

Essay

Towards a Rule Based Order in the Indo-Pacific¹

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I am grateful to the National Maritime Foundation for inviting me to deliver the valedictory address at the Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue. At the forefront of maritime dialogues with many countries, the NMF has contributed to the clarification and elaboration of the key geostrategic concept of Indo-Pacific. We look forward to innovative ideas coming out of this conference as well as the NMF's future engagements with its counterpart institutions.

Indo-Pacific is a large geographic region consisting of the world's largest as well as the smallest economies. It constitutes nearly 60 percent of the world's GDP and half of the global trade. Some of the world's busiest Sea Lanes of Communication are in this region. The region is beset with numerous disputes over land and maritime boundaries as well as the competition over resources. Terrorism, radicalisation, Climate Change, Maritime Security, migrations are major issues affecting the countries of the region. Peace and stability in Indo-Pacific is paramount for global stability. But, the region lacks a uniform rule-based security and economic architecture and dispute resolution mechanism. Global prosperity hinges on peace and stability in different parts of the world but particularly so in the Indo-Pacific where there are many moving plates, literally and metaphorically. Most countries want to see a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Although, there is much debate presently on the concept of Indo-Pacific, the idea of a link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean cultures is an old one.

1. Valedictory address at the Indo Pacific Regional Dialogue at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) on 6 March 2019

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Indian historian Kalidas Nag in 1926 had mentioned that Indian cultural influence went not only to South East Asia but deep into the Pacific. In his article "Greater India" published in the *Greater India Society Bulletin* in November 1926, Nag dwelt upon the linkages between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. Under the heading, "From the Indian to the Pacific Ocean", he writes, "... we may still safely say that there was very early maritime communication between the people across the Indian Ocean, connecting the African Archipelago including Madagascar with the Malay Archipelago" (p.40). Quoting Dr. AH Keane, Kalidas Nag further writes, "What is still more amazing is the recent discovery of Indian influence on the formation of early Polynesian poetry and mythologies".(p.43). Scholars in the past have written about the link between Malay and the Polynesian world. The Indian influence probably travelled to Polynesia from Malay and Indonesia.

Buddhism spread from India right up to Japan through Afghanistan, Central Asia, China, and Korea. The Cholas, from the 9th century until the 13th century had a flourishing relationship with the Sri Vijaya empire and the Sailendras in South East Asia. The Indian cultural influence is visible even today in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia and other countries of South-East Asia. There was a flourishing trade between India and China through the South China Sea in the 19th century. Similarly, on the western side, India has had millennia old maritime links with the ancient civilisations. So, India is historically familiar with the countries of the vast Indo-Pacific region. These historical and cultural links provide the foundation of India's ties with the Indo-Pacific in the modern times.

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During the second world war, the United States, Britain, Denmark and Australia set up a joint command headed by Lord Wavell, who later became the Viceroy of India, to oversee the military operation in the Indian Ocean and Pacific theatres. The Indo-Pacific has been an important theatre of the major wars in the 20th century. In the Cold War era, the Americans set up the military alliances CENTO and SEATO to cover the region. The concept of Asia-Pacific became more popular. Due to the exigencies of the Cold War, India got cut off from South East Asia. India was excluded from Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which is a sore point with it. It was Prime Minister Abe, evoking the Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh's 17th-century work "Majamul Bahrain", who in 2007 revived the term of "Confluence of the

Two Seas". Captain Gurpreet Khurana, in his 2007 article in IDSA journal *Strategic Analysis* used the term Indo-Pacific independently. The term Indo-Pacific was used in India-US Joint Vision Statement of 2015 for the first time in an Indo-US official document. Since then US and Indian officials have embraced the geostrategic concept enthusiastically.

With the change of geopolitical environment and the shift of the political and global political and economic center of gravity to the east, it is but natural that the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, which are seamlessly interconnected, have come to occupy greater salience in geopolitics. It is not, therefore, surprising that with the emergence of new political realities the concept of Indo Pacific is gaining currency. But, one has to be patient as the concept of Indo Pacific begins to evolve and takes shape as there are differing views on what the concept implies.

