

## THE CONTINENTAL FACTOR IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: IMPLICATIONS IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

This article argues that although the Indo-Pacific is, indeed, a *predominantly* maritime construct, it should not be viewed as *exclusively* maritime in character. Even in the geographic conceptualisation (let alone the strategic), the Indo-Pacific should be conceived not merely along east-west lines, as is the present Indian articulation, but also north-south, where the northern extent is defined by the southern rim of the Eurasian landmass and the southern extent by the northern coastline of the Antarctic continent. It is unfortunate that national security debates in the maritime context often omit the territorial concerns resulting from India's largely undemarcated and therefore contested land-borders with China and Pakistan. Accordingly, balancing India's maritime ambitions with its continental imperatives remains a vital policy challenge. For India's leaders, policymakers and planners, there is an ever-present allure in aligning too closely with the extra-regional partners in the Indo-Pacific, a temptation that could lead to strategic miscalculation, especially when China's bellicosity towards India along its land borders is glaringly evident and proximate in nature. Given India's tight military capacities, constraints of associated economics, and its large strategic gap with China, consolidating its primary area of interest in the Indian Ocean region may be pragmatic than striving to solely build an expansive oceanic identity in the Indo-Pacific. In essence, this is the enduring debate between what Saul Bernard Cohen termed as "*continentality*" and "*maritimity*". India's central challenge will always remain how to balance its land-based strategic imperatives (continentality) with its sea-based ones (maritimity).

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Land Factor, Continental Factor, Sino-Indian Boundary Issue, Land Armies, Land Warfare.

### INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific is an emerging locus of geostrategic competition, largely characterised by the rise of China.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this region is quite evidently the new geopolitical centre of gravity; on the other, it is increasingly risk-prone,

conflict-ridden and polarised. Exacerbating this complexity, the United States—notably during Trump’s first term—warped the very concept of the Indo-Pacific and moved it from a strategic geography (in which States had sufficient agency to make geopolitical choices that would further their respective national interests), to a conceptualisation that was, in and of itself, a strategy—one designed to contain China. Accepting the US ‘warp’ to be the truth, several States in the region found themselves in an uncomfortable position of being forced to choose between being ‘for’ or ‘opposed-to’ China. The result was that a few States aligned with China, while a good number sought to hedge their bets. This fuelled an array of competing impulses of competition in the Indo-Pacific, as each actor seeks to leverage and maximise its position in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Strategically, the region’s most critical dimension is its vast maritime space, stretching from the western coast of the Americas to the eastern coast of Africa and spanning 14 time zones.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 8000 by 8000 kilometres in geographic spread, the region is home to about 75 countries with over half of the world’s population and two-thirds of the world economy. About one-third of the world’s flow of trade and energy passes through this region, and it is home to the seven largest militaries and five nuclear-armed countries. Here, China is seeking to disrupt and revise the regional order, even as other powers strive to maintain it.<sup>4</sup> By 2035, China aims to become a formidable economic and a leading military power in the region, and by 2049, it aspires to possess unmatched economic, nuclear and military might on a global scale.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, China’s spectacular economic ascent has enabled an impressive rise in its military capabilities, which several experts have termed revolutionary. With China engaging in persistent maritime brinkmanship in the Western Pacific, intensifying pressure on Taiwan to capitulate, and displaying several bouts of belligerence in the Himalayas, the region is witnessing rapid changes with increased risks of escalation.<sup>6</sup> The fundamental question, then, is how India can navigate this scenario in the Indo-Pacific and balance its maritime interests with its pressing continental concerns. This will put to the test the strategic choices that India wishes to make, as the country cannot afford to ignore its continental orientation and concerns vis-à-vis China, a factor central to countering military aggression and shaping the operational environment, both on land and at sea.

