



# DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

VOL. 12 NO. 3

ISSN 2347 - 3703

APRIL-JUNE 2023

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# THE INDO-PACIFIC: A CONCEPT YET TO MATURE

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The term Indo-Pacific started to be commonly used in geopolitical and strategic discourses to denote a nuanced concept that moved away from the traditional Asia-Pacific model, around 2010. Indo-Pacific combines the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the West Pacific (WP), including the seas off South-East Asia and East Asia, encompassing the two in a conjoined perspective. The term and the concept are not new—its first recorded use being in the mid-19th century, when the term was used by a British lawyer and ethnographer. In its current use there is one definition that had been agreed upon by the different nations that span the region, each preferring to define the term with variations based on individual perspectives.

While the acceptance of the term is almost universal after more than a decade of the concept being mooted, the proposed change in the general thinking and its influence on policymaking has been slow to keep pace. There is one fundamental impediment to achieving a seamless transition to the term and what it entails in terms of geopolitical realities. While the IOR and WP are contiguous through South-East Asia, they do not have the same economic and/or security environment. In turn, therefore, the geopolitical landscapes—that are

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strongly influenced by economic, social, and cultural factors—are not the same or even similar. There are visible divergences in the levels of economic development and perceptions of security among the nations of the broader Indo-Pacific.

Since there are not even superficial commonalities between the IOR and WP, the questions that come to the fore regarding the Indo-Pacific concept are: one, as the construct had not matured to the extent anticipated even after more than a decade of it being floated, was the concept itself something of an aberration to start with? Two, will it withstand the battering of time and changing political priorities of the nations involved?

### **CHALLENGES UNIQUE TO THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION**

The nations of the IOR were under colonial rule of Western powers till about six decades back. The colonial powers had ‘forgotten’ to develop the economies and other infrastructure of these countries in their haste to exploit the colonies for their own benefit. For decades after being granted ‘independence’ these nations were clubbed together as ‘developing nations’, a term slightly more palatable than the earlier ‘underdeveloped nations’. The region is rich in natural resources, particularly hydrocarbons, and yet no one nation or power has so far attempted to dominate the region or become the assertive, *de facto* leader.

The countries of the IOR are not homogeneous and have a great deal of diversity in all aspects of normal life—in societal norms, culture and even language. Therefore, there has been no incentive to integrate or attempt to create a power group, with the result that economic progress in the post-colonial period has been slow, relative to the nations in the WP. In turn, these nations have minimal capacity to ensure sovereign security and their maritime economic zones are ill-patrolled. Since the capabilities to assert sovereignty over maritime economic zones are almost non-existent, military encounters perpetuated by economic rivalry, especially in the maritime region, are dormant and not very common.

At least for the time being the nations of the IOR are more concerned with relatively minor security challenges such as piracy, illegal fishing, human trafficking, etc., as opposed to the global

challenges that emanate from great power confrontation, that the concept of Indo-Pacific aims to address and diminish. Since their primary quest is to improve their economies and the lot of their people, these nations do not have the additional capacity required to involve themselves in, what they perceive as unnecessary, international rivalry leading to geopolitical instability. The Indo-Pacific concept as a security mantle has only limited appeal to these nations.

### **WHY THE INDO-PACIFIC?**

Some analysts are of the opinion that the move from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific was a not-so-subtle effort to bring in India conclusively into the equation, mainly because of India's emerging eminence from the turn of the century. Arguably, this may indeed have been one of the critical considerations in creating the concept, with other minor influences adding traction to it. From the mid-1990s, India's impressive economic growth, its nuclear weaponisation and the corresponding increase in military might—in general, the rise of India—refocused world attention on the Indian Ocean. It was acknowledged that there could not be any meaningful strategic action, economic or security related, in the Asia-Pacific without India's participation. Yet India had remained reluctant to overtly engage with the region.