The rise of China and the Indo-Pacific

The political, economic, and military rise of China and its assertive behaviour is transforming global geopolitics. A new balance of power is emerging in the context of China's rapid rise, and appears to be behind the resurgence of the concept of Indo-Pacific. Stability in the region is constantly under pressure. The Chinese expansion into the South China Sea, its rejection of the findings of Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), its reinterpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Laws of Seas (UNCLOS), China-Japan standoff in East China Sea over Senkaku Islands, its troubled relations with Taiwan, North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons, the Rohingya refugee crisis, India-Pakistan standoff over terrorism, The China-India military standoff in Doklam, are some of the prominent security developments that have occurred in the Indo-Pacific region in the recent years. The ongoing trade war between the US and China is also a reflection of the growing instability in the region.

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China's Belt and Road Initiative as well as the Maritime Silk Road initiative are calculated to raise China's influence in the regions far away from its shores. Port construction activity undertaken by China in several strategically located countries has created apprehensions all around about its real intentions. These decisions will have a long term impact on the stability of the region. Differences, friction, and

disputes are expected to occur with regular frequency in the Indo-Pacific. A rule-based order is therefore required so that disputes can either be prevented from escalating or resolved peacefully. The question is whether it is possible to construct such an order.

Indo-Pacific and the QUAD

Often, Indo-Pacific and the QUAD concepts are conflated. However, Indo-Pacific includes a large number of countries besides the QUAD members. For instance, the ASEAN countries are not fully in sync with the concept of Indo-Pacific propounded by the QUAD countries.

The revival of the QUAD, a quadrilateral grouping of four democracies, India, Japan, Australia and the US, is a natural response to the fundamental changes taking place in the Indo-Pacific region. QUAD 1.0 came into being in Dec 2004 when the Navies of the four countries took coordinated action to provide humanitarian assistance to the affected countries in the wake of the massive Indian Ocean Tsunami. Thereafter the QUAD went into hibernation until it was revived in its second avatar in November 2017. The QUAD is driving the Indo-Pacific concept in a major way. From time to time the top leaders of the US, India, Japan, and Australia have elaborated on the concept of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

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US

The US view of the Indo-Pacific, as articulated by President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, and other US leaders in the recent times, is framed in the context of the rise of China and US-China rivalry. The US regards China as a strategic competitor and a revisionist power as it challenges US hegemony.

In the US conception of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the countries of the region should be free to choose their political and economic systems. The US statements explicitly refer to Chinese coercion and its penchant to violate international rules. The US sees China as undertaking unfair trade practices which harm US economic interest. The Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States, a more hardline version of US's "pivot to Asia" and 'rebalance' strategies, is framed essentially in security terms which arouse suspicion in China.

Japan

Japan coined the Free and Open Indo-Pacific terminology. It does not say so openly, but it would be happy if China could be constrained. Japan has a major problem with China in the East China Sea. Japan's concept of Free and Open Indo-Pacific is similar to that of the US but the emphasis is equally on connectivity. It does not wish to anger China. Although concerned with the BRI, Japan has conditionally accepted the concept.

Australia

Australia faces a serious security dilemma. It has developed considerable economic dependence on China. They support the Free & Open Indo-Pacific concept of the US. The sharp disconnect between security concerns arising out of the rise of China and the deepening economic dependence is a reality for the Australians. By engaging in QUAD and deepening security cooperation with the US, India, and Japan, it wants to address its security concerns but at the same time, it does not want the economy to come to any harm.

ASEAN

Torn between the US and China, and faced with internal divisions, ASEAN is cautious towards the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept propounded by the US and Quad countries. ASEAN is working on its own concept of Indo Pacific. It does not want its centrality in the region to be diluted in any way. China & ASEAN are also discussing many of the issues involved. An ASEAN foreign ministerial meeting was held in January to discuss a draft paper on Indo Pacific prepared by Indonesia. It regards the East Asia Summit (EAS) as a core institution in the Indo Pacific. Although no final agreement has been reached as yet and the paper is being considered by Senior Officials meeting, it is clear that the ASEAN has concerns about the implications of the Indo-Pacific concept articulated by the US.

China's suspicions

China harbours deep suspicion for the Indo-Pacific and Quad concepts. Chinese scholars see Indo-Pacific as a US attempt to contain China's rise. In QUAD, they see the potential of the security alliance aimed at China. It must also be appreciated that China has considerable influence on ASEAN and several other countries due to substantial China-ASEAN trade and Chinese investments in the region. It is in a position to persuade many ASEAN countries to follow its line. Its Belt

and Road Initiative is meant to bring a large number of countries, who are deficient in infrastructure, to the Chinese fold. It also helps it to break the perceived US encirclement.

