

Overview of Contemporary Indo-Pacific Goals and Strategies of Powers other than India

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It is true that India's geopolitical goals and objectives are those of India alone and are not determined by any other country. However, the degree of ease or difficulty that New Delhi will face in the execution of the dynamic strategies that it has formulated for the attainment of these goals and objectives is certainly a factor of the strategies of other States that operate within the predominantly maritime geography of the Indo-Pacific. This article seeks to provide a broad overview of the current goals and expected moves of at least a few of the more significant contemporary and potential "players" of the "maritime game". Some of these strategies are predicated upon the game of chess while others seem to be manifestations of the Sino-Japanese game of "Weiqi" or "Go". Whatever be these strategies, the "board" itself — that is, the "Indo-Pacific" — has now been reasonably well-defined and accepted. Yet, just as there are still some who believe in a 'flat earth' and some who still deny human contribution to climate-change, there are, even today, a small and diminishing number of States that obdurately refuse to acknowledge that the erstwhile largely-competitive and largely-continental construct of the "Asia-Pacific" has inexorably given way to a new global conceptualisation — "the Indo-Pacific". Prominent amongst them are Russia and China.

Russia

In the case of Russia, its academic and strategic communities have already accepted and become comfortable with the "Indo-Pacific" but this is not yet the case with Russia's political elites. Clearly, Russian insecurity, which has, in the past, led to Moscow (and Beijing) claiming that the Indo-Pacific is an American construct designed to contain its main geopolitical rivals, still persists. However, Moscow is quite aware that Russia's "Far Eastern Federal District", which is governed from Vladivostok, encompasses more than a third of Russia's total landmass and contains some of the country's largest deposits of natural resources. It is also a matter of abiding concern to Moscow that not only is the Russian population ageing, it is also declining (in October 2021, the Moscow Times, in common with several leading news channels worldwide, quoted Russian Government sources in stating that "*Russia's natural population — a figure which counts registered deaths and births, excluding the effects of migration — declined by 997,000 between October 2020 and September 2021... [In fact,] Russia's total population of around 145 million is lower today than it was when President Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000 despite Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 which added 2 million to Russia's official population statistics.*") Heightening this demographic alarm is the concomitant fact that the Russian Far Eastern Federal District is home to only 7.2 million people, facing almost 110 million Chinese who live across the border, in neighbouring Manchuria (i.e., the Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang). Thus, on the one hand, in order to deal with this implied threat of Sinification, Moscow has been pouring money

into regional development, with an early consequence being the rapid development of Vladivostok and hence, an increase in its political heft. On the other, as Russia, financially oppressed by the economic sanctions imposed by the West, is steadily pushed into the arms of China, the centrality of “Pacific Russia” and the political weight that Vladivostok carries in the decision-making of Moscow is increasing inexorably.

Interestingly, the coinage of term “Indo-Pacific” is increasingly being seen in Moscow as reflecting a transformation of the “Asia-Pacific” that is taking place as a result of the inclusion of States located within the Indian Ocean and those on its rim, within the ambit of economic processes in East Asia. This is exemplified by the rapidly-growing criticality of the Indian Ocean segment of global transport routes and logistic (supply) chains between Europe and East Asia, via Africa and the Indian subcontinent.

Thus, it is, in this author’s opinion, only a matter of time before Russian reluctance is overcome by geoeconomic realities and Moscow, too, accepts and adopts the “Indo-Pacific”. The most important aspect is that Russia’s short-term geopolitics within this region will probably be to hedge against Western economic sanctions by temporarily accepting a role as a “junior partner” to China, providing the latter with its desperately-needed energy by way of oil and natural gas, in return for the hard currency that is equally desperately needed by cash-strapped Russia. However, as Moscow accepts the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical reality, the innate and enormous economic and military potential of Pacific Russia will come to the fore and will, shape Russia’s own economic and noneconomic goals that could well be largely independent of those of Beijing. Consequently, over the medium term, Russia’s Indo-Pacific gameplay will see the formulation and execution of geostrategies designed to attain these new geoeconomic and non-geoeconomic goals. The assurance and insurance mechanisms that will need to be provided by the instruments of Russia’s foreign policy, namely, Russian diplomacy and Russian maritime military power, will play an increasingly large role and the flexing of maritime muscle in covert (fleet-in-being) and overt (increased naval exercises and deployments) are very likely manifestations. New Delhi, while determining its own strategies for the attainment of India’s eight principal maritime objectives, will need to factor this geopolitical likelihood.

