



## THE CHANGING POWER-RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: DECODING NEW DELHI'S STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

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*The growing importance of the maritime sphere for trade and connectivity has made the seas and oceans arenas of stiff competition and contestation. There is intense tussle between the emerging and the established economies for greater control over the sea lanes and oceanic networks for resources, commerce, and connectivity. This has led to a dynamic shift in the focus towards security in the maritime domain. In the context of the evolving geo-strategic construct of the Indo-Pacific, it becomes important to understand the altering contours of rapidly changing power-relations in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. The rise of China as a dominant economic power, India's growing clout as a major stakeholder in the global system, and the massive increase in the volume of trade and commercial exchanges in the Indian Ocean that have contributed to the Indo-Pacific becoming not only the most important, but the most contested of maritime zones of the world.*

### Introduction

While the Indo-Pacific construct presents significant economic opportunities to India, it also poses serious strategic challenges for the country in the wake of a sharp rise of military activity on account of China's growing assertions in the region vis-à-vis littoral territories. In the context of the Trade War between the U.S. and China and other competing geo-political interests, it is imperative to examine New Delhi's changing worldview as it grapples with its own domestic economic problems, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and an aggressive China on the north-western sectors of its border.

With China consolidating its hold over South China Sea (SCS) and establishing military bases in and around the region, there is a sense of anxiety among the countries of South East Asia and India. India- that remained largely unperturbed to growing Chinese power and influence- has now moved towards reorienting its strategy to maintain both balance of power as well as its own strategic autonomy in the region. This paper would comprehensively analyze diverse aspects of the evolving power dynamics in Indo-Pacific, its strategic implications for India and the country's response to the emerging scenario.

## Indo-Pacific: The Theater of Power-Struggle

No region is more affected by the evolving global power tussle than the Indo-Pacific. With the involvement of major powers like the U.S, China, India, and Japan, the region has become the stage of a global power-struggle. The economic and strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific cannot be emphasized enough in contemporary international relations. The competitive and convergent security interests of central actors in the region - Australia, China, India, Japan, and the United States – makes the Indo-Pacific an active regional construct. The importance of the region is further strengthened by the growing significance of the Indian Ocean as a geo-political and geo-economic nerve center that has become world's busiest and most strategically significant trade corridor, carrying almost two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo.<sup>1</sup> With the growing importance of the maritime sphere for trade and connectivity, the contestation between the major players-especially China and India-has become bitter and even vicious in recent times, with the U.S. playing the role of an alert watchdog.

***In recent months, China has intensified its drive to claim territory-both land and maritime.***

In addition, there are some countries of southeast Asia such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan, who do not wish to take an open stand against China but are nevertheless perturbed by its growing assertions and military consolidation in the South China Sea (SCS) and the East China Sea (ECS) regions to the detriment of their own maritime interests. In 2016, while adjudicating the plea of the Philippines, the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague rejected the legality of China's "nine-dash line" in the disputed Spratly islands in SCS region and upheld the claims of the countries like Vietnam and the Philippines over the resources in the region in no uncertain terms. However, as China spurned

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the verdict, the Philippines and other littoral states chose not to counter China and quietly accepted the status-quo. The silence on the part of littoral countries cannot be considered as their acceptance of China's hegemonic presence in SCS and ECS regions.

China's recent belligerent activities, such acts of aggression against neighbors like India and Vietnam, consolidation of control in SCS region and non-adherence of international norms and regulations have led to a confrontational atmosphere, where conflict-either between the U.S. and China, or China and India - looks imminent. The recent dispute over the SCS or the conflict with India in Ladakh are not isolated incidents of China taking a more determined approach, but instead part of a grand strategy to validate its growing power, capability, and protect its interests and sovereignty at any cost. The Covid-19 pandemic has not appeared to have stemmed China's desire to assert its control over the SCS even if that means causing territorial disputes with the neighbors. In recent months, China has intensified its drive to claim territory-both land and maritime- against India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia, and Bhutan.

