



INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

A Road Without a Map?

When then Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, in his address to the Indian Parliament, referred to “The Confluence of Two Oceans”, meaning growing links between the Indian and the West Pacific Oceans, little did he envisage that that seed he laid would evolve into one of the biggest ideas in the form of the Indo-Pacific capturing the imagination of a cross-section of people from scholars, policy makers, journalists to business leaders. Yet, it has its detractors. Mixed reactions or tentativeness or outright rejection have arisen, inter alia, for two reasons. One, whether or not China is not part of it, and two, continuing confusion about what constitutes the Indo-Pacific in terms of its geographic contours.

Commonsense tells us that the Indo-Pacific is not an exclusive club of some countries but refers to a geographical region just like East Asia or the Asia-Pacific wherein one cannot include or exclude a country according to one's whims. The U.S. does not technically belong to the Indo-Pacific geographically but it has a huge military presence, including military bases, forces and command centres. America's largest command, U.S. Indo-Pacific



Command (USINDOPACOM) with headquarters in Honolulu, has 375,000 U.S. military and civilian personnel assigned to this command's area of responsibility, is in this region. It also has territories under its control in places such as Guam in the Central Pacific and Diego Garcia in the Southern Indian Ocean. Further, it has military pacts with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand and forward active-duty troop deployments in Japan, South Korea and Australia along with a small presence in Singapore. More recently, Washington has also crafted strategic partnerships with countries such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Pacific Islands. No question that it remains the most consequential power geostrategically, and to a lesser extent, geoeconomically (notwithstanding its relative decline). Since its ability to influence developments is substantial, no discourse is complete without its inclusion.

China is the most important resident power of the Indo-Pacific along with India, Japan, Australia and the countries of Southeast Asia. Any notion that China does not belong to this region would defeat the very purpose of creating this new construct. It is logical to raise the question why the Indo-Pacific and why not the Asia-Pacific or East Asia, which continue to be the dominant themes. It is not a replacement of one for the other but to complement each other. The 'Indo' refers to India. That's how India is referred to in Japanese and a slightly distorted version of it in China, the Korean Peninsula, and Vietnam. Even the 'Indo' part of Indonesia denotes India. If India were to be part of the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean would not be far behind. However, it makes little sense to include the entire Indian Ocean region from East and Southern Africa, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Subcontinent to the Bay of Bengal, for there are no compelling bonds that coalesce these regions with the Pacific Ocean in terms of history, culture, economic links or shared security concerns. Hence, the delineation of geographic boundary of the Indo-Pacific is indispensable.



The Indo-Pacific region is a dynamic geostrategic area, shaped by diverse national interests and evolving partnerships, with a focus on security, economics, and shared challenges.

The next important question is what the region and subregions that the Indo-Pacific represents and what is the underlying rationale. The Indo-Pacific remains confusing because there is no commonly accepted definition. For instance, India tends to include the West Pacific Ocean and the entire Indian Ocean, sometimes the whole of the African continent and Americas, whereas the U.S. broadly confines to the region that falls under the Indo-Pacific Command, that is, from Diego Garcia all the way up to Hawaii and the region that is in between including India, Southeast, Northeast Asias, and Oceania. Ditto is Australia. However, as far as Japan is concerned, in official announcements and statements the Indian and West Pacific Oceans, including the U.S. are part of the Indo-Pacific but in its strategy, it is aimed at India and the West Pacific Ocean. ASEAN that came out with an Indo-Pacific Outlook in 2018 basically focussed on issues (such as maritime security) than getting into details about what constitutes the Indo-Pacific.

There are two ways of addressing the above issue. One, not to worry too much about strict geographical delineation while keeping it flexible but focussing on issues. The second is to have some clarity on this so that by arriving at a broad definition will be helpful to understand certain common challenges that are unique



Source: Visible Earth, NASA

to this region in perspective. Of course, any definition should be premised on some rationale, otherwise, lumping Kenya or Yemen with the Philippines makes no sense, or for that matter, the issues affecting either East Africa or the Persian Gulf can be examined in the same prism as the South China Sea. This is imperative notwithstanding the fact Asia, unlike other regions, has always eluded a clearly definable entity. Europeans once called the region from Turkey all the way up to China Oriental chiefly viewing in cultural terms. Gradually, as colonialism took root, subregions came into prominence such as the Indian Subcontinent, Indochina, etc. However, the onset of the cold war and the American anti-communism crusade brought the phenomenon of creating subregions that shared certain commonalities into sharper focus. In fact, as the American military involvement intensified, a large number of Area Studies programmes were introduced in universities and think tanks so that policies could be tailored to suit local conditions rather than employ a 'one-size-fits-all' strategy across vast regions. For example, the Indochina subregion in the larger Asia-Pacific. This gave rise to various nomenclatures to identify

a region and/or subregions. That is how Pacific Asia, Asia-Pacific, East Asia and now Indo-Pacific came to be used over the years. Surely, the change of nomenclature and some amount of built-in flexibility denote how dynamic this process has been that is peculiar broadly to East Asia. Yet, without question, there is an underlying rationale, which can be one or more of the following: historical, cultural, geopolitical and economic. Thus, the justification for the Indo-Pacific is that there was a historical and cultural background that can be traced back to nearly two and a half millennia when the region between India and the West Pacific Ocean enjoyed the most vibrant and expansive relations than anywhere in the world. These were not confined to trade and commerce but spanned a vast array of cultures and associated fields. Until recently, India did not figure in the Asia-Pacific or East Asia discourse. With the emergence of India, its growing role and involvement in East Asian affairs makes a case to define the Indo-Pacific comprising the East Indian Ocean and the West Pacific Oceans.