China

China appears to believe that it is the *raison d’être* of the entire concept of the Indo-Pacific, which it perceives to be a US-driven construct aimed at the geoeconomic, military and geopolitical containment of China, through the development and strengthening of bilateral and multilateral ties with countries of a “stretched” Asia-Pacific that now includes India. China’s game moves within the western segment of the Indo-Pacific — especially the East China Sea, the South China Sea and, to a lesser extent, Oceania, have been the subject of intensive and extensive analysis and little is to be gained by regurgitating these many analyses. China’s maritime gameplay relative the eastern segment of the Indo-Pacific, namely, the Indian Ocean, is of greater interest to Indian readers but, paradoxically, has received comparative less attention from the Indian and international strategic community. The first issue that merits attention is why China would want to be a major player of the Indian Ocean game in the first place. In other words, what compels China to move into the Indian Ocean, far from the concentrated power-base it has established closer to its own shores? The answer, I posit, lies in China’s desperate need to assure domestic societal-stability, which it perceives to be the fundamental precondition

for regime survival — in other words, the continued existence of the Communist Party of China (the CPC). It is instructive to remember that the core national interest of most countries is the material, economic and societal well-being of the people[s] of the country in question. In the case of the contemporary PRC, however, the “people[s] of China” have been conflated with the CPC. The core national interest of China, therefore, becomes ‘Regime Survival’, where the survival and wellbeing of the regime is equated to the survival and wellbeing of the people themselves. There is considerable evidence of this — as witness the extensively-quoted 1973-statement of Chairman Mao Zedong, forcefully reiterated by China’s State news agency, *Xinhua*, after the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) held in Beijing between 18 and 24 October 2017, “*Party, government, military, civilian, and academic; east, west, south, north, and centre, the Party leads everything*”. With this sort of conflation and given that China’s centralised autocracy cannot afford to allow the sorts of societal venting mechanisms that characterise democracies, for the CPC, the sum of all fears is economically-driven mass-scale societal unrest. China’s efforts to create a sufficiently vibrant domestically-driven economy have run into enormous difficulties. There is reason to believe that contemporary China might well be facing a serious food shortage caused by COVID-19-induced disruptions of food-supplies, plus catastrophic-flooding in the Yangtze River-basin (China’s largest agricultural region), plus three huge typhoons hitting NE China, plus locust-swarms and fall armyworm infestations — in short, the very stuff that constitutes nightmares in the collective minds of the CPC. China is consequently forced to depend upon an externally-oriented economy. In fact, China’s merchandise-trade accounts for as much as 40% of the country’s GDP (which, in 2020, was estimated at US\$ 14.72 trillion [Nominal]). Some 90% of this merchandise trade (amounting to US\$ 4.86 trillion) moves by sea, with 50% having to transit the waters of the Indian Ocean. This massive dependence upon seaborne imports and exports, based as it is on ‘just-in-time’ logistics, is hugely sensitive to disruption. Consequently, not only is the ability to break out into the open sea — at will — a critical necessity, the subsequent need for China to shape and protect its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) is no less vital. However, being able to break out into maritime power in this fashion has always been a significant challenge for China. On the one hand, China has a very impressive length of coastline. At 14,500 km, it is almost twice that of India’s 7516 km. On the other hand, nowhere does this coastline of China’s provide the country with unfettered access to the distant seas upon which much of China’s economy depends. What China sees when it looks seaward is a near continuous chain of States such as the USA, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam, all of which are inimical to it and can, in times of geopolitical tension, make any seaward exit of Chinese merchant ships or warships extremely risky.

