

Evolving Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific

Deliberating India's Position

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The current literature on the Indo-Pacific concept is still under deliberation regarding the actualization of its structure, organization, and purpose. The term is not just a hyphenation of two oceans but a construct connecting the economies across these oceans. The Indian Ocean is the backyard of various developing economies in contrast to the developed Pacific economies. India, being one of the largest regional countries, is seen as an important fulcrum and stakeholder in the operationalization of the Indo-Pacific from an academic concept to an institutional framework. Therefore, India stands in the epicenter of the region according to its geopolitical position as well as the alliances and threat perceptions existent in the region. This paper, hence, is divided into four parts, tracing the conceptual understanding of *Indo-Pacific* in official documents beginning with the appearance of the term in the white papers of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States since 2013 and then simultaneously in 2017. The second part discusses the economic and strategic issues contributing to the shaping of this new geographical construct and how it differs from the earlier established Asia-Pacific paradigm. The current developments that are shaping India's approach toward the Indo-Pacific form the third part of the article. It attempts to draw the larger picture of India's current position on the Indo-Pacific both as a socio-economic-political platform and at the strategic level better known as the "Quad." The fourth part of the paper argues that though there are commonalities of interests among the countries on the former, the latter faces potential problems arising from two issues—one, finding a common ground for collective security, and two, the current understanding excludes the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as potential stakeholders in the Quad.

Each time a political administration coins a new word or diplomatic jargon in its official documents, the geopolitical strategic community excitedly searches to understand the meaning, causes, and implications. The past few years have seen the term *Indo-Pacific* gain new credence, originating in its use by several governments around the world and gaining momentum via the current US administration's embrace of the phrase. Although the term was introduced more than a decade ago, shifting geopolitical realities have given enough reasons for countries in the region to deliberate on it and formulate their foreign policies accordingly. Interestingly, the term has brought attention to the maritime domain of Asia and related security perceptions. Since the end of the Second World War, Asian security concerns were linked to the land-based territorial construct and scant attention was paid to the security and foreign policy of the high seas or maritime waters. However, the burgeoning maritime trade among the regional and international countries over the past decades and the lack of an overarching institutional architecture for maritime governance at the regional level, exacerbated by an increase in traditional and nontraditional security threats in the high seas, provided compelling reasons for the littorals of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean to cooperate.

India has remained a primary actor in the governance of the Indian Ocean, but it cannot work in isolation. Rather it needs cooperation with other important Indian Ocean littorals, many of whom also happen to share maritime domains with the Pacific, thereby connecting the economies of the two oceans. India's approach toward the Indo-Pacific, therefore, can be best seen working in tandem with the maritime policy considerations of other Indo-Pacific littorals. Hence, one must examine the defense and foreign policy white papers of the four large democracies—Australia, Japan, and the US, along with India—to understand their conception of the Indo-Pacific as a region and the threats facing that region and their interests. A clearer picture of other countries' perceptions is likely to provide some answers as to how India intends to work with them for a regional-level maritime governance architecture. Additionally, this knowledge can be helpful for stakeholder countries in the Indo-Pacific in conceptualizing the term in ways that converge their interests and address the challenges that the region perceives in a collective manner.

The Indo-Pacific as a Geopolitical Construct

A country's foreign policy approach is based upon the geopolitical calculations of its threat perceptions, locating challenges and looking for opportunities. A white paper can be a definitive yet confounding political document to trace these

elements—not only for domestic socio-military consumption but also for researchers, policy analysts, and decision makers from the rest of the world. These publications generate considerable interest both domestically and globally. Hence, allies and adversarial states read these documents closely, seeking to understand a country's threat perceptions and the tools they employ to deal with them. Additionally, white papers help other countries revise and refine their own foreign policy approaches accordingly toward the country publishing the document. In this context, a particular focus on any subject area is bound to raise the interest of the rest of the geopolitical community.

The term *Indo-Pacific* has recently found its place in white papers of four of the world's largest democracies: Australia, Japan, India, and the United States. This illustrates the importance of the region in the foreign policy pronouncements of these four countries in particular and for Asia in general. In 2017, the white papers of all these countries repeatedly mentioned the term *Indo-Pacific* and stressed the need to proactively secure this region for the peace, growth, and stability of Asia.

Therefore, it becomes pertinent to understand how each of these countries has defined the Indo-Pacific construct in their official documents. The “approach toward defining” a particular region can help provide clarity regarding each country's recognition of threat perceptions and opportunities.

Japan

First in line to initiate the use of the term *Indo-Pacific* in its official documents was Japan. As early as April 2017, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) released its white paper in which it clearly promoted a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” as a part of its foreign policy aimed at proactively “securing the peace, stability and prosperity of the international community.”¹ Promoting interconnectivity in the Indo-Pacific is one of the pillars in Japan's vision of “developing an environment for international peace, stability and sharing universal values.”² This white paper recognizes the growing confidence of the Asian countries and their keenness to assume leadership and responsible roles in the several domains based on the rule of law, democracy, and market economy within East, South, and Southeast Asian countries. On the other hand, it views Africa as demographically vibrant and rich in natural resources, which makes that continent full of potential and a promising market. Japan sees a role in connecting these two continents via infrastructure development projects and improving business environments through

necessary technological and similar investments that can lead to growth and prosperity throughout the region as a whole.

