

India and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Present

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There can be no objective and singular definition of the Indo-Pacific, one can only provide an Indian definition, a Japanese definition, a US definition, an ASEAN definition, etc. This is not to say that there are no common grounds in these definitions, there are as many commonalities as there are differences, and this is what makes this topic so hot and dynamic. The geopolitical reality of the Indo-Pacific perfectly represents a great power rivalry at the systemic level and also a perfect regional security complex. In this complex matrix, this paper will seek to focus on the Indo-Pacific from the perspective of India. While the term "Indo" in the Indo-Pacific does not mean India, it does refer to the Indian Ocean and India is the most important power in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, it is very important to fully understand the Indian perspective. The paper will begin by outlining the origin of the concept and thereafter the challenges in the Indian approach to the Indo-Pacific and the future prospects.

THE CONCEPT OF INDO-PACIFIC

The concept of Indo-Pacific is not as new a concept as is sometimes portrayed. The first murmur of

the concept was heard as far back as 1920 when the German politician Karl Haushofer used the term "*Indopazifischen Raum*" (Indo-Pacific Space) to talk about the resurgence of Asia (Khurana, 2019). The term was then heard in the oral discourse in Australia's strategic circles. In its current understanding, it was used by a noted New Zealand analyst Peter Cozens in 2005 when he wrote a paper for the journal called *Maritime Affairs* (Khurana, 2019).

The first decade of the 21st century saw increasing concern in India and Japan about the rise of China. Chinese presence around India was described as a "string of pearls" that was surrounding India (Ramachandran, 2007). China may not have been deliberately surrounding India, but India was getting surrounded. For Japan, there was an increasing need to secure the waters of the regions through which a significant percentage of Japan's shipping passed. In 2005, conversations discussing Indo-Pacific between the think tanks of India and Japan began emerging, catching on with the strategic concerns visible in the two countries. The term was used to describe the organic correlation of the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. The term, however, only gained real currency after the

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made his speech in the Indian parliament in 2007. He talked about the "confluence of the two seas" referring to the Indian and the Pacific oceans. He also proposed the idea of an "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" (Thankachan, 2018). This was the first deliberate and political conceptualization of the "Indo-Pacific".

The early conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific saw actual implementation in the form of the Quadrilateral Initiative in 2007. In 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed the formation of a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue which would see the participation of the United States, Australia, India and Japan (Panda, 2014). This grouping has been called the "QUAD". This was followed by a joint naval exercise between India, Japan, United States, Australia and Singapore. China was very vocal about its protests against the grouping after the conclusion of the exercise. The initial success of the "QUAD" did not last long because in early 2008 when Kevin Rudd took over as the Australian Prime Minister he decided to withdraw from the QUAD (Rai, 2018).

The early death of the QUAD did not mean the death of the concept of the Indo-Pacific. Indo-Pacific was a natural outcome



Ships of the United States, India and Japan in the Bay of Bengal during exercise Malabar 2017 [US Navy]

of the geopolitical and geo-economic realities of the region. However, the concept came into full fruition after 2010. In 2010, the concept got a boost when the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used the term "Indo-Pacific" in the context of greater cooperation with the Indian Navy (Scott, 2018). However, the US continued to use the outdated concept of the "Asia-Pacific" to describe the region (Khurana, 2019). The term gained the maximum mileage however, only when the Australian government articulated it in its Defence White Paper in 2013. Thereafter, it published its Indo-Pacific strategy in April 2019. Subsequently, the ASEAN published its Indo-Pacific strategy in June 2019 (ASEAN Outlook, 2019). Following this, the United States published its Indo-Pacific strategy in November 2019 (US State Dep, 2019). India is the only member in the QUAD that has not published its Indo-Pacific strategy. Countries considered traditionally out of the corpus of the Indo-Pacific have also taken a very keen interest in the region. This is reflected in the Indo-Pacific strategies published by Netherlands, France and Germany, in that order. This shows the relevance and the importance acquired by the region.

THERE ARE MANY COMPLEXITIES IN THE INDIAN APPROACH TO THE INDO-PACIFIC. THE FIRST AND FOREMOST IS THE HESITATION BY INDIA TO PUBLISH AN OFFICIAL STRATEGY ON THE INDO-PACIFIC.

