

## **‘Indo-Pacific’: Evolving Perceptions and Dynamics**

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‘Indo-Pacific’ is a relatively new and evolving concept, whose usage in foreign policy and strategic articulations has gained much currency in the recent past. The ‘rise’ of Asia—particularly China and India—have made the concept highly relevant, in both geo-strategic and economic terms. For much of the twentieth century, the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’—initially propounded in the 1920s by the German geographer and geopolitician Karl Haushofer—received little attention in the strategic and geopolitical discourse. It was only in early-2007 that the concept appeared in an academic writing, notably in India’s *Strategic Affairs* journal.<sup>1</sup> Along with this writing, the “Confluence of the Two Seas” articulation of the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe may be considered seminal to the development of the concept in recent years. Delivering a speech at the Indian Parliament in August 2007, Mr. Shinzo Abe contended that, “The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a ‘dynamic coupling as seas’ of freedom and of prosperity. A ‘broader Asia’ that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the concept of ‘Indo-Pacific’ is now being widely used, there is a divergence among analysts on its geographical contours. In the Indian writing of 2007, it refers to the maritime space comprising the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific and the countries littoral to these oceans, including West Asia/Middle East and eastern Africa.<sup>3</sup> At the other extreme, a conceptualisation extends the concept of ‘Indo-Pacific’ to ‘Indo-Asia-Pacific’ covering the entire Pacific Ocean.<sup>4</sup> Questions are also raised as to as to how the ‘Indo-Pacific’ is different from the already established term ‘Asia Pacific’. Further, why countries like China are not keen to embrace the idea of ‘Indo-Pacific’?<sup>5</sup>

In the above context, this issue brief explores the nuances of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept, and the reasons of its resurgence. It also analyses how the three main powers of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) Australia, India and Indonesia perceive the concept.

## **Meaning of ‘Indo-Pacific’**

The ‘Indo-Pacific’ in recent times is likely to replace ‘Asia-Pacific’ as the new zone of convergence and competition of the three powers, that are India, China and the United States.<sup>6</sup> Despite intense economic interdependence among these three powers, there is also contestation for dominance and influence in this region. The ‘Indo-Pacific’ has also emerged as a highly volatile region for nuclear proliferation involving several states, particularly the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.<sup>7</sup>

The meaning and implication of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ can be examined from various prisms; for instance, in Constructivist terms, the “Indo-Pacific presents the idea and imagery of the two oceanic regions of the Indian and Pacific Oceans that comprise of the institutional framework and inter-State operations that mesh the two oceans together.”<sup>8</sup> In terms of Regionalism, “the regions of the Indian and Pacific Oceans portray the dynamic evolution of interests and operations of the powers are shaped up.”<sup>9</sup>; in geopolitical essence the origin of the concept was elucidated by Karl Haushofer who coined the term “Indopazifischen Raum”.<sup>10</sup> Haushofer elucidated that, “dense Indo-Pacific concentration of humanity and cultural empire of India and China, which are....geographically sheltered behind the protective veil of the offshore island arcs.”<sup>11</sup>

In his classic book on sea power, Alfred T. Mahan emphasized the primacy of sea power in the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. He viewed “the two oceans hedging the continental world island and decisive of the impact that it created in terms of security and strategy.”<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Spykman termed the Indo-Pacific as the “circumferential maritime highway which links the whole area together in terms of sea power.”<sup>13</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, the term ‘Asia Pacific’ was used to analyse the situation in the ‘Pacific Rim’; by 2010, the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ was created to describe the Indian and the US perspectives of the maritime and strategic convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.<sup>14</sup>

## **Rise of ‘Indo-Pacific’**

There is nothing new in the term ‘Indo-Pacific’, if one takes a look at the history of Asia. Till the advent of colonialism, and before the Atlantic Ocean gained prominence after the Industrial Revolution, the Indian Ocean was the prime conduit of global activity. Its influence stretched as far as China, especially the region comprising the eastern Indian Ocean and the West Pacific Ocean—from India to Northeast Asia—was the hub for much of the global activity and interactions, with implications reaching far and wide beyond this region. The Indianized kingdoms like Champa in South Vietnam to Khmers in Cambodia, and from Sri Vijaya and Sailendras in Indonesia to numerous kingdoms in

Thailand and Myanmar, are proof of the impact of the Indian influence and also the exchanges that took place in the 'Indo-Pacific' region during that time.<sup>15</sup>