The Japanese construct of the Indo-Pacific is based on combining not just the two large oceans but also the two continents of Asia and Africa. Developing interconnectivity and infrastructure projects among the developing economies of these two large landmasses seems to form the heart of the Japanese concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). For the reasons of free flow of goods, capital, and knowledge in addition to human exchange, a robust and well-understood normative and institutional framework is needed as the firm ground upon which the structure can be constructed. The rules of law and complementary understanding of the global commons can be key deciding factors when enacting any formal or even informal working equation among so many countries. For Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe and his administration, freedom of navigation, as enshrined in United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas, forms a central pillar in the FOIP, valuing “freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making [Japan] prosperous.”³ In other words, Japan’s reflection of the Indo-Pacific is an external manifestation of its domestic vision, which is development oriented based upon respect for norms and rules. This aspiration was also reflected in its 2017 white paper clearly defining the Indo-Pacific as a key area for development.

Australia

With considerable strategic and commercial interests in the region, Australia regards itself as an Indian Ocean nation and has been involved in the Indian Ocean Rim Association regional institution since 1997 to foster economic cooperation.⁴ The country started its approach toward the Indo-Pacific as an extended neighborhood in its 2009 defense white paper.⁵ Titled *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030*, the document clearly identified that a stable and secure Southeast Asia is a vital strategic interest for Australia. The paper was visionary in predicting that the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions will converge as a crucial maritime region and global sea route for energy supplies and therefore see several major naval powers competing for strategic advantage in the region by the year 2030.

Apart from securing its immediate vicinity, the Australian defense white paper 2009 maintained the importance of its extended neighborhood. It highlighted the Asia-Pacific as the geopolitical construct that stretched from the eastern Indian

Ocean, as a part of its larger strategic interests. For maintaining a global security order, the country drew its strength from the centrality of the United Nations charter's established "rules-based order."⁶ To secure its strategic interests, Australian defense policy is transparent about acting independently and being self-reliant in safeguarding its unique strategic interests. At the same time, Australia promotes a willingness to lead military coalitions and make tailored contributions to other military coalitions with countries having shared strategic interests in the region.⁷



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (right) and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at a joint press statement, at Hyderabad House, in New Delhi on 10 April 2017. Photo courtesy of Press Information Bureau, Government of India.

The *Australian Defense White Paper 2013* became nuanced in its perception of the global changes and noted that "China's continued rise as a global power, the increasing economic and strategic weight of East Asia and the emergence over time of India as a global power are key trends influencing the Indian Ocean's development as an area of increasing strategic significance. In aggregate, these trends are *shaping the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic arc*."⁸ Ensuring the safety and security of sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific became a vital strategic interest for Australian national defense and maritime policy. The document called for strengthening the regional security architecture by including countries like China,

India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States as a community to discuss and cooperate on the political, economic, and security issues in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹

The term *Indo-Pacific* was further shaped and concretized in the *2016 Defense White Paper* and *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, the former of which stated that “a stable rules-based regional order is critical to ensuring Australia’s access to an open, free and secure trading system and minimizing the risk of coercion and instability that would directly affect Australia’s interests,” representing Australia’s crucial strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific context.¹⁰ Australia’s maritime-based economy requires unfettered access to trading routes, secure communications, and transport to support its economic development in the long run. Hence, the focus of Australian foreign and defense policy is to build a “stable and prosperous” Indo-Pacific region.¹¹

India

The importance of the Indian Ocean and its evolution to *Indo-Pacific* as a strategy needs a more detailed focus in this study. The Indian Ocean derives its name not from the country but the entire Indian subcontinent, which comprises several neighboring littoral and territorial countries. The Indian Ocean surrounds India on three sides, making the country as maritime focused as the Himalayas and the country’s mass (2,973,193 sq. km, with more than 7,000 km of coastline, including its island territories in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea) make it land-centric.¹² The Indian Ocean connects India to near and extended neighborhoods in both eastern and western parts of Asia and to Africa and Oceania.

There is a significant body of respectable literature that has established the Indian subcontinent’s maritime trade back to third millennium BCE, beginning with the Indus Valley Civilization.¹³ Indian maritime heritage flourished until the seventeenth century, and Indian ports were visited by ships and traders from several countries from the Arab world and Europe, including the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, seeking to trade for Indian spices. However, in modern history, since the birth of India as an independent nation in 1947, the first few decades of maritime trade, commerce, and exchange remained limited due to the shortcomings of the country’s infrastructure and institutions. It was in the 1990s that the Indian government enunciated its approach toward its neighbors across the Indian Ocean under the policy of Look East—unveiled by Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao

in Singapore in 1992.¹⁴ The new policy started as a trade and economy-based relationship between India and its ASEAN neighbors.

