



## THE INDO-PACIFIC & THE INDO-US RELATIONS **GEOPOLITICS OF COOPERATION**



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It is often argued that the 'Indo-Pacific' region is too vast to be a coherent strategic system. However, in the last few years it has come to be associated as the region where global fulcrum of power is shifting. The post-Cold war period has been experiencing a shift in wealth and power towards Asia. In 2012, for the first time in modern history, Asian states spent more on their armed forces than European ones.

By 2030, eighty-five percent of global energy consumption is expected to come from the region spanning from the Eastern Coast of Africa through Indian Ocean

and western and Central Pacific Ocean including. (Rehman 2014)

The concept has gained wide currency among the foreign policy pundits, security analysts and government officials particularly from the Australia, United States, Japan and even India. Interestingly, it is the Australian strategic community that has routinely employed the concept widely to characterise Asia's evolving strategic geography. The Australian Defence White Paper of 2013 officially terms 'Indo-Pacific' as a new region: a strategic arc connecting the Indian and the Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia.

The term Indo Pacific, is not a new creation. This essay seeks to analyse a few questions. How is Indo-Pacific different from the earlier concept of Asia-Pacific? Why does the US need this new geopolitical construct? How should India define its role in the region so that it serves national interest?

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## INDO-PACIFIC AS THE NEW GEO-POLITICAL CONSTRUCT

It has been a common phenomenon to adopt terminologies according to geo-political developments. The post-Cold war period witnessed promotion of the 'Asia-Pacific' construct. However, in the current geo-political developments Asia-Pacific is considered too narrow as it focuses on the US, China and Japan while ignoring Southeast Asia and East Asia. In the present scenario there has been rise of Asian powers and Indian Ocean is fast emerging as a huge economic and human resource potential. It is a crucial transport lane between the Middle East and North Africa's vast oil and gas supplies.

This reliance also creates a sense of vulnerability among the countries in the region. The region faces challenges like climate change and extremist policies. Indo-Pacific is the most militarized area in the world with seven of the world's ten largest standing armies, the world's largest and most sophisticated navy and five of the world's declared nuclear nations (Yoshihara 2013: 91). Security challenges range from the flash points in the South China Sea, Korean Peninsula, border clashes, Taiwan issue, the Somali pirate threats etc that affect a large part of the Ocean.

There is also a struggle for power between China and India. Both the countries look seaward and are likely to jostle for

*The term Indo Pacific, is not a new creation. It has been discussed since the 1920s and 1930s. Today, it is essentially considered to be an American strategy to build an architecture vis-a-vis China. The debate remains whether a role in Indo-Pacific would allow India to act in "strategic autonomy" to build its own conceptions of the security architecture in the region.*

influence and advantage across the entire Indo Pacific maritime theatre. China plans to develop its first island chain and green water navy for 2010-2020 by focusing on surface navy ships, nuclear submarines and fighter aircraft. Between 2020 and 2050 Beijing will finalize its fighter jet program and enhance the enlargement of the blue water navy, which will give the country the capacity to operate in second island chains that contains Japanese-held Bonin Islands and the US-held Northern Marianas, Guam, Palau and the Carolines (Bakrie 2013). China's energy insecurity has been leading its attention toward the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, through which the vast majority of the nation's oil must pass. On the other hand India's 'Look East' policy and blue-water ambitions are drawing it into the western Pacific. Both the countries view each other's military presence in the region with ambivalence (Yoshihara 2013: 92). Beijing views the entire 'Indo-Pacific' construct as a way to balance against China and has even blamed the US for stoking tensions by encouraging nations like Vietnam and Philippines to "engage in dangerous behaviour" (Reuters May 2014).

## INDO-PACIFIC AS THE US GRAND STRATEGY

For the United States, Indo-Pacific becomes strategic as it provides a more integrated approach to the region that is fast gaining prominence on the global map. Maintaining influence in the Indo-Pacific forms a central part of the US grand strategy.

Every country's grand strategy is protection of its homeland. However, US grand strategy includes more. Firstly, it involves preventing external hegemonic control over critical geopolitical areas of the world and prevent rise of other threats to the global commons. The second goal is to expand the liberal political order internationally. The third goal is to sustain

an open economic regime (Tellis 2012). The Future Directions International (2011) has defined the grand strategy with regard to the Indo-Pacific. Preventing extremist groups from threatening US interests and those of its allies; employing diplomatic relations network for influencing military and trade relations; ensuring access to natural resources and markets and ensuring the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and maritime checkpoints. The US remains focused to prevent rise of any power that can control critical geopolitical areas of the world.

Until recently Indian Ocean was considered only as a thoroughfare through which warships passed. Today, Washington wants the region to have a multilateral structure erect on the web of understandings, agreements and alliances. It is working on building relationship with countries in the region to give shape to a regional architecture in order to manage the Indo-Pacific (Cronin et al 2013).