The resurgence of 'Indo-Pacific' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be attributed to the advent of globalisation and the increasing economic links between countries. The economic and military rise of Asia, has led to the revival of 'Indo-Pacific'. The growing economic links between the nations has led to countries forging both bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation agreements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).<sup>16</sup>

Two other developments also account for the rise of 'Indo-Pacific'. The first is the 'rise' of India as a relevant regional power, considering its growing engagements with the countries in East Asia, besides its prevailing influence in the IOR. As an emerging major power, India aspires to play a bigger role in the extended neighbourhood in the 'Indo-Pacific' region, much beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Its growing military capability, a fast evolving blue-water capable navy, and an economy that is already the fourth largest in PPP terms with huge untapped potential, India will be a major player in the 'Indo-Pacific' dynamics.<sup>17</sup> Nearly 50 per cent of India's trade is with East Asia, and has witnessed high growth compared to any other region. Significantly, some of the top investments in India are from East Asia, particularly Japan. India has signed the largest number of comprehensive economic partnership agreements with East Asian countries, and will be a part of the region's mega trading bloc once the RCEP becomes functional. Likewise, India has also entered in a large number of defence and strategic agreements with countries ranging from the Indian Ocean rim to East Asia.<sup>18</sup>

The rising salience of the IOR is another factor. It is implausible to imagine the dawn of an Asian Century without the Indian Ocean, its huge natural resources (in particular energy) that are crucial for the economic development of East Asia and the shipping lanes that traverse through this ocean, besides the growing market along its rim.<sup>19</sup> Comprising some 2.6 billion people, this region is home to almost 40 per cent of the world's population, and accounts for 10 per cent of global GDP (about US\$ 6.5 trillion). Further, 40 per cent of global trade passes through the Indian Ocean, including 70 per cent of the total traffic of petroleum products.<sup>20</sup>

### **Australian and the 'Indo-Pacific'**

Australia had long embraced the term and recognised its importance. The idea had emerged in the 1950s and the term 'Indo-Pacific' featured regularly in Australian academic discourse and government discussions since 2005. While some government documents published in late 2012 and early 2013 referred to the 'Indo-Pacific', its full adoption as defining Australia's region came about only in May 2013, with the release of

the Defence White Paper where ‘the ‘Indo-Pacific’ was officially listed as one of the four strategic interests of Australian defence policy.’<sup>21</sup> While there are competing definitions of the geographic extent of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ based on different visions of the Indian Ocean, the Australian concept of the region is centred on “the maritime Indian and Pacific Oceans and their convergence in Southeast Asia.”<sup>22</sup> The Defence White Paper defines the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as the ‘strategic arc ... connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia’.<sup>23</sup> The rationale for using the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ is to take into account the current strategic realities like the ‘rise’ of India, China and Indonesia in Australia’s neighbourhood, and the US Rebalance to Asia. Australia will play an important role in the US’ Rebalancing strategy as was reflected with President Obama announcing the stationing of 2,500 US Marines at a military base in Darwin. On the domestic front enormous quantity of exports from western Australia has made the Indian Ocean and its shipping lanes critical for its own economic development.<sup>24</sup>

### **Indian Perceptions**

India also comes in the list of the few countries that have welcomed the idea of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ and included it in its official discourse. Former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh first used it while addressing the Plenary Session of the India–ASEAN Commemorative Summit in New Delhi in November 2012, remarking that “a stable, secure and prosperous ‘Indo-Pacific’ region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity”.<sup>25</sup> He used the term on two other occasions, once while addressing the Japan–India Association in Tokyo in May 2013 and the other at an event marking the fourth anniversary of the UPA-II government.<sup>26</sup> India’s embrace of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ construct denotes two things: (a) desire to play a more active role in its extended neighbourhood, that is reforming its Look East policy and making it more proactive; and (b) recognising the changing realities of the region which demand India’s attention. Not surprisingly, there are many views on the ‘Indo-Pacific’ in India.<sup>27</sup>