Within the Chinese littoral itself, Taiwan and its navy poses the most immediate obstacle to Chinese naval ambitions. Taiwan exemplifies the central dichotomy in Chinese naval thinking. On one hand, the PLAN has long adopted a doctrinal approach of projecting a defensive perimeter up to the first island chain, stretching from Okinawa to the Spratly Islands, or even more ambitiously to a second island chain that encompasses even Guam and the Philippines. This would entail a strategy of sea control via major surface combatants and advanced submarines. On the other hand, as long as an island as large and as fortified as Taiwan stays outside Beijing’s control and maintains close security ties with the United States, such a strategy is simply unfeasible. In effect, Taiwan turns the Western Pacific into a zero-sum game, giving very significant ‘forward-basing’ advantages to whomsoever it aligns with. China cannot hope to

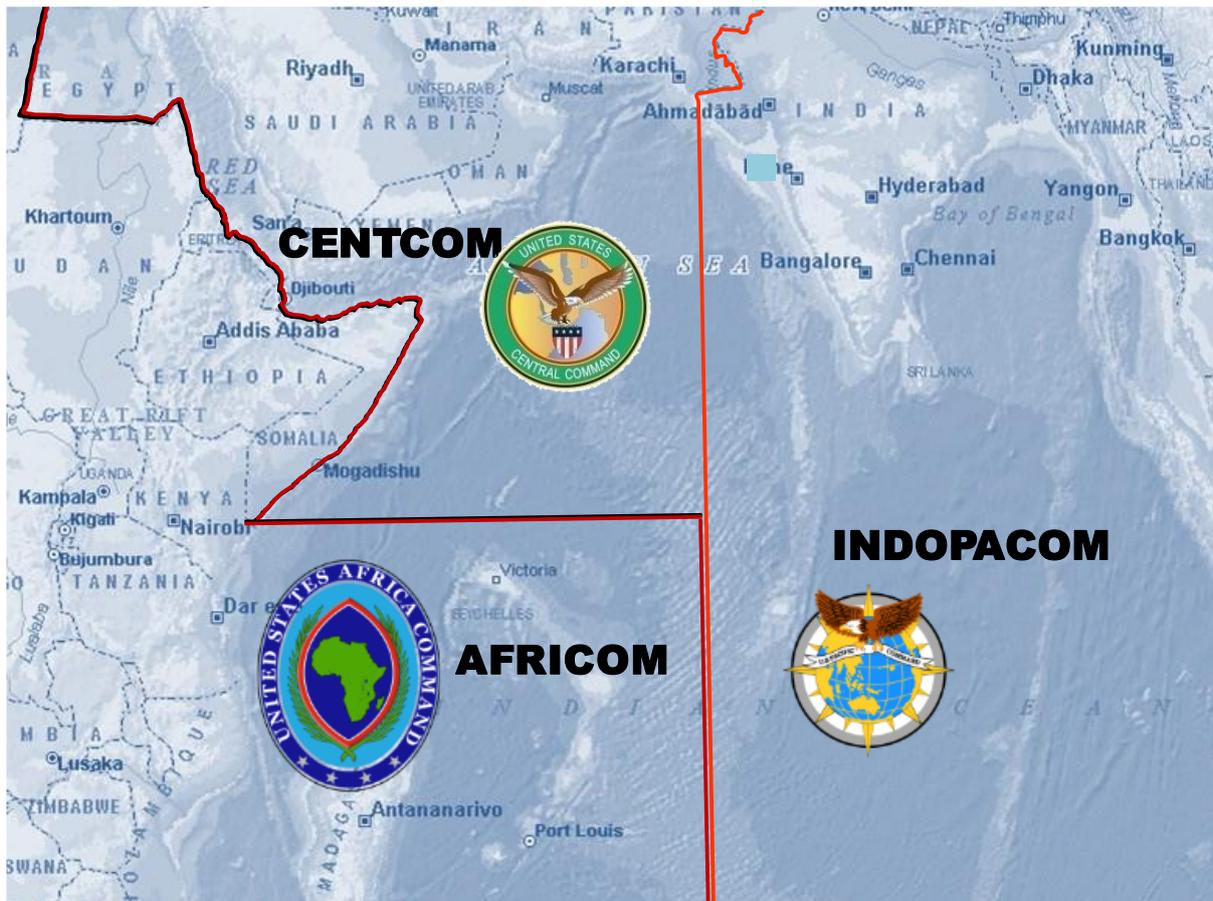
break out of the littoral and project power farther away without first asserting control over Taiwan. To mitigate this geographical aberration, China's objective necessarily shifts to one of attempting to achieve 'sea control' (a concept that always incorporates 'sea denial' — what the Americans call Anti-Access/Area Denial [A2/AD] — within it) through advanced long-range and anti-satellite missiles and directed energy weapons. This is what is often referred-to as a 'Mature Precision Strike Regime' (MPSR). However, the effort to establish an MPSR notwithstanding, China's maritime geography compels it to wrestle with the challenge of the division of naval forces by theatre, thereby weakening the overall concentration of power. Moreover, Chinese shipping suffers from additional vulnerabilities in the transiting the Indian Ocean chokepoints comprising the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait, and, the Lombok Strait. Since China does not possess a coastline on the Indian Ocean, this denies safe havens to its merchant shipping as well as its naval Fleet. This realisation drives Beijing's frenetic efforts to build blue-water naval assets and