

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

This article describes the increasingly tangible concept of an Indo-Pacific region, floated by the US for connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans through cooperation between various countries. The origins of the concept however, make many countries cautious about endorsing it. Some see it as related to the sharpening of Japan–China territorial differences in the East China Sea. China and Russia regard the initiative as part of a strategy to keep them under control and challenge their presence in both oceans. ASEAN is wary of it developing into a new security forum, reducing the organisation’s centrality in developing a regional security architecture. Nonetheless, India as the foremost power in the Indian Ocean has gradually forged a naval partnership with the US and Japan to protect maritime security and freedom of navigation without intending for it to become a military alliance against any nation.

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The “Indo-Pacific region” as a concept has not yet found acceptance by the international community as a whole, or even all the countries belonging to the region, much less the two major powers that are geographically part of it. China has concerns about the concept, because it views it as part of an American strategy to “ring fence” it. Russia is not in favour, as it believes the concept revives bloc politics harking back to the Cold War and targets it. China and Russia continue to use the term Asia-Pacific, an older concept that includes them and has an economic rather than a security thrust and both countries are members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. The Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) too has not accepted Indo-Pacific as a working

concept, as it is wary of it developing into a new security forum, centred on maritime security, reducing the organisation's centrality in developing a regional security architecture in Asia. Even India's neighbours in the Indian Ocean do not subscribe to the concept diplomatically. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka hesitate to adopt it in deference to Chinese sensitivities. Pakistan, as a close ally of China, will not accept it. Europe, barring France, which has territories in the Indian and Pacific oceans, is not a significant player in the Indo-Pacific region, although the European Union is increasingly concerned about China's geopolitical ambitions reflected in its Belt and Road Initiative, including its maritime component.

The origins of the Indo-Pacific concept make many countries cautious about endorsing it. Some see it as related to the sharpening of Japan-China territorial differences in the East China Sea and Prime Minister's Shinzō Abe's desire to amend Japan's constitution to allow the country to play a more active regional defence role.

When Abe spoke of the "confluence of the two seas" in his address to the Indian parliament in 2007, he made a strategic link between the Indian and Pacific oceans. Later in 2012, when he talked of Asia's democratic security diamond, he made clear his concerns about China, stating that peace, stability and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean were inseparable from that in the Indian Ocean. He stated that Japan, as one of the oldest seafaring democracies in Asia, must play a greater role alongside Australia, India and the United States of America (US) in preserving the common good in both regions. He expressed concern about the South China Sea becoming "Lake Beijing", with the Chinese positioning

nuclear submarines there to threaten neighbours. He added that Japan was willing to invest, to the greatest extent possible, its capabilities in the security diamond. He also saw India, sitting at the western end of the Malacca Straits, deserving greater emphasis and invited Britain and France to make a comeback to the region. With this background, one cannot yet talk of broad-based international cooperation in

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the Indo–Pacific, though one may certainly talk of reinforced India–Japan–US–Australia cooperation in the region, with France endorsing it and the European Union paying increasing attention to it.

India took a major strategic step by signing a Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia–Pacific and Indian Ocean Region with the US. Through this New Delhi has accepted that the security of the Asia–Pacific and the Indian Ocean is linked and the two countries share concerns and responsibilities to maintain peace and security in the extended maritime domain. Burden sharing is logically a part of this by way of logistics cooperation, interoperability and the build-up of India’s maritime capabilities. With the US’s official adoption of the term Indo–Pacific, India’s strategic role in this large maritime space has acquired greater centrality, underscored by the US Pacific Command being renamed the Indo–Pacific Command. India, by virtue of its geography, dominates the Indian Ocean physically. Its navy, the fifth largest in the world, is the most powerful regionally. The US, through Diego Garcia, has a strong military presence in the Indian Ocean and can move huge naval assets to these waters whenever required. In the Western Pacific, the US deploys the Seventh Fleet and has military bases and personnel on the ground as part of an alliance system. India and the US are therefore complementary partners in the Indo–Pacific.

Maritime threats to peace and stability in the Indian Ocean do not emanate from India or the US. India has no unresolved maritime disputes with its neighbours barring Pakistan in the Kutch area of the Arabian Sea. The maritime dispute with Bangladesh has been resolved with New Delhi accepting the judgment of the Court of Arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The Indian Ocean has no sovereignty disputes over islands or activities to reclaim reefs and rocks except for the US’s occupation of the Chagos Islands ceded by the United Kingdom in a transaction found illegal by the International Court of Justice. The US, on the other hand, has no sovereignty claims in the Western Pacific and is not involved in any maritime disputes with regional countries. It has treaty obligations to defend its regional allies and is determined to exercise freedom of navigation and overflight in the region in accordance with international law. The source of current maritime threats in the Indo–Pacific is China. In the South China Sea, its illegal nine-dash line, reclamation of rocks and reefs and their militarisation as well as disputes with Brunei, Indonesia, Japan (Senkaku Islands), the Philippines (Scarborough Shoal) and Vietnam (Spratly Islands) have raised tensions. Beijing has stalled negotiations on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea because it wants to present a *fait accompli* to its neighbours. Its massive naval expansion plans

are a cause of concern, coupled with admittedly declared and legitimate ambitions to develop a blue water navy to protect its sea lanes of communication and rapidly growing overseas assets.

