

DEBATE

‘INDO-PACIFIC’: AN EMERGING GEOPOLITICAL CONSTRUCT India’s Interests, Stakes and Challenges

Strategic and political developments in given historical contexts have come to define geographical regions as geo-political arenas in international politics. Regions, such as ‘Middle East’, ‘Southeast Asia’, and ‘Western Europe’, for example, have been more than just cartographic areas. Often, oceans that provide connectivity to different land masses have even defined new geopolitical constructs. Two excellent examples are the ‘Trans-Atlantic’ and the ‘Asia-Pacific’ regional constructs. Regional collective security organisations and economic groupings have emerged out of such geo-political constructs, as for instance NATO and APEC in the above mentioned areas.

Of late, a new geopolitical construct has emerged that is now being heavily debated amongst international relations scholars and strategic analysts: the ‘Indo-Pacific’.

The current use of the term does hold specific connotations. The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ has been generally used in the past, but within differing contexts. This term was often used in Australian foreign policy debates during the 1950s, 60s and 70s¹. Again, while creating a regional council on fisheries in 1948, FAO named one of them as the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council. Individual scholars have been using the term to generally define a region encompassing the western portion of the Pacific and the eastern part of the Indian Ocean.

However, when this term began to be mentioned in American official reports and statements in recent years, it attracted the renewed attention of the strategic community in Asia. The term has been used in a US naval maritime strategy report; in the US Marine’s ‘core vision’ document; former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s speeches; and even in discussions during US–Australian Ministerial Consultations. Significantly, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh used this term in his remarks during the India–ASEAN Summit in 2012.² The Australian Defence White Paper of 2013³ also mentioned the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as a strategic region.

Countries of the region have taken note of this new phenomenon, and the very concept of ‘Indo-Pacific’ is being vigorously debated and discussed in academic and professional circles. Articles and books on the subject have

been written. China has expressed its concerns over this new construct, fearing that it could be aimed at containing it. There is also apprehension in some ASEAN countries that the concept of 'Indo-Pacific' could ultimately result in their marginalisation.

Australia and the USA, on the other hand, appear to have a certain convergence: that the emerging construct of the Indo-Pacific region would be useful. In a recent International Defence Dialogue in Jakarta, official representatives from these countries expressed their desire for greater cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. The Indian, Japanese and Indonesian delegates also expressed positive views. China, however, expressed its apprehension that defining Asia in terms of 'Indo-Pacific' could be one of the ways to downplay its role and rights.

As yet, there is no firm or acceptable definition of this concept. The new emerging construct is understood to be almost an extension of the 'Asia-Pacific' architecture westward till India—one that could complement and supplement the new US 'pivot'. It is also worth noting that the US conception of 'Indo-Pacific' does not include the entire Indian Ocean littorals.

Many questions thus arise. Why is the USA promoting the idea of Indo-Pacific as a strategic region? Washington has felt quite comfortable with the concept of Asia-Pacific for many years. How is today's 'Indo-Pacific' different from 'Asia-Pacific'? What are the Chinese reservations on this emerging concept? India's Look East policy and its growing involvement in the regional, economic, and strategic architecture of the region have already made it an active part of the Asia-Pacific. What are India's interests in accepting this new framework of Indo-Pacific region? And, what are the challenges for India in articulating its strategic and foreign policy goals in the larger geopolitical context of the Indo-Pacific? How does this fast emerging construct of 'Indo-Pacific' mesh with Indian national interests? How should India respond to such developments?

There are genuine apprehensions in certain circles in India that this US promoted concept could lead to Washington roping-in India into its own strategic calculations. Thus, some feel that India—that has so far treaded carefully around the earlier attempts to recruit it as a part of the US pivot to Asia—should be equally cautious here too.

In view of the ongoing debate on the issue, the Journal has invited a few eminent policy analysts and scholars for their comments on the subject.

Their views are published as the 'Debate' in the following pages of the Journal.

(The views expressed by the authors are their own and do not reflect the views of the *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, or that of the Association of Indian Diplomats)

Notes

- ¹ Melissa Conley Tyler and Samantha Shearman, "Australia Re-Discovering the Indo-Pacific," in Rajiv K. Bhatia and Vijay Sakhuja, ed. 2014, *Indo-Pacific Region: Political and Strategic Prospects*, Vij Books India Pvt Ltd and ICWA, p.42.
- ² "PM's Opening Statement at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit, New Delhi, 20 December 2012, <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=1259>
- ³ *Defence White Paper 2013*, Department of Defence, Australian Government, <http://www.defence.gov.au/WhitePaper2013/>

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Indo-Pacific: A Construct for Peace and Stability

Sanjay Singh*

The emergence of India in the 21st century completes the creation of a composite region which could best be described by the term 'Indo-Pacific'

As the global fulcrum of power shifts further towards Asia, it would also bring about change in the dynamics within the Indo-Pacific region. Taking cognisance of this, we would need to work towards creating a security construct, and an economic architecture that leverages the civilizational linkages to expand cooperation and build partnerships across the Indo-Pacific. India naturally will be an important participant in the process.

The emergence of India in the 21st century completes the creation of a composite region which could best be described by the term 'Indo-Pacific'. Sitting atop strategic trade routes linking the West with East Asia, India is the fulcrum of a region spreading from Bab-al-Mandab and the Straits of Hormuz through the Malacca and the South China Sea to Australia and the Western Pacific. The wider Indo-Pacific region, spreading from India to the Western Pacific, is home to over 3.5 billion people, with a combined Gross Domestic Product of over \$20 trillion. It has three of the four largest economies in the world, i.e., China, Japan and India, and a substantive part of the world's seaborne trade, including that required for food and energy security. With globalization and the consequent compression of geographic spaces, 'Indo-Pacific' has come to reflect contemporary reality, and become a good way of describing the region to which the global centre of gravity is shifting. As it assumes its rightful place in the comity of nations, India would provide balance and stability to this region which has historically been an area connected to it through trade and, more importantly, through the dissemination of its ideas.

The first decade of the 21st century witnessed India growing at a remarkable pace. We are today in a period of pause before India takes another leap forward. Its people expect this, and the region requires it. India brings with it ideas that are unique to its genius, and which promote peace and harmony. It is this philosophical construct that is contained in the teachings

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of Lord Buddha, so subliminally intrinsic to the ethos of the region. It is this which encouraged Nehru to dream of 'cooperation in Asia-Pacific', an idea he promoted at the first Asian Relations Conference in March 1947, in New Delhi. It is this idea that informs the concept of *Panch-Sheel*, and it is this idea that Nehru took to Bandung. It is armed with this, and its considerable other strengths, that India joins the debate for the construction of the new architecture for the Indo-Pacific.

The debate on the Indo-Pacific comes at a time of significant progress in India's 'Look East Policy', an important connect of India to the Asia-Pacific. It is understandable that this concept is assuming growing relevance with the rise of India, and the enhancement of India's engagement with the Asia-Pacific. This engagement is of particular importance when, in response to the changing geopolitics and its effects on the countries of the region and on their strategic priorities, Asian countries—including India—are trying to create networks addressing common challenges, and creating a regional architecture to promote growth and prosperity, peace and stability. This would be done best in an inclusive and holistic manner, and in a composite region represented by the Indo-Pacific.

The term Indo-Pacific has been used with increasing frequency since the beginning of this decade, and its increasing usage today is the recognition of India's strengths and its role in the region. While speaking at Honolulu in October 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used it to describe 'a newly emerging integrated geographical and strategic reality'. In December 2012, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh used the term during the ASEAN–India Commemorative Summit, stating that ASEAN–India's 'future is inter-linked, and a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity'. In its 2013 Defence White Paper, Australia mentioned the idea of the Indo Pacific, highlighting the strategic connections between the Indian and Pacific Oceans through trade routes and energy flows. ICWA held a seminar in March 2013 on the 'Indo-Pacific Region: Political and Strategic Prospects' in which similar ideas were articulated.

Bound by the Himalayas in the north, India has naturally focused on the sea to enhance its connectivity, especially through the Indian Ocean which extends from the eastern shores of Africa in the west to Australia and the Pacific in the east. Over the centuries, the Indian Ocean region, with India as the focus, has seen numerous nations navigating its waters with freedom, promoting trade and fostering cross-cultural influences. Today, through organizations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR–ARC), the region seeks to create a collective community, seeking to

deal with contemporary challenges, building collective capacity, and promoting greater cooperation within the region. India is a prime mover in the process. This is in line with its interest in building a peaceful environment, conducive to progress and our developmental priorities. Our perspective of the region is, therefore, more than just an economic and security one. It is about addressing the aspirations of the people of this region, and guiding their destinies on a common path of mutually beneficial progress.

The US pivot to the Asia-Pacific in 2011 underlined its desire to enhance its engagement with the region. While countries of the region continue to consider economic and developmental issues to be of greatest import, peace and stability are increasingly also becoming the principal issues of concern. The dispute in the South China Sea (SCS) is symptomatic of the contradictions which have arisen between them. The dilemma which the countries of the region face is how to fashion their relationship with China, the largest economic partner of nearly all of them.

The asymmetric accumulation of economic power in the region has led to a redistribution of political and military power and an enhancement of mutual contradictions between the rising powers of the region. There is increasing stress on regional fault-lines, boundary tensions, and disputes in the East and South China seas. The Asia-Pacific security order of the last three decades—underwritten to a large extent by the USA—is coming under increasing stress by the rise of China and increasing competition as well as cooperation between China and the USA. This has raised the need for a reordering of the Asian economic and security architecture. In order to address this, the countries of the region need to come together to discuss and give shape to a regional architecture that addresses areas of discord, and promotes peace and stability.

Confidence building in the region would require greater coordination, cooperation, and integration between the nations of the region and their economies. ASEAN has provided an example for the construction of regional institutions based on cooperation and consensus. Today, it has also become the nucleus for the confidence building economic and security structures and institutions that are emerging in the region, such as the East Asian Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting plus (ADMM++), and in the negotiations for the creation of a region wide free economic space-RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership). While there are other bilateral and multilateral arrangements in place, or being negotiated (such as the TPP), the ones created by the ASEAN continue to be the most important. ASEAN centrality

and leadership—which India supports—has provided the basis for the success of these forums. Closer relations with the countries of ASEAN are at the core of India's 'Look East Policy'. Seen as a force for stability and progress, India has regularly been urged by its South East Asian partners to enhance its engagement both multilaterally with ASEAN as a whole as well as bilaterally with its constituent countries. Today, our ties with each of our ASEAN neighbours are multifaceted marked by expanding trade and economic cooperation.