However, for years there remained a glaring lack in application of this policy toward interconnectivity and infrastructure projects to integrate India and its eastern neighbors for the prospects of trade, market, and exchange of information.¹⁵ Realizing this shortcoming, Prime Minister Narendra Modi transformed the existing Look East policy into the more proactive “Act East” policy in 2015. The objective of Act East is to promote economic cooperation, forge cultural ties, and develop strategic relationships among ASEAN countries.¹⁶ The policy, envisaged both at bilateral and regional levels, includes steady efforts toward developing and strengthening the interconnectivity of northeast India with the ASEAN region through trade, culture, interpersonal contacts, and physical infrastructure projects.

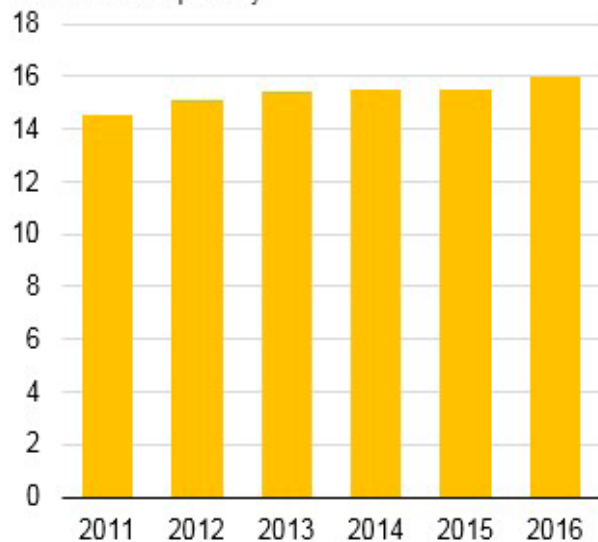
In addition to land-based interconnectivity projects, the maritime component of the Look East policy has gradually expanded, and so has the realization of the importance of the security and strategic dimensions of maritime-related trade.¹⁷ The current Indian leadership understands the growing strategic importance of the Indian Ocean not only for India but also for the entire region. The vast Indian Ocean region is composed of more than 40 states and represents nearly 40 percent of the world’s population. One-half of world’s container shipment, one-third of the bulk cargo traffic, and two-thirds of all oil shipment pass through Indian Ocean routes, though three-fourths of this traffic is destined for delivery in other regions of the world.¹⁸ For India, 90 percent of its trade volume and 90 percent of its oil imports rely on Indian Ocean transport.¹⁹

India’s current approach to the maritime domain can be described as two layered—regional and extra-regional. The recognition of the Indian Ocean as a common home to its neighboring states, its desire for regional peace, growth, and stability, and the need to protect itself from any threats led to Prime Minister Modi’s commencement of his vision of “Security and Growth for All in the Region” (SAGAR)²⁰ during his visit to Seychelles in 2015. Former Indian Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar defines SAGAR as “doctrine that succinctly defines India’s vision to collaborate with the region.”²¹

From the land-based conception of the Asia-Pacific, India’s extended neighborhood now coherently encompasses the wider, maritime-based conception of the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the second layer also considers the interconnectivity of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. About 61 percent of the world’s petroleum and other petrochemicals moved along maritime routes in 2015. The Strait of

Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca are the world's most important strategic chokepoints by volume of oil transit, and the latter lies at the eastern end of the Indian Ocean.²² In fact, the Malacca Strait is the primary chokepoint in East Asia, being just 2.7 km (1.7 miles) wide at its narrowest. It is an increasingly important waterway, with an estimated 16 million barrels per day (b/d) passing through in 2016, compared with 14.5 million b/d in 2011 (fig. 1-1). Crude oil generally comprises 85–90 percent of total oil flows per year, and petroleum products account for the remainder.²³ Therefore, safety of these maritime trade routes is a matter of concern for all regional stakeholders, including India. This realization has now broadened India's conceptual understanding of the strategic domain to include Indo-Pacific economies from the previously land-based conception of the Asia Pacific. In November 2017, a secretarial-level consultation between the officials of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and their counterparts from Australia, Japan and the United States focused on cooperation to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific region for all, marking the first official diplomatic step toward realizing India's Indo-Pacific strategy.²⁴ Additionally, recent press releases from the MEA have stressed "India's centrality in the Indo-Pacific along with Japan."²⁵ Therefore, for India, the Indo-Pacific is crucial for the security of trade and development within

Crude oil and petroleum products transported through the Strait of Malacca
million barrels per day



Crude oil and petroleum products transported through the Strait of Malacca. (US Energy Information Administration, "The Strait of Malacca, a Key Oil Trade Chokepoint, Links the Indian and Pacific Oceans," *Today in Energy* [website], 11 August 2017, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=32452>.)

the Indian Ocean and for maritime connectivity to the Pacific economies as part of its Act East Policy.