India has been deepening bilateral defence and maritime security cooperation with the United States, Australia, Japan and Vietnam. At the same time, free trade agreements with Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea and Japan and multilateral agreements with ASEAN under the RCEP initiative indicate the economic rationale behind India’s embrace of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ construct.<sup>28</sup> In a speech in Tokyo in May 2013, former Prime Minister Singh evoked Prime Minister Abe’s 2007 articulation of ‘the confluence of the two seas’, the Indian and Pacific Oceans, defining it as the ‘framework for our bilateral relationship’ and referring to Japan as ‘a natural and indispensable partner in our quest for stability and peace in the vast region in Asia that is washed by the Pacific and Indian Oceans’.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, India has been active in its engagement of ASEAN through bilateral and multilateral channels such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus (ADMM+). By

drawing up close bilateral and defence ties with the US and its allies Japan and Australia in the region, the Indian government, in recent times, has transformed India's 'Look East' policy to an 'Act East' policy. The 'Joint Strategic Vision' to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation especially in the South China Sea issued during President Obama's India visit in January 2015 reflects the 'Indo-Pacific' outlook of the Modi government.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Modi's attempt to revive the 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', or the 'Asian Arc of Democracy', is another indication of the growing recognition of India's security interest in the 'Indo-Pacific'.<sup>31</sup>

China's build-up of ports and refuelling stations all around India, including Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Bangladesh (Chittagong) and Myanmar (Sittwe and Kyaukpyu) has created a deep anxiety within Indian strategic circles. The suspicion of Chinese encroachment is more prominent in the Indian naval establishment.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, as India grows economically, increasing its reliance on the shipping lanes for trade and resources, maintaining a firm hold in the Indian Ocean is becoming a core priority. Already, Chinese presence in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea is creating a 'Hormuz dilemma' in the Indian strategic imagination, similar to the 'Malacca dilemma' of the Chinese. The increases in Chinese defence spending and rapid naval modernisation since the 2000s have led policy-makers from around the world to speculate about Chinese intentions in the region. Indian strategists and policy-makers follow China's stance in the East and South China Sea disputes carefully and share regional concerns about China's assertive posture. Since the 2000s, India has been heavily engaged in modernising its own armed forces. Especially since the terrorist attack in Mumbai in 2008, strengthening the navy and the coast guard has been the focus of the strategic establishment.<sup>33</sup>

India has been proactively engaging the small island states to ensure peace and stability within them and offering help with the same, as it did in 2009 when it offered to monitor elections in the Maldives. Additionally, India has also started its own outreach towards the Pacific island states, with Modi's visit to Fiji in November 2014.<sup>34</sup>

### **Indonesia and the 'Indo-Pacific'**

In the Vision Mission statement (Visi-Misi) in 2014, President Widodo aims to project Indonesia as a maritime power in the 'Indo-Pacific'.<sup>35</sup> He sees the closely interconnected Pacific and Indian Oceans (PACINDO) as the primary theatre of Indonesian foreign policy engagement given Indonesia's location at the cross-roads of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, its upcoming role as the chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) by the end of 2015, its improved relations with neighbouring

countries like India, Australia, who are the dominant powers in the 'Indo-Pacific', and also new policy initiatives by countries like India in the form of the 'Act East' policy and China's 'One Belt One Road' initiative from which Indonesia can benefit highly. Indonesia's 'Indo-Pacific' vision is also not new and was seen in the previous Foreign Minister, Natalegawa's statement at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington in May 2013 where he stated that,

“A triangular (space) spanning two oceans, the Pacific and Indian Oceans, bounded by Japan in the north, Australia in the South-east and India in the south-west, notably with Indonesia at its centre.”<sup>36</sup>

In the 2012 Shangrila Dialogue, President Yudhoyono declared,

“There is every likelihood that in the twenty-first century the Indian Ocean will grow in geostrategic importance. We must make sure that the Indian Ocean does not become an area of new strategic contest and rivalry. Indeed, now is the time to cultivate the seeds for long-term cooperation, based on common interests in that part of the world.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

It is generally believed that the idea of the 'Indo-Pacific' has been propagated to contain China. This assumption is not true as for regional peace and stability, China's role is crucial. While the regional interests of the great powers may diverge on occasions, shared economic interests, security and prosperity will co-exist with competition. This will demand the powers to work together for the materialisation of their interests and in dealing with the rising security threats in the region. Thus, the 'Indo-Pacific' needs to be viewed in the larger perspective of offering more opportunities for cooperation than competition. The idea of 'Indo-Pacific' offers enormous scope for regionalism and multilateralism to play a more important role than has been the case hitherto. Moreover, the idea is a reflection of the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, which cannot be viewed with scepticism, but embraced and promoted.

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