

India and the Indo-Pacific Region

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ABSTRACT:

The changing worldly and regionally geo- strategic environment has shifted the globalized purview from an Euro- Atlantic to Indo-Pacific focus and an ever increasing salience of the Indo-Pacific in Global discourse has become a recent trend and a geo- political construct at all international platforms, also as a substitute to the long- prevalent Asia-Pacific domain .There is a repositioning of global economic and military power towards this region which has resulted in significant political, economic, strategic and socio- cultural changes in the Indian Ocean region that will significantly have an impact on the Indian maritime environment in tangible ways. India has always had a prominent presence in the area and has a substantial concept to gain traction in international policy discourse.

Keywords: Geo-Strategic, Globalized, Pacific, Maritime, Global, Overseas, Leadership, Stability, Oceanic.

Introduction

The current Globalized context can be characterised by strategic flux, economic uncertainty and political transitions, in democratic as well as illiberal regimes. From Euro-Atlantic to an Indo-Pacific focus, the repositioning of Global Economic and Military power towards Indo-Pacific has resulted in significant political, economic and social changes in the Indian Ocean Region, which will impact India's maritime environment. The 21st century is being described as the Global, Asian, Asia-Pacific or the Pacific Centuries. The Asian Renaissance can be attributed to the processes of political pragmatism, economic liberalisation and administrative decentralisation.

The 'Indo-Pacific'

The Indo-Pacific as a conceptual framework is not new and has been used in various shapes and sizes to contextualize different thematic narratives. As a predominantly equatorial maritime pendulum along and Indian and Pacific Oceanic continuum, it finds mention in many scholarly works. Indo-Pacific has been used by bio- geographers to describe unique maritime ecology of the region.

In their writings during 1880-1945 British Anthropologist Henry Keane and Indian historian Kalidas Nag used anthropology and ethnicity, art and psychology, cultural and societal norms, maritime economics and commerce, besides political linkages as the threads to define as ' Indo-Pacific Domain'. Nag writes that Indo-Pacific was also known as **Australasia** by the British, **Oceania** by Continental

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scholars and also puts forth a case that this region was also termed as **Greater India**.

The changed global and regional geo-strategic environment has shifted the world view in tangible ways. The Indo-Pacific is a geo-political construct that has emerged as a substitute to the long prevalent **Asia-Pacific** which represented the 'eastward shift of global developments' from Euro-Atlantic dimension. It is an integrated theatre that combines the Indian Ocean and the land masses that surround them. It is both a strategic as well as an economic domain comprising important sea lines of communication. Since it is primarily a maritime space, the Indo-Pacific is also associated with maritime security and cooperation.

Moreover, there are diversified interpretations of this region. **US** describes the region as a region that starts at the 'western shore of the Americas and ends at the shores of the Indian subcontinent'. The stretch of sea from the Indian Ocean through to the Pacific contain the world's most vibrant trade and energy roots linking economies and driving growth and India straddling the waters from the Indian to the Pacific Ocean is, with us, a steward of these waterways .¹ While for **India** and **Japan**, the concept is much broader in expanse extending to 'the shores of African continent'. In the Indo-Pacific the term includes --- India, Australia, Japan, Association of South East Asian Nations, that occupy the strategic positions in the Indian and Pacific Ocean including small island countries. Indo-Pacific is also considered significant for countries with overseas territories in the region such as France (with New Caledonia, French Polynesia in the Pacific Ocean and islands of Mayotte and La Reunion in the Indian Ocean).

Global Shift towards Indo-Pacific--- Leading Factors

In the Indo-Pacific there are important Sea Lines of Communications i.e., primary maritime routes between ports used for trade logistics and naval forces. With the presence of key choke points, from the Mozambique Channel and Ba Bel Mandeb in the west to Lombok Strait in the east, the region plays a significant role in shaping the new power dynamics and ensuring smooth trade flows. Further the Indo-Pacific region shares 40% of the world GDP and contributes to 46% of the world's merchandise trade. The region not only represents a lucrative market but also orchestrates global supply chains.