United States

The United States has been long engaged with the Asian region as a whole. It has remained diplomatically, politically, economically, and, most importantly, militarily involved in West Asia (the Middle East in American diplomatic parlance), East Asia, and South Asia since the mid-twentieth century as a part of its Asia-Pacific strategy.²⁶ Pres. Barack Obama brought a renewed focus to South and East Asia after America's long engagements with Russia and West Asia. This shift was widely recognized as a "Pivot to Asia." However, under Pres. Donald Trump, the US administration has focused even deeper on the maritime concept of the region, aligning its policies with the Indo-Pacific construct. The *National Security Strategy 2017* and *National Defense Strategy 2018* documents—released in December and January—are the two white papers that used the term Indo-Pacific for the first time in American policy.²⁷ Both documents repeatedly used the term and even placed it before other regions such as Europe and the Middle East, highlighting the salience of the region strategically.²⁸

However, the drivers of American strategic policy to shift toward the region as mentioned in the white papers are different from those of the other three countries previously discussed. The documents highlighted the rise of China and the perception of Russia as a threat to the region—labeling these powers as the "two revisionist powers"—reflecting the drivers for American engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. Since then, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have used the term Indo-Pacific in their speeches. This has been a departure from former President Obama's approach to the region, delineated a "Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific" since 2011 and focusing exclusively on the maritime threat of China's belligerent approach in the South China Sea (SCS), East China Sea, and Indian Ocean over the last several years. The Obama administration had engaged with the region through several institutional architectures such as ASEAN and the East Asia Summit and envisioned partnerships and alliances through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—the latter of which was quickly scrapped by the Trump administration—as well as enhancement of defense posturing in the region.²⁹

The American strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific region could be gauged by the fact that the US Pacific Command (USPACOM) was renamed as US Indo-

Pacific Command (US INDOPACOM) in May 2018. However, it has been argued elsewhere that President Trump's approach toward the Indo-Pacific in the recent documents is inclined toward putting "America First" in domestic as well as global affairs rather than having a vision or a well-rounded foreign policy consideration for the Indo-Pacific.³⁰ The Trump administration, though it withdrew from the TPP, continues to view India as a major defense partner. However, the administration's policy pronouncements indicate a desire to form military and economic partnerships with Southeast Asian countries on a bilateral level. The American conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific construct still needs more deliberation to be seen as more than just a theater of conflict and competition—something that recent American documents and statements seem to convey. US policy toward the Indo-Pacific at the current stage is fragmented at best in terms of areas of engagement within the region and requires more collaborative work with regional stakeholders to develop a comprehensive security framework in the region.

Nonetheless, there are certain caveats one needs to bear in mind while considering the white papers. The objective of a defense or foreign white paper is to substantially define or redefine national strategy, embracing foreign policy and security objectives. Additionally, it explicates tools for foreign security and domestic security, through military and civilian means. It responds to risks emanating from states or nonstate actors; active, deliberate threats; and security implications of major disasters and catastrophes of a nonintentional nature. However, these official documents are to be read beyond their objectivity and require careful approach to not be taken at their face value. Countries can be expected to declare their security objectives without explicitly mentioning their threat perceptions or their strategy to deal with them. Therefore, too much reading into the defense and foreign policy white papers can be misleading. Additionally, the fact that several countries, such as India, do not even publish defense white papers cannot be construed as a lack of any tools and strategies for ensuring their national security. In other words, white papers are a crucial political document of a country; however, it is not necessary that every political leadership produce one. Absence of one does not necessarily impede a country's capability to join regional or supra-regional regimes or mechanisms to ensure its peace and security. Apart from white papers, official statements from the crucial government ministries and departments provide an insight into the government's stand on defense- and security-related issues. This paper too has based its conceptual understanding of the Indo-Pacific as mentioned in

the various official documents and statements for the purpose of debating and postulating the future of the Indo-Pacific region and construct.

Evolution from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

In this section, the paper outlines persuasions that likely contributed to the aforementioned shifts toward the Indo-Pacific construct. Chinese belligerence in the South China Sea; the current range of North Korea's nuclear and missile program, encompassing several Indo-Pacific states; and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—all of which rely heavily upon the maritime construct of the region and impact the peace, growth, and stability of the overall region. Hence, besides the focus on territorial security in Asia, there is a renewed focus on securing the seas and oceans from impending threats and unilateral aggressions.