## COMPETING NOTIONS

The Indo-Pacific presents India with an opportunity to maximise its strategic interests.<sup>7</sup> However, realising this vision remains challenging, as New Delhi's views on the region diverge from those of other actors. For instance, the priorities of Australia and Japan lie in the Pacific, while the Pacific Ocean is a secondary area of concern for India. Conversely, for Australia and Japan, the Indian Ocean Region is the secondary area of concern. While the Indian Ocean is significant to the United States, its engagements and presence have been limited in comparison to those in the Pacific Ocean. In contrast, France is focused primarily upon the western Indian Ocean, even while it has interests in the Pacific, driven by its territories therein, forces it to balance its limited assets across both segments of the Indo-Pacific. India, for its part, will have to manage and leverage its partnerships to address its threats and challenges, while recognising the orientation and capacity constraints of its partners.

Two notions, therefore, dominate the Indo-Pacific debate.<sup>8</sup> The first posits that the Indo-Pacific forms a single and coherent geostrategic space, wherein like-minded countries seek to collaborate in the face of China's rise and assertiveness. Spearheaded by the United States, this notion advocates for the formation of strong alliances and strategic partnerships to build mutual capacity and collaborate in trade and commerce, technology and scientific innovation, and military interoperability. This has resulted in the strengthening of old and new regional frameworks, such as the QUAD and AUKUS. While these new mechanisms have gained some traction, they do not evoke sufficient mutual trust to allow full acceptance of the idea of the Indo-Pacific as one cogent and coherent security construct. The second notion challenges the trans-oceanic identity of the Indo-Pacific and argues that it is not, in fact, a single coherent strategic space. Like every imaginative space, the Indo-Pacific is a construct of contested interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Adherents of the second point of view argue that the two oceans, while being contiguous to each other, are nevertheless distinct in their strategic orientation. Whether it is their maritime geographies, past histories of conflict, or current security contexts, they are distinctly different in maritime pathologies. For instance, while the Western Pacific historically has had intense maritime rivalries, the Indian Ocean has a more benign and pacifying character. The Pacific Ocean possesses a distinct oceanic identity, while the Indian Ocean is yet to find an enduring identity for itself. This often presents a conceptual dilemma to policymakers and military

planners alike. Hence, it might be prudent to consider the two oceans— Indian and Pacific— as distinct and different geostrategic spaces that need to be dealt-with as such.

Interestingly, some experts even argue that there is no such thing as the Indo-Pacific region *per se*.<sup>10</sup> Like the Asia-Pacific, they argue that the Indo-Pacific is not a geographical reality, but simply a way to frame the international environment. They maintain that it only reflects the impact of China’s rise and the reordering of power in Asia. Moreover, each country has its own interpretation of the Indo-Pacific. For Australia, the idea privileges the Pacific over the Indian Ocean.<sup>11</sup> For Japan, it is centred on China.<sup>12</sup> For Indonesia, it is about the potential impact on regional institutions.<sup>13</sup> India’s version of the Indo-Pacific is an extension of its “Look East” policy and the defence of its maritime interests.<sup>14</sup> For all, it encompasses the energy and production supply lines, sea-based infrastructure and maritime security that links this large oceanic space. Therefore, for any conceptual convergence to take place, there is a need to recognise the differences in each actor’s security perceptions, threat priorities and strategic interests.

## THE CONTINENTAL FACTOR

While the Indo-Pacific debate is unending, it is important to consider how continental factors shape the maritime orientation of States and their political leaders, policy-makers and military practitioners.<sup>15</sup> As a case in point, the roots of maritime security are often intertwined with piracy, illicit fishing, migration, smuggling and other ‘blue’ crimes, which are a consequence of social dynamics on land. Further, maritime threats are not easy to handle because of their sheer nature and bandwidth. Consequently, coherence in actors and actions across the oceanic space is difficult to achieve. Often, this leads to a breakdown in the rules of the sea— the Nord Stream gas pipeline attacks offer an example.<sup>16</sup> The Houthi problem is yet another instance of land conflicts spilling over into the maritime domain. In short, heavy reliance on land can generate vulnerabilities at sea.