The best way around this conundrum was to expand the geographical span of the term. Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept helped bring India into the broader sphere of 'maritime Asia'. However, it must be mentioned that the 'Indo' in the term stands for the Indian Ocean and not for India. Almost all the countries of the IOR and WP now accept the term and the concept, except for China. China continues to push back against the concept, with the outgoing foreign minister, Wang Yi, disdainfully predicting that the idea of the Indo-Pacific and talk of free and open trade "will dissipate like ocean foam". Such vociferous declarations can also be indicative of a deep-seated discomfort within the Chinese establishment.

### **WHAT IS THE INDO-PACIFIC ABOUT?**

Asia, as a term depicting a continent, could perhaps be made to encompass the broad region bounded by the East African coast of the Arabian Sea all the way to New Zealand and beyond, and to

the northern tip of Japan and the islands that lie in-between. Even if this is a possible geographical construct, the broad sweep is perhaps untenable when it comes to discussions of the nitty-gritty of economic and security imperatives. The term Indo-Pacific is more about perceptions than actual geographic divisions and recognises the emerging structural shift in global strategic realities.

Conceptually the Indo-Pacific establishes a link between the so-called Far East and South-Asia, a divide that was artificially created during colonial times to suit the colonial Western powers' division of the Asian region. The Indo-Pacific, it is hoped, would bring together the economic dynamism of both the sections mentioned above to face the emerging security challenges besetting the so far tranquil waters of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. It is projected to provide a frame of reference to chart a strategic course to stabilise the shifting economic balance in both the region and the world, brought about by China's unbridled ambition to achieve global power status, riding on its extraordinary economic expansion. Whether the concept achieves these objectives is yet to be seen.

An objective that has been left unsaid—and even denied by some of the larger nations involved—is that the concept is meant to provide a visible 'other view' to China's distinctly destabilising behaviour not only in its immediate neighbourhood of East and South-East Asia but also across the Indian Ocean to East Africa and the South Pacific. From this perspective, the Indo-Pacific is a sound hypothesis. The challenges to making it a reality is demonstrated in its execution when the cracks in the façade become clearly visible. The smaller nations of the broader region do not want to overtly confront Chinese belligerence and are therefore, understandably, reluctant to join the grouping. This is also the reason that the Indo-Pacific does not even have any joint planning or mutual defence arrangements and there is absolutely no transparency regarding who would do what in a crisis.

On the brighter side, the Indo-Pacific, as an idea is not merely a geographic and territorial demarcation. It represents the first step in trying to counter Chinese aggression without stepping over an invisible line that would lead to direct confrontation and conflict, a situation to be avoided. At best, the concept remains a work in progress. While progress has been slow, the move to Indo-Pacific

has tacitly acknowledged two vaguely articulated realities. One, that the maritime environment of the IOR and WP will be the primary focus of global strategic competition for the next several decades. Two, India's rise will automatically alter its strategic focus beyond its immediate neighbourhood, gradually forcing it to become part of the strategic calculus in the broader region.

The rise of India and its spreading ripples need further elaboration vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific concept. It was Japan that first articulated the imperative of engaging India in the Indo-Pacific as an idea and plan of action was to succeed. If India had to be nudged to move out of the self-imposed constraints of the post-colonial inward gazing policies, the old concept of the Asia-Pacific, which had not visibly included India, had to be brought down and a new and inclusive design had to be introduced. India, which had always considered itself a purely Indian Ocean power, had to be made active in the broader region. To a large extent, the attempt seems to have been successful with India tilting towards cooperation with the Indo-Pacific concept, especially after the Chinese border incursions in the Himalayas.

While elaborating on what the Indo-Pacific is about, it is equally important to emphasise what it is not. It is not meant to treat the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single contiguous strategic maritime system; and nor is it meant to bring South Asia and the Indian Ocean littorals into the Pacific fold. The Indo-Pacific is a broad conceptualisation that attempts to consider the changing strategic imperatives, economic realities, and security concerns of the nations in the region and their multilateral and bilateral interactions with each other to arrive at a stable geopolitical environment. Its success or otherwise cannot be judged by a single prism analysis—the variables are far too many.

