



Evolving Power Game in Indo-Pacific Region and India

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Abstract

The global geo economic power shift from the West to East (Asia), the growing geo-strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and availability of vast opportunities in this region has resulted in cooperation and competition among the powers of the world. India being one of the major stakeholders in this region is also involved in this “power game”. In present scenario, India has been recognized as the potential power in economic and strategic terms. It has been endowed with energetic and vibrant culture, multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy. Because of geo-cultural and historical linkages, the Indo-Pacific region holds a very important place in India’s foreign policy. The new evolving power game has forced India to participate actively in this region.

Keywords: Geo-economic, Region, Strategic, Engagement, Assertiveness.

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a significant geostrategic space and a theatre of Great Power competition and rivalry among the regional and external powers. While the economic cooperation between them has significantly grown in recent past, the geostrategic and geopolitical framework remains very uncertain. In essence, the emerging trends and issues in the Indo-Pacific offer unique opportunities as well as daunting challenges to the nations. It in fact, represents the centre of gravity of the world’s especially hydrocarbons which fuel the industrial engines of the world’s economies. The established and emerging powers are competing over these resources. In recent years, with the global economic power shift, it has swiftly emerged as a centre of international trade and investments. It indeed embodies a large market which is defined by nearly half of the world’s population. This is obvious from the economic issues currently dominating the regional politics. ¹ In

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this context regional peace and stability, freedom of navigation and maritime security have become very important as over 90 per cent of the world's trade by volume is by sea. The region consists of many of the world's vital choke points for global commerce, including the Straits of Malacca which is very critical for the growth of world economy. In addition, the boom in port construction has also heightened the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific and this will generate greater commercial traffic and the possibility for greater strategic competition. In the recent years the increasing flow of raw material, oil and gas into the region has led to the rise of Asia. Labour, consumer goods and capital are also increasingly flowing from Asia to other regions of the world. This region has become the global economic growth and development.ⁱⁱ

India's Interests in the Indo-Pacific

During the cold war period, this region had not been part of Indian foreign policy. Most of the countries from the Asia-Pacific region and India have been remained in the opposite groups and the historical and civilizational relations had become enervated. Until the 1970s, Indian foreign policy makers considered this region as economically less developed and thus was not attractive for trading and economic partner. In the post-cold war, Indo-Pacific has figured prominently in Indian foreign policy due to several dynamics such as end of the cold war, breakup of the Soviet Union, Chinese assertiveness in region and the Indian Ocean, regionalization trends, India's own political, economic, security situations and Southeast Asia's economic and geostrategic problems were some of the important factors responsible for the changed geopolitical landscape in both the regions.ⁱⁱⁱ India is primarily interested in a geoeconomic engagement of countries of the Indo-Pacific region to sustain India's economic growth and development. This is as true in 2016 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi as it was under prime ministers dating back to P V Narasimha Rao who launched the Look East Policy in 1992. In terms of Indian engagement in the region, the Indo-Pacific term fits easily into India's existing geopolitical formulations, combining as it does the Look South (Indian Ocean) and Look East (Pacific Ocean) setting used in India's "extended neighbourhood" framework^{iv}. The then Indian Ambassador Rao has argued that words like Indo-Pacific reflected wider shift:

"we live in an age of redefinition as the economic center of gravity has shifted towards the Indo-Pacific region....the continuation of economic growth and prosperity...is in many ways linked to the Indo-pacific region, and that we have a stake in a stable, prosperous and secure Indo-pacific region"^v.

Indian policy attempts to connects the Indian economy to its traditional maritime neighbourhood and trading partners, broadly across both sides of Strait of Malacca. Implicit in this policy is the desire for free movement of people, goods, services and investment across the region. Security of

Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCS), freedom of navigation, availability of port infrastructure and non-discriminatory access to markets are some of the basket of issues that ensue from definition of interests. In addition, India sees preserving and promoting the Indian imprint in East Asian, through shared culture, arts and religion as part of its broader interest.^{vi} To safeguard its interests, New Delhi has moved from being a passive ringside observer of East Asian multilateralism in the 1990s to an active participant in balance of power.

In the broad vision this region encompasses the military, economic, and strategic interest of regional stakeholders and their complicated and interdependent relationships. These interests include the United States' ambitious 'pivot' towards Asia, China's advance westwards through initiatives such as the 'Maritime Silk Road' and India's vigour to 'Act East' rather than simply 'Look East'. In this theater of competing national interests it is India that holds an integral role in creating a conducive regional building process. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push for economic reforms and proactive international diplomacy since 2014, India stands as the only partner equal to China and the United States.^{vii}

