



ISSUE BRIEF

No. 247

September 2020

The Indo-Pacific Region: Charting a Future Course for India



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Oceans had an important place in the Indian thinking since pre-Vedic times. Thousands of years ago, the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Indian peninsula had maritime trade.

– Prime Minister Narendra Modi
at the IISS Shangrila Dialogue, 2018

Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen two Asian giants—China and India, rise. The abrupt and meteoric rise of China, in particular, took many by surprise and left some uncomfortable, especially the US. India, after several false starts, is also marching towards an impressive growth. While the Asian giants rise, there is a simultaneous unraveling of the erstwhile powerhouse, the “Euro Zone”. The US too looks battered from prolonged offshore military adventurism. These events have moved the holy grail of power decisively from the West to the East. In the process, a gargantuan region, the ‘Indo-Pacific’

Key Points

- Rise in the significance of the maritime Indo-Pacific region requires India to carry out a paradigm shift in its current continental-leaning world view.
- An organic fusion of the Act East Policy, the Think West Policy, and other sub-regional policies into one single coherent “Indo-Pacific Policy” is required.
- To balance China, an aggressive-defence is to be adopted “to dominate the IOR and venture purposefully in the South China Sea and beyond”.
- In the Indo-Pacific led world order, the ‘Blue Economy’ shall play a pivotal role for nations aspiring to rise; India too needs to reinvent its past glory.

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The Indo-Pacific Region: ...

has emerged as the new “mover and shaker” of the world order. From India’s perspective, the rise of the Indo-Pacific region coincides with its corresponding global spike. The impact on India is accentuated, as it is located right at the core of this Region. The Indian policymakers are aware of the changing milieu and acting boldly to keep pace with the fast-changing scenario. Yet the overall response seems inadequate and dilatory. The paper shall attempt at enunciating the essential future course for India in the changing global affairs.

The Indo-Pacific Region

The Indo-Pacific region is an amalgamation of two Oceans, namely, the Indian and the Pacific, and stretches from the eastern coast of Africa through the Indian Ocean up to the Western Pacific coast of America. The contentious South China Sea is the fusion zone of the two oceans. The Indo-Pacific region is home to nearly 3 billion people with the most diverse cultural affinities. In the twentieth century, power was measured in terms of military might. Today, the economic muscles have overtaken military supremacy. We see trade emerging as a potent war form. The Indo-Pacific region with vast natural resource flows, globalised supply chains, and international distribution networks already has a gross domestic product (GDP) of nearly US \$20 trillion and thus, is a fertile region for future global contests.

From Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: The Expanding Great Game

Till the mid-twentieth century, the Pacific-Atlantic region, with the US and Europe on its vanguard, shaped the global affairs of the world order. The rise of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

thereafter led to the rise of the Asia-Pacific region. In the past few decades, however, the Asia-Pacific has morphed into a larger strategic space—the Indo-Pacific. There have been several factors affecting the Indo-Pacific region’s significance. Three key factors are enumerated next:

- **Growing relevance of the Indian Ocean.** There has been an exponential increase in trade and commerce flow through the Indian Ocean. Various Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) of the Ocean are now the busiest transit routes and affect most nations.
- **US-China rivalry.** The threat to US’ superpower status and the world drifting towards bipolarity, has caused the anticipated friction. The growing difficulty of US to challenge China on its own, has also been a key determinant for the strategic expansion of the Asia-Pacific region.
- **Rise of India.** India is on its way to economic and consequently strategic and political rise. With improving infrastructure, young demography and a renewed focus on manufacturing, India is set to play a central role in determining the fate of the Indo-Pacific region.

Charting the Future Course for India

The rise of the Indo-Pacific region offers India an appropriate platform to engage in economic, political, and strategic domains. In the current world order, both India and the Indo-Pacific region stand to gain from each other. The interplay—though would be multilayered, complex, extremely challenging—has the potential of shaping India’s prospects in the twenty-first century. The kaleidoscope of actions undertaken by India in the past few years is encouraging. The incumbent Foreign Minister S Jaishankar noted that:

Out of the 142 connectivity projects (undertaken) in different parts of the world, 53 have been completed in [the] last five years. In Bangladesh, pre-1965 rail and road connectivity which were disrupted, have all being restored—we have connectivity projects in waterways and ports in roads and rail with Bangladesh. With Nepal, there is a whole set of roads which have been completed. There is a sea change in Nepal's electricity situation because of transmission projects undertaken by India. There is a fuel pipeline from Motihari to Nepal. [The] rebuilding of rail network of Sri Lanka which was disrupted after their civil war has happened. I think to some extent India is a prisoner to its past image, we have to get behind that [S Jaishankar, Keynote Address, Minister of External Affairs (India), during Raisina Dialogue, January 2020].