The ASEAN–India partnership promotes the basic objectives of the nations of the region: peace and stability, progress and prosperity. India's deepening bilateral political, economic, security and functional cooperation with ASEAN countries individually and collectively responds well to regional challenges. In particular, as maritime nations, India and ASEAN members are intensifying their cooperation for the promotion of maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation as well as the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes in accordance with international law. With its efforts toward modernization bearing fruit, the Indian Navy is increasingly cooperating with the navies of the region in anti-piracy and disaster management exercises and efforts. Multinational maritime exercises have been held focused on common concerns in the region, such as piracy, gun running, the smuggling of narcotics, and humanitarian issues, and putting together programmes to enhance maritime security. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is an initiative in this direction. The growth of our political dialogue, the intensification of our consultations in regional forums, and the expansion of our security and counter-terrorism cooperation has had a positive effect on regional peace and stability.

India has also developed strategic partnerships with the other major countries of the region—Japan, Korea, China, and Australia. We have given concrete shape to frameworks for dialogue on political and strategic issues with each of these countries. We have entered into Agreements for comprehensive economic partnerships with both Japan and the Republic of Korea. Both are important trade, technology and investment partners. Japan is a major source of capital and technology, and there is considerable scope to jointly participate with it in the economic development in the region. Korean companies are large investors in India. China is our largest neighbour, and a major trading partner with which we are building multifaceted relations. The relations between India and Australia are strengthened by people to people contacts, trade, and partnerships especially in the area of energy and natural resources. The two countries also share a partnership in IORA.

India is engaged in negotiations to enter into FTAs with both Australia and New Zealand. The USA, which has a major presence in the region, is a valued partner. India and the USA share a commitment to democratic values and the rule of law, and have become strong and durable partners. India has a strategic partnership with Russia, a member of the East Asia Summit process. India also cooperates collectively with the EAS member countries under the aegis of the ASEAN-centred political and economic structures.

India's major focus has been on promoting economic integration and connectivity, and providing our considerable expertise in areas required by the region, such as dealing with developmental concerns, changing demography, urbanization, climate change as well as non-traditional threats. We have emphasized on the need to work for the evolution of an open, balanced, inclusive and transparent regional architecture, which has been welcomed by ASEAN countries and our other partners. They appreciate India's balanced approach to regional issues which promotes peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

As the global fulcrum of power shifts further towards Asia, it would also bring about change in the dynamics within the Indo-Pacific region. Taking cognisance of this, we would need to work towards creating a security construct, and an economic architecture that leverages the civilizational linkages to expand cooperation and build partnerships across the Indo-Pacific. India naturally will be an important participant in the process.

Notes

- ¹ Valedictory Address by Secretary (East) at the Asian Relations Conference IV: 'Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: *Asian Perspectives* 22 March 2013, <http://icwadelhi.info/asianrelationsconference/images/stories/Valedictoryaddressbysecretaryeast.pdf>
- ² 'Realising the ASEAN'India Vision for Partnership and Prosperity: Translating the Vision Statement', abstract of the presentation of Sanjay Singh at DDVI-IDSA, February 2014
- ³ 'The Indo-Pacific: Political and Strategic Perspectives', remarks at IPCS Book Discussion: http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/SR162-BookReview-IndoPacific.pdf
- ⁴ Opening Statement by the Prime Minister at the 11th ASEAN-India Summit in Brunei Darussalam 10 October 2013: <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/22307/Opening+Statement+by+Prime+Minister+at+11th+ASEANIndia+Summit+in+Brunei+Darussalam>
- ⁵ Opening Statement by the Prime Minister at the Plenary Session of the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit, 20 December 2012: <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches->

Statements.htm?dtl/20981/Opening+Statement+ by+Prime+ Minister+at+ Plenary+ Session+of +India ASEAN+Commemorative+Summit

⁶ Opening Remarks by the Prime Minister at the 10th India–ASEAN Summit, 19 November 2012: <http://mea.gov.in/media-dvisory.htm?dtl/20825/Opening+Remarks+by+Prime+Minister+at+10th+IndiaASEAN+Summit>

⁷ Statement by the Prime Minister at the 9th ASEAN–India Summit, 19 November 2011: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=77320>

⁸ Vision Statement–ASEAN–India Commemorative Summit, 20 December 2012: <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/20982/Vision+StatementASEANIndia+Commemorative+Summit>

‘Indo-Pacific’ as a New Template of Analysis

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The Indo-Pacific offers enormous scope for regional multilateralism to play a more important role than it has so far. Once it is recognised that economic cooperation, shared prosperity, and security challenges are no more sub-regional in nature but span the entire region, the Indo-Pacific will be better appreciated. Thus, the Indo-Pacific needs to be viewed in the larger perspective of offering more opportunities for cooperation than competition. Moreover, it is a reflection of the rapidly changing geopolitical reference points. Thus, instead of looking at the Indo-Pacific idea with scepticism, it should be welcomed and promoted.

Although it is a relatively new and still evolving subject, a lot has been talked about the concept of the Indo-Pacific—about how it is fast emerging as a reference point of geostrategic as well as geo-economic analyses, and why it could become a more appropriate framework to understand current realities. However, there is a lot of confusion on what exactly the Indo-Pacific constitutes, especially in terms of its geostrategic contours, and the implications of the employment of this idea for India and the rest of the region. Doubts have also been raised about whether it is one of those passing fads among geostrategic analysts, whether it is merely an extension of the by now well known Asia-Pacific, or whether it represents a fundamental shift from the existing frameworks such as East Asia, Asia-Pacific, etc. The other question is: why are some countries—especially India, Japan, the USA, Indonesia, and Australia—so apparently excited about the Indo-Pacific whereas China seems to look at it with considerable suspicion and disdain? And, why do several other Southeast Asian countries still appear to be weighing its long-term implications?

In order to understand the emergence of the Indo-Pacific and put it in perspective, it is essential to keep in view two issues. One, that there is nothing sacrosanct about regions—that is, they are not cast in iron. On the contrary, history clearly shows that regions are dynamic, and their geographic contours are subject to change depending on socio-political conditions and/or economic exigencies. Various nomenclatures have been coined in the present Indo-Pacific region without clearly defining geographic boundaries, such as the Far East, Asia and Pacific, Asia-Pacific, Pacific Rim, Pacific Asia, and East Asia.

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The term 'Indo-Pacific' has come into circulation relatively more recently, but is rapidly gaining salience as a tool for analysis, and a means of understanding the emerging dynamics in a rapidly changing politico-economic environment. The credit for coining the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a reference point for analytical purposes goes to the historic speech that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave to the Indian Parliament in 2007. He contended that

the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A 'broader Asia' that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form.¹

However, its origins can be traced back to ancient times, and the pivotal role that the Indian Ocean in particular played in bringing not just its rim but also much of the Pacific Asian region closer to each other through vibrant commerce and cultural links. As a well known Indian strategic thinker has said, 'millenniums before Columbus sailed the Atlantic and Magellan crossed the Pacific, the Indian Ocean had become a thoroughfare of commercial and cultural traffic.'²

Indeed, international relations in their true sense actually existed in ancient times in the vast Indo-Pacific region. There is, in fact, nothing new about the Indo-Pacific, if one takes even a cursory glance at the history of this region. Till the onset of colonialism, for more than two millennia, it had thrived virtually as one common region, interacting closely with various sub-regions benefitting from each other. Before the Atlantic gained prominence consequent to the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the European metropolitan powers, and later the United States at the turn of the 20th century, the Indian Ocean was the principal conduit and theatre of global activity and, overwhelmingly, the eastern parts of this activity went all the way up to China. Especially the region comprising the East Indian Ocean and the West Pacific Ocean—from India to Northeast Asia—was the hub for much of the international relations, with implications reaching far and wide beyond this region—unlike some of the European empires which, geographically, had limited sway, confined mostly in the narrow waters of the Mediterranean. Skills and knowledge were transmitted through this region, and civilisations, cultures, languages, religions, ideas and economic interactions flowed back and forth from one end to the other. The Indianised kingdoms that held sway, from Champa in South Vietnam to Khmers in Cambodia, and from Sri Vijayas and Sailendras in Indonesia to numerous kingdoms in Thailand and Myanmar, are testimony to not merely the mammoth nature of Indian influence but also to the dynamic and expansive

exchanges encompassing the vast Indo-Pacific region.

The south Indian Chola kings dispatched a huge flotilla of ships in the 10th century to subdue a wayward Sri Vijayan king in Indonesia (the only known naval mission by an Indian king), and the most spectacular overseas maritime expeditions, led by Admiral Zheng He during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), were to the Indian Ocean. Even during the long colonial era—when whatever remnants of seafaring traditions of the littoral states were severely curtailed, and any semblance of naval power was decimated, and thriving regional economic links were ruthlessly snapped—the Indian Ocean’s strategic and economic significance and its close connection with the Pacific never diminished. What the British did was to secure the ancient trade links that existed within the Indian Ocean rim and the Indo-Pacific region through their colonial rule. India played a pivotal role in controlling much of this vast region because of the huge material and manpower support it could offer.

The resurgence of the Indo-Pacific in the 21st century has to be viewed in the context of the fact that the world has shrunk immeasurably, thanks to globalisation and the unbelievable strides in communication and transportation. Rapidly growing interdependence is fundamentally altering the way nations are interacting with each other. Moreover, the emergence of Asia as the global centre of gravity is marked by not merely the emergence of China and India as great powers but also by the fact that the entire region is rising and witnessing unprecedented growth and development. Besides the massive economic boom and prolonged dynamism, the political and security spheres are also undergoing remarkable transformations. As a result, the barriers that segregated the sub-regions within the vast Indo-Pacific region are fast breaking down, leading to the emergence of one large geographic entity comprising the East Indian Ocean and the West Pacific Ocean. For instance, a couple of decades ago, the economic links between Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia were tenuous. Beijing did not have to worry about either the ‘Malacca dilemma’ or about the security of trading routes in the Indian Ocean. A rift between Japan and China would have hardly affected Southeast Asia. However, this is not so now. Similarly, India’s stakes in East Asia have become so critical today that it has no option but to constantly augment its engagement with the region. India has perforce become a part of the emerging regional security equilibrium. For that matter, one could hardly imagine Japan, China, Malaysia and South Korea sending their naval ships to the east coast of Africa, quite often working with their counterparts from India, USA, and the EU countries in patrolling and conducting counter-piracy operations. Undoubtedly this is because their stakes in the Indian Ocean have become vital.