Over the nation's recent history, Chinese leaders, beginning from Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao, have attempted to convince the global community that the country would neither seek hegemony nor would

it subject other countries to “aggression, interference, control, subversion or plunder.”<sup>2</sup> However, the current policies and incidents suggest that the “peaceful rise” dictum has been shunned by Xi regime in order to realize the “Chinese Dream” which many commentators believe is simply a euphemism for “hegemony”.<sup>3</sup>

Though there is lack of unanimity regarding the actual jurisdiction of the Indo-Pacific, as a geo-strategic construct it has gained substantial ground in recent years as part of global discourse, much to consternation of China. China is not comfortable with the advancement of this dictum as it fears it may undermine its power and influence in the region. The Trump administration's strong stand against Chinese assertions, intensification of politico-economic tussle between the U.S. and China, India's growing engagement with ASEAN countries and an evolving strategic partnership with Japan, mounting international pressure have made China's position somewhat vulnerable in the region. However, it is difficult to believe that China could be anyway pushed to cede the space or control in the region to any other player or claimant. The way China is expanding its power, influence, and territory, as well as consolidating its control over the SCS, has led many to apprehend that it could very well be the initiator of a prolonged global conflict.

The worsening security scenario in the Indo-Pacific is a litmus test for the U.S. as it is presented with an opportunity to re-establish its pre-eminence vis-à-vis China, with friends and allies expecting it to play a more proactive role in the region to counter Chinese moves and protect their interests. The member countries of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), reluctant to challenge China both militarily or financially, look towards the U.S. to revitalize its engagement with the region and revive the security ties to put China at bay.<sup>4</sup> Along with the U.S., India is also expected to play a major role in the region to counterbalance China's growing influence. The turbulence and the rapidly evolving strategic equations in the Indo-Pacific presents both opportunities and challenges for India as it seeks greater economic and strategic engagement with

countries of southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim.

## India's Strategic Leap Forward

Foreign policy, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was redefined so as to not merely manage India's external relations and institutional engagements but rather project India as an important and responsible stakeholder in the global political system. To achieve this goal, the Modi government adopted a multi-pronged strategy that entails the following priorities; revitalizing relations with its neighbors; deepening engagement with countries in the extended neighborhood; strengthening its regional position in Asia; enhancing partnerships with major powers like the U.S., Russia, and China; breaking new ground in relations with middle-level powers like Germany, France, Australia, and Israel; playing a proactive role in world affairs by becoming an part of the global political and economic architecture; and finally, intensifying the process of economic modernization in the country through vital support from different countries.<sup>5</sup>

***All these initiatives can be seen as part of serious efforts by India to become a more influential strategic player in East Asia and the Pacific.***

Moreover, there was a conscious move towards a pragmatic reorientation of foreign policy priorities, reworking some of the old policies and initiating a number of new policies- such as “Act East”, “Connect Central Asia”, “Look West”, and “Project Mausam”- to revitalize relations with those countries and regions, which were previously not part of India's primary foreign policy agenda.<sup>6</sup>

There has been a push by India towards enhancing the scale of engagement with the major powers and others through a series of regional organizations such

as the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (with the U.S., Japan, Russia, and others), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (with Russia, China, and others), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and the BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal, and Bhutan) grouping. When Modi rechristened “Look East” to “Act East” to revitalize relations with South East Asian countries, he had been making efforts to establish some sort of alliance in the Indo-Pacific among friendly countries to protect India’s maritime interests.<sup>7</sup>

***The continuing “Asia-Pacific” construct was considered narrow and ambiguous in terms of incorporating India in the affairs of the region.***

Modi’s focus on economic diplomacy and his push to market “Brand India” through initiatives like “Make in India” achieved significant outcomes in the economic, technological and energy sector.<sup>8</sup> Programs like this helped link domestic policy with foreign policy facilitating investment, innovation, skill development, and manufacturing infrastructure in India to make the country part of the global supply chain. All these initiatives can be seen as part of serious efforts by India to become a more influential strategic player in East Asia and the Pacific.