## **ISSUES WITH THE RISE OF CHINA**

China's rise—economic, defence capabilities, space exploration—and bounding global influence and power status has long been accepted by the international community. The countries of the Indo-Pacific region, who are by and large practitioners of some sort or the other of democratic governance, have become increasingly concerned with the fact that the rise of China has coincided with its progressively coercive and belligerent behaviour.

Examples of China's selfish, thoughtless and bellicose behaviour abound in the region. Australia is a victim of its economic boycott and insidious political campaigns, especially within the Chinese diaspora. Sri Lanka was drawn into a web of economic indebtedness that has eroded its fundamental sovereignty through participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, which was—at least, formally—meant to build infrastructure for the benefit of the recipient nation. Large Chinese fishing fleets blatantly encroach upon the territorial waters of smaller and economically and militarily weaker South-East Asian nations and well beyond Asia. China has been fortifying islands in the South China Sea for the past decade, claiming the Sea—common to several other nations—to be its exclusive property. This action is in direct defiance of a decision given five years ago by the Arbitral tribunal constituted under the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention that unanimously rejected China's expansive South China Sea claim, as having no basis in international law.

More unnerving for the smaller Asian nations is China's aggressive border incursions against both India and Japan, the strongest of the Indo-Pacific nations. There is an inherent and palpable fear of China's unilateral military actions. Further, China's overt threats against Taiwan are at a different plane to all its other activities—it unsettles and destabilises the entire region. An unbiased question that needs to be asked, and answered unambiguously, is there a way to ensure that China's rise to prominence, influence and global status can be based on peaceful and law-abiding initiatives that would carry the smaller nations of the region with it willingly—not as coerced and cowed minion states?

The answer is not difficult to fathom. From China's actions and activities, it seems clear that at least for the time being a balanced 'peaceful' rise, wherein China is benign and law-abiding in its dealings with neighbours, seems to be out of Chinese calculations. Chinese aggression, actual and rhetorical, points to confrontation and conflict. It seems that the nation has no time to talk and negotiate, only willing to point a finger, blame and scold all others. Under these circumstances, the Indo-Pacific as a concept that has yet to be fully executed, represents the greatest geopolitical challenge that the world has faced since the rise of fascism and Nazi power in the early decades of the 20th century.

## **US-CHINA INTERACTIONS: BALANCE VS CONTAINMENT**

The world is currently witnessing the dawn of a new era in the Sino-US relationship where engagement and dialogue is receding and gradually being replaced by a vociferous demand for containment, a dangerous trend. In China, the Party control spreads its tentacles into all aspects of society and the economy and is currently buoyed by the self-established belief that China's time in the sun has finally come. This belief is further sharpened by a perceived conviction that the US capacity to stand up to tough situations and its staying power has somewhat diminished and that it will be found wanting when the chips are down. In the Indo-Pacific, unfortunately, these are concerns for the US allies as well, although they are not openly articulated.

The US in the meantime is continuing its determined pursuit to maintain its global strategic primacy. However, staying as the number one power is now being achieved by dogged attempts to block and contain China's moves rather than by increasing its own economic, political and diplomatic powers and standing. This lets China retain the initiative in any bilateral interaction. The current stance of the US is a negative game and will not deliver successful long-term results. Further, containment is not a feasible option since China is already fully immersed in the global system, both economically and geopolitically—tangible containment will be impossible to achieve. Instead, the US should concentrate on leveraging and improving its own strengths—technological developments, economic depth, and strategic flexibility—to rise above Chinese power. Long-term solutions to the challenge will become obvious only under these circumstances.

Ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the concept of balance of power has lost its relevance. There was a short-lived period of euphoria when well-meaning strategists believed that a multipolar entity where all nations, great and small, would have equal rights and influence would emerge. This was but Utopian thinking and would not survive the first five or six years, when the US clearly emerged as a hegemonic power heralding the arrival of a unipolar world. Subsequently its self-imposed world leadership became almost dictatorial in nature, much to the chagrin of genuine middle-powers. Today, more than ever, there is a need to

establish a broad balance of power, not merely in military matters, but in all aspects of realpolitik—socio-economic, geopolitical and info-technological realms. Such a global balance of power must take into account China's genuine needs, not its ambitious and overarching power grab through military and economic threats and coercions.