In other words, that the artificial geographic boundaries of sub-regions, primarily created by the European colonial powers for their convenience, are not tenable is manifested in the way countries are forging both bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation agreements and region-wide mega trading blocs. These include the Regional Comprehensive Economic Cooperation (RCEP) comprising ASEAN plus six of its close economic partners or, for that matter, even the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). In this scenario, it is inconceivable to imagine the heralding of an Asian Century without factoring in the Indian Ocean, its huge natural resources (in particular energy) that are critical to East Asian economic development, the trade routes that traverse through this ocean, and the huge market that is emerging in regions around its rim.

The Indo-Pacific owes its rise to two important developments. One, the emergence of India as a great power and its growing forays into East Asia besides being a dominant power in the Indian Ocean. As an emerging great power, India is aspiring to play a bigger role in the larger region beyond the narrow confines of its immediate neighbourhood. Its formidable military power—equipped with nuclear weapons and a variety of ballistic missiles, a navy that is fast becoming blue-water capable, and an economy that is already the fourth largest in PPP terms with huge untapped potential—will be a major factor in any new architecture that emerges. While New Delhi hardly mattered either in regional security or economics in the aftermath of the Cold War, today virtually no discourse on East Asia is complete without a reference to India. Aside from the USA and Japan, several Southeast Asian countries have been nudging India to play a more proactive role in East Asian affairs. Even China had to concede that India is an East Asian power, and that it could significantly contribute to regional peace and development. Nearly 30 per cent of India's trade is with East Asia, and has been witnessing fastest growth compared to any other region. Some of the top investors in India are from East Asia. No wonder it has signed the largest number of comprehensive economic partnership agreements with East Asian countries, and is poised to be part of the region's mega trading bloc once the RCEP becomes operational. There is no question now that India's future lies in the Indo-Pacific. Likewise, most robust and a wide variety of strategic and defence cooperation agreements that India has entered into are with the countries of the region—from Indian Ocean island states to East Asian countries.

The other reason why the Indo-Pacific is acquiring such salience is because far from being the global backwaters, the Indian Ocean is emerging geostrategically and economically as a pivotal region. For a long time, the Indian Ocean was seen primarily in terms of security issues regarding the

trade routes carrying energy to Japan and, to a lesser extent, South Korea. This has dramatically changed with China's growing dependence on imported energy and natural resources, and East Asia's growing economic links with the rim countries. What is noteworthy is that the Indian Ocean region is emerging as a major growth centre in its own right. Besides India, virtually the entire rim is economically one of the most vibrant regions in the world. Stretching from eastern Africa to Southeast Asia, it is endowed with vast natural resources and a rapidly expanding market. Comprising some 2.6 billion people, this region is home to almost 40 per cent of the world's population, and accounts for 10 per cent of global GDP (about US\$ 6.5 trillion). There is no question that its sea lines of communication are among the world's most important—40 per cent of global trade passes through the Indian Ocean, including 70 per cent of the total traffic of petroleum products.³

Touted as the new frontier, the rise of Africa is also likely to considerably increase the Indian Ocean's overall significance in the coming years. It is the fastest growing continent at present. In the wake of Africa's emergence, one aspect that has caught the attention of the world is the new-found interest in Africa by the rising Asian powerhouses, especially China and India (more recently Japan too), and their fast-expanding footprint. These powers are moving from the margins to centre stage in Africa, upstaging European powers that have held sway since the days of colonisation.⁴ This only means that the Indian Ocean's importance will be further boosted.

There seem to be some misconceptions that the idea of the Indo-Pacific has been created to contain or constrain China, and is designed to marginalise it in the new discourse. Both assumptions could not be more erroneous. In the same way, because Southeast Asia is at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, its geostrategic importance will be further enhanced. Of course, since great power interests converge most profoundly in this region, they are invariably bound to overlap which, in turn, could give rise to competition and a clash of interests. However, that is not unique to the Indo-Pacific, and has been a prominent feature of East Asia anyway.

The biggest upside of the vast Indo-Pacific is that it offers a lot more room, both literally and figuratively, for great powers to accommodate each other's interests rather than only remain concerned about stepping on each other's toes, which seems to be the case in East Asia.

The Indo-Pacific also offers enormous scope for regional multilateralism to play a more important role than it has so far. Once it is recognised that

economic cooperation, shared prosperity, and security challenges are no more sub-regional in nature but span the entire region, the Indo-Pacific will be better appreciated.

Thus, the Indo-Pacific needs to be viewed in the larger perspective of offering more opportunities for cooperation than competition. Moreover, it is a reflection of the rapidly changing geopolitical reference points. Thus, instead of looking at the Indo-Pacific idea with scepticism, it should be welcomed and promoted.

Notes

- ¹ 'Confluence of the Two Seas,'. Speech by Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, in the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August 2007, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.
- ² K.M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1945.
- ³ Kevin Rudd, 'The Indian Ocean: in need of a regional organisation to match its growing influence', *The Hindu*, November 14, 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-indian-ocean-in-need-of-a-regional-organisation-to-match-its-growing-influence/article2627557.ece>
- ⁴ G.V.C. Naidu, 'India, Africa and the Indian Ocean', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2013, p. 192.



India and 'Indo-Pacific': Involvement rather than Entanglement

Raghavendra Mishra*

While the Pacific pole of the Indo-Pacific is important, the primacy of the Indian Ocean in the national strategic calculus is far more critical due to energy dependency on the Middle East, increasing economic linkages with Africa, and the security of major sea lines of communication passing through the western Indian Ocean.

The Indian strategic policy framework should factor the nuances of emerging multi-polarity, and a deepening of 'vertical and horizontal intermeshing' brought about by the globalisation process. While the stance of 'strategic autonomy' remains inviolate, the tenets of maintaining equidistance and balance among the power centres may prove to be a constraint. The simultaneous management of mutually opposing paradigms across the strategic threads of politics–diplomacy–economics–security could be best served by a 'functional transactional approach' instead of a rigid straight-line, single point of departure policy.

The current globalised context can be characterised by strategic flux, economic uncertainty, and political transitions in democratic as well as illiberal regimes. The 21st century is being variously described as the Global, Asian, Asia–Pacific or the Pacific Centuries. Notwithstanding various spatial descriptions, what has captured the imagination of the strategic community is the ascendance of Asia. The Asian Renaissance can be attributed to the processes of political pragmatism, economic liberalisation, and administrative decentralisation. Each rising Asian state has chosen its own characteristic path which is driven by its internal dynamics and its perceptions about its national as well as the international security architecture.

This Asian 'continuum of prosperity' extends from India to Japan in the East and Australia to the South, along the maritime periphery of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, where the economic and societal affluence indicators are far more positive than the relative global stasis. In contrast to these regional

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positives, there obtain adverse trends of religious extremism and terrorism, widespread poverty, and diverse developmental trajectories, besides transnational challenges such as piracy, arms as well as drugs and human trafficking. This region is also host to a majority of enduring strategic rivalries that are rooted in emotive and historical territorial disputes. This has led to a revival of terms such as the 'Greater or Extended Asia-Pacific', and more recently, the evolution of the new geo-political paradigm of 'Indo-Pacific' that seeks a strategic connect between two of the largest oceanic tracts. One analyst has typecast this paradoxical Asia centric milieu in the Indian and Pacific Oceans as 'historically unprecedented' and has also remarked on the 'hitherto unseen maritime dynamism of the Indo-Pacific'.

The geography of hyphenated geospatial constructs has never been easy, especially those with maritime connotations, inviting different definitions with the attendant dilemmas of what to include and what to exclude. One way of arriving at consensus is to frame the narrative along the geography-geopolitics-geo-strategy ambit, linking these to the 'contemporary context'; and, as long as strategic complementarities exist, the exact shape and size of the construct becomes of secondary importance. The Indo-Pacific as a conceptual framework is not new, and has been used in various shapes and sizes to contextualise different thematic narratives. As a predominantly equatorial maritime pendulum along an Indian and Pacific Oceanic continuum, it finds mention in many scholarly works. Indo-Pacific, or to be more precise, Indo-West Pacific (Indian Ocean and West Pacific), has been used by biogeographers to describe unique marine ecology of the region.

In their writings during 1880–1945, British anthropologist Augustus Henry Keane, and an Indian historian named Kalidas Nag used anthropology and ethnicity, art and archaeology, cultural and societal norms, maritime economics and commerce besides political linkages as the threads to define an 'Indo-Pacific Domain'. Nag writes that the Indo-Pacific was also known as Australasia by the British, Oceania by Continental scholars, and also puts forth a case that this region could even be termed as 'Greater India'.¹ India's historical engagements with Pacific Asia were mostly benign and mercantilist. However, there is one record which speaks of the existence of an expeditionary outlook: that is, when the Cholas in 9th and 10th centuries used naval power as an integral element to buttress their imperial ambitions in South-East Asia.

In his sea power-centric ruminations after his *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History: 1660–1783* trilogy, Alfred Thayer Mahan—eulogised and

disparaged in equal measure—shows a distinct Indo-Pacific bias. Halford Mackinder, who espoused the Heartland concept, stated that the Eurasian heartland is surrounded by four marginal areas ‘accessible to shipmen’ that are also the coincidental spheres of four great religions: Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. He describes two of these southern regions as mutually connected with each other, and oriented to the Indian and Pacific Oceans: the ‘Eastern Inner Crescent’. Karl Haushofer, through a quasi-scientific *Geopolitik* framework, used the term ‘Indo-Pacific Region’ (*Indopazifischen Raum*) to describe an interconnected space of geo-strategic salience because of its vibrant economics, transportation networks, maritime connectivity, and hinterland potential. The German General’s debate, however, was based on a comparative analysis of the Indo-Pacific region vis-a-vis the other geo-political space of Indo-Atlantic, and advocated an alliance comprising India, Japan, Russia and China to challenge the other colonial powers and the USA. Nicholas Spykman—originator of the Rimland theory—argued that the global grand strategic plot after the Second World War would not be dictated by strict maritime or continental worldviews, but lie along the rim (littoral), where sea and land mediums interact as an unbroken connect for the employment of naval power, especially along the marginal seas girdling the Eurasian heartland. He expanded this argument to aver that the Indo-Pacific connect would assume greater prominence over the Atlantic–Mediterranean–Indian Ocean Rimland, when the Chinese and Indian quotients rise to strategic significance in global politics.

As far as Indian geopolitical thought is concerned, in the closing stages of the Second World War, Jawaharlal Nehru had predicted that the Pacific would emerge as the centre of global geo-strategy, with India playing an integral part in its regional dynamics. While his assessment took some time for realisation due to the Cold War bipolarity—considered by many as an aberration in international politics—his words strike a prescient chord in contemporary times, and are reproduced at some length below to emphasise the underlying precept.

