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Over the past decade, the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ — which acknowledges the geopolitical unity of littoral nation-States of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, across a predominantly oceanic regional-expanse — has become intrinsic to global political, economic and strategic discourse. Within geopolitics and its subsets, viz., geo-economics and geostrategy, the prefix ‘geo’ — as Australia’s Professor Andrew Phillips succinctly informs us — refers to a country’s ‘strategic geography’ (the core spatial assumptions underpinning her grand strategy).

What actually is this relatively-unfamiliar animal: ‘Strategic Geography’? And how does it differ from ‘real Geography’? If one were to take a chart or map that depicts ‘real’ geography and then place upon it a set of coordinates defined by specific latitudes and longitudes, and, within the area that has been so bounded or enclosed, if one were to then give special focus — at the national-level — in terms of the planning and execution of one’s geopolitical strategies, this enclosed or bounded area would define one’s ‘strategic geography’. Obviously, the strategic geography of one country, say India for instance, can hardly be expected to be the same as that of, say, Maldives, or, for that matter, the USA. As such, every geopolitically defined ‘region’ is an artificial, manmade construct, whose defining-boundaries can be (and often are) different for different geopolitical players. This is as true of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as it is of any other ‘region’.

The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ has, in the fullness of time, moved quite decisively from its origins within the discipline of ‘biogeography’ into ‘geopolitics’. Indeed, the term has, especially in recent years, acquired very considerable geopolitical traction. Insofar as India’s perspective of the Indo-Pacific is concerned, Shri Narendra Modi, the Hon’ble Prime

Minister of India, speaking at the 2018 edition of the *Shangri-la Dialogue* in Singapore, unequivocally spelt out these bounds as extending “*from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas.*” Defining the contours of India’s ‘grand strategy’ within this region, he emphasised that India’s ideals of democracy were founded-upon five Hindi words, all of which start with the sound ‘s’ – सम्मान (respect); सम्वाद (dialogue); सहयोग (cooperation), शांति (peace), and समृद्धि (prosperity). The Prime Minister emphasised that “*India’s... engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region... will be inclusive. We are inheritors of a Vedanta philosophy that believes in essential oneness of all, and celebrates unity in diversity... That is the foundation of our civilizational ethos – of pluralism, coexistence, openness and dialogue... We will engage with the world in peace, with respect, through dialogue and absolute commitment to international law. We will promote a democratic and rules-based international order, in which all nations, small and large, thrive as equal and sovereign. We will work with others to keep our seas, space and airways free and open; our nations secure from terrorism; and our cyber space free from disruption and conflict. We will keep our economy open and our engagement transparent. We will share our resources, markets and prosperity with our friends and partners.*”

India’s belief in an Indo-Pacific that is free, open and inclusive and one that is founded upon a cooperative and collaborative rules-based order, finds resonance across not just the region but the world at large. It finds its most eloquent yet succinct expression in the concept of SAGAR – which is not merely the Hindi word for ‘ocean’, but, far more meaningfully, is the acronym for “Security And Growth for All in the Region”.

However, India is not the sole power within the Indo-Pacific and its own geopolitics is impacted by the geopolitics of other regional and extra-regional powers that operate within this region. Indeed, within the Indo-Pacific, one encounters a heady mix of maritime connectivity, collaboration, cooperation and competition – all of which is increasingly being recognised as being of the most immediate importance to the world, to Asia, and, most especially, to India. Many of these processes – whether collaborative, cooperative or competitive – are occurring simultaneously on both, the tangible and the intangible plane. Thus, in the high drama that is unfolding before us, the main protagonists and supporting-actors alike, all jockey for influence, projecting the attractiveness or otherwise of a way-of-life that they either espouse or reject, both individually and collectively.

