a grinding halt by 1979 – paralleled the progress in Indo-American ties which, in turn, reduced New Delhi's threat perception of American presence in the region.

India distanced itself slowly from the denuclearisation theme after conducting its first atomic test in Pokhran in 1974. Throughout the Cold War, India saw the Indian Ocean as a subset of Cold War politics and practiced "selective alignment"[11] to secure its own interests in the region. Although such a position did allow India to maintain strategic autonomy while retaining its ambitions to have a regional naval presence, its policies were at best reactive. The Indian navy played only a modest role, being restricted to conducting naval training exercises with Oman, and helping to avert a coup in Seychelles. In other words, it was concerned only with elementary maritime security needs. A positive push towards enhancing India's naval capabilities was visible during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure when India purchased a second aircraft carrier, leased a nuclear submarine from Russia, and successfully conducted Operation Cactus in the Maldives[12].

The end of the Cold War and the resultant changes in India's economic policy focusing on liberalisation and privatisation brought the focus back on the Indian Ocean as a medium for importing its hydrocarbon energy needs. The dissolution of the Soviet Union freed India to independently cultivate ties with Washington, which it strategically started through the Malabar naval exercises. As an extension of trying to move away from its Cold War 'non-aligned' posture and take advantage of the new international environment, India developed ties with countries such as the UK, France, and Russia through bilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean.

China also started making its presence felt in the region by expanding its naval capabilities beyond its coastal waters. It is during this period that the seeds of what came to be later described (in 2005) as China's "String of Pearls"[13] strategy, were sowed. Through the 1990's, China supported the construction of new naval facilities on Myanmar's Hainggyik and Great Coco Islands increased naval co-operation with Pakistan through grandiose plans to develop the Gwadar

Port, and developed existing naval facilities at Sittwe near the Bangladesh border, etc. An important consideration in Chinese thinking was how to secure the important Sea Lanes of Communication to protect maritime trade routes. However, at this stage, the PLAN was seriously ill-equipped to carry out even non-combat operations from its shores – as was evident from its failed operation to evacuate Chinese citizens from Somalia[14] – which restricted China's naval ambitions. Since then, China has been steadily investing in developing its sea power, and blue water logistics capabilities.

However, a positive development during this period was a decisive shift in India's strategic vision, which expanded beyond South Asia to an "extended neighbourhood" with the adoption of 'Look East policy.' India entered the 21st century with a more decisive outlook to face the challenges of a multipolar world. It revealed itself to be more confident about its regional and global aspirations, and more vocal about its own maritime ambitions. India's strategic thinking was now shaped by a desire to be the "most important maritime power in the region"[15]. To achieve this, New Delhi published its first Maritime Doctrine in 2004 (later updated in 2009) and Maritime Strategy in 2007 which reflected these aspirations, and expanded the navy's military role to cover "constabulary", "combat", and "diplomatic" roles.

The 2015 updated version of the Maritime Strategy explicitly recognises that India's "strategic imperatives" (which guides its relations with the seas) also have a "security connotation". It outlines the Indian Navy's aspirations to become a "net security provider" for the region[16]. These aspirations are supported by some remarkable achievements, such as the development of the *INS Vikrant*, India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier, which is expected to join service in 2022; the building of Shivalik Class stealth frigates, the first indigenous warships to be built with stealth features; the commissioning of Kolkata class guided missile destroyers; the commissioning of two Scorpene class submarines in 2017; and the latest being the Defence Acquisition Council approving the construction of six diesel electric submarines at the cost of over ₹45,000, crores.

A key focus of the Indian Navy over the years has been on indigenisation efforts which, despite several hurdles, have made steady progress[17]. The Indian navy's engagement has been matched with swift diplomatic soft power persuasion which has clearly sent out the message that there has been a shift in India's maritime strategy and policies. The 2015 document's formal acknowledgment of the Indo-Pacific, and its importance for securing India's maritime security shows a willingness on India's part to renew its own strategy, keeping in line with India's strategic interests.

The Indo-Pacific in India's Maritime Vision

Although the term "Indo-Pacific" has entered the strategic lexicon relatively recently, the geopolitical amalgamation of the Indian and Western Pacific Oceans and the existence of both as a single strategic system can be traced back to over 200 years when British imperial forces were consolidating their position in India[18]. British withdrawal from the Pacific during the inter-war period and, subsequently, Japan's unconditional surrender in 1945, left uncertain the fate of the region. It also left America in an enviable position to spread its influence in this region.