The Pacific is likely to take the place of the Atlantic in the future as a nerve centre of the world. Though not directly a Pacific state, India will inevitably exercise an important influence there. India will also develop as the centre of economic and political activity in the Indian Ocean area, in South-East Asia and right up to the Middle East. Her position gives an economic and strategic importance in a part of the world, which is going to develop rapidly in the future.²

In the current Indian geopolitical lexicon, the term Indo-Pacific was used in 2007, albeit in a limited bilateral sense, to articulate the shared interests between India and Japan regarding the security of sea lanes passing through Indian and Pacific Oceans. These views also found resonance in the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's 'Confluence of Two Seas' address to the Indian Parliament in 2007. An eminent Indian strategic analyst has also used the concept of Indo-Pacific to underline his arguments about the future of a Sino-Indian maritime contestation. The limits of the Indo-Pacific, in these cases, encompass the complete Indian Ocean up to the Western Pacific.

In Western discourse, the term Indo-Pacific has been extensively used by the strategic community, with Australia incorporating it in their strategic and defence policy documents since 2009. The official policy articulations of the USA continue to use Asia-Pacific in an expanded sense from India eastwards up to the Central Pacific; this also coincides with the imagination of the Australian viewpoint. In an unexpected move, the communiqué released after recent ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Myanmar has welcomed the Indonesian proposal to adopt an Indo-Pacific regional framework for geo-political and geo-economic reasons. A more recent geopolitical narrative posits that dramatic changes in the concentration of population, industries, services, and the political power of maritime states have created a 'maritime ring' around the 'continental interior'. This ascendancy of 'Maritimity' over 'Continentality' is most obvious around the mixed Continental-Maritime geo-strategic realm of the Indo-Pacific.

This relevance of Indo-Pacific in maritime economic terms to the world at large, can be gauged from the latest annual United Nations Report wherein the combined share of Asia and Oceania stood at 50 per cent of the global goods loaded, and 58 per cent of those unloaded (in tonnage terms). The report also reveals that 16 of the top 20 ports in the world, in throughput terms, are located along this Indian and Pacific Ocean periphery, particularly in East Asia.³ Further, the Indian and Chinese naval modernisation programmes, the acquisition of advanced long-range systems, and plans for sophisticated expeditionary capabilities by resident stakeholders have served as the themes of recent analytical narratives. India's 'Look East' policy, which started in early 1990's seeking an enhanced politico-economic engagement, is gradually but inexorably acquiring 'strategic' overtones. India's military maritime *qua* naval doctrinal and strategy documents have identified the 'South China Sea and beyond' among the secondary areas of focused interest.

Thus 'Indo-Pacific' is neither a new paradigm, nor a Western concept but a framework of strategic relevance for the world at large, including India. Considering India's multifarious interests to its East, an involvement—against entanglement—seems a strong possibility. Thus, US notions of Rebalance in the Asia-Pacific, Beijing's March West and India's Look East policies are bound to intersect in different ways across foreign policy, economic, and security dimensions. The roles of other prominent stakeholders will also be important. ASEAN is seeking to expand its constituency. Japan has a dual hedge strategy of a reinvigorated military alliance with the USA while seeking to balance China by an enhanced politico-economic engagement with other regional players. A revitalized Australia is seeking an expanded space in the security discourse.

India's security challenges can be termed as territorially vexatious and aspirationally maritime. This dilemma is neither unique nor novel, having dogged large continental states that are also endowed with a favourable maritime geography. This paradox, however, requires redefinition in the current intermeshed globalised environment where cooperation—competition—contestation form an integral part of international politics. While Delhi may correspond with Washington and others—except for attaching the 'core interests' tag—on the issue of freedom of navigation, it is as much in India's interest to forge better economic ties with a global powerhouse like China without losing sight of the current unfavourable trade balance. The logic of better economics translating into better politics is true to an extent, as the stakes for involved parties become that much higher. However, an overextension of this rationale may become self-fulfilling. The economics—politics—security nexus works well in a stable environment, but starts disaggregating once the scope of crisis expands, and starts assuming conflictual overtones.

Going beyond the continentalist—navalist debate, the nascent maritime consciousness among Indian strategic community, though encouraging, is yet to take firm roots. A recent argument about maritime power persuasively interlinks the four strategic requisites for generating credible maritime capabilities by stating that '*sea power demands national—not just naval—consciousness, consensus, commitment, and stamina*'.⁴ With around 95 per cent of India's trade by volume and 68 per cent in terms of value being transported by sea, the mercantile component contributing 41 per cent to India's GDP and 58 per cent of external trade taking place by the medium of seas, should cement the importance of oceans to India's strategic interests.⁵ As far as the Indo-Pacific is concerned, 44 per cent of national exports and 40 per cent of imports in 2012 were destined for this region.⁶ Five of India's top ten export destinations and seven top

import origins, in value terms, are located on the Indo-Pacific rim.⁷

When juxtaposed against existing constraints, these aforementioned imperatives paint a different picture. India is ranked 16th in terms of mercantile shipping capacity which, in real terms, translates into a paltry 0.97 per cent of global share in tonnage terms, 1.38 per cent in the number of ships, with 89.6 per cent of India's maritime goods transported by foreign shipping.⁸ Despite being one of the world's leading economies, an Indian port does not figure among the top 30 list in throughput terms. In military security terms, the budget share for the Indian Navy has increased from 14.9 per cent to 19.3 per cent during 2000–2013, but it continues to be the least funded among the three services.⁹ In the absence of a public articulation of national vision, the Indian Navy's efforts to propagate doctrinal and strategic maritime beliefs have been painted as 'ambitious' and 'aspirational'. Such criticism is misplaced as maritime capabilities require significant capital, and involve long periods for conceptualisation, design, build phases, and making these assets operationally relevant. Therefore, the enduring tenets and medium-term metrics encapsulated in the doctrine as well as strategy documents seek to address challenges much beyond the immediate future—a fact not adequately understood/appreciated by analysts and policy makers the world over.

While the Pacific pole of the Indo-Pacific is important, the primacy of the Indian Ocean in the national strategic calculus is far more critical due to energy dependency on the Middle East, increasing economic linkages with Africa, and the security of major sea lines of communication passing through the western Indian Ocean. Certain quarters have also expressed doubts about the staying power of the USA because of energy sufficiency, the draining effects of two largely indeterminate and prolonged military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, fiscal constraints, and the need for a more robust counter to an increasingly assertive China in its immediate periphery. Further, an enhanced involvement of Beijing in the strategic dynamics of the Indian Ocean is considered inevitable due to the long sea lines carrying crucial energy and strategic minerals for sustaining its frenetic pace of industrial production.

In conclusion, the Indian strategic policy framework should factor the nuances of emerging multi-polarity, and a deepening of 'vertical and horizontal intermeshing'¹⁰ brought about by the globalisation process. While the stance of 'strategic autonomy' remains inviolate, the tenets of maintaining equidistance and balance among the power centres may prove to be a constraint. The simultaneous management of mutually opposing paradigms across the strategic threads of politics–diplomacy–economics–security could be best served by a 'functional transactional approach' instead of a rigid straight-line, single point

of departure policy. Mutual give and take by linking national policies to national objectives, accompanied by smart hedging, flexibility, and responsiveness are assessed to be the catchphrases for tomorrow. In all this, the arcs of prosperity and crises to India's east and west would require a larger footprint across the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

Notes

- ¹ Augustus Henry Keane, *Man, Past and Present*, Cambridge: University Press, 1899. Kalidas Nag wrote a monograph and full-length book each on the subject, namely, *Greater India*, Greater India Society Bulletin No. 1. November 1926, 44 pages, publishing details not available; and *India and the Pacific World*, Calcutta: Book Company, 1941.
- ² Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Calcutta: The Signet Press 1944; 1989 Centenary edition by Oxford University Press, p. 536.
- ³ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Annual Report, *Review of Maritime Transport 2013*, New York, United Nations Publication, 2013, pp. 9, 91.
- ⁴ David C. Gompert, *Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific*, Santa Monica: Calif, RAND Corporation, 2013, p. xi, author's emphasis.
- ⁵ Government of India, Ministry of Shipping, *Annual Report 2012"13*, p. 8. Nirupama Rao, Foreign Secretary, 'Maritime Dimensions of India's Foreign Policy', <http://www.maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/Speech%20by%20Foreign%20Secretary%20Nirupama%20Rao.pdf>. UNCTAD, Supra Note 15, p. 97.
- ⁶ Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, *Export Import Data Bank*, <http://commerce.nic.in/eidb/default.asp>.
- ⁷ Export-Import Bank of India, *Catalysing India's Trade and Investment*, p. 4, <https://iaspace.pbworks.com/w/file/66821776/fore-trade.pdf>, (accessed May 12, 2014). The leading import destinations of India on the Indo-Pacific being China, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Australia and Indonesia. The export destinations are UAE, China, Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia.
- ⁸ UNCTAD Supra Note 15, p. 43 and Ministry of Shipping Annual Report, Supra Note 20, Annex V, p. 84.
- ⁹ Based on the Annual Ministry of Defence reports, author's compilation.
- ¹⁰ Vertical intermeshing in this case refers to engagements across individual strategic domains of politics, diplomacy, military-security and ideology (informational). Horizontal intermeshing, on the other hand, means cooperative-competitive transactions across the various multiple sectors within a strategic domain.



Indo-Pacific and the Practice of Strategic Autonomy

Monish Tourangbam*

What makes the Indo-Pacific construct appealing to Indian policymakers and the strategic community is that it gives ample scope for the practice of India's strategic autonomy. It gives space for it to drive the emerging debates as a more direct stakeholder rather than being seen as a co-opted partner in America's rebalancing strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. While the term 'strategic autonomy' needs to be defined based on India's capabilities and aspirations, it will augur well for India's own interests to take into confidence other countries in the region (besides the major powers) regarding the viability of this new geopolitical and geo-economics construct. India's rising capabilities and a sober analysis of its strategic autonomy denotes India's ability to take foreign policy steps commensurate with its national interests. This includes striking partnerships and coalitions as and when it suits India's priorities of balancing uninterrupted internal development amidst a stable and secure external environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

The contours of world politics, and the way countries engineer their foreign policies usually revolve around certain geopolitical and geo-economics constructs. The end of World War II brought forth the significance of the transatlantic alliance which cemented the importance of military institutions like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Breton Woods economic institutions. Amidst the joint management of strategic issues by the USA and its European partners, Cold War competition with the Soviet Union led to both superpowers hopping across the world for alliance partners, leading to American engineered institutions like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) - although, over the years, ASEAN has morphed into a different entity, with the South East Asian countries taking the lead in the affairs of the region. Over the years, countries like India and the USA have taken due cognizance of the centrality of ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific construct through their 'Look East Policy' and the 'Rebalancing Strategy' respectively. However, in recent times, countries like the USA, Australia, Japan, and India are acknowledging and promoting the emergence of a new geopolitical construct in the form of the Indo-Pacific region.