China Factors

Rising China is clearly a key factor in the Indo-pacific region and its rise is swiftly altering the geostrategic equations in the region. Its assertive foreign policy, growing economic and military power have also changed the strategic environment of the region. Though China's growth has benefited regional countries in the economic field, its increasing expenditure on military modernization have caused major concern for the countries of the region as well as other countries of the world. China's maritime boundary claims, increasing military activities in the South China Sea and nationalist rhetoric s are seen as China's strategy to spread its influence.^{viii} Furthermore, One Belt One Road initiative is also not just symbolic China's emergence at the global stage as a major country but it is also meant to represent China's distinctive diplomatic approach marked by Chinese features, Chinese style and Chinese confidence. India is skeptical about China's involvement in the construction of infrastructure projects under this OBOR initiative in India's neighbourhood including in SriLanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Maldives, and others. Especially, India has been particularly worried about China-Pakistan Economic Corridor(CPEC). Some of the proposed projects under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor are in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir(PoK), which India considers to be its own territory occupied by Pakistan, therefore labels it a disputed territory.^{ix} New Delhi is apprehensive on the risk of military facilities being surreptitiously built in its proximate and broader maritime neighbourhood. On China's 'string of pearls' in the Indian Ocean, India sees

the risk that the Indo-Pacific maritime space that is crucial to its economic interest might get locked into no-go areas, hindering freedom of navigation and imposing higher costs on trade. In the context on China's growing influence over the South China Sea and East China Sea, there is a risk of both accidental and intentional escalation of violence in the region. While India is protected from such conflicts by distance, it will not be immune from indirect economic and security consequences.^x Thus the balance of power also is in a process of a gradual shift, with China and India becoming important stakeholders in the global world order.

USA's Balancing Strategy

As the geostrategic importance of the region has rapidly increasing, the US has redefined its broader foreign policy engagement with the region. It strongly believes that its foreign policy interests would be best served by moving from an earlier emphasis on just the 'Asia-Pacific region' to one based on a broader 'Indo-Pacific region'. It is cautious about china's growing assertion and its aggressive attitude in the region and territorial claims, which are viewed by America as against the international laws and will lead instability in the region. So to protect its national interest, America wants to play a larger and long term role in shaping the region.^{xi} Most of US allies welcome America's this rebalancing strategy. But at the same time, they seek to constructively engage with rising China, which they consider important for the region;s overall peace and prosperity.

Regional Security Architecture

The security environment of the region is complicated by maritime boundary disputes in the SCS, disagreement over territorial water in the Bay of Bengal, Great Power competition, in addition to the emergence of non-traditional security threats such as piracy, drug and human trafficking, terrorism and climate change. There is much more, where India can cooperate with the Asia-Pacific region. Cooperation on borderless issues such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation and piracy is important to strengthen the regional security architecture. Traditional regional distinctions have lost meaning, because of the global nature of the challenges that countries are facing today. There is a need to confront terrorism, which neither respects power, nor heeds size. Today apart from India, even Asia-Pacific regions orderly society is facing this menace. There is a need to protect the common commercial sea lanes, combating piracy, choking off narco-trade and curbing gun-running. There is a need to tackle these problems jointly in a determined manner through regular exchange of experiences, information and intelligence.

Today there is a need to formulate cooperative security framework. The recent trends indicate that the power of technology and a globalised economic system will dominate the world structure. Ethno-

nationalist violence and terrorism fed by extremism are one set of impeding factors, which need to be suppressed and eradicated. Terrorists exploit the freedom which their societies guarantee to the people. It has also become clear to the international community that terrorism can be tackled and curbed only with a global and comprehensive approach.

India's relations with the Asia Pacific region have grown considerably over the last decade, but a vast potential still remains untapped. Asia Pacific region has considerable strengths in the old economy and has lot of ambitions in the new economy. There is a huge potential in this region for developing the mutually beneficial research and business partnerships. India's strategic partners in this region not only seek to further strengthen their ties with India on a wide range of issues, including trade and investment, defence, maritime security, science and technology and disaster management, but also urge India to play a more proactive role in the Indo-pacific and beyond. The US in particular, considers India as a linchpin in its rebalancing strategy. India through its Act East policy could play a positive and stabilizing role in the region and contribute in creating an enabling environment for peace and prosperity. Cooperation and understanding between India, China and UAS would not only decide the future of the Indo-Pacific region, encompassing the East Asia, Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean region, but also the global world order of the 21st century.

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ⁱⁱ Rajiv K Bhatia and Vijay Sakhuja (eds.), **Indo-Pacific Region: Political and Strategic Prospects**, Vij Books, New Delhi, 2014, pp.xi-xii.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bawa Singh, "New Geopolitical Great Game of Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Options for India", at <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2016/05/22/new-geopolitical-great-game-of-indo-pacific-challenges-and-options-for-india/>, accessed on 5/1/2018.

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^v Nirupama Rao "India and the Asia-Pacific: Expanding Engagement, 5 December, available at <http://www.indianembassy.org/prdetail1833>, accessed on 5/1/2018.

^{vi} David Brewster(ed), "**Indo-Pacific Maritime Security: Challenges and Cooperation**", National Security Collage, Australian National University, Canberra, 2016.

^{vii} Soyen Park and Ramandeep Singh, "India's inevitable role in an emerging Indo-Pacific", at, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/12/03/indias-inevitable-role-in-an-emerging-indo-pacific/>, accessed on 6/1/2018.

^{viii} Bishoyi, **op.cit. n.1.**

^{ix} Antara Ghosal Singh, "China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative and India's Approach, In Gurpreet S. Khurana and Antra Ghosal Singh (eds.), **India and China Constructing a Peaceful Order in the Indo-Pacific**, National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, 2016, pp.23-32.

^x Brewster, **op.cit. n.6.**

^{xi} Barak Obama, at, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliamne, accessed on 5/1/2018.