From a military perspective, these competing notions on the Indo-Pacific also give rise to an impression that the region is primarily a maritime dimension, that the prevailing security imperatives dictate focusing on the maritime space, and that the terrestrial dimension is less relevant. However, landforms remain important. The fact that humans live on land, governments exist on land, act from land,

and that wars are predominantly fought on land for territorial aggrandisement, suggests that land is an important driving factor in the national security dynamics, perhaps along with the maritime dimension.<sup>17</sup> The key question, then, is how the land factor impacts the conceptualisation of the maritime domain and the formulation of national security policy.

Three factors explain this predicament.<sup>18</sup> First, the geographic configuration and size of the countries dictate their strategic orientation. Peninsular, deltaic, or landlocked, these contexts necessitate a 360-degree security approach, prioritising their land borders, festering internal security issues, and the maritime dimension, respectively. The greater the continental context, the stronger the propensity to de-prioritise the maritime concerns in comparison to the security of its land borders.<sup>19</sup> For instance, countries like India, Thailand, Vietnam and South Korea, with contested land borders, have little choice but to prioritise their land forces over building their naval capacity. Moreover, the decisive battles happen on land, be it the defence of the mainland or island territories, thus explaining the centrality of land war-fighting components on land and at sea.<sup>20</sup> For instance, in the case of Taiwan, denying the key terrain to China is a function of the collective capacity of Taiwan and its partners' land, air and naval war-fighting capacities. Similarly, the role of special forces in fighting 'sneaky wars' to protect the littoral or the island territories is a pertinent example of the role of land components in contributing deterrence at sea.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the assertive behaviour of the Chinese naval militia in the South- and East China Seas points towards the close interplay between Beijing's land-based and maritime military components. In the case of India, China's growing military might and its assertive posture along the Himalayas pose a tougher challenge to India. India needs to craft a border guarding strategy that safeguards its rightful claims and also deters China from undertaking any unilateral military action.<sup>22</sup>

Second is the case of island States, or island territories forming large archipelagos—while they, too, need a 360-degree security orientation, their priorities are different.<sup>23</sup> Securing the surrounding territorial waters and the maritime economic zones, approaches to port infrastructure, internal waterways, and coastal defence remain their key priorities. Countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Australia and Japan face such threats. Such States, then, tend to prioritise their maritime security needs over the simplistic terrestrial defence of the island territories. Taiwan is a peculiar case, where its proximity to the Chinese mainland forces it to prefer a strong all-round coastal defence with fixed air defence platforms along the periphery, over the traditional platforms of maritime security,

such as warships and submarines. India's case is equally unique, wherein some of its island territories located away from the mainland require the ability to hold and defend these far-flung island chains with adequate military strength to deter any surreptitious incursions or occupation.

Third, it needs to be appreciated that the land-based military components alone can provide the foundational capabilities of scope and scale—much larger than what the air or naval components can provide.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the sheer nature of their organising and operating principles enables the conduct of large-scale military operations to counter any aggression by a powerful adversary and consolidate gains made by the naval and air forces. Land warfighting components, therefore, are central to a State's military capability to deter and defend its vital interests on land and at sea. Land armies make up nearly 68 per cent of the military forces in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, 85 per cent of India's armed forces are committed towards its land borders. Indonesia's land forces are pegged at 75 per cent, the Philippines' at 70 per cent, and Japan has committed approximately 65 per cent to land war-fighting requirements.

Consequently, land-warfare practitioners tend to argue that any drawdown of land forces can only come at a huge cost, and any strategy will have to balance competing requirements on land, in the air and at sea. As a case in point, India cannot afford to be weak in the Himalayas at the cost of being strong at sea.<sup>25</sup> It is, therefore, no surprise that India, at present, can afford to spend only 14-17 per cent of its defence budget on its navy, even though there might be a strong strategic case to build a capable navy for the Indian Ocean, if not for the whole of the Indo-Pacific. The doubts expressed with regard to patrolling the far seas in the Indo-Pacific region, thus stem from, these budgeting and capability-building dilemmas.