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Thus, a pertinent question arises: how should India define its success in the Indo-Pacific region? Defining success becomes imperative for any strategic vision to be adequately assessed. Success can be defined only when India's goals and objectives are clearly defined. And, setting goals and objectives necessitates a clearer understanding of India's practice of strategic autonomy. The concept of strategic autonomy has largely been seen as the lens through which most of India's foreign policy decisions are to be taken. However, what does strategic autonomy really signify? And, how does it represent a graduation from Non-Alignment? As debates and deliberations emerge on India's perspective and role in the Indo-Pacific region - which are now being seen as more inclusive than the Asia-Pacific construct - notions about the practice of strategic autonomy need to be clearly spelled out.

One of the most significant differences which reveal strategic autonomy as a graduation from Non-Alignment is India's ability to engage with some Western countries, the most important being its emerging strategic partnership with the USA. This is quite unlike what accrued in the Cold War era. Even as carpers in India's strategic community continue to see eminent vulnerabilities and challenges to India's independent decision-making while building ties with the USA, this relationship has undoubtedly changed the trajectory of India's foreign policy. It has also led to new dynamics with other US allies like Japan and Australia - countries that are, and will be, instrumental in shaping the Indo-Pacific architecture. India's relationship with the USA has given a new dimension to India's understanding of its own rising capabilities and aspirations amidst the changing distribution of capabilities, both regionally and globally.

In essence, because of India's changing equations with the USA, the notion of strategic autonomy better reflects the realities of world politics, and comes minus the anti-Western edge often identified with Non-Alignment. This understanding of strategic autonomy will be germane in navigating India's policy priorities in the new and emerging Indo-Pacific construct. Spelling out the salience of strategic autonomy in India's foreign policy, the much debated document 'Non-Alignment 2.0' has pointed out that a strategic approach should strive

to give India maximum options in its relations with the outside world—that is, to enhance India's strategic space and capacity for independent agency—which in turn will give it maximum options for its own internal development.

These are indeed early days when one considers the use of Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct. Nevertheless, India has to reassess its foreign

policy manoeuvres in the context of its core policy parameters. India's own intent to expand its zone of influence towards its east is largely commensurate with the emerging importance given to the Indo-Pacific region. The economic vitality of the trade routes in the region is giving extra importance to the need for stability and continued economic growth of the countries in the region. The increasing importance to the term being given by the USA in its strategic vision indicates its belief that the sustainability of America's primacy could be largely determined by how it manages its relations with allies and new partners in the region. Relations with an economic giant like China are instrumental for all countries in the region. However, many countries are also wary about the increasing influence of China and its wider implications and, as such, want to count on the rules of the international community and the freedom of navigation as espoused by countries like India and the USA.

Through a proactive role in the emerging debates on the Indo-Pacific, India can carve out a strategy which will streamline its domestic growth commensurate with its foreign policy orientations, and thus help take forward its aspirations to be a global power of some reckoning. In this pursuit, its capabilities and willingness to contribute to the distribution of global public goods, and the maintenance of the global commons, will come under scrutiny. Surely, in a globalised and an interdependent world, the promotion of India's national interest necessitates greater engagement with a wider pool of countries-*albeit* in strategic but flexible interactions, and not in strict alliance set-ups. One thing is clear: the adoption and recognition of the term 'Indo-Pacific' as an emerging geopolitical entity does not guarantee the meeting of minds or any consonance in strategy among countries. This has been seen in the kind of ambiguous reception that America's rebalancing strategy has had in India, even as the USA has called its defence cooperation with India a 'lynchpin' of the strategy¹.

Thus, the increasing importance given to the term in strategic communities and government circles in many countries, like the USA, Australia or Japan, needs to be accompanied with a clear enunciation and recognition of the differences. India's own expanding geographic interests seems to be aligned with the attention given to the Indo-Pacific region. There is no gainsaying that India's increasing capabilities have made possible increasing leverages in the region, and in the global arena. However, this change requires India to step up its search for resources in the widest space possible. The sustenance of India's domestic growth and the exemplar of its democratic polity and social inclusiveness are instrumental for both the material and ideational success of India in the global firmament. This

necessitates that India steps up its role in securing and safeguarding the trade routes crossing the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. With its size both in terms of geography and demography, its enduring democratic political system, and increasing power capabilities, India could be what some call the 'bridge state' in the changing global order. As India straddles the divide between the developing and the developed world, its diverse identity and multiplicity of interests could put it in an opportune position to negotiate the emerging transitions in world politics.

In such a context, there is need for internal consensus regarding India's external engagements within the country as well. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic system is seen as a recognition of the recent growth in interconnectivity over energy security, economic vitality, and security concerns among countries in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. Moreover, India is being largely seen as a potential net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. Also, India's role in the Indo-Pacific can be seen as a geographic expansion of the importance being accorded to India in the Asia-Pacific. As India's former Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran, wrote while reflecting on the Indo-Pacific²,

...it is also a reflection of the concept of the Asia-Pacific, which hitherto excluded India, expanding westwards to encompass the subcontinent as its integral part. As India's regional and global profile increases, it will inevitably gravitate towards the centre of this expanded geopolitical and geo-economic space.

The waters in the Indian and Pacific Ocean are becoming the centre of global commerce and trade. As India's former National Security Adviser, Shivshankar Menon has said, '...The new equilibrium in Asia is likely to be as much a result of production chains and regional and global market integration as of purely security driven alliances or structures.'³ The dynamism of Asian markets is leading to the creation of various multilateral and bilateral forums towards the economic structuring of the region. And, the unmistakable rise of China as an economic behemoth has been central to these webs of economic linkages and interdependencies developing in the region and beyond. Hence, as regional and extra-regional countries manoeuvre the complex geoeconomics of the Indo-Pacific, the invariable centrality of the China factor in forums, the inclusion as well as the exclusion of China will become paramount. In a globalised world determined by increasing levels of complex interdependence, coalitions and partnerships will be fluid rather than ones based on structured and cemented alliances. India needs to start taking a more active role in bilateral and multilateral forums to ensure that the world

economic order remains open—albeit in a fashion that takes cognizance of its own priorities and needs.

Adding to the challenges of developing a more plural, open, and inclusive security architecture in the Indo-Pacific are the persistent strategic rivalries and protracted territorial and maritime disputes in the region, including the one between India and China. Even as trade and commerce signify the salience of cooperation in the region, there is simultaneous increase in military spending among Asian countries, accentuating the security dilemma inherent in the region. Moreover, the continued dominance of the US Navy, and the increasing ambitions of the Indian Navy and Chinese Navy, coupled with real time threats from non-state actors, necessitate a more robust and integrative maritime governance, aimed both protecting and fostering the common interests of the region.

Asia is also a theatre for the complex interplay of Sino-US competition and cooperation. Moreover, the love-hate relationship between a reigning power and its competitor complicates matters for other countries in the region, including India. Certainly, India and the USA share a larger strategic vision that looks at the security and stability in the Asian region, and attempts to preclude any destabilising role that China's rise could play. However, history does not disappear soon, and lingering concerns and a persisting mistrust between the two countries—reminiscent of the Cold War period—still remain. This lack of trust between the two countries often spills over, and impedes both sides from going ahead full-steam on issues spreading across the political, economic, security, and strategic realms. Moreover, there seems to be a strategic concern in India that China's relatively increasing power vis-à-vis the USA could, perhaps, lead to the USA accommodating China. This could be detrimental to India's interests in the Asia-Pacific, thus raising the importance of India's own strategic development, and its attempts to narrow its capability gap vis-à-vis China.

Therefore, even as India and its prospective partners in the region talk about shared strategic interests, in the end, every country's strategic visions are dictated by its own interests. Thus, striking unison among them is easier said than done. Even as the China factor remains prominent in regional constructs like the Asia-Pacific or the emerging Indo-Pacific, the success of any strategic arc would depend on how pertinent issues of common concern are brought forward and discussed, rather than base the construct—and the resultant multilateral institutions—on a single causal factor like the rise of China. Only issue based debates and deliberations would guarantee the sustainability and inclusivity of a strategic arc like the Indo-Pacific that is still finding its

feet in the lexicon and practice of world politics. As debates and deliberations on the relative decline of the USA abound, in the near term, neither is the USA declining so fast, nor is China rising so fast as to topple the supremacy of the former.

In this complex uncertainty prevailing in the global system, where does India stand? What are its strategic choices? And, how will be able to achieve most of its goals without necessarily budging from its practice of strategic autonomy?

What makes the Indo-Pacific construct appealing to Indian policymakers and the strategic community is that it gives ample scope for the practice of India's strategic autonomy. It gives space for it to drive the emerging debates as a more direct stakeholder rather than being seen as a co-opted partner in America's rebalancing strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. While the term 'strategic autonomy' needs to be defined based on India's capabilities and aspirations, it will augur well for India's own interests to take into confidence other countries in the region (besides the major powers) regarding the viability of this new geopolitical and geo-economics construct. India's rising capabilities and a sober analysis of its strategic autonomy denotes India's ability to take foreign policy steps commensurate with its national interests. This includes striking partnerships and coalitions as and when it suits India's priorities of balancing uninterrupted internal development amidst a stable and secure external environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

Notes

- ¹ U.S. Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta, 6 June 2012, at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116636>
- ² Mapping the Indo-Pacific, Shyam Saran, <http://www.cprindia.org/blog/borders/3574-mapping-indo-pacific>
- ³ Closing Remarks at the 13th Asian Security Conference, 18 February, 2011 - Shivshankar Menon, http://idsa.in/keyspeeches/AmbShivshankarMenon_13ASC



'Indo-Pacific': Likely to be Peripheral for India

R.S. Yadav*

India's interests in the Indo-Pacific region seem to be limited in terms of both its foreign policy priorities and its lack of capability as a major power. Though it is making progress in attaining the status of a rising power, yet it has to establish such a claim through a threefold manifestation in the form of its hard power position; its soft power status; and its demonstrative capabilities. Besides, Indian interests are more or less limited towards its immediate and extended neighbourhood. ...

In such a context, India's stakes in the Indo-Pacific region are not much. While it may continue to link up this area, inhabited by people of Indian origin, in terms of socio-cultural ties in no way should it associate itself with security issues. India does not face many challenges in this region. This region is likely to remain peripheral for its foreign policy outlook and orientation in the near future.

