

India's Interests in the Indo-Pacific

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Analysis of the political, economic and geo-strategic importance of the geographical continuum of the Indian and Pacific Oceans is relatively recent in academic literature. In India, the term “Indo-Pacific” to describe this space is believed to have first figured in an academic paper by Gurpreet Khurana in 2007.¹ Later that year, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe laid out his expansive vision of the “dynamic coupling” of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.²

Academic discussions in India on the geo-political implications of this construct received a fresh impulse from the statement issued after Prime Minister Modi's meeting with US President Trump in June 2017, which described India and the US as “democratic stalwarts in the Indo-Pacific region”, adding that “a close partnership between the US and India is central to peace and stability in the region”.³ The India-US-Japan “Malabar” naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal shortly thereafter, which President Trump described as “the largest maritime exercise ever”, sought to underline this joint resolve. The contemporaneous face-off between Indian and Chinese troops on the Doklam plateau in Bhutan underlined the rationale for the various initiatives for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

The importance of the Indo-Pacific to India does not need much elaboration. India is located astride the world's busiest maritime corridor, which is also becoming the world's most militarised one. Foreign trade has risen to over 40 percent of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and over 90 percent of this trade is by the Indian Ocean, which includes most of its oil supplies and about half its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports. Protection of these sea lanes is in India's vital economic, security and strategic interests. Terrorism, piracy, smuggling, human trafficking and marine degradation are some of the challenges.

Dynamics of Indo-Pacific region have changes due to assertiveness of China and inconsistent US response.

The two major trends that changed the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region over the last decade are the increasing assertiveness of China and the somewhat inconsistent response to it from the US. China's summary rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration judgement on its territorial claims in the South China Sea, its unilateral actions to enforce these claims and aggressive actions against countries deemed to have hurt its interests, were mostly unchallenged by the Obama Administration, except for symbolic statements and gestures. Its grandiose Belt and Road Initiative, designed to expand China's presence and influence across the Indo-Pacific, has not met a coherent response.

The Trump Administration's reassertion of US commitment to the region has rekindled dormant initiatives and spurred new ones. The resurrection of the India-US-Japan-Australia Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is one example. Other bilateral dialogues sought new cooperation ideas to promote regional security. India is naturally interested in participating in initiatives that aim to reshape the dynamics in the region in favour of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, embracing a common rules-based order, as Prime Minister Modi said in his widely acclaimed keynote address at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018.⁴

It is worth noting that, while India has a broad geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific—from Africa to America—and has important interests in the entire space, the situation in the east is qualitatively different from that in the west. The US definition covers only the eastern part, as underlined by the redesignation of the US Navy's Pacific Command as Indo-Pacific Command. Given their strong local concerns in the region, this is also the definition that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Australia prefer. India has to develop distinct strategies for each of these two parts of the Indo-Pacific.

An Indian strategy for the eastern part of the Indo-Pacific should factor in a few important ground realities.

- Many commentators envisage the aim of this strategy as containing or confronting China. This is not a sustainable approach, because most countries in the region are struggling to reconcile their intense economic engagement with China and the strategic challenge it poses. A viable strategy has to focus instead on partnerships that increase national capacities and create diplomatic structures that would influence China's actions by diluting its uncontested dominance of the region.
- Political efforts have to be underpinned by military strength. Without it, dialogue mechanisms like the Quad or other demonstrations of security concerns can have only a limited impact. It is instructive to recall the rather dismissive comment in China's *People's Daily* on the visit of a nuclear-powered US aircraft carrier to the Vietnamese port of Danang in March 2018: "The South China Sea may be a good place to flex muscles, but it is primarily comprehensive strength that shapes the geo-politics there".⁵
- There is an inherent problem with the current regional security architecture. A US security umbrella over the region was a post-World War II construct—and it was directed against a Soviet threat, with a more or less passive observer in China (particularly from the early 1970s). In today's situation of an assertive China, with Russia aligned with it, this is a seriously flawed structure. The US umbrella can be effective only if countries in the region, individually and collectively, develop credible deterrent capabilities. A non-resident power, however strong, cannot be an effective antidote to a strong resident power.
- An effective Indo-Pacific strategy has to be built on a judicious mix of bilateral and multilateral initiatives. Among India's bilateral efforts are strengthening strategic partnerships with Vietnam, Japan, Korea, Indonesia and Australia. In 2016, India launched an initiative to reenergise cooperation in the framework of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) for regional connectivity and maritime security. BIMSTEC's inclusive connectivity projects would provide alternatives to China's bilateral projects. There are suggestions that inclusion of Malaysia and Indonesia in BIMSTEC could create an inclusive economic grouping in this important sub-region of the Indian Ocean, as well as enhance security cooperation.
- An important element of an Indo-Pacific strategy should be a coherent response to the Belt and Road Initiative, not by simply rejecting or

dismissing it, but by nudging it towards a more equitable implementation model. While massive investment for global connectivity and infrastructure should be welcomed, the major powers, as well as the recipient countries, should press China for a more transparent approach in selecting economically viable projects, according with the recipients' development priorities, ensuring that debt burdens are sustainable, bringing in private capital and opening them to non-Chinese companies. This approach does not, of course, imply a dilution of India's protest against the affront to its territorial integrity that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents.

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Turning to the west, the recent intensification of India's relations with the countries of West Asia has created new political, economic, defence and security linkages of mutual interest, transcending the political, religious and sectarian divides of the region. A partnership programme, SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), was articulated by Prime Minister Modi in March 2015, involving cooperative efforts for capacity building and security. The India-Japan initiative for an Asia Africa Growth Corridor is a vision to promote connectivity, infrastructure and development across the Indian Ocean space. Elements of India's security and developmental cooperation in the western Indian Ocean include transfers of a patrol vessel and a maritime surveillance aircraft to Mauritius and Seychelles respectively, and connectivity infrastructure projects in these countries.

It is important to recognise that the Indo-Pacific construct is work in progress, in which every participant country has its own distinct interests, aspirations and concerns. The ultimate objective is political equilibrium and a sustainable security architecture, but there are many definitions of these terms and widely differing perspectives about the path to achieving these goals. This is evident from the responses in ASEAN and Australia to US articulations about a free and open Indo-Pacific, as well as Prime Minister Modi's nuanced formulations in Singapore.

The recent political and economic flux in the region adds to the uncertainties. The US-China stand-off on trade and intellectual property rights (or Chinese "technology thefts" as the US forthrightly terms it) coexists with US-China economic interdependence and the importance of China for an early resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. At the same time, as President Trump pursues

his unorthodox direct diplomacy with the North Korean leader, China worries about the dilution of its leverage and Japan worries that its security may be compromised in a US-Korea deal. These concerns have driven China and Japan to suspend (at least for now) their strategic rivalry and engage in dialogue, including on Japanese participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. A Russia-China axis to counter US interests in the region further complicates the regional dynamics. India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific, therefore, involves reconciling divergent or conflicting interests. This is best achieved through quiet diplomacy, rather than by loud declaratory statements.

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Notes

1. Gurpreet S Khurana, "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation", *Strategic Analysis* (IDSA/Routledge), Vol. 31 (1), January 2007, pp. 139-153.
2. "Confluence of the Two Seas", Speech by the Prime Minister of Japan in the Indian Parliament, August 22, 2007, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>
3. <https://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?28560/Joint+Statement++United+States+and+India+Prosperity+Through+Partnership>
4. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>
5. Quoted in *National Interest*, March 07, 2018: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/china-says-us-carriers-vietnam-visit-was-waste-money-24785>