China has been expanding its presence in the Indian Ocean by developing ports in key countries such as Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor linking Sinkiang/Xinjiang to Gwadar in Pakistan gives China access to the Arabian Sea and the China–Myanmar Corridor gives it access to the Bay of Bengal. These two corridors are intended to ease China’s Malacca dilemma but more importantly link the land and maritime dimensions of the Belt and Road Initiative. Thus for the first time in history a single power could dominate both the Asian landmass and the seas around it. This would be a huge geopolitical development with serious security implications for the rest of the world. China is building dual use ports in the Indian Ocean. In addition to its base in Djibouti, it will almost certainly establish a naval base in Pakistan facilitating its expansion towards the Gulf and Africa. Chinese submarines have already surfaced in Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

India and the US have been conducting the Malabar Exercise in the Indian Ocean for some years now. The complexity and scale of the exercise has grown with every passing year and it has now become a trilateral exercise with Japan’s participation. Protecting sea lines of communication, combating piracy, smuggling, terrorism, trafficking and supporting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief are some of the shared objectives. India has signed a logistics as well as an interoperability agreement with the US and has acquired advanced American maritime surveillance capabilities (P8I aircraft). India, the US and Japan have held naval exercises in the Sea of Japan as well.

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has been also exploring for oil in the Vietnamese exclusive economic zone. India and Japan support a free and open Indo–Pacific and politically cooperate with each other to affirm this. The foundation of defence ties between the two countries is also being built up and in 2018 they signed a Maritime Domain Awareness Agreement covering white shipping. This creates the basis for intelligence and information sharing going beyond commercial shipping in the future, especially as Japan has a potent maritime reconnaissance fleet. A logistics (acquisition and cross servicing type) agreement between the two countries has been discussed, which would undoubtedly contribute to regional peace and security in the Indo–Pacific by allowing India access to Japan’s base in Djibouti. Such an agreement would also have the potential of the Indian navy obtaining access to bases in Okinawa and thus sustaining itself in the Western Pacific. India and Japan have also agreed to develop “smart islands” in India’s territorial domain, opening doors to Indo–Japanese collaboration in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Defence cooperation between India and Australia has been stepped up as well with a focus on the Indo–Pacific. In early September 2019, India’s naval chief visited Australia and in November 2019, India’s defence minister attended the Australia–India bilateral meeting in Bangkok. The expectation is that a mutual logistics support agreement, information exchange and a broader maritime cooperation agreement important for maritime domain awareness, would be signed to elevate the strategic partnership. Bilateral naval exercises with Australia have been scaled up, with the third expanded AusIndex exercise (with a thousand strong Australian naval contingent) conducted off the coast of Vishakhapatnam on the east coast of India in April 2019. It included four frontline ships with integral helicopters, P8I and P8A maritime reconnaissance anti-submarine warfare aircraft and 55 American and 20 New Zealand military personnel present as witnesses. According to an Indian government statement, the enhanced complexity of this exercise is indicative of the interoperability of the two naval forces. Further, the two navies are co-chairs for the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium working group on information sharing and interoperability with the inaugural meeting hosted by Australia in June 2019. So far however, Australia has not been included in the trilateral India–US–Japan Malabar Exercise.

Nonetheless, the Quad concept (India, US, Japan, Australia) has been gaining greater traction and four official level meetings have been held until now. A major political decision was taken with the first meeting of Quad foreign ministers being held on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly session at New York. India believes in keeping the Quad separate from the Indo–

Pacific concept, as it is narrower in scope, involving only four countries and has a military dimension in addition to a political one. Australia, for example, is keen to join the Malabar Exercise, to make it a quadrilateral exercise. While the Quad is separate from the Indo-Pacific concept, it will bolster the latter as an additional arrangement to promote peace, stability and the rule of law in the region. The agenda of the Quad goes beyond maritime security, with issues of counterterrorism, cyber security, humanitarian and disaster relief, development finance, etc also being discussed.