The concept of 'Indo-Pacific' is a recent construct in the discourse of post-Cold War new-regionalism debate in international relations. The main proponents of this idea are Australia and the USA, whereas China has reservations about this idea. In India, scholars, academicians, and policy makers are debating the very idea with precautions, having mixed reactions both in support and opposition to this issue. Thus, some questions arise. (i) What is so new about this geopolitical space called the Indo-Pacific region? (ii) What are its likely implications for India's foreign policy? (iii) Is the idea in consonance with India's foreign policy? Or does it denote a new beginning?

India's likely perspective towards this area will be dependent upon the answers to these questions. The term 'Indo-Pacific' has gained currency in the discourse of international politics in recent times. Geographically, it refers to a vast area of space which lies between the Indian sub-continent and the western part of the Pacific Ocean since historical times. However, it has gained currency due to the geo-political and geo-strategic thrust given to it by some powers who have coined this term for their foreign policy gains. Since then, it is being debated as a new regional concept, having bearings for the major powers and aspiring power centres. Through this term, both the Indian

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and Pacific Oceans are linked in such a way that Western Pacific has become a larger part of the Indian Ocean space. On the one hand, it has become an arena of great strategic concern for both the USA and Australia; on the other, it has created apprehensions in China as, through this, its underbelly—that is, the South China Sea—may become a theatre of major power rivalry. Simultaneously, it has also expanded the security alignments of the USA from Australia to the Indian sub-continent. Moreover, indirectly, India's maritime and security interests have extended from the Indian Ocean to that of the Western Pacific region. Thus Indo-Pacific is the geo-strategic alignment of forces which is the creation of the larger Pacific community based on socio-economic or socio-cultural identities.

The geopolitical construct of the 'Indo-Pacific' region is not only related to the foreign policy strategies of major powers, but also has serious implications for a rising power like India. This new shift and orientation in global maritime focus means that if India joins such group, its concerns are bound to exceed beyond the traditional focus up to the Indian Ocean region. Besides, India's Look-East policy is going to witness a two-fold qualitative transformation. On the one hand, its cooperation is not likely to be limited to ASEAN; rather it has to expand beyond Southeast Asia, both at the bilateral and multilateral levels. On the other hand, the kind of existing cooperation witnessed today is mainly in the economic sphere: in the new context it is bound to converge with strategic concerns in this expanded geo-political space. Moreover, earlier, India was not considered a part of the Pacific community and was denied membership of APEC on this pretext. But, through the acknowledgment of the concept of the Indo-Pacific, it became an integral part of it, as the new concept considers South Asia/Indian sub-continent as part of this region. Joining this group is not based on objective conditionality whereby India can claim to follow an independent foreign policy without external pressures and intervention. Rather, indirectly through this arrangement, India becomes part and parcel of the regional allies of the USA. As a result, it may have to face the consequences of major power rivalry in the region.

To understand this new change, it becomes imperative to evaluate it in terms of a paradigm shift being witnessed in India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. First, one needs to evaluate the basic tenets of the changed nature of its foreign policy so as to contextualize its stakes and challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era represents a major shift in its orientation towards the major powers by aligning closely with the USA in terms of the convergence of its 'interests and values'. It has culminated in Indo-US security collaborations in the context of the

Asia-Pacific region. Simultaneously, through its Look-East policy, India has developed warm ties with ASEAN not only in economic cooperation but also in security concerns by joining the ARF.

It is also true that India's Look-East policy is not limited to Southeast Asia alone but it extends itself into the larger area of the Asia-Pacific through its collaborations manifested in its joining the East Asia Summit (EAS). However, for balancing the increasing power of the USA, and to attain an appropriate position in Asia, India has also associated itself with a triangular strategic partnership between India–Russia–China. India continues to woo China and Russia bilaterally as well as through cooperation in the areas of trade, technology transfer, and energy resource sharing. Besides, India has demonstrated its enhanced power capabilities by declaring itself a nuclear power in May 1998.

Simultaneously, India is making efforts to acquire a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Therefore, India's new initiatives—or non-initiative—in the Indo-Pacific region need evaluation in the context of its contemporary foreign policy moorings in general, and its outlook and orientations toward this region in particular.

In this changed global scenario, India's interests in the Indo-Pacific construct can be visualized as under the following: first, this newly conceived region does not seem to be supplementing and complementing India's interests either in terms of its recognition as major global power, or providing guarantees for its appropriate space in Asia. On the contrary, it may result in India stretching out its resources much beyond its capabilities to act as a dominant player in the vast space called the Indo-Pacific. As far as the economic goals of India's foreign policy are concerned, it has already made its inroads in Southeast Asia through its collaborations with ASEAN. Even its improved bilateral ties with Australia in the post- Cold War years can serve its purpose of economic cooperation beyond Southeast Asia. Moreover, even in a limited sense, its maritime cooperation with the states of this region can ensure the free flow of trade and communication links with this area. However, in no way do these collaborations allow India to play a more serious power projection role by involving itself in the dominant security alliance system. Thus, India is constrained with regard to playing a more important role in this region because of its resource constraints, and its limited power projection capabilities.

Second, the construct of the Indo-Pacific region is mainly advocated by the USA, along with support from Australian policy makers, and seems to

have been primarily advanced by the former's interest in this region to marginalize China. Besides, an effort has also been made by the USA to involve India in the larger game plan of American strategies in this area. On the other hand, India has been engaging China since 1988 towards the realization of peace in South Asia, particularly on the India-China border. Simultaneously, India has maximum trade with China, and the economic compulsions of both are working as strong input in enhancing their bilateral cooperation in many areas of common interest. Moreover, the kind of developmental approach followed by the two countries is enhancing their energy requirements. Thus, at this juncture, India cannot afford to annoy China by any new permutations and combinations in its strategy towards this region.

The third concern is the emerging convergence of interests between India and the USA, and its likely implications for the Indo-Pacific region. Given the track record of the last two decades of warm relations being witnessed between them, it seems that the USA might be interested in getting India's support on this issue. However, in the larger interest of India's foreign policy goals, and its efforts towards attaining independent status in global decision-making, it is not likely to serve India's interest if it acts as a blind follower of the USA. As far as the issues of sea lane security, fight against pirates, international terrorism, etc. are concerned, India can go along with America. But going beyond those points may damage India's image as an independent state in global politics. Besides, it may also become counter-productive in balancing its interests with other centres of power, particularly Russia and China.

Fourth, in the changed geo-political realities in the post-Cold War era, a new regionalism focusing on the economic realignment among actors has become a prominent feature of global politics. The Asia-Pacific is no exception to this phenomenon. Besides, the strengthening of existing organizations—such as the ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC)—was undertaken to benefit from this changed scenario. India also became founding member of IOR-ARC, along with other 13 major states of the Indian Ocean. This organization envisages various kinds of multilateral arrangements and an institutional setup for enhancing cooperation among the 36 littoral and 11 hinterland states of this region. However, due to the lack of a common level of economic development and diverse foreign policy orientations among them, this organization could not become functional, despite the growing need of economic cooperation among the Indian Ocean states. Thus, despite India's keen concern to cultivate good neighbourly relations with these states, IOR-

ARC has failed to enhance cooperation among its member states. Therefore, to realise such activity in the further off areas of the Pacific region with remote commonalities of interests seem to be doubtful.

Fifth, since Independence, India has adopted a policy of good neighbourly relations. This has been reflected through its initiatives such as the *Panchsheel* and the Gujral Doctrine. In the post-Cold War structural changes, India took new foreign policy initiatives of an extended neighbourhood encompassing the region surrounding India's territorial boundaries in 2004. Thus, the region of Southeast Asia, East Asia, Central Asia and West Asia acquired prominence in its foreign policy projections in the twenty first century. It seems that India is keenly interested in cultivating friendly ties with its proximate and extended neighbouring states. Going beyond this periphery is not part of the contemporary thrust and capabilities of India's foreign policy. Besides, extending its interests beyond Southeast Asia is also constrained by its naval capabilities. Thus, it is not compatible with India's contemporary policy to attach more prominence to its extended neighbourhood.

Sixth, in the current international milieu, politico-strategic interests have become secondary, and primacy is now being given to economic considerations which have attained prominence because of globalization after the end of the Cold War. Here, the major determinants of global, regional and bilateral relations are related to trade, FDI, technology transfer, joint ventures, etc. India is no exception to such change. In the name of structural reforms it is also opening up its market for outsiders, and making efforts to do away with structural barriers so as to make its economy competitive in the outside world. It has also fixed a target of 8 to 10 per cent annual growth to bring its economy on a sound footing. However, to attain such objectives, it is inevitable that India should have huge energy resources at its disposal. In contrast, Central Asian Republics and Russia are huge energy surplus states. Thus, along with its Look-East policy, it has to think about its Look-North policy as well, in which Central Asian Republics are going to acquire long term prominence in India's energy security policy. Thus, oil and gas supplies from Central Asian Republics are bound to acquire more significant space, perhaps, than its moves towards the Indo-Pacific region.

Finally, India's projection of itself to the outside world and its acquisition of status as a major power are always likely to depend upon its power and status in South Asia. India shares history and geography with this region, and all of them have century old common cultural, economic, and social bindings, consolidated by their joint struggle against colonialism. All of them are also part of larger third world groupings, facing common hardships for their

survival and development. In contemporary times, all of them are facing new challenges in the form of terrorism, drug-trafficking, environmental degradation, etc. Even colonial legacies have left behind conflicts among them in the form of border disputes, water sharing, and ethnicity—all of which affect their bilateral and regional ties.

Thus, the first priority for foreign policy makers in India ought to be to resolve prevailing crises in South Asia, for only good neighbourly relations and tranquillity in South Asia can allow India to play a significant role at the global level. Thus, South Asia is bound to remain central to India's foreign policy goals as compared to the newly constructed far off region of the Indo-Pacific.

Thus, in the given scenario, India's interests in the Indo-Pacific region seem to be limited in terms of both its foreign policy priorities and its lack of capability as a major power. Though it is making progress in attaining the status of a rising power, yet it has to establish such a claim through a threefold manifestation in the form of its hard power position; its soft power status; and its demonstrative capabilities. Besides, Indian interests are more or less limited towards its immediate and extended neighbourhood. In terms of global politics, its role is to create a balance among the powers, with a vision of fulfilling all its economic needs, and a global acknowledgment of its position by attaining a permanent seat in the UNSC and its nuclear power status.

In such a context, India's stakes in the Indo-Pacific region are not much. While it may continue to link up this area, inhabited by people of Indian origin, in terms of socio-cultural ties in no way should it associate itself with security issues. India does not face many challenges in this region. This region is likely to remain peripheral for its foreign policy outlook and orientation in the near future.