China's Aggressive Maritime Posture

The South China Sea, incorporating an area from the Karimata and Malacca Straits to the Strait of Taiwan, presents a peculiar challenge that the world is finding extremely difficult to overcome. It is among the world's most important maritime trade routes and is currently under dispute due to China's unilateral and excessive claims in the region. The SCS connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean via the narrow straits—Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda—all lying to the west of it. The region is also important for the maritime trade flow and its abundant resources. Most the economies to the east of the SCS—like China, Japan, and Korea—are dependent upon the oil that comes from West Asia and Africa.³¹ As discussed earlier, crude oil forms the largest part of the maritime trade passing through the Indo-Pacific, and the SCS route forms a crucial sea lane of communication (SLOC). The oil tankers and ships reaching East Asia travel the shortest route through these three straits.³² Overall, in 2016, maritime trade worth US \$3.4 trillion passed through the waters of the SCS, making it one of the most significant maritime trade routes in the world.³³

China has been legally claiming the landforms as well as the waters of the SCS on the basis of historic maps since 1951.³⁴ The maritime region lying to the south of Hainan extends to 3.5 million km² and has been demarcated by Chinese authorities under U-shaped dashed lines to represent its claims, known as Nine-Dash Line (NDL). China has been aggressively countering rival claims by Vietnam and the Philippines on various occasions within this maritime region since the 1970s.³⁵ The SCS region is surrounded by five countries in addition to China and Taiwan:

Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. All the countries claim overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and rights within the region. However, by claiming the entire region and the resources therein, China has unilaterally impinged the maritime rights of all the other SCS littorals.

Since the 1970s, China and other littoral states have disputed over the landforms in the region that fall into their claimed jurisdictions. The most important ones are the Spratly and Paracel groups of islands that lie beyond China's 200 nautical EEZ—some parts fall into the maritime jurisdictions of Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines.³⁶ However, the superior economic power and military strength that China possesses in comparison to these other states have afforded it the ability to project its power over several of the landforms since the 1970s.³⁷ Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines continue to hold several of the other landforms in the Spratly and Paracel groups.

The Chinese historic rights over the NDL were “invalidated” in a legal battle between Beijing and Manila over the excessive claims at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in a landmark verdict in July 2016. However, recent reports and satellite images confirm that over the past few years China has constructed artificial islands and dual-use military establishments such as runways and infrastructure in the disputed areas.³⁸ Beijing has been extensively demonstrating its growing and modernized military and naval fleet while hampering the use of open seas and overflight rights in the SCS by other countries.³⁹ Such belligerent actions threaten the peace and security of the region in general.

North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Program

Kim Jong-un's authoritarian and autocratic regime in North Korea has used nuclear weapons and long-range missile systems as tools for blackmailing and negotiating with the United States rather than for conventional deterrence. The country has conducted more than 150 missile and nuclear tests since 1984—over half of these tests since 2011 when Kim took power.⁴⁰ While his predecessors Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il focused on the testing of short- (up to 1,000 km) and medium-range missiles (1,000–3,000 km), Kim Jong-un aimed his attention at perfecting the intermediate-range missile (3,000–5,000 km) and intercontinental missiles (greater than 5,500 km) that cover the entire Indo-Pacific region, touching the shores of Australia and all of South and Southeast Asia and reaching as far as Oman in the western Indian Ocean.⁴¹

The totalitarian North Korean regime and its destabilizing behavior have created a sense of insecurity among its neighbors. The nuclear and missile tests have been a matter of concern since 2006. Though the success of earlier tests were contested, the 2016 tests indicated the country had attempted a thermonuclear or hydrogen bomb test yield estimated anywhere between 10–20 kilotons. By comparison, the Hiroshima bomb explosion in August 1945 yielded 15 kilotons. There are unconfirmed reports that Pyongyang is on its way to miniaturizing its nuclear weapons, which could then be mounted on the long-range missiles with the capability to reach Japan and Western parts of the United States—putting the entire Indo-Pacific region under constant nuclear threat.⁴²

The danger of nuclear weapons under an authoritarian ruler has contributed to regional insecurity. The United States has been a forerunner in ensuring global nuclear nonproliferation and arms race reduction and, therefore, views as imperative remaining engaged with the North Korean regime. The United States and its allies, notably Japan and Australia, are demanding North Korean submission to a non-proliferation regime as a precondition for any negotiation, and China's and Russia's calls for freeze on further North Korean tests are supported by other states such as France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and the United States. The larger geopolitical implications of North Korean nuclear weapons have brought together several regional and extraregional countries to negotiate with Pyongyang's leadership.

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative

There have been many scholarly debates regarding the drivers and the larger geopolitical implications of Chinese president Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is aiming to stimulate a new approach to economic globalization—one in which Beijing plays a pivotal role in shaping the norms and institution building. First proposed by Xi in 2013, BRI is a much-touted \$1.3 trillion connectivity and infrastructure development project encompassing more than 60 countries in Eurasia and East Africa. Beijing promotes BRI as a development vehicle for the hardware of trade and investment. Additionally, it is also the foundation on which China views its role in future global leadership. The BRI has two primary components: the overland Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the sea-based twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)—thus, “belt and road.”