### **From “Act East” to “Act Indo-Pacific”: India’s New Strategic Paradigm**

The Indo-Pacific perhaps constitutes the most recent and yet most vital strategic paradigm for India. India realizes that it cannot afford to remain stagnant in the face of growing dominance of China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its attempts to militarize India’s oceanic neighborhood.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the increasing focus on the maritime sphere for both trade and security has made India move towards protecting

its interests in the Indian and Pacific Oceans vis-à-vis China. This explains India’s renewed efforts to firm up a coherent Indo-Pacific strategy, in consultation with other Pacific countries, that would help in not only pursuing its own maritime-strategic interests, but also counter Chinese influence.<sup>10</sup>

It is not only India that is perturbed by increasing Chinese presence in the Pacific maritime zone, countries like Japan, Indonesia, Australia, and above all the U.S., are equally disturbed by what they see as Chinese attempts to unilaterally control all the commercial trade routes and maritime-mineral resources in the region. These countries have been pushing for the advancement of the Indo-Pacific, both as a geo-strategic construct and a new strategic sphere of influence that would be more open, democratic, and inclusive.

The Trump administration, after assuming power in 2016, altered Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” strategy to vigorously pursue the “Indo-Pacific” to ensure that the strategic balance in the Asia Pacific does not become Sino-centric and there are enough opportunities for southeast Asian countries for pursuing their economic goals. President Joe Biden may choose to continue with the “Indo-Pacific” strategy to counter China or go for initiation of a new policy framework to reestablish American preeminence in strategic affairs of the region. Significantly, both the “Pivot to Asia” and the “Indo-Pacific” strategies while attempting to redefine the geo-strategic space, called for the strategic restructuring of Asia-Pacific, that traditionally included East and South East Asia, by incorporating South Asia and Indian Oceans regions as one single strategic theatre. Also, both strategies wanted India to play a more proactive role in the region to maintain the balance of power. The continuing “Asia-Pacific” construct was considered narrow and ambiguous in terms of incorporating India in the affairs of the region.<sup>11</sup>

India, keen to develop a sound strategic deterrence against China, grabbed the opportunity provided by the Indo-Pacific construct to build partnerships with resident countries and major stakeholders in the region. Since assuming power in 2014, Prime

Minister Narendra Modi has been working towards reviving India's maritime connections with its extended neighbors and allies in Asia and thereby boost the evolving Indo-Pacific narrative. His call for "open, inclusive, democratic and transparent Indo-Pacific region" during the Shangrila Dialogue in 2018,<sup>12</sup> as well as India's strenuous efforts to augment maritime connectivity with various countries through initiatives such as "Sagarmala"<sup>13</sup> could be seen as part of this strategy.

To expand India's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and build mutually beneficial partnerships, India has undertaken several policy initiatives. The "Act East Policy", that has achieved significant results for India in recent years, might evolve into "Act Indo-Pacific" signaling India's intent to play a major role in the region.<sup>14</sup> It must be noted here that the Indian Navy, in 2015, launched a new maritime security strategy, that sought to expand India's "areas of maritime interest" to the entire western and southwestern Pacific Ocean.<sup>15</sup> These efforts reflect India's eagerness to firm up a coherent and forward-looking Indo-Pacific strategy that would not only help in countering China's coercive diplomacy but would also help in enhancing its strategic capabilities.

### **Bilateral and Trilateral Dialogues: A New Multilateral Approach**

India has started engaging with countries through bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral dialogue mechanisms that have proved more useful in achieving agreements and sorting out differences. In recent times, while India has conducted 2+2 dialogues with the U.S., Japan, and Australia, trilateral dialogues have been conducted between India-Japan and the U.S., India-Japan-Australia (JAI), Russia-India-China, India-Australia-Indonesia, and the Quadrilateral meetings between India, Japan, Australia and the U.S.