During her visit to Honolulu in October 2010, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used the phrase "Indo-Pacific" to describe a newly emerged and integrated theatre. The region spans two oceans — the Pacific and the Indian — that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy." (Clinton 2011) During his trip to Australia in November 2011, Obama also talked about Indo-Pacific as he mentioned "new opportunities to train with other allies and partners, from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean." Thus, there has been an American acknowledgement about Indian and Pacific Oceans constituting an inter-linked geopolitical space, not only because it is important to "global trade and commerce" but also because they impact on strategy (Saran 2012).

Given the nautical nature of the Indo-Pacific theatre, the US navy is expected to play a major role in the strategy. The 2010 Quadrennial Defence Review stated seeking alliances and concentrating

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resources in the Indo-Pacific to serve US' security interests. The US is working towards strengthening traditional alliances with Japan and Australia and is aiming new security partnerships with India. From joint defence production with Japan and India, to securing bases and increasing rotational presence with Australia, Singapore, Indonesia etc, attempts are being made for an enhanced US presence in the wider Indo-Pacific. It is proposed that by 2020 about 60 per cent of the American naval forces—including six aircraft carrier battle groups as well as a majority of the navy's cruisers, destroyers, Littoral Combat ships and submarines—will be stationed in the region (BBC 2012).

Along with strengthening defence ties, the United States is also trying to integrate economically with the Asian economies. Washington has been launching multinational partnerships with countries in South East Asia and South Asia in areas of agriculture, food security, connectivity, education, energy security, environment etc. Moves like Indo-Pacific Economic corridor and Lower Mekong initiative allow US to enhance its presence in areas where historically it had been under represented (Campbell and Andrews 2013: 6). It is also working on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that seeks to bring together economies from across the Pacific – developed and developing alike – into a single trading community. It aims to move beyond the conventional border-related barriers to free trade, and aspires to promote deeper economic integration

and secure US market access for agricultural products, manufacturers and services (English 2012). There has been a momentous growth in energy and economic flows between the Indian Ocean littoral and East Asia. Alternative energy options, unconventional gas and surging energy demand are reshaping the geopolitical energy space. The efforts by the US to be part of these groupings reflects its broader effort to engage with Indo-Pacific.

Washington has also reached out to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to build an Indo-Pacific region. However, ASEAN till now has taken conflicting position regarding the construct and is unable to present a united front in this regard. China on its part has expressed its concerns over this new construct, stating it as an attempt at containing it. Beijing has not been able to accept regional architecture building, multi-polarity and multilateralism and has continued to insist on exclusionary strategies based on narrow definitions of its own security interests. Beijing has had difficulty in accepting the "Asia-Pacific" label which draws the US into Asia, and now the "Indo-Pacific" which creates a triumvirate of regional powers by including India (Singh 2013).

### INDIA'S ROLE IN INDO-PACIFIC

India's inclusion in the Indo-Pacific has largely been promoted by a broader network of Australian and American think tanks. Promoters of the concept talk about how countries in the region 'should take a leading role in shaping the economic and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific' and seek to tie India more closely with the US, Australia and Japan (Singh and Inderfurth 2011: 2). The US has talked about India's desired role as a "net security provider" to preserve maritime transportation routes and global commons in the Indian Ocean (Scott 2012: 89).

Steps taken by India over the past decade to expand its presence and enhance its influence throughout the region has made such a prospect more alluring to the US policymakers. With opening of economy, India has been connecting with its Indian Ocean neighbours and major maritime powers of the world. There has been a new reliance on the sea for energy and mineral resources. India has been engaging with regional actors on bilateral as well as multilateral framework. From Look East policy, there has been a graduation towards engage East policy with growing economic relations with the ASEAN, China, Japan and Australia. India is also in the mode of enhancing its maritime presence throughout the Indian Ocean Region. Along with revolutionising its defence procurement by acquisition and construction of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarine and fleet tankers, New Delhi is also developing naval ties with countries like Singapore, Oman etc in the Indian Ocean region. Such agreements allow India's presence from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca. In the last few years there have been annual naval exercises with France (Varuna, since 2002), the United States (Malabar, first in 1992 and again regularly since 2002), Russia (Indra, since 2003) and the United Kingdom (Konkan, since 2004). India and US naval exercises progressed from small scale basic passing manoeuvres among naval vessels and replenishment-at-sea drills to larger scale anti-submarine exercises in 2003. The mutual deployment of aircraft carriers from both sides in 2005 served as a visible demonstration of mutual combined power projection potentiality. The Malabar-2 exercises in September 2007 also involved Japan, Singapore and Australia pointing towards an 'Indo-Pacific' orientation, much to China's chagrin (Scott 2012: 98). Since then, the exercises have remained bilateral but Malabar Exercise 2014 seeks to register Japanese presence on India's invitation. This has raised questions regarding the larger geopolitics around

such a naval exercise in the region.