Of great import is the fact that this is a region in which several Asian powers are once again rising, especially in geo-economic terms. The more striking examples include India, Iran, Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, and the ten nations that constitute ASEAN. Even as individual nation-states that are the inheritors of great and wondrous civilisations

manoeuvre to once again occupy what they perceive to be their rightful place in the sun, we are, indeed, witnessing a historic restoration of the balance of global power. The Indo-Pacific is in the throes of maritime change and this change is of an order of magnitude and complexity that was unimaginable only a few short decades ago. The multinational, rules-based order — exemplified by the consensual entry into force of the 1982 UN Law of the Sea, which has thus far sustained maritime intercourse between nations — is under great strain as new rising powers offer alternative interpretations of maritime order, with the promise of inclusive economic growth through their own connectivity models. As a resurgent maritime nation, India, likewise, seeks to emphasise its great civilizational and cultural heritage and offers the region an inclusive model of constructive engagement. Other great civilisations, too, such as those of China, Russia, Iran, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and South Korea, are all striving to break free from the shackles of relatively modern history — whether colonial or not — and re-establish prominence if not predominance. Nation-states of the Indo-Pacific are wrestling with the multi-faceted challenges of the globalised world in which they find themselves.

The ‘geostrategies’ that these rising powers are putting in place so as to attain their respective geo-economic objectives, as also their non-geo-economic ones, are grating against those of the world’s established ‘Grotian’ powers. The resultant geopolitical friction is already of an order of magnitude that demands the most careful attention so as to be able to devise suitable pan-regional mitigating-geostrategies by all players within the Indo-Pacific. By virtue of the maritime dominance of this region, countries that demonstrate adroitness and adeptness in terms of competence within the maritime domain will tend to prosper more than others and will be better able to shoulder the multifarious responsibilities that are attendant upon regional leadership.

How then could India best-demonstrate requisite dexterity within the predominantly-maritime expanse of the Indo-Pacific? How might she best position herself to inclusively carry the region along as she seeks to seize the myriad opportunities that are unfolding within this strategic geography, even while facing the multiple challenges that lie within it? It hardly bears stating that the ability to identify both, opportunities and challenges, and, equally important, to listen-to — and be sensitive-to — the varying perspectives of other States located-in or operating-within the Indo-Pacific, is a clear and evident prerequisite for India and the region to jointly arrive at a ‘win-win’ set of solutions.

It is this realisation that drove the Indian Navy — the foremost maritime expression of the sovereign power of the Republic of India — to launch, in 2018, an annually-recurring

and regionally-focussed international conference, which it aptly named “The Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue” (IPRD).

With the National Maritime Foundation ably functioning as the Indian Navy’s ‘knowledge-partner’ and the ‘chief organiser’ of the event, the 2018-edition of the IPRD delved into several of the nodes that define the security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific from India’s perspective, as also the perspectives of its maritime neighbours. It provided a platform from which the more significant of the several maritime challenges that confront countries within this region could be identified. Since every challenge is simultaneously an opportunity, it sought to highlight some of the many opportunities that present themselves before India’s maritime policy-shapers, policy-makers, and, the practitioners of these policies. As such, it dwelt upon four basic themes: (i) The growth, opportunities and vulnerabilities of maritime merchandise trade, including associated infrastructure such as ports and multi-modal connectivity, as seen from the very different perspectives of large and small littoral and island nations; (ii) Regional connectivity-models; (iii) Pan-regional challenges such as sustaining persistent surveillance at sea, the increasing digitisation of the maritime space, the dangers of cyber-malevolence that are already afflicting the maritime domain, etc.; (iv) the role of Indian industry within both, the private and the public sectors, in enhancing holistic maritime-security. It was a hugely successful endeavour that provided invaluable inputs — from a national as well as a regional perspective — to policy-makers, policy-shapers and members of the general-public that shaped (and continue to shape) India’s own strategies for risk-mitigation within the maritime domain.

‘IPRD-2019’, which was held in Delhi’s resplendent ‘Manekshaw Centre’ over 05 and 06 March 2019, successfully and strikingly built upon the excellent foundation that had been laid by the preceding edition. Despite the geopolitical turbulence precipitated by military action across the India-Pakistan border, the Indian Navy was represented at its apex-levels, with a stirring Keynote Address being delivered by Admiral Sunil Lanba, PVSM, AVSM, ADC, Chief of the Naval Staff. For its part, the NMF, which has, in a remarkably short period of time, acquired a substantial international reputation for the excellence of its scholarship, the conviction in its advocacy of India’s maritime interests, as also its evident and much-appreciated convening-skills, has become synonymous with the IPRD-series, and remains the Navy’s knowledge-partner and the chief-organiser of each edition.