The expanse of Indian and Pacific Ocean combined has vast reserves of marine resources including Offshore Hydrocarbons, Methane hydrates, Sea Bed minerals. Rare earth metals, fisheries etc. Sizable coast lines and Exclusive Economic Zones EEZ of littoral countries have created a competitive environment for exploitation of these resources.

'India'---in the Indo-Pacific

As far as the Indian geopolitical thought is concerned in the closing stages of the second world war Jawaharlal Nehru had predicted that the Pacific would emerge as the centre of global geo-strategy, with India playing an integral part in its regional dynamics. He also said that the Pacific is likely to take the place of the Atlantic, in the near future, as a nerve centre of the world. tough not directly a Pacific State, Indian will automatically exercise an important influence there. India will also develop

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as the centre of economic and political activity in the Indian Ocean area, in the South-East Asia and right up to the Middle East. Her position gives an economic and strategic importance as a part of the world, which is going to develop rapidly in the future ².

India's interest and concern in the Indo-Pacific grew because of the fact that nearly 50% of India's trade is centered in the Indo-Pacific region and Indian Ocean carries 90% of India's trade and its energy sources. India wants to assure freedom of navigation, secure choke points, resolve conflicts peacefully and address non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean Region. In addition to this India wants to expand its own presence in the region, especially in Africa, the middle East and Southeast Asia and maintain its role as a net security provider. India also wants to ensure that China does not gain a significant strategic foothold in the region. India also favours sustainable development of the region through development of blue economy.

It is to be noted that India does not see the Indo-Pacific as a strategy or a grouping that seeks to dominate or is directed against any country. The core attribute of India's Indo-Pacific strategy is to strengthening and preserving traditional roles in IOR. The "Shangri-La Dialogue speech". aimed at mitigating such sensitivities and articulating his vision of a constructive relationship for India with all countries of the Indo-Pacific Region. India's Indo-Pacific outlook is not directed against any country but instead stands for "a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces us all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity". India's approach of promoting a "democratic and rules based international order" places responsibility on "both existing and rising powers" in the region not to return "to the age of great power rivalries" ³. Indo-Pacific regions stretches from "the shores of Africa to that of the Americas" – an expansive definition the United States does not share.

India's growing strategic engagements across an expanded geographical space, commensurate with its current and potential international roles, India's stated objectives leave open the question of how to realize them, gives the realities on the ground in both Indian and Pacific Oceans. A common strategic framework embracing both the Oceans is at an aspirational stage, the respective strategic perspectives, instrumentalities and capabilities have yet to crystallize, held hostage as they are to geo-political currents and elides and the attention spans of national leaders who mostly remain in a "fire-fighting mode" ⁴.

Challenges for India in the region

Along with the Indian stronghold in the Indo-Pacific Region there are some challenges that are to be faced by India as: it has limited Naval capacity and also lack military base that creates a fundamental and logistical challenge in India's activity to sustain continued its continued presence in the IOR ⁵. Tariff and non-tariff measures act as a major impediment to trade in this region and impede regional cooperation. Moreover, poor infrastructure connectivity also multiplies the problem for India.

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While some security architecture exists in the Pacific Ocean and force equilibrium characterize some of the regions in the Indian ocean there is no overall security architecture in the region. Common threats such as climate change, environmental degradation, piracy, human trafficking are the threats in governance mechanisms throughout the Indo-Pacific continuum. India feels that its strategic stakes in the Pacific are growing, causing it to attempt to leverage its regional relationships to influence the maritime system in the Pacific to suit its interests.

Political fragility and the resultant economic disarray invite external powers to manipulate domestic political processes for their own agendas, they also intensify multiple regional power struggles. State fragility at key Ocean locations as well as in the middle eastern heartland, compounds in at least three ways the threats to maritime system stability posed by climate change, extreme weather conditions and structural embedding of nonstate actors—be they extremists, pirates or common criminals- within collapsing political structures.

Among the multilateral organizations that are still in the more formative stages are the Indian Ocean Rim Association IORA and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium IONS. IORA is beginning to engage its member countries to develop an extensive maritime safety and security cooperative enterprise with legal and regulatory underpinnings ⁶. Owing to the numerous dimensions involved in developing such a capability for the organisation, the process is still in its infancy and thus the organisation's and member's capabilities mostly remain woefully limited. However, this organisation could be the main agency for providing many of the functions needed to sustain a transformed maritime system for the Indian Ocean.