The MSR is focused on developing key seaports that connect to land-based transportation routes across countries. The maritime trade route envisioned in this

initiative starts from the South China Sea, connecting westward to the Indian Ocean and finally reaching Europe through the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea. The success of the BRI and Chinese economy is dependent upon the SLOCs in this region.⁴³ China has been systematically modernizing its army, airpower, and naval forces for several years.⁴⁴ The importance of SLOCs as envisioned in the BRI, has, therefore, incentivized China to build up its military and naval forces to protect its ships. However, the nature of forces being utilized by Beijing has become a matter of concern for the other regional and extra-regional countries involved in the region. Deployment of aircraft carriers, amphibious attack ships, submarines, and related craft points toward an offensive, warlike Chinese psyche rather than any intention to simply protect their maritime routes. Moreover, Chinese investment in building dual-use ports and airfields in Pakistan, Africa, and Sri Lanka and on the South China Sea islands raise questions about Beijing's objectives—in fact presenting China as a regional security threat. These activities have reverberating impact on other countries that are trying to counter Chinese belligerence through internal (buying or building arms and strengthening militaries) or external (aligning with other powers) balancing, thereby making the region precarious.

China is providing loans through its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to countries for the development of projects under the BRI. However, there are strong concerns about such “debt diplomacy,” under which the recipient nations might have put collaterals against the loans gained from China.⁴⁵ For example, China's leasing of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port for 99 years against the unpaid \$3.1 billion loan at a 6.3 percent interest rate is one such example.⁴⁶ This is a deviation from the noncollateralized developmental funds given by the World Bank or International Monetary Fund. A recent 2018 study by the Washington-based Center for Global Development claimed that 23 of the 68 potential borrower countries under the BRI were already at a “quite high” risk of debt distress.⁴⁷ The threat of economic insecurity related to such a massive and interconnected project are intimidating. As China moves toward globalization and institution building following a blueprint that deviates from the Western-led order—maybe “with Chinese characteristics”—the norm and rule making under the BRI still remains a big question mark.⁴⁸

The current developments in Asia demonstrate threat perceptions in the maritime domain. While the oceans serve the positive role of interconnecting countries economically, diplomatically, and culturally, they also serve to link the threats

found in one area to the entire region. Therefore, none of the countries in the Indo-Pacific can formulate its maritime policies in isolation by excluding these common threat perceptions or being selective of the ones that affect it more than others. The next section is an overview of how the stakeholders are currently cooperating to address the concerns that affect the Indo-Pacific region.

India's Approach in the Indo-Pacific

India's geopolitical location, its capability and ambitions, and the various threat perceptions present in the Indo-Pacific will remain key determinants in shaping the nation's position in the region. India is a large country with a population second in size only to its neighbor, China. India also possesses one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Growing economic ambitions come with more responsibilities and an appetite to play a larger role in the regional geopolitics and security architecture. India, too, is looking forward to its role as a "net security provider" in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁹ However, New Delhi still lacks clarity on how it can go about taking a leading role in the regional architecture and institutions.

Prime Minister Modi has demonstrated his clarity and vision toward India's position and importance in the Indian Ocean. In a speech in February 2016 at the International Fleet Review held at Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, Modi stressed India's centrality in the Indian Ocean and the shared opportunities and threats that the Indian Ocean presents to the regional economies.⁵⁰ More than 40 countries have shores on the Indian Ocean, and half of world's container traffic and close to one-third of world's cargo traffic passes through this region. India has 1,200 island territories and a huge EEZ of 2.4 million km² in the Indian Ocean, establishing the importance of the region for the country—and vice versa. At the same time, the region shares threats of seaborne terror, piracy, natural disasters (like tsunamis and cyclones), and manmade problems such as oil spills and climate change, which continue to put at risk the stability of the maritime domain. The scale and complexity of these challenges toward international maritime stability cannot be the preserve of a single nation.⁵¹ Hence, to ensure a peaceful and stable maritime environment, Modi explicated his vision of SAGAR, making the Indian Ocean region his foremost policy priority. The policy is conceptually based upon actively pursuing and promoting India's geopolitical, strategic, and economic interests on the seas, in particular the Indian Ocean.

India has been involved similarly at the political, institutional level within the Indian Ocean states through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) since

1997. The organization celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2017 and has “remained committed to building and expanding understanding and mutually beneficial cooperation through a consensus-based evolutionary and non-intrusive approach in the rapid changing environment faced by the region.”⁵² IORA is a dynamic organization of 21 member states and seven dialogue partners within the Indian Ocean. The organization has eight focus areas: maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, tourism and cultural exchange, blue economy, women’s economic development, and academics, science, and technology.⁵³ On the other hand, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) forms the functional body, comprising 35 Indian Ocean littoral states that have been grouped into four sub-regions (South Asian, West Asian, East African, and Southeast Asian littorals including Australia). IONS formed in 2008, seeking to provide a regional forum through which the chiefs of navies (or equivalent maritime agency) of all the littoral states of the IORA can increase maritime security cooperation.⁵⁴

Over the past few years, one can observe a lack in attention in India’s foreign policy approach focused on issues of immediate bilateral and multilateral importance. This adversely impacted India’s relationship with the states at the long-term, strategic level. Now, however, India and the United States have restarted their institutionalized dialogues designed for deepening cooperation in the spheres of defense, technology, and counterterrorism.⁵⁵ The two countries have operationalized agreements for allowing greater bilateral interoperability and technology transfer, including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Association (LEMOA).⁵⁶ Apart from the United States, the Indian navy regularly carries out naval exercises to increase interoperability in the maritime domain with several countries such as Singapore (SIMBEX),⁵⁷ France (VARUNA),⁵⁸ Australia (AUSINDEX),⁵⁹ Oman (Sea Breeze),⁶⁰ Japan (JIMEX),⁶¹ and Myanmar (MILAN and CORPAT).⁶² The scope of these exercises has remained limited to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.