The response to IPRD-2019 — with a ‘packed-house’ attendance numbering over 500 on each of the two days — was clearly indicative of the international-heft that India, the Indian Navy, and the National Maritime Foundation, now carry in maritime capitals and planning-centres, right across the globe. At no point did audience-interest flag as all present

savoured the intellectual delights set before them by the extremely impressive array of chairpersons, moderators, speakers and panellists. The audience interacted intensively and extensively with the luminaries on stage and jointly delved-into the nuances of the five themes that made up this year's edition of the IPRD. The themes, each of which is of great contemporary relevance, were (i) Achieving Cohesion of the Indo-Pacific through Maritime Connectivity: Practical Solutions, (ii) Attaining and Maintaining a Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Way-ahead measures, (iii) A Regional Approach to the Blue Economy, (iv) Maritime-Industry 4.0: Skill-Development and Employment-generation Opportunities, and, last but not the least, (v) Achieving Complementarity between SAGAR and SAGARMALA: Regional Opportunities.

A variety of specific-topics, relevant to each of these five themes, were dilated-upon by globally-renowned domain experts and policy-makers from a 'Baker's Dozen' countries of the Indo-Pacific — Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Several '*eminences-grises*' graced the occasion, including former Chiefs of the Naval Staff of India, Admirals Arun Prakash and RK Dhowan (the current Chairman of the NMF); former Commanders of the Sri Lanka Navy, Admirals Jayanath Colombage and Jayantha Perera; H.E. Sidharto R Suryodipuro, Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia to India; the brilliant Dr James Boutilier of Canada; Dr Arvind Gupta, former Deputy NSA and current Director of the influential think-tank, the Vivekananda International Foundation, who was the valedictorian of the conference; Mr Amitabh Kant, CEO of NITI Aayog; the bright, erudite and ebullient Director-General of the NMF, Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan; and many others for whom heads would willingly turn in any maritime gathering, the world-over.

Each session was visibly effervescent and gripping, with perspectives being exchanged between those on stage and those in the audience, reflecting an encouraging and uniform degree of thoughtfulness, incisiveness, and, often, sheer brilliance.

Although it would be somewhat premature to list out all the policy-recommendations that would emanate from the IPRD-2019 for consideration by the soon-to-be-elected Government of India, even the most preliminary listing would certainly include the very promising connectivity models encompassed in the acronym and sobriquet, 'NAMO's Bouquet'. Within this acronym, the letter 'N' denotes the 'International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which is, of course, basically a North-South multimodal trade-corridor between Mumbai and Iran and thence to Azerbaijan and through (or around) the Caspian Sea to St Petersburg, in Russia. However, a far more significant manifestation of

this strategic acumen is the East-West linkages that will spread from Baku — moving westward to Eastern Europe and eastward to the Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan. These will merge with one or more of China's 'Belts' within the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) and it is moot whether the two connectivity-models will be collaborative/ cooperative or competitive with each other. The next letter, 'A', denotes the joint Japanese-Indian conceptualisation of an 'Asia-Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC), which promises to promote East-West maritime trade across a huge swath from Japan to the eastern shore of the African littoral. It is worth noting that already we have Indian private ports such as Essar setting-up terminals in East African countries such as Mozambique. The third letter, 'M', denotes Project MAUSAM. This is an East-West 'cultural' corridor that is underpinned by the monsoon winds, which enabled the magnificent cultural impact of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, upon the countries of the Indo-Pacific. The fourth letter, 'O', stands for an 'Open' and free Indo-Pacific whose intrinsic inclusivity is founded upon an international and consensual rules-based order at sea, defined by respect-for and adherence-to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The last letter, 'S', stands for the Indian prime-ministerial vision of SAGAR, in which all boats are envisaged to rise on a rising tide. India certainly holds that it is not possible for a single economy to ride a crest while others are left to wallow in an economic trough. This is why the concept of 'Security (holistic- security) and Growth for All in the Region is quite so captivating and visionary an articulation. Indeed, even the letter 'B' (which commences the word 'Bouquet' is well-chosen, as it connotes the Bay of Bengal in general and 'BIMSTEC'

in particular. The articulation by the Director of Bangladesh's newly stood-up think-tank 'BIMRAD' (Bangladesh Institute for Maritime Research and Development) upon BIMSTEC was most impressive and is a clearly-defined thrust area for India. Indonesia's Sea Toll Road Project, and its extension, which seeks focussed connectivity between Sabang and Port Blair, must likewise be accorded the utmost priority.