Recently, India was engaged with France and Australia to hold the first ever trilateral dialogue at the Foreign Secretary level,<sup>16</sup> which has crucial significance as it signals the unveiling of a new strategic roadmap to contain China's bellicose rise. During the dialogue, the three countries decided to make concerted efforts, by pooling their resources and capabilities, towards

establishing a free, open, inclusive, democratic, prosperous, and rules-based Indo-Pacific and thereby foil Chinese attempts to unilaterally alter the equilibrium in the region.

***2020 has been very significant for India, with the country's swift move towards cementing its partnerships with like-minded and major players in the Indo-Pacific.***

Interestingly, the statement issued by Ministry of External Affairs of India said, "the three countries had an exchange on the priorities, challenges and trends in regional and global multilateral institutions, including the best ways to strengthen and reform multilateralism",<sup>17</sup> sending an unambiguous message to China. Moreover, the three countries focussed on fostering cooperation and forging partnership at both the trilateral and regional level for the judicious and effective management of marine global commons and maintenance of marine biodiversity through regional organisations such as ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Indian Ocean Commission.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, it has been decided that the dialogue will continue on an annual basis.<sup>19</sup> The trilateral dialogue is expected to provide a fillip to the relations between the three countries as well as provide a counter-framework to Chinese-led initiatives. Through these dialogues, India has largely succeeded in fulfilling its economic and strategic interests by reviving maritime linkages with Pacific countries and augmenting maritime connectivity with both immediate and extended neighbors.

Despite the enormous challenges presented, the year 2020 has been very significant for India, with the country's swift move towards cementing its partnerships with like-minded and major players in the Indo-Pacific. India and Japan, after years of long deliberations, have finally signed Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, or ACSA on September

09, 2020, that would “allow the two countries to use each other’s maritime bases and facilities for repair and replenishment of supplies besides facilitating scaling up of overall cooperation”.<sup>20</sup> This agreement, expected to “facilitate the smooth and prompt provision of supplies and services between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Indian Armed Forces”,<sup>21</sup> assumes significance in the context of China’s increasing aggression in both Ladakh and the Senkaku Islands. The ten year agreement will be automatically extended every decade unless one side decides to terminate it.

It is worth noting that India has signed similar agreements with the U.S., France, Australia, South Korea, and Singapore to share logistics for facilitating the movement of each other’s warships and aircrafts, thereby strengthening the overall interoperability and defense partnerships.<sup>22</sup> India, through these agreements, now has access to important maritime bases such as Djibouti, Diego Garcia, Guam, and Subic Bay, as well as the Reunion Islands off the coast of Madagascar. Importantly, the agreement signed with Australia in June 2020 would provide Indian ships free access in the southern Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean.<sup>23</sup> It is significant to note that India was recently admitted as the fifth observer of the Indian Ocean Commission, the only African regional organisation composed entirely of islands, after China, Malta, the European Union, and the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF).<sup>24</sup> India’s entry into this important regional organization is a significant development as it helps in expanding its outreach to the western Indian Ocean.<sup>25</sup>

## The Road Ahead

Indo-Pacific has emerged as one of the most volatile conflict zones of the world. On one hand, there is China asserting its dominance over crucial maritime spheres and on the other there are countries of southeast Asia, Japan, India, and the U.S. who are insistent upon establishing a free, open, inclusive, rule-based international order in the region that would be beneficial to all the stakeholders. In this context, India’s role becomes most important as it tries to play the role of a balancer- countering China, but not necessarily becoming antagonistic, and promoting multilateral interests and protecting the rights of major players

including that of the U.S. India has to play a critical in shaping the regional strategic discourse that has been drifting towards uncertainty, mutual suspicion and deep distrust for each other and also increasing fight for control over natural resources. In no way can India afford to miss this most crucial opportunity. ■

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