India

At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region. India sees Indo-Pacific as a Free, Open and "inclusive" region where rule-based order prevails and there is equal access to the shared maritime and airspaces. India also regards ASEAN and South Asia at the center of Indo-Pacific. Connectivity and cooperation are emphasized. The 'inclusivity' concept outlined by PM Modi seems to suggest that China is not ruled out in the Indo Pacific order. However, if China is seen as digressing from the established international norms and is bent upon coercion, its inclusion in any Indo-Pacific arrangement will create problems.

Like other countries India too must balance competing requirements. It has strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region, both on the east as well as the west. The Act East Policy is a core principle of India's foreign policy. It is trying to revive its age-old contacts with Southeast Asia and beyond. This will require not only diplomacy but also resources and hard military power. At the same time, it also requires a well thought out strategy which not only projects its national interests but also helps bring stability in this strategic region.

While PM Modi articulated India's Indo-Pacific strategy at Shangri-La last year, this policy needs to be refined and given substance. Strengthening and further developing its Navy, enhancing engagement with the US, Japan, Australia, ASEAN, New Zealand, and South Korea and Pacific Island countries and to build connectivity in the region is an obvious priority. BIMSTEC, BBIN, Mekong- Ganga Corridor, Asia-Africa-Economic Corridor are some of the instruments through which India can engage with the countries of the Indo Pacific region more closely. Maritime security, safety and security of Sea Lanes of Communication, Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) are undoubtedly the areas that need cooperation. Cooperation in blue-economy should also be stepped up. India's Indo-Pacific strategy cannot only be government-led. The private sector and civil society should be involved in this as well.

India has had strong cultural links with Southeast Asia, which must be revived and strengthened. The potential of Ramayana and Buddhism to revive and build cultural and people-to people ties should be fully explored. People to people contacts

through trade, tourism, cultural exchanges, education and think tanks must be strengthened.

Future Evolution of Quad

The QUAD was revived in 2017 but its evolution has been slow, leading to suspicions and apprehensions in the minds of many countries concerning its mission and efficacy. It has yet to develop its identity. Is it a forum primarily for security-dialogue amongst member countries or will it take on board the issues of economic development, infrastructure, and connectivity as well?

Given the complexities of geopolitics and geo-economics, building a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific is a challenging task. A judicious mix of political, economic and security strategies will be required. While the QUAD can evolve as a forum for security dialogue and cooperation, care must be taken to involve and engage with the countries of ASEAN.

A number of measures could be taken to give the QUAD some heft and significance. Steps towards institutionalization of QUAD meetings need to be taken. For instance, regular meetings should be held at the foreign ministers' level on the margins of major groupings. A chance was missed at the G-20 meeting in Argentina where an informal meeting of the four top leaders could have been held. A charter broad principles and objectives should be developed. The rules of engagement with other organizations should be laid down.

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Apart from bringing some conceptual clarity, the QUAD could also set-up mechanisms for practical cooperation. For instance, they could institutionalise mechanisms for information sharing amongst the respective security agencies. Three of the four countries already have well-developed mechanisms to share intelligence. India could be included in these mechanisms. This will go a long way in helping the four countries to form a common vision of the emerging security challenges.

Maritime cooperation should form an important aspect of QUAD's activities. The four countries are well placed to take steps to enhance Maritime Domain Awareness and Space Domain awareness. They can also help each other to build capacities of their security agencies in areas such as cyber security, counter-terrorism, countering violent extremism. Joint naval exercises should be held regularly. Australia

needs to be included in the Malabar series of naval exercises. The think tanks of the four countries could join hands to develop further research on Indo-Pacific issues generating policy recommendations in the process.

Having developed its own identity, the QUAD need not shun dialogue with any country or organisation. Quad should develop a dialogue mechanism with the ASEAN, East Asia Summit, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and others. Engagement with China on issues of common concerns need also to be undertaken.

Conclusion

Building a rule-based order in the Indo-pacific is likely to prove to be a challenging task. Given the rapid change in the geopolitical and security environment, many countries are naturally hedging their bets. ASEAN will need to be taken on board. The dilemma of dealing with China, which most countries face, will have to be resolved. If the Indo-pacific region were to geographically cover areas right up to the eastern coast of Africa, thought would need to be given on how countries in the Gulf and coastal Africa would be incorporated in the concept of Indo-Pacific. A balance between the security and economic dimensions of the concept of the Indo-Pacific would be necessary. It will be a while before the Indo-pacific concept is concretised. Prime Minister Modi has given a broad concept, which can accommodate a diverse range of concerns based on certain principles. That may be the way to approach the challenge of building a rule-based order.