In the ensuing bipolar competition between the US and the Soviet Union, and regional developments such as the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962, and the emergence of the Association of Southeast Asia in 1961 (later expanded and renamed Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967), the region was fragmented into smaller parts in the 1960's. The result of this fragmentation, along with frayed Indo-US relations during the Cold War period was India's isolation from the wider Southeast and East Asian region.

Although it was Shinzo Abe who first promoted the concept of the Indo-Pacific in his 2007 "Confluence of Two Seas" speech in the Indian Parliament[19], it was largely due to the US administration's efforts that the term came to occupy a space in the geopolitical imagination. Washington's own moves to re-prioritise the region emerged against the backdrop of the "pivot to Asia" after its relative neglect due to a preoccupation with the Middle East under the banner of the "war on terror". It was also a recognition of the need to work with 'like-minded' partners to maintain its position, given the emerging multipolar distribution of power, and to create a hedge against China. What emerged as a diplomatic effort to reassure Asian allies (and make new ones) of the US commitment to the region under the Obama administration, became a foreign policy priority for the Trump administration. The US Department of State's Indo-Pacific report of 2019 reiterates that Washington has a "fundamental interest" in ensuring that the "future of the Indo-Pacific is one of freedom and openness rather than coercion and corruption"[20].

Given India's central location, it is inconceivable to think of the Indo-Pacific without India. This is being increasingly recognised by all the relevant actors in the region. The move away from the Asia Pacific to the Indo-Pacific in the official vocabulary of countries like the USA, Australia, and Japan is, in many ways, a recognition of this centrality. However, with it also comes an appeal to India to become a part of the larger solutions to the region's problems.

Although India has embraced the 'Indo-Pacific' construct – even setting up an Indo-Pacific division to focus exclusively on geopolitical developments in the region – it has expressed some caution, given the dangers of posturing in a region that has delicate and constantly changing balance of power equations. Therefore, India has come up with its own vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) for the Indo-Pacific, which although similar, is not the same as that of the USA.

The most obvious difference is the geographic delimitation of the region. While the USA officially still considers its own west coast to the west coast of India as the Indo-Pacific expanse[21], India's definition expands from the eastern shores of Africa to the western shore of the USA. Speaking at Shangri La in 2018, Prime Minister Modi gave the clearest exposition of India's Indo Pacific vision by describing the region as a "free, open, inclusive region" which is not a "club of limited members"[22]. By making ASEAN centrality the foundation stone of the region, New Delhi is trying to maintain a distinction from the US vision for the region which has generated anxieties among certain South-East Asian countries.

The Trump administration went beyond any of its predecessors to strengthen the "anti-China" rhetoric in Washington's "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy. This has, in the eyes of many, reduced it to nothing more than a narrow, security-centric effort to contain China. With the escalation of US-China confrontation and the Indo-Pacific as the epicentre of this competition, Washington is construing Indo-Pacific cooperation against China. This was the theme of Mike Pompeo's latest five-nation Asia tour (which included India), which was termed as an "anti-China roadshow"[23] because of his repeated denunciation of the Chinese Communist Party. This, however, has created more unease than assurance for the Southeast Asian countries which share a complicated relationship with China, and which cannot be reduced to the binaries of friend or foe. Although China's own assertive foreign policy actions in its immediate neighbourhood – such as establishing new administrative units in the disputed Paracel and Spartly Islands[24], and the Chinese attack on a Vietnamese fishing vessel[25] – has reignited apprehensions in these countries about Chinese intentions in the South-China Sea. Thus, US attempts to bring these nations into an ideological struggle against China have borne little fruit. This narrative of a "free" order led by US v/s a "repressive" order represented by China is based on a fundamental misreading by Washington of ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook which is premised on

deepening regional cooperation in a manner that does not "create rival blocs", "deepen fault lines, or force countries to take sides"[26].

India's approach to the Indo-Pacific is motivated by awareness and understanding of these regional realities. With inclusivity and ASEAN centrality as central pillars, India has positioned itself in a comfortable place to maintain the delicate balance in the region while maintaining strategic autonomy, which is true to its core foreign policy principles. Such a stance has undoubtedly been complicated by India's frayed relations with China post the border conflict in Ladakh. This has made managing Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific New Delhi's topmost foreign policy priority. By stepping up quadrilateral security cooperation with the USA, Japan, and Australia, India has sent out the message that this group of "like-minded democracies" are ready to counter Chinese growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, such a position is not a deviation from its inclusive vision but is derived from the shared values the democratic countries share in the region, which are being repeatedly violated by Beijing.