The need for inclusiveness in creating a '*Free and Open Indo-Pacific*' was a view that resonated from Australia to China and from the USA to Japan, the Republic of Korea and China. And yet, Indian policy-makers will need to tread a narrow path as they seek to amalgamate the many nuances that lie within this apparent ubiquitous 'inclusivity'.

The 'Blue Economy' reflects a common aspirational goal for a sustainable model of economic development that is environmentally and ecologically sensitive, where the natural resources of the Earth are recognised as being inexhaustible only if they are carefully nurtured and allowed to replenish themselves as nature intended. If not, they are very exhaustible, indeed. There is a clear need for India to not only embrace the United Nations

(IMO) ‘Regional Seas Programme’, which is designed to address the accelerating degradation of the world’s oceans and coastal areas through a ‘shared seas’ approach, but also to proactively champion its adoption across the Indo-Pacific. There is an equally obvious need to delve further into the ‘best practices’ of China, Japan, and South Korea, on the one hand, and those of Small Island Developing States such as those located within the Indian Ocean. The latter is something that the IORA is well-placed to handle and scale upwards so as to make these practices relevant to its members and its partners alike. Much can be gained if India were to share its unique success in developing Low Temperature Thermal Desalination plants and transform its experience within the Lakshadweep Islands into a regional offering — from India with love (for the planet)!

The impact of Industry 4.0 technologies upon the mass-scale skilling of the work force — not just in India, but across the region as a whole — was amongst the most gripping of the discussions of IPRD-2019. Of course, the subject needs an entire set of conferences of its own, but even so, the discussions were absorbing in the extreme. In far too many cases, nations of the Indo-Pacific are still engaged principally in the development of skill-sets that were relevant to ‘Industry 2.0’ or ‘Industry 3.0’. The fact, however, is that all these countries are already in the throes of major disruptions being caused by the advent of ‘Industry 4.0’. Both individually and collectively, ‘AI-driven autonomous robotics’, ‘Big-data and analytics’, ‘Cloud-computing’, the ‘Internet of Things’ (IoT), ‘Horizontal and Vertical System Integration’, ‘Cybersecurity’, ‘Augmented-reality’, ‘3-D Simulation’, and ‘Additive Manufacturing’ involving 3-D printers, are all generating an increasingly pressing need for India and other developing countries of the Indo-Pacific to redefine the skill-sets required of the workforce in predicting jobs applicable to the maritime domain that will be required for it to take fullest advantage of ‘Industry 4.0’. Skill-development is a major thrust-area of the Government of India, but Indian Industry needs to be a far more significant and proactive partner in this endeavour. Across the Indo-Pacific and within the maritime domain, a few countries (Singapore and South Korea, for instance) have already embraced many of these disruptive technologies, with impressive results. It is necessary for the best-practices of such countries best be proliferated across the region to mutual benefit of all.

The information-updates provided in respect of India’s SAGARMALA project and the SAGAR conceptualisation were excellently presented by senior (Joint Secretary level) officials from the Ministry of Shipping and the Ministry of External Affairs (IOR Division), respectively. Of particular value was the exposition by senior representatives of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA), which served to dispel several myths through the presentation of not just the cold, hard statistics, but their analysis. There is an obvious need

to amalgamate the ports of India's most-immediate maritime-periphery (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar) into the Indian port-led growth-story. Only then will India's championing of inclusiveness receive true acknowledgement and support.

All in all, the IPRD-2019 was like a heady glass of excellent wine — it left one euphoric and ready to take on the maritime challenges that sit as a disguise over the several exciting opportunities that are embedded within. The future is one of great hope and through future editions of this annual dialogue, the joint aim of the Indian Navy and the National Maritime Foundation to provide a platform for substantive, substantial and insightful discussions pertaining to the geopolitical developments affecting the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific, and, more importantly, to provide sharply-focussed, policy-relevant inputs to policy-shapers, policy-makers and the public at large, both in India as well as across all countries concerned with developments in the Indo-Pacific region, is set to be realised. All that it now needs is more-visible and more-tangible ministerial and bureaucratic support and involvement. In the interim, of course, the Navy and the NMF would do well to recall the famous exhortation of the 19th Century US Admiral, David Glasgow Farragut, "*Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!*"

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