With the above structures in place, it could be safely argued that India has a vision and strategy for the Indian Ocean. However, as India is extending its approach toward the Indo-Pacific as its extended maritime domain, it needs to ponder more deeply the institutional structures required to do so. Considering the current trajectory of India’s involvement in the region through bilateral and multilateral institutions related to several aspects of security (economic, military, political, and so forth), it could be argued that India is approaching the Indo-Pacific with a two-pronged approach—building multilateral alliances for socio-economic

and political issues for development and keeping the security issues on a more bilateral level with the other regional powers rather than an overarching institutional proposition within the Indo-Pacific.

One of the key factors driving India toward its Indo-Pacific neighbors was the recognition of a lack of interconnectivity that includes the western region as India's immediate neighborhood in addition to its eastern neighbors. Expanding the area of interest and influence has come to be a foreign policy driver for New Delhi in recent years, and Prime Minister Modi's foreign visits are examples of the fact. There is a growing awareness among Indian leaders regarding the country's poor position in connecting with its neighboring states in terms of infrastructure building and capacity development due to the country's own internal structural problems. However, India does share old historical and cultural ties with many of its neighbors, which several subsequent Indian leaderships are trying to revive as part of the nation's "Neighbourhood First" policy.

India's approach toward Africa can be seen in this context. As a continent, Africa has huge human and resource potentials, but it lacks development and capacity building needed for its growth. Several Asian countries are taking initiatives to address structural issues that is keeping resource-rich African states from peace and prosperity. Japan has been playing a major "complementary role" by providing developmental assistance to African states. At the same time, to bridge the supply-and-demand gap between the developing countries—like India and those in Africa—and developed Japan, the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) has been proposed. AAGC, in its vision document of 2017, has been envisaged as a socio-economic project to improve infrastructure, connectivity, and related development projects and increase people-to-people interaction between Asia and Africa.⁶³ The project envisions that it "will have a strong influence on India's constructive role in shaping the global agenda for sustainable economic development and international cooperation based on the principles of solidarity, equity and sharing."⁶⁴ In other words, there is a political willingness among nations and mutual acknowledgment of the opportunities presented by having an institutional structure in place.

On the strategic side, however, there is still a lack of any institutional structure in the Indo-Pacific region. The four large democracies of the region—Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—are in talks for renewing their Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, an informal body better known as the Quad, into a formal institutionalized relationship. The primary objective of the Quad is to maintain a rules-based order in the regional maritime security architecture. The first meeting

of the Quad took place in May 2007 on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in the Philippines, and the second one was held in conjunction with the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018. In 2008, the cordial relations between the ruling Australian government and China temporarily led to Canberra quitting the group. Japan, India, and the United States went ahead with the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, and the trio continued conducting joint naval exercises, known as the Malabar exercises in the Bay of Bengal near India and in the waters near the Okinawan coast of Japan. After the failure of the first iteration of the Quad, a revival occurred in 2017. Changing geopolitics in the region and China's belligerent maritime posture at the regional level and bilaterally with several countries of the neighborhood—including India, Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines—had heightened the sense of threat perceptions in the intervening decade.

Despite seeing China as a threat individually, the defense and security white papers of the four Quad nations do not reflect this perception at a collective level.



An Indian Navy explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) technician and a US Navy sailor launch a MK18 Mod. One unmanned underwater vehicle during a mine countermeasures training mission near Sasebo, Japan, during Exercise Malabar 2016, June 13. A trilateral maritime exercise, Malabar is designed to enhance dynamic cooperation between the Indian Navy, Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), and US Navy forces in the Indo-Pacific. US Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Charles White.

Except for the US paper, which repeatedly mentions China as the threat to American interests in the Indo-Pacific, the white papers from the other three members of the Quad have centered their focus on the growth and developmental aspect and maintenance of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. The lack of a common understanding of the Indo-Pacific region as a theater and the delimitation of its scope form the basis of the fault line for any organizational and operational structure to be developed among the four countries. India shares a long-disputed territorial border with China, and the two nations fought a brief but bloody war in 1962. China and Japan too have a disputed maritime border in the East China Sea. Similarly, Australia and the United States share their maritime zones with China in the Pacific Ocean. Still, all the members of the Quad conceptualize the Indo-Pacific in their own manner based upon their maritime interests, rights, and threat perceptions, and these disparate conceptions are likely to have implications for any intra-regional legislation required for political and institutional building. The territorial/maritime proximity and economic interdependence with China can be seen as one of the major reasons for these countries to avoid increased hostility in the region.