Incorporating QUAD in India's Indo-Pacific Outlook

Two important developments took place last year which refocused attention back on the QUAD, after a rather hasty dissolution in early 2008. Firstly, in contrast to the previous assistant level and working-level meetings, which were held on the side-lines of other summits, the first standalone meeting of QUAD took place in Tokyo on 6 October[27]. Secondly, Australia's induction into the Malabar exercise[28] – conducted between Indian and US navies since 1992 and joined by Japan in 2015 - finally operationalised naval coordination among all the four QUAD countries. It is not a coincidence that these developments come at a time when all four countries have been at the receiving end of Beijing's abrasive actions. Clearly, China has been irked by this unity and has quickly changed its official discourse towards the QUAD from one of outright dismissal to a more defensive posture. After comparing the QUAD to "sea foam" which would "dissipate soon"[29], the latest Chinese move has been to project it as an "Indo-Pacific NATO"[30] in the making in Asia. This is a deliberate misrepresentation of the shared principles of respect for the rule of law, freedom of navigation, territorial sovereignty, and other common values, and reflects its growing anxieties.

There is no doubt that there is a tension between India's vision of the Indo-Pacific centred on inclusivity and the multilateralism which the QUAD presupposes[31]. On one hand, the QUAD's emphasis upon a "rules based world

order" aligns well with India's diplomatic and political priorities in the region; on the other hand, its image as a closed and exclusive clique undermines the narrative of inclusivity that it stands for. India's attempt at decoupling the QUAD from the Indo-Pacific[32] has also raised more questions rather than answers. It also does not bode well in presenting the region as a strategic continuum in which India is an important actor.

However, these tensions can be accommodated, and some of the questions answered if one looks at the purpose and fundamental nature of the QUAD. The quadrilateral template took birth in 2004 in the aftermath of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in which the navies of the four countries participated in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. This ad-hoc organisation was given some structure when a framework was set up among the Foreign Secretaries of the four countries. The first meeting of the organisation focused on security collaborations, centred mainly around non-traditional security threats of terrorism and sea piracy. Following this, the four navies came together in Singapore to conduct naval exercises in September 2007 to enhance mutual interoperability. Beijing was uncomfortable with this development from the start. It feared "that the four countries were ganging up against China in a security alliance"[33]. This created apprehensions among member states and, with Australia succumbing to Chinese pressure[34], the QUAD collapsed.

Although the QUAD's revival took place against a very specific geo-strategic context –Beijing launching its BRI initiative – with the proclaimed aim of creating a new geopolitical and geo-economics map, India was more cautious than its partners in the continued emphasis upon inclusivity. In fact, India was the only country to mention "inclusive", in addition to "free, open, prosperous" in the individual statements released by each country after the first meeting of the QUAD 2.0 in November 2017[35]. In the subsequent meetings, the QUAD has not brought out a single joint statement. This largely indicates the lack of a common vision for the framework. However, this has not halted cooperation among member states. On 21-22 November 2019, India hosted the first counter terrorism exercise among QUAD members. Later, in the virtual summit held on 20 March 2020, the QUAD members, together with senior representatives from South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand, issues such as cooperation in vaccine development was also discussed. Beijing's "gross aggression"[36] figuring in the latest QUAD meeting (held on 6 October) should not come as a surprise, given how it directly threatens the strategic interests of all members.

However, it is worth noting that it was only the USA which alluded to the CCP's "authoritarian nature." The other three countries chose to use their words carefully, and defined the agenda of the meeting in more positive terms, with only veiled references to China.

The expansion of areas of cooperation beyond hard security issues is in keeping with the fundamental nature of the QUAD as a forum for "diplomatic consultation" for "countries who have convergences … who do not agree on every issue, but have substantial common ground"[37]. The flexibility inherent in the structure of the QUAD provides India enough space for diplomatic manoeuvring which is necessary for it to maintain self-sufficiency and independence. Ultimately, it is India's vision of multi-polarity which shapes its strategic choices; and, the participation in QUAD is no different. It holds the potential to promote a multi-polar Asia through inclusive multilateralism.