There are many complexities in the Indian approach to the Indo-Pacific. The first and foremost is the hesitation by India to publish an official strategy on the Indo-Pacific. The closest India has come is when Prime Minister Modi used the term Indo-Pacific ten times during his speech at the Shangri La dialogue in 2018 (MEA, 2018). This was significant as this was India's first official iteration of the term at the highest level. Since then, India has taken several steps in this direction. India conducted the trilateral Malabar naval exercises in the Indian Ocean in November 2020 with the participation of Australia also. Australia last participated in 2007. Facing objections from China, India has been reluctant in including Australia in the Malabar naval exercises which was originally a bilateral naval exercise between India and the United States and later saw the participation of Japan as a permanent invitee. Moreover, the year 2020 also saw the second Foreign Ministers meeting of the Quadrilateral Initiative or QUAD being held in Tokyo in October 2020. This included the four QUAD members, namely, India, Australia, United States and Japan. The first QUAD Foreign Ministers meeting was held in 2007, however,

following objections from China it was once again, called off due to the withdrawal by Australia after the Australian Prime Minister withdrew from the meeting. The QUAD was revived in 2019 when the second ministerial meeting was held in 2019 and the latest was held in 2020.

Apart from the Malabar exercises and the QUAD ministerial meetings, India has shown its commitment to the Indo-Pacific in several other ways. India's Ministry of External Affairs established a new division called the Indo-Pacific division in April 2019 (MEA, 2019). The territorial divisions of India's Ministry of External Affairs are crucial for policy planning, therefore the move shows the importance of the Indo-Pacific for India. The Indo-Pacific Division deals with matters relating to the Indo-Pacific, India-ASEAN relations, East Asia Summit, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). In the spirit of the Indo-Pacific, the Ministry has also created another division called the Oceania division. This division will focus on South-East Asian nations, Pacific Island



Indian "Chicken's Neck" and the project for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor [Wikipedia and the CPEC website]

states and the larger Indo-Pacific. The idea behind the division is to look at countries from Thailand to the Pacific islands as belonging to one region. The division will be headed by an Additional Secretary ranked officer. This is also an indication of the importance of the Indo-Pacific. In November 2019, India has also proposed an Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (Saha, Mishra, 2020). This initiative is intended to ensure a safe, secure and stable maritime domain. The focus areas include creating partnerships among interested states in enhancing maritime security; sustainably using marine resources; disaster prevention & management.

TWO MAJOR CHALLENGES: CHINA AND PAKISTAN

There are several steps in the right direction that India has taken, however, there are several challenges that continue to remain. These challenges can be summed up in two words, one is China and the other is Pakistan. China is a major determinant of India's Indo-Pacific policy. Most of the major policy decisions that India takes and does not take with respect to the region may be

considered to be linked to China directly or indirectly (Pant, 2006). China is India's second-largest trade partner, and India depends on China for nearly 14 per cent of its imports. China has slowly but steadily captured a large share of India's markets for products that include critical sectors such as telecom and electronics, and pharmaceutical ingredients.

China is a major determinant of India's foreign policy decisions also because of the security implications for India that are associated with China. The most crucial of these security implications arise from the shared borders in the North and Northeast of India. India shares about 3488 km of its borders with China, a significant portion of which is disputed. China's military superiority coupled with this proximity makes it a highly risky business for India to take an overly aggressive stance against China (Pant, 2006). Moreover, the northeast of India which shares a large border with India is very fragile in terms of security because it is connected to India only through a narrow strip of land called "chicken's neck" corridor (Haider, 2020). China can occupy this strip of land and very easily

CHINESE NAVAL PRESENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN HAS BEEN INCREASING SUBSTANTIALLY. CHINESE SUBMARINES ARE OFTEN SIGHTED IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION, OFTEN UNDER THE CLAIM OF ANTIPIRACY ACTIVITIES.

cut-off mainland India from the north-eastern region of India. The northeast of India is also fragile because it has a history of separatist and insurgent tendencies. The region is also backward in terms of socio-economic development. All these border security risks became very real for India in the recent present, when India was involved with China in the Doklam crisis in 2017, and the Galwan valley crisis in 2020 (Kaura, 2020).