The proponents of the concept among the Indian policy makers defend India's role in 'Indo-Pacific' by stating that it preserves the 'strategic autonomy'. Strategic autonomy is a step ahead from the Non Alignment idea as it talks about giving "maximum options (to India) in its relations with the outside world". It is believed that the Indo-Pacific construct seeks to establish a plural, inclusive and open security architecture. This allows India to create a web of cooperative relations with all the stakeholders based on mutual interest and benefit (Geraghty 2012).

For India, non-traditional security challenges comprise an important part of the 'Indo-Pacific' policy formulation. Problems of regional instability from non-traditional sources, such as weak state capacity in key parts of the Indo-Pacific, pose a significant challenge. This requires that India steps up its role in securing and safeguarding the trade routes crossing the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. The focus remains on securing sea-lanes and maritime governance through regional initiatives such as the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). Indian navy is cooperating with navies of the region to tackle disasters, narcotic smuggling, gun running etc. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is an initiative in this direction. India also contributes to the African Union Mission in Somalia and has begun bilateral and trilateral naval coordination and patrolling with China, Japan and Kenya, Madagascar and the Seychelles in Africa. There have also been efforts to strengthen organisations like Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), an institutional set up for enhancing cooperation among 36 littoral and 11 hinterland states of the region.

Alongside, India is working with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Nepal for closer trade

through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The Mekong-Ganga initiative, launched in 2000 involving India, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam has recently expanded its ambit to include trade, investment, energy, food, health and highway connectivity (Chako 2012). India has also associated itself with triangular strategic partnership between India-Russia-China and in the areas of trade, technology transfer and resource sharing. The dynamism of the Asian market has led to emergence of such multilateral and bilateral initiatives which are more likely to remain fluid rather than structured. It is thus in India's interest to take a more active role in these forums in a way that maximises its own priorities and needs.

However, territorial and maritime disputes in the region pose a major challenge to this phenomenon. China factor looms large in India's strategic calculus. China's so called string of pearls has granted it several footholds in the Indian ocean. India would want to see those reduced but cannot do much to undo it. Even though China's trade routes and dependence on energy bring it to Indian Ocean, it has so far shown ambivalence in joining any cooperative framework and has preferred to stand apart. Albeit late, New Delhi is trying to renew its ties with countries in the Indian Ocean region. Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Verma stated, "It is important to realise that if one nation does not meet a need, there will always be another ready to fill the vacuum. Such cooperation drives the strategic balance between friendly and other influences in the region." (Verma 2010) Thus, India aims at denying further opportunities to China to expand its footprint in the Indian Ocean region. New Delhi is also trying to gain a foothold in the Pacific. It is conducting naval partnership with Hanoi and pursuing oil exploration with Vietnam. New Delhi is also providing strong support for the peaceful resolution of the territorial

disputes in the South China Sea, criticising China's nine-dash line policy and emphasising on the freedom of navigation in the Western Pacific.

Yet, India does not want to be closely aligned with the US and its allies in the region. The India-Australia-US trilateral dialogue was already dead on arrival as many considered this as an American-led approach implicitly targeting China (Geraghty 2012: 9) However, the India-Japan-US trilateral dialogue for "peace and economic prosperity" around the globe has been on an upswing. The dialogue has already moved to concrete projects including connectivity projects in South East Asia and disaster management projects. Defence and intelligence-sharing will also be taken up at this trilateral dialogue in near future, with an eye on China.

Despite that, India and China are also working on raising the level of mutual political trust and promote the in-depth development of bilateral co-operation. The two sides are cooperating not only on economic areas of interest, but also in the areas of politics, boundary negotiation and non-traditional security. On the regional level both the countries actively participate in multilateral co-operation processes such as the free trade schemes in the South-East Asia.

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Moreover, both countries recognise that non-traditional security issues in the region, such as terrorism, transnational crime, piracy, natural disasters and other challenges, can only be tackled through joint efforts and regional co-operation. One example is the sub-regional co-operation between China, India, Burma and Bangladesh, which focuses on economic co-operation, as well as non-traditional security issues, such as narcotics.

## CONCLUSION

Indo-Pacific is still finding its feet in the practice of world politics. For the American policymakers, Indo-Pacific seems to be an attempt to integrate India in an Asian architecture that seeks to serve US interests.

The Indian side, however, has welcomed the concept because it provides space for India to follow its strategic autonomy. India can continue to engage with countries all across in flexible interactions and not form alliances. Indo-Pacific concept allows India to be a direct stakeholder rather than being an alliance partner of the US.

Thus, India can take foreign policy decisions that sit in consonance with its national interests. On one hand India has opted for a common thread with the United States on the issue of 'unhindered freedom of navigation in international waters' and has joined in defence dialogues with Washington and Tokyo. Alongside it has called for 'real concert of Asian powers' that includes both China and the United States to ensure maritime security in the Indian Ocean and the need to create a more balanced security architecture in the region.

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