

Essay

Regional and Sub-Regional Constructs within the Indo-Pacific

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Interpretations of the Indo-Pacific construct by analysts and foreign and security policy establishments remind one of the old poem about the elephant and the '6 blind men of Hindoostan', given the parallel narratives that prevail on the Indo-Pacific, which vary depending on geographical location, strategic objectives and economic interests. While both Japan, the first major country to embrace the concept emanating from the strategic community, and the US, favour a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy and vision, they place differing emphasis on the economic and security dimensions. The Indonesians, in leading an ASEAN approach to the Indo-Pacific, have favoured an 'open and inclusive Indo-Pacific', ever cautious that 'free' might be seen as directed against non-democratic China.

But while divergences abound, the concept has gained salience, and there is now widespread acceptance, despite hold outs like China and Russia, of the strategic connection and economic interdependence of the littorals and sea lanes of the Indian and Pacific oceans located in the region which has become the centre of global economic growth. This region is also recognized as the theatre of power projection and assertiveness of a rising China, challenging and disrupting the status quo as it seeks to shape a new order based on its unquestioned pre-eminence.

Given the vast geographic remit, which is better defined now than when the concept was mooted, the Indo-Pacific embraces several regions and sub-regions, each with its own geopolitics, economic interlinkages, alignments, territorial and other disputes and challenges, and equations with major powers in the region, including China. These could be identified as the South Pacific, including Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Island

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states; the East China Sea; the South China Sea; ASEAN countries; the oceans around the Indian sub-continent, including the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal; the Arabian Sea and the Western Indian Ocean with the African littorals and islands.

Besides the ASEAN, there are pre-existing organisations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) that have had to evolve a strategy to deal with the emergence of the Indo-Pacific construct, which has also given rise to many new dialogue mechanisms among like minded countries seeking to align their security and economic interests. The best known among these is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the QUAD, which has brought together four leading democracies of the region--US, Australia, Japan and India-- in an informal grouping to discuss security threats, ways to ensure freedom of navigation and the need for a rule-based order. At this point it is the very fact of the holding of three meetings of the QUAD that is more significant than the emergence of a consensus-based approach, as these meetings have so far only produced statements from the participating countries listing their respective priorities. In the case of India these have been connectivity, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation and maritime and cyber security.

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The Indo-Pacific has also seen the establishment of other diversified special partnerships and trilateral arrangements such as: India-Japan-US, India-Japan-Australia, India-Australia-Indonesia, Japan-US-Australia, etc. There is now talk of an India-Australia-France trilateral given that France is a regional power and all three have territories which are key to strategic surveillance of the wider region. In addition to trilateral arrangements, several bilateral strategic partnerships -- such as India-Japan, India- Indonesia and India-Australia-- seek to promote a shared vision of the Indo Pacific. Thus, a cascade of partnerships are being formed-- from the multilateral to the bilateral within the Indo-Pacific—in order to find common ground and areas for cooperation.

It is useful to visit some of the regions and sub-regions within the expanse to understand the convergences, issues and disputes which have the potential to affect the stability and peaceful growth of the region.

- a. **South Pacific-New Zealand, Australia, Pacific Island states** Australia was one of the first to espouse the concept of the Indo-Pacific in its Defence and Foreign Policy White Papers. As a maritime nation it recognized the importance of binding the Indian Ocean and India in the security architecture of the region. These papers also implicitly argued for a balance between China and the US, heedful of its not

inconsiderable and burgeoning economic relationship with China. But this has not deterred it from participating in regional dialogues such as the QUAD or signing a trilateral MOU with Japan and the US, focused on developing infrastructure and investments as a counter to the BRI.

New Zealand had been a hold out, seeing little merit in the use of Indo-Pacific and antagonizing China. But the growing acceptance of the construct seems to have persuaded them to come on board too as is seen from a press release of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade on August 1, 2019, which uses the nomenclature in the context of challenges and cooperation in the region.

The 18 Pacific Island states which constitute the Pacific Islands Forum, dominated historically by Australia and New Zealand, have seen China make inroads through immigration and control of natural resources, undeterred by the fact that several of the countries still recognize the Republic of China (Taiwan). China has taken BRI projects to Fiji and a few others, and there have been rumours of it seeking a naval base in Vanuatu, which has been denied so far. But there is no doubt of the rising influence and presence of China in the islands.