China's rise must be balanced and managed to benefit all, not frustrated and contained to accommodate short-term gains for the US and its allies. A new balance of power has to be developed in which China finds a legitimate position commensurate with its power and status. Creating such a power balance with equitable equilibrium is the biggest challenge facing the international community and comity of nations. The concept of the Indo-Pacific—with the participation of all the democracies of the region—is the first step in attempting to create such a de facto balance along the lines that suit the majority, with an appropriate mix of military, economic and geopolitical factors. Such a balance of power, if generally accepted, would also 'contain' China and hence has to be a flexible and evolving process.

### **JAPAN—ITS IMPERATIVES**

In 2016, Japan proposed the notion of a "free and open Pacific" (FOIP) as a strategy for the Indo-Pacific comity of nations, the then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declaring that it would form the core of Japan's foreign policy doctrine. This was a principle warmly welcomed by India and other nations. However, none of these nations envisaged cutting economic ties with China, even as China dismissed FOIP as yet another initiative to contain it. Succumbing to reality, in 2018, Japan called FOIP a vision rather than a strategy. The same was endorsed by the US in its strategy paper, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, published in November 2019.

In the past decade or so, Japan has been marking out an independent strategic role for itself, willingly expanding its constitutional boundaries to project power and leveraging its economic clout. Even though the US capacity to stay the course is being questioned in whispers around the region, the US remains the cornerstone around which Japan's security imperatives are built.

Accordingly, Japan acknowledges that only a US-led Indo-Pacific alliance, or an informal grouping, can guarantee a balance of power with China.

Any emerging balance of power must be able to bring a measure of stability in the Indo-Pacific region—a difficult equilibrium to achieve since any initiative to calm the currently turbulent waters of the region will be viewed by China as an attempt to contain it. China is bound to reject any, and all, such attempts. Chinese policies of aggressive diplomacy and coercive economic initiatives thrive in uncertain waters when it holds the distinct advantage of the element of surprise in its favour. Even so, Japanese initiatives at achieving close cooperation through the building of strategic relations with the nations of the region—especially the US, India and Australia—is meant to signal to a wary China that there is an urgent need to maintain a steady balance of power without resorting to belligerence and coercion.

Japan has also been at the forefront of pushing economic cooperation initiatives in the region. However, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership—a free trade pact, which Japan and Australia barely managed to salvage—and India's initial reluctance and then refusal to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership have thwarted Japan's efforts to counter China's economic heft in the region.

### **A RELUCTANT INDIA—STRATEGIC DRIVERS**

For little less than a decade, India has been in the middle of a major geopolitical realignment. Since the current administration was voted to power in 2014, and again in 2019, India has repositioned its foreign policy to reflect only its national interests in a hard-headed manner. The esoteric, old-world concept of non-alignment—which has never served India's interests—has been discarded as so much old baggage. A visibly new sense of India understanding its economic and military power and influence on the global stage has percolated into the body politic and strategic policymaking machinery. There is a new wave of patriotism breezing through the nation. In the bargain, however, the clear demarcation between patriotism and nationalism has somehow become vague, at times making it an unholy mix that is difficult to

unravel. This is, perhaps, the new baggage that India will have to carry.

India's strategic reorientation has been the result of some pragmatic calculations at the apex body of the country's geopolitical and strategic decision-making apparatus.

One, it has recognised China as its deep and long-term strategic competitor, a fact reinforced by the display of China's overt ambitions in the region.

Two, India's newfound confidence makes it more comfortable in discussing and increasing strategic cooperation with the US and its regional allies, Japan and Australia.

Three, this increased dialogue and cooperation with the major democracies of the Indo-Pacific region harks back to India's steadfast support for strengthening a liberal international order.

Four, India envisages this liberal international order not as an extension of US exceptionalism but as a vehicle reflecting the altered global power equation, in which India has a rightful voice. The emerging strategic thinking in India will not countenance the country being sidelined or pushed around in any discussion regarding the Indo-Pacific—it will balk at any international order in which it has no influence or an emphatic voice.