The Belt and Road Initiative announced in 2013 has won Beijing many constituencies in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN's biggest trade partner, China has offered mega infrastructure projects to some member states, targeting key countries like Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand for connectivity projects. Importantly, it has succeeded in reclaiming and militarising the South China Sea islands without triggering US intervention while dividing ASEAN on the issue. The US under President Donald Trump is no longer seen as a reliable security and economic ally. Trump's policies towards North Korea have caused uncertainty in the region. In addition, China's trade and investment ties with Japan, Australia and the US are huge and even with India are considerable. This has a bearing on how far other countries in the Indo-Pacific region would challenge China head-on. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership negotiations, from which the US is absent, have been accelerated. This despite Washington walking out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, thus bolstering Chinese economic domination of the Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN is concerned about mounting US-China tensions and would rather not have to choose between the two. While the US is important to it for security, China is geographically and culturally close and important for trade. The member states would rather avoid a binary choice, preferring instead to have the

New Delhi views Beijing as its biggest strategic adversary but has to recognise the reality of the Indo-Pacific concept not covering the land threat from China, the China-Pakistan nexus, the geopolitical danger of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the exclusion of the Arabian Sea from the ambit of America's Indo-Pacific Command and so on. India therefore needs to keep China engaged, knowing that it has to address those issues on its own.

best of both worlds. Similar concerns have been expressed in Australia, given the vital economic ties it has with China. Japan too must strike a balance between its massive economic interests in China and concern about the latter's aggressive maritime conduct. New Delhi views Beijing as its biggest strategic adversary but has to recognise the reality of the Indo-Pacific concept not covering the land threat from China, the China-Pakistan nexus, the geopolitical danger of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the exclusion of the Arabian Sea from the ambit of America's Indo-Pacific Command and so on. India therefore needs to keep China engaged, knowing that it has to address those issues on its own. The unpredictability of Trump's America does not help forge truly robust policies towards China by others.

In this context, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018 deserves attention, as it dealt extensively with the Indo-Pacific concept. He mentioned how the Malacca Strait and South China Sea connect India to the Pacific and to most major partners—ASEAN, Japan, the Republic of Korea, China and the Americas. He noted that India has been helping to improve maritime security for its friends and partners and promoting collective security through fora like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. It has been also advancing a comprehensive agenda of regional cooperation through the Indian Ocean Rim Association, besides working with partners beyond the Indian Ocean Region to ensure that global transit routes remain safe and free for all. In his speech, Modi recognised that an important pillar of the India-US partnership is the shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Importantly, he noted that India's relations with Indonesia have been upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, with a common vision for maritime cooperation in the region. Indian armed forces, especially the navy, have been building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific for peace and security, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. They train, exercise and conduct goodwill missions across the maritime zone. For example, with Singapore, India has the longest uninterrupted naval exercise, which is in its twenty-fifth year now. India has been working with partners like Vietnam as well to build mutual capabilities.

According to Modi, the Indo-Pacific is a natural region. The ten countries of Southeast Asia connect the two great oceans in both the geographical and civilisational sense. Inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality and unity lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific concept. India does not see the concept as implying a strategy or as alluding to a club plotting against any country. Its

vision is a positive one with diverse elements. One, it stands for a free, open, inclusive region. It includes all nations in this geography and others beyond with a stake in it. Two, Southeast Asia is at its centre and ASEAN has been and will be central to its future. Three, a common rules based order for the region should be evolved through dialogue, which protects the sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength. These rules and norms should be based on the consent of all, not on the power of the few. It also means that when nations make international commitments, they must uphold them. Four, all should have equal access as a right under international law to the use of common spaces of the sea and in the air with freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law. Five, the connectivity initiatives in the region must be based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability. They must empower nations, not place them under impossible debt burden. They must promote trade, not strategic competition.

India has been cooperating with Indonesia and Singapore to allay ASEAN concerns about the Indo-Pacific concept reducing its centrality in developing a regional security architecture in Asia. India has strong ties with Vietnam and continues to pay attention to Myanmar as a key country for developing east-west connectivity from India through Myanmar to Thailand and eventually on to Vietnam. India has patiently watched the situation in the Maldives turn in its favour. It has been keeping a close eye on Chinese activities in Sri Lanka and has stepped up its own political economic and cultural engagement with this neighbour. India has been active in forging stronger ties with Indian Ocean island states, including Mauritius, Seychelles and more recently the Comoros and Madagascar.

In May 2018, India signed a Joint Strategic Vision for Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region with France. It covers the southwest region of the ocean in particular, with maritime security, combating piracy, terrorism, etc as its focus. This cooperation will assist in keeping an eye on naval activities by extra-regional powers in the Horn of Africa and the eastern seaboard of Africa, in particular through the Mozambique Channel. India and France have also signed a logistics agreement. In short, India has been actively participating in forging international cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region as broadly as possible and at different levels. 