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Challenges to the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture: Emerging Role for India

Arvind Kumar*

India should play an active role in seeking to address the challenges to the creation of a new and acceptable Indo-Pacific security architecture. Over the years, the aspirations and ambitions of India have grown. It has been acknowledged as a predominant power in South Asia, and an emerging power in the whole of Asia. Its desire to be a leading power in the Indian Ocean Rim cannot be questioned. However, India cannot shy away from assuming responsibilities and playing a more proactive and positive role, especially if it desires to be an influential player in Asian and world affairs. India's strategic orientations need to be adjusted to go beyond the Indian Ocean region to the Pacific Rim.

Contemporary debates on the Indo-Pacific region have reflected a number of varying perspectives regarding its relevance and growing significance in the emerging international security environment. Whether the Indo-Pacific region can be considered a geopolitical region has formed a major part of discourse among the members of the academic and strategic communities. If it is believed that geopolitical regions are those that are largely connected by geographical contiguity, and constant political, cultural and military interactions among the countries, then the discourse on the Indo-Pacific region as a geopolitical region becomes important and significant. Undoubtedly, the way the things are unfolding in the current milieu, it seems that the Indo-Pacific region will be attracting more attention from a number of major powers in the foreseeable future, including from India.

It must be pointed out here that the Asian geopolitics is now largely characterized by ongoing debates about the term 'Indo-Pacific'. So far, Asia-Pacific was the standard geopolitical term to connote the region; but now the word 'Indo-Pacific' is being inducted into the lexicon of the strategy documents of all the major powers. The term 'Indo-Pacific' in these strategy documents signifies nothing but a combination of the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Rim countries. In particular, there is a serious move by the USA to re-balance its Asia strategy, and create its sphere of influence across the

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Indo-Pacific region. Geographically, the Indo-Pacific region connects two of the major oceans in the world: the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Indian Ocean dimension of America's Pacific rebalance is critical to its Pivot strategy. The USA, however, has also attempted to use the term 'Indo-Asia-Pacific'.

The other major power, Japan, wants to be the promoter of rules across two inseparable oceans. It has identified the Indo-Pacific region as the confluence of two seas. Indonesia, another power in Southeast Asia, has called for a region-wide treaty to safeguard the Indo-Pacific engine of global growth. Australia also has gone to the extent of formalizing the concept of the Indo-Pacific in its official documents. India has called for cooperation from its East Asian counterparts in making the Indo-Pacific region stable, secure, and prosperous. Singapore seems to be comfortable with the term Asia-Pacific despite the fact that their interests span the two oceans.

So far, China has not been able to adopt the concept of 'Indo-Pacific' formally. However, at the same time, the use of the term 'Indo-Pacific' is being seen in most of its scholarly writings and analyses. To a greater extent, such usage of the term will pave the way for China to develop an Indian Ocean strategy. China has been completely preoccupied with the disputes on its eastern maritime edge. Such preoccupation has led it to enhance its presence, and reflect its strategic ambitions, in the Indo-Pacific region. China's overwhelming capabilities and its larger aspiration to become unipolar in Asia in a multipolar world have created competition among the major powers. China's signalling to the rest of the world about its aggressiveness through its military posturing has fuelled a lot of debates regarding challenges to the successful building of an Indo-Pacific security architecture.

The Indo-Pacific region as a whole is currently reflecting major changes in economics, strategic behaviour, and diplomatic manoeuvring among the major powers, especially as each nation competes with the other in order to create its own sphere of influence to exploit the potential of the region as a whole. The creation of a single strategic system in the Indo-Pacific region by combining accelerated economic and security connections becomes the fulcrum between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Will the concept of 'Indo-Pacific' region help in integrating and uniting the major powers into one single strategic system? This question remains a major subject of debate and discussion.

There seems to be a dominant view that the Indo-Pacific region is going to be marred by a lot of differences, and that competition will make it a region subject to increasing great power rivalry. Undoubtedly conflict seems less likely in the current era of interdependence among the major powers. However,

while the roots of the new Indo-Pacific seem to lie in economics, the larger consequences are going to be undoubtedly deeply strategic. Thus, it is very important to understand the complexities involved in the region. The greater power rivalry in the region will have negative consequences for peace and stability, and also question the major issues involved in the Indo-Pacific security architecture. It must be emphasized here that this Indo-Pacific region is not going to be an ordinary geographic region, and thus the management of the complexities will be more challenging for the major powers.

China seems to be emerging as a significant Indo-Pacific power, if only because of its evolving economic and strategic capabilities. Japan also would like to be an active part of the Indo-Pacific great game. It faces many challenges in the region, emanating mainly from China. In fact, there are many strategic differences in China–Japan relations. These differences have obviously been responsible for a downslide in their relationship over all these years. The projection of power and force posturing by China has certainly created fear in the mind of Japan. Thus, it could be argued that evolving a meaningful and effective strategic system in the Indo-Pacific region will be fairly difficult as a number of contradictions exist in all the possible permutations and combinations.

The emerging trends in the interactions among great and rising powers in the Indo-Pacific region are not coherent. The critical needs of the major powers in the Indo-Pacific region, including India, vary and create competition. The competition among the major powers will be mostly centred on tapping natural and energy resources in the region. In the age of globalization, the Indian Ocean in particular contains almost half of the world's container traffic. The Indian Ocean Rim lands from West Asia to the Pacific account for 70 per cent of the traffic of petroleum products for the entire world.

The USA has been playing a critical strategic role, and its presence in the Indo-Pacific region is mostly seen as a balancer. It has also been attempting to build a number of bilateral and trilateral dialogue structures so that China's overwhelming presence is not allowed to pose a threat. China's growing wealth, its expanding strategic reach and rising military capability has certainly generated concern and apprehension among the other major powers in the Indo-Pacific region. India, on the other hand, is being perceived as a part of the solution and not a part of the problem. India's emergence as a rising power in the Indo-Pacific region has hardly caused concerns among the existing major powers. India is generally viewed by other major powers, including the USA, as a responsible power in the international system.

India's likely future role in the Indo-Pacific region can only be analysed in the context of understanding the convergence of the security dynamics and the geopolitical compulsions of both the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions. That India is emerging as a significant power in the geopolitical dynamics of Southeast Asia is being acknowledged by members of the strategic community. India has also been actively engaging itself in Northeast Asia and the South Pacific. In the current situation, it is anticipated that the new government in New Delhi will play a more proactive role in South Asia. The signs of such changes in India's policies are becoming visible. The trajectory of India-Japan relations is expected to be more robust than before, thus creating a new strategic space for both countries in the evolving Indo-Pacific security architecture.

There is a possibility that the major powers in the Indo-Pacific region will consider a new collective security system not only to address common threats—like piracy and terrorism—but also provide a platform and common guidelines to address probable interstate conflicts. India, in particular, has argued and proposed the idea of a 'Concert of Powers' spanning the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Such a concert of powers will help in making inroads into engaging with China as a responsible and effective player in the new strategic system. This might also help reduce the risk of unintended conflicts in the Indo-Pacific region. There will be a debate, however, regarding whether India's greater economic influence in the Indo-Pacific region would automatically translate and culminate into a larger strategic role in the foreseeable future. The idea of a concert of powers needs to envisage the challenges accruing from the strategic dimension. There will always be significant limitations on the strategic interactions among the major powers of this concert.

Nonetheless, India should play an active role in seeking to address the challenges to the creation of a new and acceptable Indo-Pacific security architecture. Over the years, the aspirations and ambitions of India have grown. It has been acknowledged as a predominant power in South Asia, and an emerging power in the whole of Asia. Its desire to be a leading power in the Indian Ocean Rim cannot be questioned. However, India cannot shy away from assuming responsibilities and playing a more proactive and positive role, especially if it desires to be an influential player in Asian and world affairs. India's strategic orientations need to be adjusted to go beyond the Indian Ocean region to the Pacific Rim.

India needs to exercise all its diplomatic skills, and effectively broaden the scope of its regional engagements in order to play an influential role in the Indo-Pacific region. Can India afford to build an informal coalition with the

USA and Japan to counterbalance China? There are many analysts who oppose such an idea point blank. Does this require intense debate and discussion? The answer to this question is, probably, 'yes'.

In the meantime, India should propose a series of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral security dialogues among the stakeholders to help build a consensus for a collective security arrangement on the basis of the 'concert of powers' concept. Such an effort will enable India to develop a regional confidence-building mechanism that will bring its own economic dividends. China, for the time being, could be kept out of the loop. Such dialogue may culminate in a multipolar regional order that will help India maintain its strategic autonomy, even while interacting with major powers such as China and the USA.

The Indo-Pacific region emphasises the sea as the main source for commerce and competition, and thus India would like to see how its overall interests are protected. The idea that the entire Indo-Pacific is becoming one interconnected region will have its own limits. The strategic dimension in the relationship among the major powers in the Indo-Pacific region will impede the idea of interconnectedness to grow and flourish. In the short run, the inherent tensions among the major powers—whether it is between China and South East Asia in the South China Sea, or between China and Japan in the East China Sea—will be stumbling blocks in the way of an effective single strategic system, and a robust Indo-Pacific security architecture. At the moment, India is required to play a measured role in the Indo-Pacific by prioritizing its interests and maintaining a balanced relationship with the other major powers of the region.

The scale of commerce and volume of trade among the nations will certainly be given priority by the major powers; but this will certainly not be at the cost of the strategic dimensions of the relationships. No major power in the Indo-Pacific region can afford to initiate measures which would be inimical to their overall interests. The responsibility of the entire group of major powers, including India, would be to build a conducive environment in the interest of the Indo-Pacific region. The emerging Indo-Pacific order will be based mainly on finding ways to manage the intersecting and expanding interests of a number of countries. The region will be mostly dictated by a combination of both the realist and the neo-liberalist paradigms of international relations theory. India's stakes are high, and there is a need for serious debate on India's priorities and interests, and on the means by which India should try to achieve its goals.



‘Indo-Pacific’: India Will be a Fringe Player

A. Vinod Kumar*

Inclusion of the IOR in the Indo-Pacific paradigm only underlines the coming future of great powers attempting to spread their writ in this expanse. Already reeling under continental security challenges, a looming economic crisis, and a tardy defence modernisation process, India will need to toil in the coming years to sustain whatever leverage it already has. While economic considerations will be a driving factor in India’s effort to enhance cooperative relations with major actors in the Pacific, the expectation is that it will be a mere fringe player in the strategic dimensions of Indo-Pacific for some time to come.