- b. **East China Sea** Japan which has been a strong proponent of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' is locked in a territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands with China where there are continuing provocations caused by intrusions of Chinese vessels in its EEZ. Japan is also locked in a rapidly deteriorating diplomatic and economic spat with South Korea over cases pertaining to WWII treatment of forced labour and comfort women. This dispute between 2 US allies in a region vulnerable to the unpredictable North Korean regime, could only benefit China.
- c. **South China Sea** As is known, China claims almost 80% of the South China Sea, which is one of the world's busiest sea lanes, challenging freedom of navigation and unimpeded flow of trade and commerce. China has populated and militarized disputed islands in the area and disregarded an ICJ judgement in a case brought by the Philippines. Along with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan also have territorial counter claims which have been met with the threat of use of force by China. Chinese actions in the area have raised red flags about its disregard for international law, and its use of coercion and military muscle to resolves disputes.
- d. **ASEAN** After early reservations and following almost a year of negotiations, the ASEAN countries, at a Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) held in Bangkok in June 2019, adopted the "ASEAN outlook to the Indo-Pacific". Countries within the grouping like

Thailand and Indonesia had pushed for a common position after the US endorsement of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific in 2017. The process is believed to have been led by Indonesia which has its own ambitions to leverage its strategic geography and emerge as a 'maritime fulcrum'. The document has been careful to avoid any strategic language so as to walk a fine line between China and the US, and focus on implementing existing ASEAN priorities such as maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development goals, etc. Critical to it has been the maintaining of ASEAN centrality (acknowledged also by India) and its existing mechanisms, which have been offered as platforms for dialogue and implementation of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

- e. **Indian sub-region, including Bay of Bengal and Andaman sea** This is a region located at the crossroads of the northern Indian Ocean which harbours the principal sea lanes of the world and the Andaman Sea, the bridgehead to the Malacca straits. It is of great strategic importance to India, the fastest growing and largest economy

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of the region, as 95% of its trade and 83% of its energy requirements flow through it, as also 80% of global oil and gas supplies. The Indian sub-continent and its periphery is also experiencing the ambitious projection of Chinese power seen in its investments in Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Sonadia (Bangladesh), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and

Gwadar (Pakistan) ports and its manoeuvres in the Maldives, giving rise to fears of a 'string of pearls' to encircle India. There is simultaneously a growing presence of the Chinese navy (PLAN) in the northern Indian Ocean with 6-8 naval ships and submarines in the region at any point of time. This region of the Indo-Pacific has, therefore, emerged as a theatre of naval activity of several maritime powers all seized of its importance to freedom of navigation and trade.

- f. **Arabian Sea** The littoral of the Arabian Sea is unquestionably one of the 'hot spots' of the world, riven by historical rivalries and contemporary disputes, exacerbated by outside powers such as the US. The region stands poised on a knife's edge of armed confrontation following the drone attack on Saudi Arabian oil installations, which threatens not only the peace and stability of the region but also the energy security of the countries of the Indo-Pacific which depend on free passage through the Strait of Hormuz for their oil and gas supplies. The protracted war in Yemen has sharpened Iran-Saudi hostility and China appears to have used the opportunity of the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iran nuclear deal and ensuing sanctions to strengthen ties with Iran. A recent report in

the Petroleum Economist says that China has pledged an investment of US\$ 400 billion in Iran as part of the BRI; US\$ 280 of which will be in the oil and gas sector, accompanied by the stationing of 'up to' 5000 Chinese security personnel to protect the Chinese projects. This development along with the existing conflicts in this complex region will add another dimension to the strategic dynamic of the extended Indo-Pacific.

- g. Western Indian Ocean** The western most reach of the Indian Ocean includes 10 East African coastal and island states. It is an area which has assumed importance due to the potential of the region's marine resources, extractive industry, rich fisheries, oil and gas deposits, geographical location straddling key sea lanes and as the gateway to the African mainland. This an area where global powers such as the US, France, China and even Japan, have jostled for a foothold through bases, such as in Djibouti, tie-ups with strategic objectives, and also actions ostensibly to tackle non-traditional challenges such as piracy, arms, drugs and human trafficking, etc. The African Union has declared the eastern seabed as the frontline of the African renaissance and given prominence to the development of a blue economy. Given the importance of its resources, maritime challenges, including non-traditional threats, there is a recognized need to develop a regional maritime security network in the region to tackle issues, ensure stability and counter the hegemonistic designs of some.

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India's vision

Prime Minister Modi articulated India's vision for the Indo-Pacific in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, as a 'free, open, inclusive region, embracing all in the common pursuit of progress and prosperity. It includes all nations in the geography and also those beyond who have a stake in it'. This read along with the concept of SAGAR, makes it clear that India sees the Indo-Pacific as a region with multiple players, and is willing to engage with all for a rule-based order which will ensure peace, stability and prosperity of the entire region. India is aware of its very strategic location and that it is the major beneficiary of the Indo-Pacific construct which acknowledges its importance in regional and global geopolitics. India's Indo-Pacific vision is directed by its Act East Policy-- to which now an Act Far East element has been added--, our historical and strategic ties with Iran and the GCC, source of our energy supplies and home to 8 million of our diaspora, and our substantive

engagement with the African countries of the western Indian ocean where we are set to increase both economic and maritime security cooperation.

The Indo-Pacific has come to occupy a central place in India's foreign and security policy. The setting up of an Indo-Pacific division in the Ministry of External Affairs is testimony to this. With its focused efforts and ability to reach out to all the players, even China with which it has a multilayered engagement, India can underscore its credentials as a major power which intends to play a pro-active and defining role in the region.