establish deep-water ports in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, etc. Fundamentally, all this reflects a very strong Chinese desire to overcome the constraints imposed upon her by her maritime geography and defines in substantial measure, the maritime strategy that China has formulated and must execute in its endeavour to attain its geoeconomic goals — a very substantive one being to assure the security of Chinese oil-imports across the Indian Ocean. The centrality of this goal may be gauged by the fact that oil-demand in China, which is the world's top oil importer, remained strong throughout 2020, even as the COVID-19 crisis hammered global appetite. In fact, Chinese imports rose 7.3% to a record of 542.4 million tonnes or 10.85 million barrels per day (bpd)! Although three major overland crude-oil pipelines — the Skovorodino-Daqing feeder-link of the Eastern Siberia Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline, the Kazakhstan-Xinjiang pipeline, and, the Maday/Kyakpyu-Kunming pipeline — feed crude-oil into China, even taken together they account for less than 13% of China's current oil imports. 87% of China's imports must still come by sea. Consequently, China must necessarily forge its maritime strategy such that the 30-35 Very Large Crude-oil Carriers (VLCCs) that are present on any given day in the Indian Ocean, are afforded preventive and curative protection.



Picture Credits: Tomas Pueyo, "What China Wants and Why", <https://unchartedterritories.tomaspuoyo.com/p/what-china-wants>

USA

As in the case of China, US maritime strategy within the Indo-Pacific is too well known and too comprehensively analysed to bear any substantial repetition here. One important aspect, that bears repeating, however, is that even the post-Trump US construct of the Indo-Pacific remains circumscribed by the areas of operational responsibility assigned to the three directly-concerned unified combatant commands, namely, the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), the Central Command (CENTCOM), and, the Africa Command (AFRICOM), as may be seen from the accompanying diagram.