Five, India has firmly committed to significantly improving its defence capabilities and further refining its broader security apparatus, through a number of measures that include the fine-tuning of the alignment between foreign policy and security imperatives, a concerted drive to Indianise the military-industrial complex, and a major reorganisation of the three armed forces from the grass-roots level. The success, or otherwise, of these measures in the next decade would determine the strategic geopolitical and security path that India will tread for the next four or five decades. In this respect, India today stands at the crossroads vis-à-vis its security imperatives and its ability to face the emerging geopolitical challenges.

Six, while the above factors are critical to determining India's long-term strategic future, India will always look towards maintaining maximum freedom of action and strategic autonomy in all its actions. Centuries of colonisation, and attendant oppression had left an indelible mark on the psyche of the nation—India will not become a

formal 'ally' of the US or any other nation, in the commonly accepted meaning of the word 'ally'. In the past decade India has adopted a cautious 'neighbourhood first' approach to its foreign policy and has been providing support to other nations on a bilateral basis. This is a step forward from its previous reluctance to fully engage with another country at the strategic level. At the basic level, while India's newfound confidence in its own capabilities will be a driving factor in its foreign policy and national security imperatives, its own national interest will determine India's future strategic path in geopolitical, economic and security matters.

### **SINO-INDIAN EQUATION**

There is a visible dichotomy that, underlying all other aspects of India-China interaction, is the fact of the elements of economic cooperation superimposed on the ongoing strategic competition between the two neighbours. India categorically opposes any move by China to become the predominant power in the IOR and tries to curtail all China's efforts to make inroads into the Indian Ocean. India's interaction with China is always influenced by the fact that the two nations have gone to war and that the shared and disputed border in the Himalayas is still a point of contention that bubbles out of the cauldron at unpredictable moments. China's instigation of border clashes has not helped stabilise matters.

Once again, the bottom line is that India will always contrive to retain its freedom of strategic manoeuvre. Its gravest concerns are that China's unimpeded rise will lead to its influence impinging on India's strategic choices and flexibility in geopolitical initiatives. The realignment in India's foreign policy and build-up of defence and security capabilities is aimed at avoiding such a situation.

### **AUSTRALIA'S CHALLENGES**

There is no getting away from the fact that Australia's security is closely linked to the Indo-Pacific region and its prevailing circumstances. Within this construct, China plays a critical role in shaping Australia's strategic perceptions for two major reasons. One, China plays an inordinately critical role in the stability and well-being of the Australian economy; and two, the large Chinese

diaspora resident in Australia is very often leveraged by China to become political influencers in Canberra's decision-making process.

Stemming from this inimitable situation, Australia is forced to approach China in its own unique manner. Despite China imposing severe economic sanctions and overtly interfering in its geopolitical initiatives, Australia still does not view China as an adversary or even a hostile power. In the past one year, after a labour government has taken power, there has been a slight thaw in the relationship, although China's reaction to even minor diplomatic incidents continues to remain unpredictable.

Australia has countered China's brash behaviour pattern with enormous patience. However, in dealing with an impetuous China, Australia has pointedly been concerned about its lack of democratic credentials, even as China continues its relentless climb up the ladder towards great power status, using both overt and covert means, bullying, bribing and threatening any party that comes in its way. The reality is that all nations of the Indo-Pacific region understand that China is a 'one-party state' and that the ills of such a situation colour—and to a certain extent legitimise—China's perceptions of its actions to achieve predominant status in the Indo-Pacific and further afield.

Australia continues to dream of an Indo-Pacific where China will play an important, responsible and constructive economic role that would transcend the region and have a worldwide impact, within a global order that is anchored in adherence to the accepted international law. At least for the time being, in the near future, this will remain an illusory vision. China will continue to play by its own rules, irrespective of the consequences. The Indo-Pacific is where the visible ruptures and confrontations will take place.