The shared borders and the disputed boundaries are not the only cause of the security concerns for India with China. Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean has been increasing substantially. Chinese submarines are often sighted in the Indian Ocean Region, often under the claim of antipiracy activities. Just between 2013 and 2018, at least eight deployments of Chinese submarines occurred in the Indian Ocean (Mishra, 2020). In 2019, Chinese submarines were frequenting the northern and eastern Indian Ocean. Moreover, the ports and maritime infrastructure acquired recently by China such as Gwadar (in Pakistan), Hambantota (in Sri Lanka) and in Djibouti have added to India's



anxieties and are also likely to increase the frequency of Chinese submarine activity in the future (Mishra, 2020).

China has also been increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region which is traditionally considered an Indian sphere of influence. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has developed infrastructure and increased its influence in India's neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. China has also been interfering in the political affairs of countries like Nepal and contributing to the development of anti-Indian sentiments in these countries. The term "string of pearls" is used to describe the Chinese encirclement of India, like a string around it.

The above-mentioned factors taken in combination complicate India's relationship with China in a unique way. Due to the trade dependence, Chinese power superiority and proximity, India finds it difficult to take a strong stance against China. But increased Chinese activity and aggression in the Indian Ocean Region combined with the encirclement of India, and the recent clashes in Galwan and Doklam also necessitate a tough stance towards China. This complication is reflected in India's seemingly contradictory foreign policy approach, wherein, on the one hand, India participates in forwarding the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, participates in the QUAD meetings; conducts the Malabar naval exercises with the QUAD partners; stays out of the Belt and Road Initiative; launches the Asia Africa Peace Corridor with Japan; starts the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative; has been significantly strengthening its relationship with the United States and Japan; among other things. But on the other hand, India is part of BRICS, RIC, SCO, AIIB; India hesitates to call the QUAD an alliance or to give an overt impression of it being a group focused against China; and until recently India was very reluctant

to allow Australia to participate in the Malabar naval exercises etc. (Rajagopalan, 2020)

The second major challenge for India, that influences its approach to the Indo-Pacific is Pakistan. Indian national security approach is Pakistan-centric, and therefore India's national security strategy is focused on land combat on the western border. Indian navy, therefore, is also lacking in terms of capacity and capability. Moreover, the Indian maritime security strategy lists the western Pacific as a secondary area of interest for India and the Indian Ocean as a primary area of interest. This is a major hole in the Indian approach to the Indo-Pacific (Tej and Mukherjee, 2018). The Western Pacific is not of direct relevance to India, while for the other QUAD partners -the US, Australia and Japan-western Pacific is more important than the Indian Ocean. Despite the rhetoric on the Indo-Pacific by the US, Japan and Australia, it cannot be denied that they do not consider the Indian Ocean as an area of primary importance. While the US has renamed its Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific command and India has created an Indo-Pacific division within the Ministry of External Affairs, the ground realities are not easy to change.

China and Pakistan have separately posed significant security threats to India, however, what worries India more is the strengthening of the China-Pakistan nexus. Indian strategic experts have always been wary of a two-front war against India by Pakistan and China. China has religiously supported and backed Pakistan's nuclear programme. It has also been an ardent supporter of Pakistan on the Kashmir issue with India. China has been providing Pakistan with military expertise and equipment for decades. The most significant development in the China-Pakistan relationship happened when Pakistan allowed China to build the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative to pass through a dis-

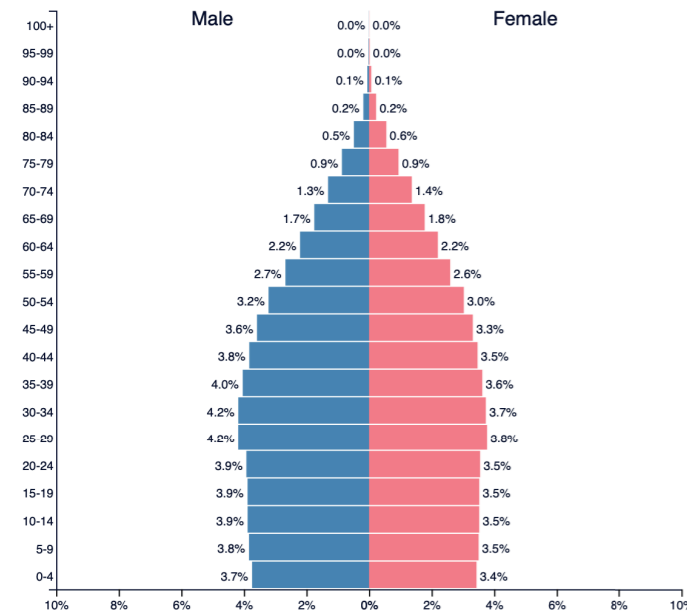
CHINA AND PAKISTAN HAVE SEPARATELY POSED SIGNIFICANT SECURITY THREATS TO INDIA, HOWEVER, WHAT WORRIES INDIA MORE IS THE STRENGTHENING OF THE CHINA-PAKISTAN NEXUS. INDIAN STRATEGIC EXPERTS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN WARY OF A TWO-FRONT WAR AGAINST INDIA BY PAKISTAN AND