Complications and a Way Forward

The term Indo-Pacific has gained currency in India since 2006, when the term was used as an academic and strategic concept.⁶⁵ The regional geopolitics has come a long way since in defining the threats and opportunities for India and other littorals in the Indo-Pacific region. Japanese prime minister Abe’s “Confluence of the Two Seas” speech in 2007 in the Indian parliament brought regional focus to the term by advancing cooperation and development. The United States and Australia, as the other stakeholders in the peace, security, and development in the Indo-Pacific region, joined the ranks recently to initiate a regional-level maritime dialogue. Nonetheless, the term still suffers handicaps from several angles, starting with the conceptualization of the term and further from a lack of finding common grounds to form a supra-regional institution to address security concerns.

That said, there are a few existing institutional mechanisms that can function as a platform for dialogue and deliberation among the regional stakeholders, reducing the need for establishing new institutions for maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. These include the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), and the IORA—all of which deal with security issues within the region. These ASEAN

sister organizations have seen some successful participation over the past years, with several high-ranking political and military officials from the member and observer countries attending each year. However, the same cannot be said of the outcomes of such meetings, as the joint communiqués or statements produced after these summits have reflected the inability to establish common grounds in terms of threat perceptions.

Still, it brings the focus back to the centrality of ASEAN countries as the pillar for the establishment of an Asian security architecture. ASEAN countries have shown their willingness to develop an open and inclusive maritime security architecture but have shied away from any strategic-level, Quad-like arrangements.⁶⁶ Just like several other neighbors, many ASEAN countries have complicated relations with China. On the one hand, there are disputed maritime boundary issues that some of these countries face individually with China, and on the other, they are dependent upon China economically—even more so now, as the BRI offers attractive land and maritime infrastructure and connectivity development opportunities to Southeast Asia. ASEAN countries see these development-based projects as a boost to their economies. Additionally, land-oriented ASEAN countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and others share better bilateral relations with China than the maritime counterparts, which has reflected in their seeming inability to come up with a collective position in ASEAN with regard to China. The latter, too, plays an upper hand while negotiating with ASEAN at the multilateral level as seen in discussing maritime issues. The Declaration on the Code of the Conduct on South China Sea (DoC 2002) that is yet to be concretized into a binding code of conduct, remains a point in case. China's precondition while discussing the DoC is to keep the maritime issues pertaining to SCS out of the agreement, which has kept the agreement from reaching fruition.

The reinstated Quad had an enthusiastic start with a joint secretary-level meeting among the countries; however, the initiative is facing issues with India repeatedly not accepting Australia in its Malabar naval exercises over the years.⁶⁷ India did not provide its reasons for the exercises that were held in June 2018 near coast of Guam.⁶⁸ Moreover, Indian foreign policy is in a flux vis-a-vis its relations with China, and as the general elections are approaching in 2019, the current leadership appears reluctant to put India in a volatile situation.

Nevertheless, the Indo-Pacific regional maritime framework is likely to see a joint effort from the four countries based upon a common agreement of being free, open, and inclusive, governed by a rule of law, and norms based upon the

consent of all to ensure the peace and prosperity of the region. However, the same cannot be said about the establishment of the Quad in the current form of a purely military angle. Several countries, including ASEAN nations, though agreeable with joint maritime and military exercises, have expressed their reservations regarding militarizing the region with warships. The countries in the region are seeking freedom of navigation and overflight rights as common for all and have denounced unilateral attempts by any country to claim territorial rights of sovereignty over these global commons. Additionally, these nations seek peaceful settlement of disputes and the formation of partnerships based upon shared values and interests rather than war fighting. In other words, the Quad states need to consider these aspirations of the regional stakeholders and ensure an overall security of the region beyond the military perspective. Having stated that, as most of the littoral countries in the IORA are dependent upon maritime trade and have considerable stake in the security of the Indo-Pacific, such concerns need to reflect in regional policy making collectively and without ambiguity.

This article establishes that India's position in the Indo-Pacific stems from its location and its interests in the region. The nation is keen to take a larger role in the regional security architecture—for which it needs to move beyond the Indian Ocean and take a proactive role in consensus building among the regional stakeholders.⁶⁹ At the same time, US foreign and security policy need to move beyond China's containment and seek to engage with American allies at a regional level beyond military or economic bilateral partnerships. India has a role to play beyond just being a major defense partner to the United States in ensuring a peaceful, free, and open Indo-Pacific. Along with Australia and Japan, India can deliberate on how New Delhi wishes to conceptualize the Indo-Pacific and then address the threat perceptions collectively. The Indo-Pacific is still evolving, and now is an opportune time for the Indo-Pacific littorals to cooperate on issues of concern to build a maritime security framework architecture and for India to take a prominent role in it. **JIPA**

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