Perspectives on the Indian Ocean Region

India has national responsibility to safeguard its mainland and islands. Associated objectives include contributing to a safe, secure and stable region and fulfilling a commitment to help others during natural disasters and other operations. India seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation within the region, including strengthening maritime security capacities and maritime economies. Further it also aims to achieve collective cooperation for peace and security better preparedness for emergencies through multilateral mechanisms such as bilateral maritime security cooperation. India also intends to contribute greater to regional integration on the basis of sustainable development including for combating climate change and building the Blue Economy. The primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean rests with the littoral states themselves. India seeks a climate of trust and transparency, respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries while remaining sensitive to each other's interests, peaceful resolution of maritime issues and increased maritime cooperation.

The Indian navy is the most powerful navy in the region and enjoys considerable convergence of strategic interests with the U S Navy. The U S Navy under grids the current maritime order and is

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uniquely placed to seed and nurture the maritime system envisaged in the SAGAR construct. Building such a system will require both bilateral and multilateral naval diplomatic engagements. The Indian Navy and its affiliated think tank participants can play a thought leadership role. The diplomatic engagements involved need to be nuanced and light of touch, otherwise certain other elements—not all well—disposed—may try to undermine the very diplomatic efforts attempting to create the envisaged maritime order. Certain recent developments, such as in Maldives, Seychelles and elsewhere, suggest the need for a more nuanced Indian Approach ⁷.

The Indian Ocean maritime system is becoming increasingly fragile and the US Navy capacity to undergrid it is diminishing perceptibly. None the less, America retains significant national capabilities that can help shape a new maritime system for the Indian Ocean. In contrast to those relating to other bodies of water in Southeast and East Asia within the Indo-Pacific construct, the Indian Ocean maritime system is fraying at the edges more than it is crumbling under intensifying great power contestation. The Indian Ocean no longer serves as an instrument for Naval Force projection to achieve power equilibrium in the middle east hinterland as was the case during the cold war. A pan-Indian Ocean maritime system has to be devised to meet today's context in which the region faces multitudinous challenges to its political and economic stability.

The Pacific is likely to take place of the Atlantic in the future as a nerve centre of the world. Though not directly a Pacific State, India will also develop as the centre of economic and political activity in the Indian Ocean area, in the South East Asia and right up to the Middle East. Her position gives an economic and strategic importance in a part of the world, which is going to develop rapidly in future.

Relevance of Indo-Pacific in maritime economic terms to the world at large, can be gauged from the latest annual United Nation's report wherein the combined share of Asia and Oceania stood at 50 % of the global goods loaded and 58% of those unloaded. 16% of the top 20 ports in the world, in throughout terms are located along this Indian Pacific Ocean periphery, particularly in the East Asia. India's Look East Policy which started in early 1990s seeking an enhanced politico-economic engagement is gradually but inexorably acquiring strategic overtones. India's military maritime naval doctrine and strategy documents have intensified the South China Sea and Beyond.

Thus Indo-Pacific challenges can be termed as territorially vexatious and aspirationally maritime. This dilemma is neither unique nor novel having dogged large continental states that are also endowed with a favourable maritime geography. This paradox, however requires redefinition in the current intermeshed globalised environment where cooperation – competition- contestation form an integral part of international politics. Going beyond the continentalist- naval debate, the nascent maritime consciousness among Indian strategic community, though encouraging, is yet to take firm roots.

In conclusion the Indian strategic policy framework should factor the nuances of emerging multipolarity and a deepening if vertical horizontal intermeshing brought about by the globalization process. While the stance of strategic autonomy remains inviolate the tenets of maintaining equidistance and balance among power centres may prove to be a constraint. The simultaneous

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management of mutually opposing paradigms across the strategic threads of politics-diplomacy-economics -security could be best served by a functional transactional approach instead of a rigid straight lined, single point of departure policy. Mutual give and take by linking policies to national objectives, accompanied by smart hedging, flexibility and responsiveness are assessed to be the catchphrases for tomorrow. In all this, the areas of prosperity and crises to India's east and west would require a larger footprint across the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

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