Can a new geo-political construct influence a nation’s policies? Is it feasible for a nation to frame its strategy on the basis of a geo-political construct? India’s strategy has for long been driven by the concept of non-alignment, as shaped by the Nehruvian idea to stay away from bloc rivalries. Even after the Cold War ended, India continued to prime its foreign policy on this idealism while beginning to open up to nations with which it was not on engaging terms earlier. Having initiated a policy of economic liberalization around the same time, India also endeavoured to integrate rapidly with the global economy. While economic considerations began to determine India’s strategy since the 1990s, there are hardly any notable instances suggesting any domineering influence of geo-strategic constructs in India’s policymaking. India’s economic leap, and its concomitant effects on foreign affairs and strategic thinking has allowed the country to be increasingly conscious of its rising profile, but it has made no determined efforts to expand its imprint beyond the regional periphery. Even the proponents of India’s rising power potential have grimly noted the innate Indian reluctance to assume any global leadership roles even while it struggles to shake-off its ‘regional power’ identity.

In recent years, India’s political and military leadership has sought to redefine India’s strategic periphery to reflect its growing economic and political leverage. The result has been a wider articulation of its national interests stretching across the South Asian landmass and extending to the farthest littorals of the Indian Ocean as well as to the Asia Pacific region. This geo-political construction has facilitated some renewed policy thinking as

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exemplified by the Look East Policy, and initiatives like the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), both framed in the 1990s, with emphasis on economic cooperation and minimal security imprints. The economic surge also enabled a defence modernization effort, which prompted the leadership to talk about power projection, realigning exclusive economic zones, and articulating its expanded strategic interests. However, in the same breath, it also rejected any allusions of expeditionary intentions or extra-regional forays.

The transformed security environment after the 9/11 attacks justified a noteworthy Indian presence in the littorals through the internationally-mandated roles of protecting the region from piracy, terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Out-of-area sojourns in Africa, West Asia, and Central Asia were largely driven by economic and humanitarian impulses rather than any geo-political ambition, with the only strategic concerns related to vigorous Chinese inroads in these regions. In short, India hardly figured in any major geo-political constructs beyond the IOR, be it the Asia-Pacific or in the Great Game in the Eurasian frontlines. Consequently, it is doubtful whether reframing of the Asia-Pacific into a maritime-oriented construct may at all alter India's strategy or propel it to devise a force pivot in this nautical expanse. Keeping in mind India's traditional inclination towards reactive policymaking in the face of emerging eventualities, it will be interesting to ascertain whether India will devise a committed strategy to face the developments in this new geo-political construct, or whether it will prefer incremental responses to the challenges and opportunities as and when they emerge.

Many motives could be attributed to the manner in which the Indo-Pacific paradigm is gaining primacy in Asian geopolitics. At the core of this paradigm are three overlapping features. First is the indomitable American attempt to find a strategic justification for its Asia Pivot strategy, and its need to propound a language for its rebalancing campaign. Second, it exemplifies measured efforts to amalgamate the geo-political dynamics of the Pacific Rim and the Indian Ocean littorals into a holistic whole. This entails the introduction of key IOR actors like India into the East Asian balance of power while also extending the Western Pacific dynamics to the Southern Asian periphery. The third factor emerges from a combination of the first two, and serves as the foundation of the Indo-Pacific realignment: to formulate an inter-oceanic campaign to contain the 'rise of China' across the wide stretches of the continental expanse where China's presence is domineering, by mobilizing a spectrum of actors impinged by the Chinese

challenge.

Thus, the shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific comes with a new set of complexities. The Asia-Pacific paradigm entailed the intersection of many great powers and the competitions of power binaries: between the USA and Russia, USA and China, Russia and China, China and Japan, China and India, and so on. On the other hand, the Indo-Pacific centralizes the interplay of the triad—the USA, China and India—through the dimensions of competition, conflict and cooperation. As a result, the other major actors in the region including Japan, Australia, South Korea—and other East Asian groupings—like ASEAN—becomes catalytic forces in the power balancing that the USA is seeking to engineer. Though trading partnerships are likely to ease the competition and contest in this spectrum, the consolidation against China will also be directed towards diminishing the economic leverage that feeds its ascendancy. While China has an active economic engagement with South East Asian countries, the region attains a significant place in the Indo-Pacific paradigm, being the confluence wherein Chinese, American and Indian interests will converge and conflict.

Thus, what does a regional mobilization of great, medium and small powers against one country imply for the region? It is probable that it may not be a stabilizing balance-of-power affair, and might prompt the Chinese to pursue new alignments and allies. Force mobilizations and strategic see-sawing in the Indo-Pacific could become the cause of renewed competition and contestations, primarily in two dyads: China and the USA, and India and China. Assuming that the USA's 'Asia Pivot' will drive the pulse of the Indo-Pacific, stability in this construct will be largely determined by its strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, the Asia Pivot is already subject to considerable confusion, especially with heavy budgetary cuts impeding the US military's ability to raise force structures for mobilization in the Pacific, and the Obama's administration's hesitance to articulate its strategic goals.

Many analysts have preferred to describe the Asia Pivot as an 'escape route' from the Middle East and Afghanistan while also 'assuring' allies in Asia of the US resolve to check the uninhibited rise of China—the cause of a security dilemma in the Asia-Pacific and IOR. Nothing explains this more than the description by Hillary Clinton in a *Foreign Policy* commentary of October 2011 that "the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the US will be right at the centre of the action." Articulating the initial conceptions of the Indo-Pacific construct and underlining the import of a military rebalancing strategy to this region, Clinton remarked: "How we translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific

oceans into an operational concept is a question that we need to answer if we are to adapt to new challenges in the region. Against this backdrop, a more broadly distributed military presence across the region will provide vital advantages.

Though the idea of an Asia Pivot is now over four years old, the ambiguity around it is driven not just by the delays in military deployment but also in the diplomatic challenge of having to propel the Pivot, and reassure Asia-Pacific allies without menacing China.

However, with the drawdown in Afghanistan nearing, Washington is now upping the ante on the Indo-Pacific, as is evident in the renewed fierceness shown by Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel by terming Chinese assertiveness in South China Sea as 'destabilising and unilateral'. At the Shangri La Conference held in Singapore in June 2014, Hagel promised not to 'look the other way when fundamental principles of international order are challenged.' With the US-China rivalry being a *fait accompli*, Beijing is expected to seek newer political and economic endeavours to counter the 'rebalancing'. Though not expected to radically change its posture on disputes with its East Asian neighbours, as well as India, China might devise an engagement strategy to wean away its neighbours from the American allurements.

The other aspect of the Indo-Pacific theatre is about how China will promote its interests in the IOR region while handling any challenge that India could pose. Though the spread of the new geo-political construct inherently enshrines an Indian role in shaping the strategic character of the frontline where the Pacific meets the Indian Ocean, it also inevitably highlights the increasing Chinese sway in the IOR even while maintaining its clout in the Pacific. Thus, it will be necessary to ascertain whether the power-play of the Pacific will now spill over to the IOR, wherein the three major powers might compete for greater strategic space. It is, however, important to note that despite this eventuality, the IOR and Pacific Rim have distinctly different characteristics that may diminish the possibility of the emergence of a uniform and integrated theatre of engagement and competition. There may be many converging characteristics and interests of key actors in both regions: such as trade and commerce, the security of SLOCs, and the means to tackle dominant security threats. But to assume that a common balance of power equation could be permeated across the Indo-Pacific may be an unsound notion.

This being the larger picture, can India be expected to play any impactful role in the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific? India has refrained from extra-regional ventures and its chances of playing the role of security provider

beyond its immediate periphery are extremely limited in scope. On the other hand, despite making a notable presence in IOR, India realizes that its sway over the region is constantly being challenged by other actors flocking to the region. Being bogged down by continental rifts with powerful neighbours, the cost of maintaining security effectively in extra-regional engagements is very high for India. Pakistan as such remains a perennial headache, but the actual Indian dilemma is about having the means to manage the Chinese challenge—both as a rising power and in terms of threat to its own security. This dilemma manifests in many ways: on the one hand, many Indians perceive China as its primary competitor, but India is yet to develop the wherewithal to face China head on; on the other, despite being welcomed into numerous avenues to contain China, India has tactfully remained aloof owing to fears of antagonising China.

While the glaring military asymmetry with China might be among the primary reasons that could have dissuaded India from any such forays, New Delhi has attempted to countenance Chinese inroads into its periphery through its own novel ways. Recent military and diplomatic forays in South-East Asia were intrinsically about making a riposte to China's purported attempt to encircle India through augmented military and commercial presence in India's neighbourhood, often described as the 'string of pearls'. Though India was not expected to counter this frontier push through a matching presence on China's borders, it has managed to reject Beijing's warnings against meddling in the South China Sea, and enhancing partnerships with South East Asian nations that oppose the Chinese assertion.

By expanding this outreach to other Pacific powerhouses like Japan, South Korea and Australia, India could have given immense discomfit to China. Instead, India withdrew from the quadrilateral initiative with Japan, Australia, and the USA after sensing a Chinese dissension. The quadrilateral was a glaring example of the limitations that India faces when it comes to confronting China. It only perpetuates the assumption that India will prefer to be at arm's length from the Asia Pivot and other mobilisations in the Indo-Pacific region. It also undermines the prevailing belief among western powers that India could be an effective 'hedge' against China. Far from playing that role, India has made measured strides in securing its economic interests, playing subtle roles in the Indo-Pacific security dynamics even while ensuring that it does not blow the bugle for 'contain-China' campaign by some analysts of the American strategic community.

The other aspect is about the over-emphasis on India's pre-eminence as a net security provider in the IOR. The domineering presence of the Indian

Navy from the Gulf of Aden to Malacca, its role in protecting the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), and effective role in tackling piracy in the Arabian Gulf are cited as examples of its influence. Armed with two aircraft carriers for both its seaboard, the Navy has also taken postures of 'tacking to the blue waters' and acquire capabilities for power projection in the region. Having said this, none of these capabilities or intentions has figured in India's strategy nor valued by the politicians, who seem to be averse to any power projection pursuits beyond its immediate security requirements.

Similarly, the perceived dominance of India in the IOR might also be marginal, especially when considering that other great powers are omnipresent in the region. This is because despite various initiatives like IOR-ARC, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the many naval interaction with littoral states, there is no basis to assume that IOR will remain under India's control and dominance. Rather, the inclusion of the IOR in the Indo-Pacific paradigm only underlines the coming future of great powers attempting to spread their writ in this expanse. Already reeling under continental security challenges, a looming economic crisis, and a tardy defence modernisation process, India will need to toil in the coming years to sustain whatever leverage it already has. While economic considerations will be a driving factor in India's effort to enhance cooperative relations with major actors in the Pacific, the expectation is that it will be a mere fringe player in the strategic dimensions of Indo-Pacific for some time to come.

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