Let us not forget that much of Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia and



Singapore) is in the East Indian Ocean region, the region with which India has a strong historical connection and also has been the focus area of the earlier Look East and since 2014 the Act East policy. As part of this policy, India has been evolving a multi-faceted relationship with ASEAN as an organisation and its key member states. India's relations with Japan have undergone a tectonic shift in recent times, China has been a significant economic partner to India despite a tense border dispute. Similarly, India's interactions have increased manifold with South Korea and Australia. In fact, it is with this region that India's interactions have been the growing the fastest. Unlike even a couple of decades ago, today no discourse is complete without a reference to India, an indication that its relevance to regional security and economics is growing rapidly. As a result, India and the region towards its east can broadly be called the Indo-Pacific. This provides not simply much-needed clarity but also makes sense to use it as a template to understand and analyse current regional dynamics.

However, the Indian government's official statements and documents not only do not distinctly

state what they mean by the Indo-Pacific but quite often they are very misleading and perplexing. Prime Minister Modi's 2018 keynote address to the Shangri-La Dialogue is the most-cited source to get an idea about India's official viewpoint. In his words, "India's own engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region – from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas - will be inclusive." Does it mean not just the entire Indian Ocean region but the whole of the Pacific Ocean whereby both the Americas are included in this expansive definition? Obviously, there is no way a policy nor a strategy can be crafted towards such a vast region covering virtually the entire world except Europe.

The other authentic source to understand the Indian government's thinking on the Indo-Pacific are the Annual Reports of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). They are even more bizarre. For instance, for the first time the MEA included a tiny separate heading 'Indo-Pacific' in its Annual Report in its 2018-29 edition. It simply enumerates various interactions India had with ASEAN and other multilateral mechanisms it led such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus

One (that is, the Dialogue Partners), and so on. Even more bizarre is that in the same report, there is a section “Southeast Asia & Asia-Pacific” as though they are two different regions. Additionally, it also mentioned participation in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) activities. The same thing is repeated year after year ever since.

To be sure, the MEA has created an Indo-Pacific Division (in addition to the Indian Ocean Division). Strangely, under its jurisdiction come two regional organisations – IORA and ASEAN, and the security dialogue mechanism, the Quad. Surely, the Secretary-East oversees the East Asian region (additionally the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and MERCUSOR, a South American Trade Bloc) but not necessarily what can broadly be construed as the Indo-Pacific. This is because there is no specific target region from MEA’s perspective, “...from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas” is the Indo-Pacific. Instead, if the focus is confined to the East Indian Ocean and the West Pacific Ocean regions, it becomes easier to examine issues in perspective.

The next pertinent issue is, what are the most discernible trends that are uniquely common to the Indo-Pacific, how they will impact its security and economic landscape, and what are the implications for India. There is a fundamental shift in the ‘post-cold war’ paradigm that dominated the discourse wherein America remained the preponderant power robustly backed by its alliance system and forward troop deployments, now to ‘post post-cold war’ as a new reference point. The ascent of Asian great powers, which remained on the sidelines during the cold war, was not seen to alter the equilibrium in any significant way. That’s not the case today. It is not merely the rise of China that is challenging the extant order but both India and Japan too are doing it but not as forcefully as Beijing. A militarily and economically powerful China, an emerging India trying to create a niche status for itself, and a Japan taking tentative but firm steps to gain as much strategic autonomy as it can within the alliance framework are upending the status quo in their own ways by reorienting their approaches and expanding their strategic footprints.

Without question, the global strategic focus is shifting back to the Indo-Pacific, which is reclaiming its paramount status that historically it used to enjoy until it was crudely disrupted by the colonial powers. All indications suggest that the current century (and probably the next one too) belongs to it. A notable development is a shift of focus from the continental (historically a dominant feature) to the maritime sphere. A clear indication is the way the entire region is modernizing itself. Prominently, the Asian great powers, including Japan, are acquiring power projection capabilities (aircraft carriers, for instance) to be able to operate far beyond their immediate vicinity.

