

India's 'Act-East' Responses to the Strategic Realities in the Indo-Pacific Region: A Review

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Abstract

The geopolitical standpoint of India's foreign policy has focused on soft power dynamics, cultural rejuvenation, and political connection with the diaspora. With the intent to pursue a good neighborhood policy, to promote regional economic cooperation and to revitalize the essence of regionalism India articulated a liberal foreign policy perspective under the guidance of Inder Kumar Gujral during his tenure as Foreign Minister and Prime Minister in 1996-98. The approach gained considerable acceptability and relevance among Gujral successors. Both Vajpayee of the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP and Manmohan Singh of the Congress Party supported the rationale of the so-called Gujral Doctrine. As the Indian economy began to accelerate, the pursuit of integrating the region received a pragmatic dimension. Regional institutions like the ASEAN (Association of South -East Asian Nations) play a pivotal role in facilitating the development of regional identity in the world's most economically vibrant region. It was apprehended that incompetence on part of India to cultivate relations with its neighbors would lead to further Chinese penetration to the zone of India's natural hinterland and traditionally an exclusive sphere of influence. India's apprehensions about Chinese ingress were so strong that New Delhi actively worked to include Western powers into an observer role in the regional forum of SAARC, when Pakistan and Bangladesh urged for a more formal Chinese role in the subcontinent. The Indian foreign policy establishment emphasized the attributes of building a peaceful periphery rendering greater access to the Indian market through unilateral economic concessions if necessary, and focused on the Indian relevance to make its neighbors feel amicable in their collaboration with India with a view to strengthen India's strategic links with the neighbors rather than merely protesting to their defense ties with Beijing. This study aims to focus on the relevance of India-ASEAN collaboration in addressing to the strategic realities of the Indo-Pacific region.

1. Background

In the twenty-first century the world is witnessing a transition, which is the outcome of the dynamics of power politics, redistribution of power and strategies of interdependence and connectedness. The increased relevance of China and India has shifted the focus of the international politics from the Euro-Atlantic zone to Asia-Pacific. Some experts comment that regarding military power the international system is still unipolar but with regards to economic power, it is multipolar. The Indo-Pacific region has undoubtedly evolved as a significant geopolitical entity linking the two great oceans and consolidating Asian regions to China and India. Considering the wide gamut of the region it is inconceivable to think of the emergence of a single security order for the entire region. The United States has been the primary security provider in the Indian and Pacific Oceans but the relative subsiding of the strengths of the United States like its declining naval capabilities, economic dilemma since the end of the 2000s

and its exhaustion from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars have led to the rise of certain questions about the credibility of the United States to preserve its traditional role in the two oceans. Meanwhile, the naval abilities of many medium powers in the Indo-Pacific littoral are rapidly increasing. All these factors have engendered extraordinary geopolitical uncertainties. The United States is steadily confronting the perception of relative decline and it has outlined a strategy of "re-balancing" US military forces toward Asia. Despite domestic challenges, the United States has revealed its determination to remain a substantive power in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific by regulating its forces, leveraging its technological capabilities, revamping its old and new partnerships and promoting improved operational doctrines.

Most of the countries possess the promises of the world's fastest growing economies thereby imbibing it the credibility of being the cynosure of global geopolitical and strategic dynamics. The Indo-Pacific region possesses abundant hydrocarbon resources and crucial offshore resources that

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make it the most important transport corridor, which in turn, induce the regional and extra-regional powers to contend or cooperate with one another in order to establish their individual clout and also to counter the influence of potential opponents. For instance, US policy of 'Rebalance to Asia' not only abetted skepticism in China but also in many parts of the Persian Gulf states, which apprehended that decrease of the US presence in the region might escalate the risk of their vulnerability. But US non-withdrawal from the region has exhibited a rearrangement of the traditional international security structure with immense ramifications. India holds considerable significance as a major refining centre and exporter of oil products to East Asia through the South China Sea.