## INDIA'S PREDICAMENT AND CONCERNS

While the Indo-Pacific is a necessary construct as a response to a changing world order, it needs to be firmly rooted within India's national security priorities and aspirations. From a layperson's perspective, India's threat perceptions currently appear more territorial than maritime. India must balance its continental priorities with its evolving maritime interests and oceanic identity in order to make prudent policy choices to allocate resources for the Indo-Pacific. Any pragmatic Indian

strategy, therefore, must avoid an overly simplistic pursuit of the Indo-Pacific ambitions based on securing imaginary red lines at sea. It is essential to carefully balance these concerns with real-world territorial ones, incorporating challenges vis-à-vis China and Pakistan that are proximate in both time and space, and arise from the troublesome and fastidious border-demarkation histories of India's immediate land neighbourhood. Such an approach will enable India to optimise its limited resources and capacities to better prepare for land, air or sea-based threats.

However, a few aspects complicate India's predicament. First, the Chinese have been closely watching the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a geo-construct, within which the US and its partners are advancing their geo-political interests in Asia.<sup>26</sup> Within this context, the role of India and the Indian Ocean stands out as a critical geopolitical factor, highlighting the Chinese efforts to strengthen its position in this region to mitigate vulnerabilities in terms of energy and the passage of its trade through various chokepoints. Second, given the growing significance of the Indian Ocean Region, China is likely to prioritise both its seafaring capacities as well as the force-projection capabilities of its naval assets in the region. How Chinese leaders perceive and assess the emergence of the Indo-Pacific, and India in the Indo-Pacific, will demonstrate the extent to which China will leverage its military capacities to secure its economic vulnerabilities in India's neighbourhood. Third, the Indo-Pacific challenge is escalating amid intensifying US-China rivalry. For India, the policy dilemma creates a 360-degree national security challenge, in which the territorial dimension presently outweighs that of maritime security. Until this shifts in favour of its oceanic interests, India will have to make do with fewer choices at sea. Consequently, some experts argue that robust 'sea-denial' rather than 'sea-control' might be a more pragmatic naval strategy for India, with technology choices in the form of undersea capabilities, providing the best bang for the buck.<sup>27</sup>

## MAKING POLICY CHOICES

The widening strategic gap with China will put to the test the policy choices that India wishes to make in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>28</sup> Whether these are securing India's sea-lines of communication, protecting maritime choke points, or fortifying its island territories, prioritisation would require developing a cogent and coherent oceanic identity for India. How to tailor its strengths and vulnerabilities at sea, without

over-polarising the oceanic space it aspires to secure, and without losing sight of its territorial vulnerabilities along the unsettled northern borders with China, is the key challenge that policymakers and practitioners confront today.

Three aspects are pertinent here. First, the extent and direction of India's oceanic identity require clarification. Does it weigh westwards towards the Gulf region, or eastwards to the Malacca Straits, and in that case, to what extent into the Pacific Ocean? These policy choices might help prioritise India's maritime security agenda with greater precision, rather than trying to deploy and operate throughout the entirety of the Indo-Pacific. Second, how can the Indian State break away from its continental outlook? Is it feasible in the near term, and how could India create conditions for itself to shift from a continental mindset to balance and prioritise its maritime contexts? This transition would be unlikely until China and India find a mutually acceptable solution to resolve the land-border issue. Therefore, India's land power components will remain crucial in shaping the environment on land and at sea, shaping foundational capabilities both in scope and scale, to counter aggression in the continental and maritime contexts.

## CONCLUSION

Security debates in maritime-driven contexts frequently omit land-centric sub-continental concerns. Balancing India's maritime priorities with its continental concerns is paramount, especially given China's bellicosity towards India's land borders and its likely future assertiveness in the Indian Ocean region. For India's policymakers, being swayed by the strategic rhetoric of its extra-regional partners in the Indo-Pacific can be tempting; however, such a rhetoric could lead to miscalculations in its strategic choices. Given India's limited military capacities, constrained economics, and its substantial strategic asymmetry with China, it is far more prudent to focus on consolidating its primary area of interest in the Indian Ocean region.

## ENDNOTES

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