Given the uncertainties surrounding the US commitment to the region under the upcoming Biden administration, it is crucial that India continues with its multi-directional diplomacy. In doing so, India must be careful to accommodate the sensibilities of all regional stakeholders, including Russia which has been particularly apprehensive about the Indo-Pacific construct in general, and the QUAD in particular. Despite repeated diplomatic outreach by New Delhi, Moscow's official position is that the Indo-Pacific is an artificial construct which divides the region into rival blocks[38]. The latest reiteration of this position came when the Russian Foreign Minister described the QUAD as a "devious policy" by western powers to engage India in "anti-China games"[39]. Russia is not alone in harbouring such apprehensions: Sri Lanka's foreign secretary, Jayanth Colombage, also expressed apprehensions about the QUAD giving rise to a "cool war" in the Indian Ocean[40].

It is imperative for India to allay such fears, which it has done by reiterating its official policy that it does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or an exclusive club; nor is it directed against any country, and that it stands for an "open and inclusive region"[41]. A positive response from Russia to India's diplomatic efforts to include it in the Indo-Pacific came when it applied for dialogue partner status in the Indian Ocean Rim Association[42]. Although the inclusion of Russia would strongly support New Delhi's claims that the Indo-Pacific initiatives are not simply a US-centric plan and boost its claims of inclusivity, there are significant hurdles as Australia, South Africa, and Iran have opposed Kremlin's application.

Conclusion

At a time when geopolitical equations are in a state of flux, a fundamental tenet of geopolitics is worth remembering: perceptions may change, but geographies do not. Currently, the discourse on a free and open Indo-Pacific is centred upon China. However, viewing India's perceptions of the region through such a narrow lens would misconstrue its inclusive vision, and negate the long history of maritime activism which predates Independence. Although domestic and international compulsions prevented India from materialising its inherent maritime potential for a long time, the geostrategic insights of K. M. Panikkar has resurfaced in India's strategic discourse at a time when New Delhi has embraced its maritime identity. This embrace has been a slow but steady development, paralleling India's own growing capabilities and intentions. As an emerging global power, India is taking a broader view of its naval responsibilities – securing territorial waters and island territories; the protection of global commons; a focus on the "freedom to use the seas", and "ensuring secure seas."

Ensuring a stable and favourable Indian Ocean is particularly crucial for India to secure its maritime interests, given its vulnerability to traditional and non-traditional threats in the region due to its geography. Moreover, India's increasing dependence upon seas for its trade - with its seaborne trade growing twice the global growth rate over the last decade – makes it imperative to work with partners to protect them against disruptive forces. India has attempted to achieve this not only by bolstering its naval capabilities but also by pursuing nuanced maritime diplomacy, couched in the language of cooperation and mutual benefit – a natural extension of its foreign policy discourse centred around strategic autonomy. Although many misconstrue such a position as New Delhi's hesitation to face an assertive China, India's latest moves have shown that a retaliatory posture does not negate strategic autonomy.

The flexible geometry of the QUAD has allowed it to send out a strong message to China that its disruptive behaviour will not be tolerated. This has been done without threatening ASEAN countries. Although it is tempting to get swayed in nationalistic fervour, and bandwagon with the USA in its anti-China tirade as Beijing openly violates international laws and undermines a rules based order in the region, this will only harm India's long term interests. The exclusionary nationalist framework does not have much worth beyond its rhetorical value. Instead, a flexible, inclusive, and plural notion is better suited, given the regional realities. India's nuanced SAGAR vision is based on

an acknowledgment of the unique reality of the dynamic balance of power equations in the region, and reflects its diplomatic exceptionalism.

Notes:

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[2] K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1945, p. 9.

[3] While standing on the quarterdeck of *INS Mysore*, the second cruiser to be acquired by India's independent navy, 1958, Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, stated (28 March 1958) that "whichever power controls the Indian Ocean has India's sea borne trade at its mercy apart from its independence"; quoted in Satyindra Singh, *Blueprint to Bluewater: The Indian Navy, 1951–65*, New Delhi: Lancers International, 1992, p.1

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[11] Ibid.

[12] In November 1988, a coup to over throw the Maldivian government of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was thwarted by the intervention of the Indian Armed Forces. The assistance was provided on the request of the Maldivian President. The coup leader and other members were apprehended by an Indian Naval ship on the high seas, after a coordinated maritime search for the vessel they were escaping in.

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