For the USA, the Indo-Pacific construct enables the formulation and dissemination of a counternarrative to the Sinocentric restructuring of the region and offers a means to rebalance US foreign, security, and economic policies towards China. Given the staggering volume of literature available on the subject, perhaps the following bulleted summary of six major objectives of the US strategy within the Indo-Pacific would be sufficient:

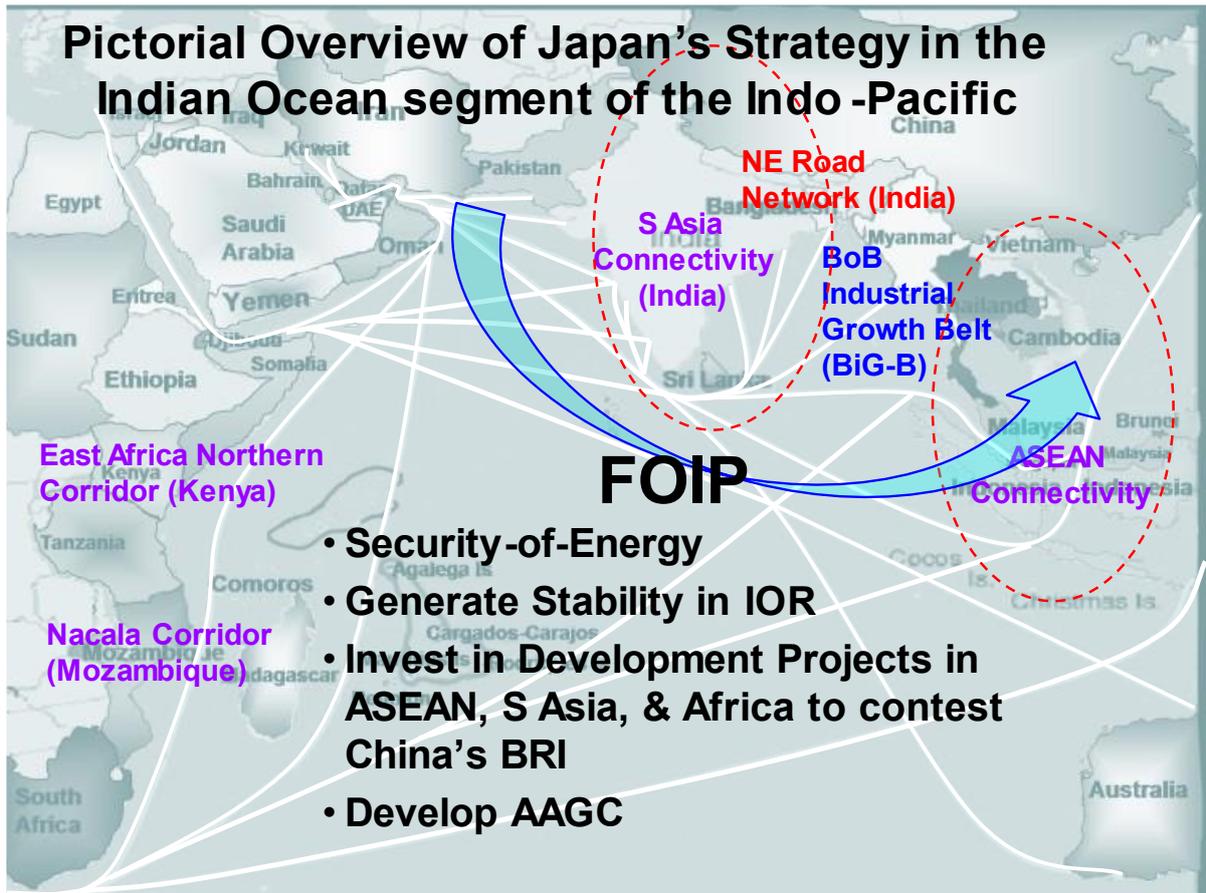
- Provide alternatives to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) within the Indo-Pacific.
- Secure freedom-of-navigation within the Indo-Pacific.
- Maintain the existing rules-based international order.
- Ensure free, fair, and reciprocal trade between the US and the region through bilateral trade agreements.
- Strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of the 'QUAD' and pursue the QUAD action-agenda emanating from the online "Leaders' Summits" of 12 March 2021 and, just six

months later, the first in-person Leaders' Summit of 24 September 2021. In particular (and over and beyond the immediate goal of combating the COVID-19 pandemic):