2. Indo-Pacific Region: A Zone of Challenges

There is debate in academia on the usage of the term "Indo-Pacific". Some scholars are averse to the traditional separation between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and are propounding the concept of a maritime Asia. Some others have underscored the significance of the "confluence of the two seas", the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, in the backdrop of the rise of China and the emergence of India. In his speech to the Indian Parliament in August 2007, Shinzo Abe, the Prime Minister of Japan at the time, highlighted that the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, by overlooking the geographic barriers, uphold a vigorous convergence of seas of freedom and prosperity thereby paving the way towards the realization of a broader Asia. To underline the relevance of the evolving geo-strategic realities of the Indo-Pacific region, in the US official articulation of 'pivot policy', the concept of "Indo-Pacific" was initiated by Secretary of the US State, Hillary Clinton in 2010. The US strategic thinking has well grasped the concept of "Indo-Pacific" and has been integrated in the America First National Security Strategy (NSS), announced by the Trump administration in 2017. It is categorically mentioned under the regional rubric of the strategy document that there is an ongoing geo-political competition between the open and repressive visions of the world order in the Indo-Pacific region. Though the Indo-Pacific region eulogizes the imperative of connectivity still it is a realm of contestation and competition.

Since it plays a pivotal role in facilitating trade and oil flows, the Indo-Pacific region has become the centre of geo-strategic competition between the established and the emerging powers. Activities like port development, military operations and opposing rhetoric could jeopardize the stability of global trade flows, which in turn would diminish the propensity of economic development of India and China. But the alarming non-traditional security challenges in the Indian Ocean Region also provide avenues for potential cooperation between China and India and other regional actors. China's assertive foreign policy has created geo-strategic instability in the Indo-Pacific region, which poses severe military, economic and political challenges to the US interests in the region. Though China's rise has accrued economic benefits to the regional countries but its

increasing expenditure on military capabilities and power projection, particularly in the East and South China Seas have raised considerable dilemma in international community. With the boosting of Asian economies and Asian energy resources, with the rise of Africa as a zone of economic growth and the eastward drift of both Africa and West Asia rather than towards the West, the centre of prominence of global commerce has shifted from the Atlantic to the 'Indo-Pacific'. As a consequence, the Indian Ocean region has emerged as the primary centre of global commerce. Potential conflict over the possession of resources poses to be a destabilizing factor that affects the geopolitical relations in the region to a large extent.

China's increasingly ambitious economic and political role in the Asia-Pacific has undoubtedly been a cause of concern among other countries in the region. The dispute in the South China Sea between China on the one side and SEA and the United States on the other has attracted much international attention like the continuing differences and ambiguities between the United States and China for dominance over small island territories in the Pacific with huge surrounding economic zones. It can also be stated that a situation like a new Cold War is emerging in the Indian Ocean region. And herein there is a clash of strategic interests between China and India and cooperative equations are emerging between India, Japan, the US and Australia.

It is often being stated that an outward-looking approach motivates a nation to go beyond the parameters of land connectivity and be more and more inclined towards sea power. It has been alleged that protecting sea lanes against hostile powers has perhaps become the primary concern for China and India is sceptical regarding China's over-ambitious forays in and around the Indian Ocean. The contentious territorial claims and China's ongoing attempts to further its economic and strategic leverage in the region have inevitably been major concerning factors. The disputes between the regional powers are the demonstrations of multiple, complex and overlapping claims based on historical rights and international law. The lack of solidarity and unanimity has impeded the quest for collective resolution to the region's security issues. Initiatives undertaken by the international organizations like the ASEAN have undoubtedly boosted up the spree of dialogue and information sharing agendas but failed to deliver any concrete outcome.

China's long-term plans for its presence in the Indian Ocean have prompted India to develop its Indian Ocean fleet and to cooperate with other countries in the region. Some Western scholars have dismissed the notion that there is a new 'Great Game' being played out in the region. But, as Colonel Stuart Kenny at the Australian Defence College in Canberra outlined that there exists a New Great Game, based on historic mistrust and present competition. It has to do with border disputes in the Himalayas, the contestation for influence in Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar, cross-border insurgencies, the sharing of water resources and strategic rivalries in the Indian Ocean.