## **CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

The major, larger, economically more powerful, democracies of the Indo-Pacific have a long road to march in their attempt to stabilise the region. They must be able to convince the smaller nations that committing to the notion of Indo-Pacific and the vision of FOIP would be a far better long-term option than coming under the economic and security umbrella of China, for short-term gains. Considering the

financial carrots that China holds out to entice the smaller economies of the region and the lack of a considered joint approach by the US, Japan, India and Australia to effectively counter these moves, it looks certain that the road to Indo-Pacific stability will be long and rocky. The situation is further complicated by the shadow of the historic record of colonisation in the region and that of Japanese aggression in the last century, which looms large as a backdrop to all initiatives by the larger democracies.

Irrespective of all external influences, China will ultimately define its own strategic balance, both in the region and the world. It is an ancient country and a civilisation that has a clear vision of its place in the world, its actions are shaped by its long history as the Middle Kingdom—historical memory, which highlights perceived slights and insults, is a strong and undeniable influence in the formulation of China's foreign policy. Flowing from this reality, China's future behaviour will continue to be a mix of the predictable and the uncertain. What can be predicted with assurance is that China will not accept a global or regional order in the mould of what was crafted in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union that led to unquestioned US hegemony.

What is uncertain is how China will create an alternative world order. Will it attempt to alter global and regional institutions as well as established norms and perceptions of national security and/or global stability to gradually assume centre stage? In this context, the other unknown is, where does China see the US fitting into the altered world over? What is predictable is that China will not arrive at a power-sharing bargain with the US, even though power-sharing is the only viable option. Equally predictable is the fact that the US also will not agree to such a bargain—the status quo of animated face-off and confrontational diplomacy will continue unabated. If at all any shift in the power balance takes place, it will, in all probability, be incremental, uncertain, unconventional and fully organic to the Indo-Pacific region.

Japan and India are both unambiguous in their commitment to balance China; and geography and history place these two democracies on the opposite sides of the scale to counterbalance China. The question is how will the combined strategic weight that

these two nations bring to the equation be applied to the emerging scenario? How this strategic Indo-Japanese arrangement brings to bear its combined economic and military strengths optimally—to contain and balance emerging inequities—will have a direct impact on China’s long-term plans for the region.

The French have tried to push themselves into the Indo-Pacific, vocally trying to establish a self-proclaimed role as a stabilising mediator. However, this is a self-aggrandising proclamation that France does not have the capability, power or influence to achieve. Accordingly, the nations of the Indo-Pacific have dismissed it as nothing other than empty rhetoric from a European nation seeking to increase its diminishing relevance in global matters.

The other reality that the Indo-Pacific construct must factor into all calculations is that the strategic predominance of the US is declining at a pace faster than anticipated and may not be a determinant factor after the next decade. The liberal international system—on the back of which the current world order rests—is a battered concept on the verge of collapse. Liberal democracies that held up the system based on law and order are being pushed towards identity politics. Democracies and their constituents demand, and expect, authoritarian leadership, which is an antipathy to the concept of liberal democratic process. Governance has inexplicably become a quagmire of contradictions.

Economic necessities have become the prime drivers of strategic imperatives in most nations, crossing ideological barriers. The situation often leads to fluid strategic competitions that may have been easily avoided in the past. The fluidity inherent in the global strategic scenario in turn brings in unpredictable end points. This combination is bound to create a vicious cycle of fluid relativities bringing uncertain end states that in turn require further and greater fluidity to contain. Unfortunately, such cycles cannot remain self-perpetuating; they will eventually come to a decisive ‘tipping point’ when the countries involved will perforce start to collapse one by one, leaving one, or at best two, battered leaders standing. The further reaction of these ‘winners’ will determine the future strategic world order. The worrying uncertainty is that the strategic ingredients to

greater staying power in the vicious cycle (discussed in the article) is not fully known or explored.

It is within this uncertain and somewhat murky circumstances that the Indo-Pacific as a concept, and the FOIP as a vision, has to grow and mature if they are to ensure that the region avoids entering into the self-destructive cycle of strategic fluidity and uncertain end state. While the concept and the vision are ideas whose time has come, the question remains whether or not they will mature in time for the region to avoid the cycle and its inevitable tipping point. The current pace of maturing seems to indicate that it will be a close-run race.