- Preserve a free, open, rules-based order that is rooted in international law.
- Bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.
- Protect the freedom of navigation and overflight.
- Support the region-wide establishment and proliferation of disaster-resilient infrastructure, including the greening and decarbonizing of major shipping ports in all four member countries.
- Promote 'quality infrastructure' as opposed to merely 'inexpensive infrastructure' through the "Quad Infrastructure Coordination Group" and the 'Blue Dot Network'

Japan

Japan's maritime strategy remains founded upon former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Within the eastern segment of the Indo-Pacific, that is, the Pacific Ocean in general and the north-western Pacific in particular, Japan faces short-term existential threats from North Korea and China (the latter in the eventuality of a Chinese attempt to forcibly take-over Taiwan and the resulting US intervention). In contrast, in the western segment (the Indian Ocean) and outside of the QUAD common commitments mentioned above, the main geoeconomic goal of Japan is to assure the safety of thrust of the country's energy-imports by way of crude-oil from the Persian Gulf. Like any country that has a substantial single-commodity vulnerability (for Japan this is actually a dual vulnerability engendered by its enormous dependence upon the import of food and crude-oil), Japan has formulated maritime strategies that seek, in the first instance, to ensure the long-term political stability of its import-sources. This is a matter of little or no concern where food-imports from politically stable countries such as Australia is concerned, but is a massive worry in terms of oil-imports given the extreme political fragility of Persian Gulf States. Japan's strategy is accordingly aimed at the promotion of sub-regional stability through the provision of economic security (since economic factors play such a large role in societal instability). The provision of economic assistance by Japan to West Asia and East Africa also enables the diversification of crude-oil supply-chains, thereby catering for geopolitical turbulence in the Persian Gulf that could lead to the temporary closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Since all of Japan's imports of crude oil move along established international shipping lanes (ISLs) Japan's maritime strategy also seeks to ensure that these oceanic areas through which these shipping routes pass are themselves secure. This drives the JMSDF presence in the north-western Indian Ocean. A broad overview of the Japanese strategy is depicted in the accompanying diagram:



Australia

Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy is circumscribed by its treaty-alliance with the US (ANZUS), Canberra's continual reappraisal of the rise of China, and its long-standing, deep interest in the South Pacific (Oceania). For the first quarter of the current century, Australia, which was the first country to use and promote the use of the term "Indo-Pacific", largely perceived the region as a space where *"China's growth is accelerating shifts in relative economic and strategic weight"*... such that its *"power and influence are growing to match, and in some cases exceed, that of the United States"*. However, between 2018 and 2020, there was a strong Australian push-back against China's interference in Australian domestic politics — through espionage, economic blackmail, and attempts to buy off Australian politicians. China has (typically) retaliated against Australian trade, banning seven categories of imports ex-Australia, while Canberra has publicly voiced its suspicions of China as the [possibly-deliberate] initiator of the COVID-19 Pandemic. As things stand, Sino-Australian relations are at fast-approaching a nadir. In contrast, US-Australian ties, which are founded upon the (now bilateral) ANZUS Treaty, have only grown stronger. Moreover, AUKUS (2021) appears to have overshadowed ANZUS and is driving Australia's defence industry, especially in the Northern Territory which, having surrendered the port of Darwin to China's Landbridge company in 2015 in a deal that gave the company total operational control of the port and 80 per cent of ownership of the land and facilities, now appears to be trying to reinvent itself as the point of the Australian defence spear.

