

## Book Review

# Indo-Pacific – Diverse Perspectives

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*The Indo-Pacific Axis: Peace and Prosperity or Conflict?*

*Edited By: Satish Chandra and Baladas Ghoshal*

*Manohar Books, New Delhi, 2017*

**B**eyond the physical divisions of geography, the political map of the world is also subject to mental maps that forms and divides between spaces. While often mental maps can be a product of intellectual simulation, it is also used as a shorthand tool to depict the strategic realities of a space over a certain time period. One such nomenclature is the emerging discourse of the 'Indo-Pacific' which has been widely discussed, debated, deliberated and at times discarded.

This edited book is a valuable addition to the nascent but growing literature on the Indo-Pacific. While it brings into focus many interesting themes and important questions from a wide range of authors pertaining to different fields, the central question of the book is, what defines the emerging arc of the Indo-Pacific – Peace and Prosperity or Conflict? Consisting of 13 chapters, the book probes into multiple aspects of the region. What forms the Indo-Pacific as a region? What is the future of the Indo-Pacific like? What has been the approach of the major actors in the region – including perspectives from India, Japan, Indonesia, Australia, Vietnam? How will the cooperation and rivalries span out in this new theatre? What would be the role of major powers like the United States and China?

### Common Thread

Although differing in their tone and opinions, the chapters have one common binding thread – projecting the 'Indo-Pacific' as an emerging arena of importance owing to its economic vitality and security equations. The question of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific

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and why is it important has been answered through multiple arguments. Rajiv Bhatia in his chapter “Indo-Pacific Region: An Indian Perspective” mentions how globalisation, technology and geo-politics has brought down the mental borders which previously existed, inextricably linking the destiny of the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. Sudhir T. Devare in the chapter, “The Arc of Peace and Prosperity in the Indo-Pacific Region” has argued that there has always been a strategic continuum between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans and there is a need to adopt an integrated approach in understanding the region owing to their growing interdependence. In a more deeply political take to this question of what triggers the imagination of the Indo-Pacific, Swaran Singh, in his chapter “Locating China in the evolving discourses of the Indo-Pacific Geopolitics”, explains that the Indo-Pacific is a product of receding US alliance structure and an emerging China. He contends that the new nomenclature is an expression of the search of new allies and strategic paradigms of the US in the face of its decline. In a more functional understanding of the region, Vice Admiral Arup Singh in his chapter “Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific” explains that the centrality of the strategic continuum in the region lies in trade, density and concentration of shipping lanes, energy and other mineral resources.

### **Major Actors**

A vital theme of the book has been to consider the perspectives and approaches of the major actors towards the Indo-Pacific. India’s approach to the region has been curated identifying its key interests and its emerging role. The introduction of the book explores the various facets of India’s role as a balancer to China, as a maritime power owning up a new identity and a burgeoning economic force whose trade and security interests are undeniably linked to the sea. In the chapter “India and Australia: Creating New Strategic Geometries in the Indo-Pacific”, David Brewster explains the landscape of the Indo-Pacific using India-Australia ties. While both the nations favour the pre-dominance of the US as the major power in the region, both the states are wary of hedging its potential decline through the creation of new Asian partners in stabilising the region. In the pursuit of such geometries, India and Australia have an overlapping space to create a partnership.

Another vital state in the region, Japan would seek to counter the Chinese advance and build deeper ties with favourable states as enumerated in the chapter, “Japan and the Changing Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean: An Indian Perspective” by Rajaram Panda. Voicing Vietnam’s perspective in his chapter “India’s Role in Ensuring Stability and Security in the South China Sea”, Vo Xuan Vinh argues in favour of a more assertive stance by India in the South China Sea alongside developing deeper relations with Vietnam and the Philippines in order to counter the unilateral rise of China. Shankari Sundaraman in the chapter

“Understanding the Indo-Pacific: Why Indonesia will be Critical?” explores the crucial role that Indonesia is positioned to play in the region owing to its geographical significance and reorientation of its maritime policies. As the archipelagic state strives to become the ‘global maritime fulcrum’, what would also be closely watched is how Indonesia manages to balance its ties between the arch-rivals in the region – China and Japan.

While there is no single chapter solely taking an account of the regional security architecture, the issue has found space in multiple chapters. David Brewster has borrowed from US analyst Michael Green in stating how mini-lateral arrangements can fill up the vacuum in the region, a vacuum that exists between ‘realist bilateralism’ and idealist multiculturalism’ (pp. 51). Swaran Singh in his chapter has raised the issue of a faultline that exists between the states of the Indo-Pacific. The disjuncture lies at the heart of the Sino-US competition in the region -- whereas, the security arrangement of the region is headed by the US the economic partnerships are increasingly tilted towards China (pp. 149). The challenge, in that case, for building a stable regional architecture, lies in solving this dichotomy. For India, the policy suggestions have largely been in favour of developing its Act East Policy further and using the ASEAN and the EAS as the anchor for its Indo-Pacific advances (pp. 25).

The book successfully encapsulates the range of issues vital as a gateway to the debates related to the present and future of Indo-Pacific. Explaining what the present region looks like, the book also manages to give a glimpse of how the emerging discourses might unfold owing to the rise of China, a possible US rebalance, India’s gradual maritime overtures and the contemporary orientations and policies of the regional actors. The book by and large contends that while the emergence of the region is a product of a strategic continuum between the Indian and Pacific oceans along with China’s unprecedented rise that has taken an alarming shape, its future would depend on how the states manage their equations with one another, adhering to notions of mutual growth and security.

As the idea of Indo-Pacific gains steam, this book provides an exhaustive account of the approaches of major actors in the region and the possible outcomes of their policies. However, there are two strands that seem to be missing in this volume. One, the aspect of non-traditional security issues does not find much of a merit or space in the chapters. Given the importance of trade in the region, what invariably links itself as a security threat are the issues of maritime terrorism, drug trafficking, migration and a host of natural disasters that problematize the stability of the region. Not only these threats have a cross-boundary effect but the mitigation of the threats would also require a trans-boundary solution which might also impact the regional security structure. The second issue that is primarily missing is a voice from China. In a situation where there are increasing perceptions that Indo-Pacific is a

region that is conceptualised to contain and restrict the rise of China, especially owing to its territorial ambitions in the South China Sea, the absence of Beijing's approach on the Indo-Pacific in the book makes it problematic for capturing the entire picture.