Defense capacities and assets in the Indian Ocean region encompass measures like manned and unmanned maritime surveillance and response aircraft, offshore patrol vessels, support vessels, watercraft, frigates, naval combat helicopters etc. The Indian Ocean region is well positioned as critical asset in the realm of anti-submarine warfare. It is an undeniable fact that China has made considerable headway in the Indo-Pacific region, more particularly compared to India's advances in the region and initiatives like SAGAR lag far behind to that of the BRI. Therefore, India's foreign policy needs to focus its navy's military cooperation with the compatible countries, especially Japan and the US. India bears the potential to challenge China's increasing influence in the region primarily for crucial reasons like: the location of India at the northern centre of the Indian Ocean provides it with the accessibility to the Indian Ocean from all corners relatively easily. Moreover, India is the only country among the countries around the Indian Ocean that possesses a powerful navy. And most pertinently, India has long respected the freedom of navigation in the SLOCs for all the countries as a responsible and dependable maritime power.

3. India's Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific Region

Historical inferences have emphasized on consultations and negotiations as the most pragmatic and effective strategy to resolve the maritime disputes. In order to achieve the objective of win-win cooperation it is imperative to manage differences through making rules and devising parameters to establish regional peace and stability. New strategic challenges have arisen in the Indo-Pacific region due to a number of factors like unresolved territorial disputes, the rise of terrorism, non-traditional threats like piracy, transnational crime etc. Moreover, the existing structures are not competent enough in confronting many current conflict situations. China's challenges to India's supremacy in the Indian Ocean have triggered India's drive to modernise the Indian Navy and has also accelerated the zeal of cooperation with other countries in the region. India requires focusing on strategic communication into its national security policy. There is utter requirement of a clear articulation of India's motives and initiatives to its neighbours and regional partners. As India moves towards a pivotal position in international politics with bigger stakes in the world, predictability and clarity of its intent should mandate the fundamental contours of its course of action.

India has modified its foreign policy approach from the traditional strategy of balancing power steered to ensure material and political support of its major partners without disrupting its freedom of action and it has been an encouraging approach to balance threat. The balance of threat theory is premised on the notion that the states collaborate to balance against threat dynamics rather than power alone. In this lieu factors like geographical congruities, potential, capabilities and intent of the source

of the threat are the crucial variables. For instance, keeping in mind China's geographical proximity and its aggressive military capabilities vis-a-vis India, China may be perceived as a potential threat to India's national security. It is mention worthy that under the multi-alignment policy, India is cultivating its relations with China's opponents such as the USA and Japan. The momentum is undoubtedly gaining ground and India's collaborative endeavors with the USA after 'pivot to Asia' policy and the USA's extension of support to India's membership in a number of multilateral institutions is generating an impression most particularly among the Chinese population that the USA and Japan are aligning with India to balance China in Asia. India's collaborative military exercises with the USA, Japan and other rivals of China have further solidified the perception.

The emergence of international organizations like the ASEAN pose considerably significant factor in political dynamics as India and ASEAN share enduring cultural and historical bonding's and many political and economic lineages. They endorse the attributes such as the rule of law, international norms and the respect for state sovereignty and multilateral cooperation besides several institutional similarities. The stakeholders in the region need to decipher each other's concerns and priorities and it should be borne in mind that connectivity can mitigate several challenges. Connectivity should uphold solidarity and be based on confidence and trust. To promote connectivity respect should be adhered to the aspects of sovereignty and territorial integrity consultation, good governance, transparency, viability, and sustainability, which are inclined to empower nations and safeguard them from debt burden. Promotion of trade and infrastructure is also needed. For the cause of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region it appears that the policymakers in both China and India will be keen to venture all three ideas such as cooperative security, an Asian concert and balance of power. Their respective emergence and relevance have made them more open to regional cooperative mechanisms. But the Asian neighbors will not pursue multilateralism at the cost of their own autonomy. Beijing and New Delhi have exhibited profound interest in more formal dialogue and discussion on maritime security issues with other great powers, which might eventually lead to an Asian concert. At the same time, they have actively followed the policy of balancing each other in the Indo-Pacific region. The vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific strategic space with its distinctive priorities, as the Pacific for China and the Indian Ocean for India, can spur the emergence of subregional orders. The relative decline of the United States has not subdued the dominance in controlling both the oceans' spaces as well as delineating the overriding security framework for the Indo-Pacific stretch. The trajectory of the US equations with China and India and the evolving dynamics between Beijing and New Delhi are likely to be the basic contours of the prospective security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. Though other countries have a

role on the political evolution of the littoral it is the United States that exerts the most vital influence on the emerging Sino-Indian incongruities in the Indo-Pacific region. It is interesting to perceive that the countries of the region, having recognized that there is much to be gained through cooperation rather than through rivalry, have exhibited keenness to collaborate with each other in economic matters. There is much more progress that can be achieved through cooperative endeavors. The region has abundant commonalities that can be optimally harnessed for mutual benefit. Crucial perceptual and practical issues need to be addressed. For instance, South Asia region, as a unity, has not yet acquired adequate international acceptability. Its leaders need to be more proactive and competent.

4. Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific is an emerging concept and there is no fixed definition of the region as yet. The countries falling in the direct hinterland of the vast Indian and Pacific Oceans can be broadly termed as the Indo-Pacific. The six major parameters of the Indo-Pacific are: a free, open and inclusive region, ASEAN centrality, rules-based order, equal access to the global commons (sea and air); rules based trade environment and last but not the least connectivity based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. The use of the term 'Indo-Pacific' has gained momentum due to the increasing connectedness of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, whether this geographic entity is to be addressed as Indo-Pacific or Asia Pacific is not that pertinent. Certain pertinent developments have been observed in recent years in context of India's foreign policy strategies. First, the Look East or Act East Policy has paid considerable dividends. India has developed dynamic bilateral relations (for example with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka) and is proactive in sub-regional programme like the BBIN as well as is engaged with several regional initiatives (for example with ASEAN, BIMSTEC and IORA). Second, connectivity is the core to most of the regional cooperation initiatives in which India participates. Third, the India-Japan strategic partnership has made considerable headway, which underscores the importance of Indo-Pacific cooperation. The Indo-Pacific connectivity aspect against the backdrop of the region's recent developments in geo-economic and geo-strategic cooperation needs to be thoroughly reviewed.

The roadmap toward a mutually beneficial, free, open, inclusive and cooperative Indo-Pacific can commence from classifying specific actions to increase cooperation on issues of broader interest. India's Foreign Minister has asserted that there lies a compatible geographic logic to the Indo-Pacific. In a valedictory address at the end of the joint Indian Ocean Dialogue and Delhi Dialogue, which converged two key foreign policy imperatives of India-Act East and Indo-Pacific, Foreign Minister, Jaishankar stated that since there was an agglomeration of opinions on the Indo-Pacific, there has been a benefit of taking the idea outward with all

the stakeholders of the larger region. He further claimed that India's approach to this concept has led to the admission of the fact that both geographical adversities of the Indo-Pacific region and everything in between should ideally have their innately evolved approach to the Indo-Pacific. Expanding the geographical and the strategic domain of the Indo-Pacific, India is now including the western Indian Ocean and Africa. The nations of the eastern Indian Ocean and states on the connecting seas leading to the Pacific have delineated their perception of the Indo-Pacific region and there is possibility of the western Indian Ocean version of this concept as well. The important responsibility is to devote time and effort to avail the Indo-Pacific region as an open, free and inclusive avenue to accrue tangible and substantive cooperative initiatives.

The prime focus of Indo-Pacific is centered on the ocean wherein India plays a vital strategic role in the Indian Ocean. India is primarily a maritime nation, having an enduring history of maritime trade. It is the ocean that connects India with its major trade partners. Over 70 percent of India's merchandise trade per annum is conducted through ocean. India has been experiencing a substantial growth in commercial and subsistence activities at sea, relating to trade and transportation, resource exploitation and the leisure industry. These activities are imperative for any country's economic development as these accrue better opportunities for livelihood. Given the economic prospect of the Indo-Pacific region, several countries are investing substantial financial, technological and human capital to develop maritime economies and are endeavoring to harness their unique strengths. Many countries have announced initiatives and action plans to promote the Blue Economy or the Ocean Economy. For example, Indian PM Modi has emphatically eulogized the Blue Economy as a new pillar of economic activity in the coastal areas and linked hinterlands through the optimum exploration of oceanic resources. He has also announced his vision for the seas through Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). It is imperative for India to have a comprehensive understanding on the characteristics, geography and history, stakeholders and their concerns, security objectives and threats, existing and potential challenges and most importantly the way forward in order to play a credible role as a security provider, facilitator or balancer in the Indo-Pacific region.

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