In terms of Australia's current maritime strategy, it needs to first be acknowledged that the Indian Ocean has historically had a lower strategic priority for Canberra than had the Pacific in

general and the South Pacific in particular. Of late, however, Canberra has realised that the depth of the Chinese penetration in the Indian Ocean can no longer be ignored and Australia can no longer afford to focus exclusively on the Pacific but must increasingly factor the Indian Ocean into its strategic calculations. Australia is, of course, also hedging against the possibility of the end of a US-centred regional order, although the establishment of AUKUS seems to have caused apprehensions to recede somewhat. Canberra does, however, remain alive to the geopolitical swings and lurches of successive US administrations. It is accordingly exploring network diplomacy as an important component of its to strengthen its collaboration with Indo-Pac countries other than the USA and China. As in the case of India, Japan and the US, Australia's commitment to strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of the 'QUAD' and pursue the QUAD action-agenda forms an important facet of its maritime strategy.

Where India is concerned, Australia had long been sceptical of New Delhi's capacity, capability and political willingness to balance China. However, this perception changed after the India-China clashes in Doklam (2017) and Galwan (May 2020) and the growing engagement of the Royal Australian Navy with the Indian Navy in combined exercises, especially those of the MALABAR series, and the bilateral AUSINDEX (the fifth edition of which was held off the Northern Territory, in September, 2021). In June of 2020, India and Australia signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as well as a "Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", and two key defence agreements, namely, the Australia-India Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement, and the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement.

France

France is the only European nation with a significant presence in both, the Indian Ocean (La Reunion, Mayotte, Tromelin, Îles Glorieuses, Juan de Nova, Bassas da India, Europa) and the Pacific (including New Caledonia and French Polynesia). Therefore, an Indo-Pacific maritime perspective comes naturally to it. A broad overview of the geoeconomic and non-geoeconomic goals that French strategy within the Indo-Pacific seeks to attain may be obtained through the following bulleted summary:

- Protect French territories and overseas citizens.
- Assure a central role for France in the region.
- Sustain a regional perception of being a mediating, inclusive, and stabilising "resident" power.
- Focus upon both, traditional and non-traditional security issues (naval security, cybersecurity, MDA, HADR, disaster resilience, climate-change, etc.)
- Support and uphold a rules-based international order that will ensure maritime security and critical trade links, increase arms exports from France, and, curb nuclear proliferation and terrorism.
- Maximise cooperation with India and ASEAN.
- Strengthen the role and visibility of the EU.
- Promote the admission of the EU into the East ASEAN-led fora, especially the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Germany

In August of 2020, Germany issued its “Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific” (*Leitlinien*), wherein it identified the eight core regional interests that its strategy would seek to promote, namely:

- Peace and Security throughout the region.
- Diversifying and deepening of relations with States of the region, as also with States operating within it.
- Promotion of multilateral economic and security structures
- Preservation of open shipping routes
- Promotion of open markets and rules-based multilateral free trade
- Digital transformation and connectivity
- Environmental protection and socially-compatible growth
- Access to fact-based information

Germany has formulated a two-pronged strategy to promote the above-listed interests. On the one hand, it will support:

- Joint European approaches.
- Multilateralism.
- A rules-based order.
- UN SDGs.
- Human Rights.
- Inclusivity.
- Centrality of ASEAN and ASEAN-led multilateral fora.
- A multiplicity of critical supply-chains.

On the other hand, it will oppose:

- Efforts to contain the growth of any specific State.
- The rise of strictly bipolar structures.

Conclusion

In sum, the wide acceptance of the Indo-Pacific construct signals a return of the pendulum of global power to Asia, after several centuries of European and Western centrality, during which the Atlantic Ocean was considered to be the centre of gravity of global economic activity. Although the Indo-Pacific encompasses a very large continental element comprising the Russian and Eurasian landmasses, it is predominantly a “maritime” space. That said, and the US Trump-administration’s assertions notwithstanding, it is important to bear in mind that the Indo-Pacific is not, in and of itself, a “strategy”. It is, instead, a “strategic geography” within which several countries, including India, of course, formulate and execute a number of cooperative, collaborative, competitive and even confrontational strategies. It would be prudent for Indian maritime thinkers to keep a weather eye on these.

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