The post-cold war U.S.-led unipolar movement is over, which is reflected in the way Washington has been tweaking its strategy toward the Indo-Pacific from Pivot to Asia to Rebalancing and now strengthening alliances and building strategic partnerships. As part of this, Washington is adopting a multi-pronged



The Indo-Pacific is shifting as China, India, and Japan challenge the existing order, while the U.S. strengthens alliances and partnerships.

approach from promoting security dialogues such as the Quad, building new military alliances (AUKUS), creating minilaterals (U.S.-Japan-South Korea and U.S.-Australia-Japan trilaterals), erecting subregional security alliances (SQUAD comprising the U.S., the Philippines and Japan), and qualitatively augmenting defence and security interactions. China certainly is the chief target but the agendas are much larger.

No Indo-Pacific discourse is complete without factoring in China, the elephant in the room. In every sense- geopolitically, militarily, economically and in terms of its dominance in the regional value chain – China looms very large. No country can match its US\$ one trillion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by which it will reap not just economic but geopolitical benefits too. Its economic dominance is also becoming a cause for concern for several countries due to their excessive dependence. It is most visible in Southeast Asia, a region, despite all its limitations and constraints, that is coming of age economically. With a combined GDP of nearly US\$ 4 trillion and a market of over 600 million people, Southeast Asia's economic heft cannot be overstated. It is emerging as a key cog in the regional value chain and hence it cannot afford to antagonize China. Perhaps a bigger upside it enjoys is its geostrategic location at the heart of the Indo-Pacific at the intersection of two fastest growing regions of the world, i.e., the West Pacific and the Indian Oceans, and surrounded by rising great powers, i.e., China, Japan and India. However, ASEAN-led multilateralism in particular has not lived up to its initial expectations, a reason why other arrangements such as Quad have come into being.

In spite of all the talk about rising geopolitical tensions, interestingly one can see a solid correlation and interplay between economic interdependence and security, something security experts tend to overlook. Strong economic interdependence knitted by robust production networks that are lifelines in the region alone explains the prolonged stability and why no major war has occurred for the past four and a half decades (discounting occasional militarily insignificant minor skirmishes). There are no compelling reasons why this aspect will not

continue to play a key role in the coming years too.

No question that all the above developments will have profound implications for India. Its trade has been growing the fastest with the Indo-Pacific countries and this region is the chief source of much of the investments it is receiving.

Geostrategically, India shares maritime and land boundaries with three key countries of Southeast Asia- Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar. Moreover, a narrow waterway connecting the Malay Peninsula with the Sumatra Island of Indonesia, the Malacca Strait is the second busiest shipping trade route in the world, close to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This and other developments in the maritime sphere are critical to Indian interests. Importantly, India's rapidly growing stakes will be impacted by the changing Indo-Pacific security complexion. In other words, whichever way one looks, India's future is firmly tied to the developments in this part of the world.

Against the above backdrop, what are New Delhi's objectives, both short to medium and long-term, and what strategy it seeks to adopt are two important questions. In his address to the Shangri-La Dialogue, Prime Minister Modi mentioned six key objectives. These, according to the MEA's 2019-20 Annual Report, are: "India's Vision for the Indo-Pacific focuses on a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific. India emphasizes respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations in the region, equality of all nations, peaceful resolution of disputes, avoidance of use or threat of use of force and adherence to international laws, rules and regulations. India's objective is a multi-faceted engagement with all countries in the region and those with interests in it, encompassing political, security, economic, and sociocultural spheres, aimed at Security And Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)." One wonders whether these are ideals or objectives. If they are objectives, what steps it is taking to achieve them is the next question. Aspiring for all those above things is fine, but what is realistically achievable requires stating those goals more clearly.

As noted, the Indo-Pacific is witnessing remarkable

changes and is transiting to a new security order, which, as history demonstrates, invariably tends to disturb the status quo accompanied by instability. hence, the near-term challenge for India is to craft a strategy that would ensure that the transition is smooth. Secondly, it is equally important to envision an order that does not undermine India's interests and offers a tangible long-term role in regional affairs. A suitable strategy needs to be created to achieve these two principal objectives. One can envision three ways of achieving these key goals. One, since economic interdependence alone does not guarantee that geopolitical issues will not threaten stability, efforts must be made to ensure certain events do not spin out of control. It is where India can play a key role in contributing to the regional power balance by working with others to build a viable balance of power so that the region is not dominated by any one power.

Two, China is too important a power to be relegated to the sidelines, and hence, it is imperative to engage China productively without compromising the basic and well-established ground rules of conduct in international affairs with a clear understanding that crossing certain redlines will invite retribution. Third, since regional economic interdependence has proven to impact how countries make their foreign policies, India has to revisit its decision to withdraw from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) so that it becomes a key partner in the regional value chain.

After being on the sidelines for over two centuries, an opportunity beckons India to ensconce itself as a key power. It is in a position to play a unique role as a resident power located in a geostrategically vital region with a formidable military power and an economy that is vibrant and fastest growing in the world.

For India, the bottom line should be to work towards creating an enduring and viable multipolar regional order. On the one hand, this alone will ensure the region's stability and, thus, economic progress and a credible role for India.

Based on the evidence available in the public domain, New Delhi certainly is on the road to be a pivotal player in Indo-Pacific affairs, but what is missing is a map in the form of a strategy that can provide a guide to realise its goals. ●

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