puted territory (for India and Pakistan) called the Gilgit Baltistan. This is also the reason why India did not participate in the Belt and Road Initiative of China when even China's traditional adversaries like Japan participated in BRI at some level (Jacob, 2019). Participation in BRI would mean a tacit acceptance of Pakistan's claim to the disputed territory.

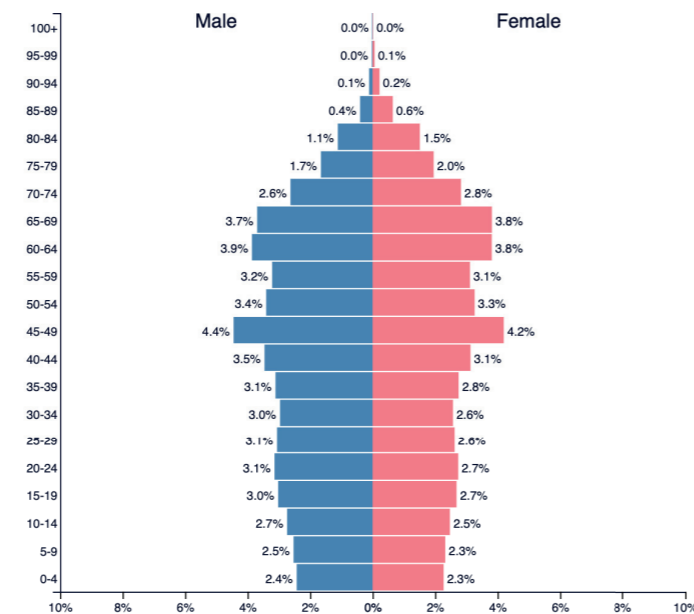
THE MOST IMPORTANT POWER IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

While the word "Indo" in Indo-Pacific refers to the Indian Ocean and not India, India is the most important power in the region. India is crucial to the success of the strategy of Free and Open Indo-Pacific and therefore these contradictions and complexities in India's foreign policy approach must get resolved soon. The prospects for this happening seem brighter in the present situation. India's actions have been more promising and encouraging since the culmination of the Galwan valley clash between India and China that began in May 2020 and is still ongoing. Unlike the previous clashes, 20 Indian soldiers lost their lives in the Galwan valley crisis. Taking a tough stance against China, India banned the import of several products from China and in another major blow to China also banned 247 Chinese apps in India. While analysts believe that this is not enough on the part of India, the actions are more than what India did after the Doklam crisis in 2017. India stood its ground in Doklam and belied Chinese assumption that India will not respond to Chinese constructions in Doklam. However, after the crisis, India took a series of appeasement measures in favour of China. India did not maintain official contact with the Dalai Lama and Tibet's government in exile. Moreover, India proposed an annual informal bilateral summit that was accepted by Xi Jinping. Two informal summits have already been held and the leaders of the two states have

India ▼ 2035



China ▼ 2035



Demographic projection for India and China by 2035 [populationpyramid.net]

THE INDIAN OCEAN IS THE WORLD'S BUSIEST TRADE ROUTE AND 80 PERCENT OF THE WORLD'S MARITIME OIL TRADE PASSES THROUGH THE INDIAN OCEAN. INDIA IS THE ONLY COUNTRY THAT CAN PROVIDE SIGNIFICANT NAVAL PROTECTION TO THESE SIGNIFICANT SEA LANES OF COMMUNICATION.

had 14 other meetings.