The Indo-Pacific Approach

India's advantageous positioning to dominate the world's busiest trade route along the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), is a situation filled with opportunities for India to gain one-upmanship in the Region. In the Asia-Pacific region, however, China shall dominate in the foreseeable future and the ASEAN grouping shall remain the most dominant economic constellation. The Indo-Pacific approach delineates the Region into two halves—the IOR and the Asia-Pacific. India should aim to dominate the entire Indian Ocean region as a sole naval and maritime power from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok. For the Pacific region, including the South China Sea, India should strengthen its existing bilateral and multilateral alliances, while simultaneously ramping up its military deterrence and strategic clout.

Future Course: 'The Three Domains'

With the aforementioned 'Indo-Pacific approach' at the core, India is required to take several initiatives

to get in sync with the new current geopolitical world order. Among these, the following three domains are indispensable for India to influence and shape events of the future:

- Re-structure Policy Framework.
- Strengthen Strategic and Security Spheres.
- Expand the Blue Economy Horizon.

Re-structure Policy Framework

Regional trappings have kept India from creating a coherent, multilateral, and global policy framework. The current foreign policy framework is an assembly of regional and sub-regional policies, which lacks strategic depth. The rise of the Indo-Pacific region and the centrality of India require policymakers to cater for larger scale and synergy. PM Modi vividly surmised the vision in the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, when he said the following:

India's vision for the region in one word is 'SAGAR'. Which stands for Security And Growth for All in the Region and, that is the creed we follow to our East now even more vigorously through our Act East Policy by seeking to join India, especially her East and North-East, with our land and maritime partners to the east (Prime Minister Modi, Keynote Address, Singapore, IISS Shangri-La Dialogue June 1, 2018, 17th Asia Security Summit, p. 4).

Develop a Maritime Mindset

India, during her independence, suffered partition on the eastern and western fronts which broke the natural land and sea corridors. This was followed by

a major military drubbing along the Himalayas in a conflict with China. These events led India to become inclined towards a continental policy. So the maritime next-door and culturally organic South East Asia remained conspicuously absent from policy drawing rooms. The oceanic Indo-Pacific requires India to ramp-up its current continental policy paradigm to a maritime one. The Indian Navy has adopted the vision of “Taking to the Blue Waters” in 2003, which was a leap ahead for an erstwhile brown water coastal defence force. The Naval doctrine now states that the arc of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Malacca, or the entire IOR, should be considered as the legitimate area of influence of the Indian Navy. (Dr. David Scott, “India’s Drive for a ‘Blue Water’ Navy”, International Relations, Brunel University, *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Winter 2007-08, Vol. 10, Iss 2, page 11.)

Merge the “Act East” with the “Think West”

While Act East Policy is Asia-Pacific centric, the relatively new “Think West Policy” focuses on the western hemisphere of the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific region, a greater strategic space, demands a coherent singular policy domain rather than a cluster of many. An organic fusion of the Act East Policy, the Think West Policy, and other sub-regional policies, into one coherent “Indo-Pacific Policy” should be promulgated. In line with the SAGAR vision, India has been an active participant in primarily maritime mechanisms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and Mekong Ganga Economic Corridor (MGC). India also convenes the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and through the Forum for India-Pacific

Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), India is also engaging with the Pacific island countries.

Strengthen Strategic and Security Spheres

The strategic engagement of India by the late twentieth century had remained restricted to South Asia, the region which is among the least integrated. India, inspite of her considerable soft power influence, has failed to make commensurate strategic and economic impact. Similarly, Pakistan on the west has been the ‘great wall’ which has kept India from interacting freely with the resource rich West Asia and the Central Asian Republics. As with the policy recourse, a major strategic and security rework is long due.

Expand Strategic Reach

The world is fast transforming into a multi-polar setup with an emerging permutation of alliances. In this milieu, a ‘traditionally hesitant player’ India will need a major makeover. The Indian Navy in its Doctrine of 2009, defined the primary sea space stretching around the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, and the Cape of Good Hope. The Doctrine included the South China Sea as an area of “strategic interest” (Priya Suresh, “India a Vital Player in South China Sea”, *Takshashila Institution Under India’s Security Relationships in Indian Ocean Region*, September 19, 2015). So, India which always was content at being the “net provider of regional security” in the Indian Ocean, now seeks to play a vital role in protecting the freedom of navigation across the Indo-Pacific region. Promulgation of an integrated multilateral interaction system would be vital. There are several engagements underway vis. the 2+2 dialogues with mainly the US, Japan, and Australia, the trilateral dialogues between India-Japan and

the US, India-Japan-Australia, Russia-India-China, India-Australia-Indonesia and the Quadrilateral meetings between India, Japan, Australia, and the US. Integration of these and other bilateral and multilateral interaction will yield far-fetching gains.