India's response to the Galwan valley crisis in 2020 has been much stronger than the Doklam crisis and this provides an insight into the future of India-China relationship and the future of the Indo-Pacific in general. The outgoing US ambassador to India, Kenneth Juster revealed in his farewell speech in January 2021, that the US was working in close cooperation with India in managing the ongoing border clash with China. This has come as a very crucial revelation and reflects a very strategic shift away from India's aged adherence to the approach of "strategic autonomy" in its foreign policy. The policy of strategic autonomy may be defined as an "inherent ability and desire of a nation to take independent foreign policy decisions to realize her core national interests" (Raja Mohan, 2018). In India's case, this is a Cold War hangover and a combination of realism and the spirit of the non-aligned movement. As part of this, India refrains from favouring any particular power and in the context of the Cold War, it refrained from favouring either the United States or the

Soviet Union. However, it is well known that India has been closer to Russia since her independence in 1947. India maintains close defence ties with Russia, which is quite irreplaceable for India. This has begun to slowly change as India is strengthening its relationship with the United States, especially since the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014. As part of this, India has signed a series of agreements and defence pacts with the United States in the recent years. This includes the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) signed in August 2016, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) signed in 2018 and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), which was signed in October 2020. But over and above the defence pacts, the cooperation with the United States in managing the border clash with China is a significant milestone for India as it marks an almost paradigmatic shift in India's foreign policy approach of "strategic autonomy".

India is crucial to the success of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Strategy. India is the most important power in the Indian Ocean Region and there can be no Indo-Pacific without India. The Indian Ocean is the world's busiest trade route and 80 percent of the world's maritime oil trade passes through the Indian Ocean. India is the only country that can provide significant naval protection to these significant sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean. While the US and Japan can provide some level of patrol and protection, the advantage India has in terms of proximity cannot be replaced. India is also soon to overtake China as the most populous country in the world and unlike China, has a very favourable demographic dividend. India has more than 50 per cent of its population below the age of 25 and more than 65 percent of its population below the age of 35. India's demographic dividend is believed to peak in 2041 when the share of the working-age population (aged 20-59) will be 59 per cent of the population of the country. In the upcoming decades, this demo-

graphic dividend is expected to add 2 percent GDP per capita growth annually to India. India is presently the fifth largest economy in the world in terms of GDP and the third largest in terms of PPP. Global Firepower ranked India fourth in terms of the global power index in 2020. India is thus a very promising power with great power ambitions and is slowly but steadily shedding its inhibitions of taking a stronger stance against China and discarding the outdated principle of "strategic autonomy". The Galwan valley dispute has damaged a very carefully and painfully established dialogue mechanisms and a working relationship between India and China, and as the Indian government maintains, it is unlikely to be "business as usual" with China anytime shortly. Nonetheless, in the absence of another significant provocation by China, India is unlikely to retaliate very strongly against China. India will continue to prioritise its domestic economic growth as it is in a very crucial

THE GALWAN VALLEY DISPUTE HAS DAMAGED A WORKING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA. NONETHELESS, IN THE ABSENCE OF ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT PROVOCATION BY CHINA, INDIA IS UNLIKELY TO RETALIATE VERY STRONGLY AGAINST CHINA.

juncture of its economic development and continues to cope with significant levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

It does not escape even a casual observer of the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific that the regional politics is rife with complexities and contradictions. India is a significant player in the Indo-Pacific but has a conflicted policy towards China. The areas of interests for India and the other powers in the Indo-Pacific must find more convergence. India should list the western pacific as a primary area of interest and build naval capability conducive to act in the Western Pacific. The United States, Japan and Australia must increase their focus in the Indian Ocean. Combatting terrorism is a major priority for India, and the US, Japan and Australia should support India's stance on terrorism in various multilateral institutions and in anti-terrorism operations. India must work to incorporate

regional organisations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) into the Indo-Pacific. India should use strong regional organisations such as the IORA to assert the importance of the Indian Ocean Region and to ensure that the Indian Ocean region is not marginalised in the larger narrative and future course of action focusing on the Indo-Pacific. IORA will also expand the geographic scope of the Indo-Pacific by including states like Oman, UAE, Yemen and East African states more actively in the Indo-Pacific. India must also closely engage European countries such as the Netherlands, France and Germany in the region, who have published an Indo-Pacific strategy. This becomes especially important in the event of the increasing Chinese influence in Europe. The European countries must do the same concerning India, and aptly identify and appreciate the potential of India and engage India meaningfully •

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