Balancing China

The very idea of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' today faces an imminent threat from China which has swiftly transformed into a belligerent state under the garb of its "peaceful rise" rhetoric. Chinese presence, both military and otherwise, in the Indo-Pacific region is nothing less than ubiquitous. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most sweeping of all—where the much-touted "String of Pearls" is a mere subset. As China stokes its global ambitions, India is the least insulated. The Indian Ocean littorals have been witnessing increased Chinese interventions. The BRI is a powerful strategic tool of China for luring in a new partner and vassal states, including Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and the Maldives which have become virtual power islands of China in the Indian Ocean. Chinese are also deploying submarines, including nuclear powered, close to the Indian Ocean littorals in the garb of anti-piracy role, in the waters of Shalala. The war hysteria created during the Doklam and Galwan standoffs should also not be forgotten in hurry.

India will need to expeditiously complete establishment of the "amphibious warfare base" in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This is a prerequisite for any form of aggression, as the archipelago is in the vicinity of Chinese trade "jugular"—the Malacca Strait. India also needs to create a counter-narrative for the BRI projects, for its security interests. The India-led International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is an intuitive and outstanding connectivity behemoth, traversing the entire Eurasian landscape.

The INSTC has immense potential to become a truly Indo-Pacific connectivity project, with India as the land-bridge connecting Eurasia with the ASEAN states. Similarly, the Japan-India initiated Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) also needs to be fast-tracked. India should push these as a counter to BRI with a more transparent, participative and inclusive model.

The South China Sea is an area which is yet to be fully explored. It is the only access to the East China Sea—links South East and East Asian region and east coast of Canada and the US. It affects almost 55 percent of India's trade and provides valid ground for India to intervene in the Region for securing vital interests. India will have to deepen strategic and security engagements with all stakeholders of the South China Sea vis. the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. The Region offers an opportunity for creating India's own "string of pearls" with Mongolia, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, and Japan as other key China-wary states. India is already seeking access to Vietnamese (Cam Ranh Bay), Taiwanese (Kaohsiung), and Japanese (Okinawa) ports for forwarding deployment of Indian naval assets on the pretext of safeguarding energy resources, traversing from the Sakhalin province of Russia. India is also part of the Quadrilateral grouping alongside the US, Japan, and Australia. While the grouping can barely stake claim to anything substantial, yet has the potential to block China's only access to the sea on its east.

Expand the Blue Economy Horizon

As India moulds its policies and expands its strategic reach, becoming an absolute maritime power, will be a key prerequisite. The oceans have today become conduits for a nation's growth as it facilitates the transportation of trade, economy, and the projection

of power on the land. India will thus need to focus on the Blue Economy.

India's continental obsession, however, has led to the neglect of the Blue Economy development as well. On the other hand, China is already the largest shipbuilder in the world and leads the world's fish production (Somen Banerjee, "Maritime Power Through Blue Economy in the Indian Context" Chapter 2, *Vivekananda International Foundation*, 2018, page 20). As much as 24 percent of her maritime trade is shipped to the hinterland through inland waterways. China is a formidable maritime power in the making. Historically, however, Indian trade has suffered due to inefficiencies in connectivity with the hinterland and poor logistic chain, including at the ports. The current turnaround time of Indian ports is 2 to 2.5 times that of the world standards.

On the positive side, India has much wider access to the oceans than China. India has a rich endowment of freshwater resources like rivers, lakes, dams, reservoirs, tanks, and ponds—all the components of the Blue Economy. Integration of all these components is necessary. Cluster based development of industries that are port-led would make Indian industries competitive. India has thirteen coastal States/UTs with approximately 7,500 km of coastline and also about 14,500 km of inland waterways. This when overlapped with the busiest sea lanes in the world, located in the near vicinity, provides immense opportunities. The current dispensation is making significant strides, it has identified twelve 'Swadesh Darshan' circuits, promulgated maiden cruise shipping policy, mooted plan for the development of cruise tourism among others. The 'Sagarmala Project' deserves a special mention for being a holistic plan towards acquiring a sizeable Blue Economy. It aims at infrastructural development in four phases vis. port modernisation, port connectivity, industrialisation, and coastal community development. More than

forty ports are planned for upgrade along with six to eight new ports, fourteen Coastal Economic Zones (CEZs) and twelve energy industries are also part of the mega initiative.

Conclusion

The state of global disarray today is a significant factor in the rise of the Indo-Pacific region. So, while the future of this Region holds a promise, a lot is yet to unfold. India's aspiration to influence global order will require a bold interplay of vision and action. The enunciated future course is an attempt at that very cause. In the course, it has become clear that India has to work assiduously towards becoming a maritime power. The policymakers will have to be cautious, though not to fall for the one-nation obsession espoused and promoted by some. Kissinger's musing that "there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests", holds good in this context. A nation's domestic condition dictates its global positioning, so India will have to be cautious in dealing with its political and economic situation back home, while seeking a greater role outside.

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