

India's concept of Indo-Pacific is inclusive and across oceans

By Huma Siddiqui

The acceptance of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic construct linking the contiguous waters of the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean has gained currency in the last few years with the shift in the geopolitical center of gravity to this region.

Globalization, trade dependence, the seamless connectivity of the maritime domain and the changing nature of the maritime threat becoming more transnational in nature has blurred physical boundaries and raised awareness of the importance of ensuring secure seas for the unhindered movement of trade and energy.

This has also coincided with the remarkable rise of China, unprecedented historically by its sheer scale and ambition. Its territorial claims in the South China Sea, its belligerence in the East China Sea and its rapid advance into the Indian Ocean through ambitious strategic and economic initiatives like the Belt-and-Road Initiative have challenged the established an international rules-based system which respected the oceans as the common heritage of mankind.

The Indo-Pacific construct means different things to different people. For the US, it extends up to the west coast of India which is also the geographic boundary of the US Indo-Pacific command whereas for India it includes the entire Indian Ocean and the western Pacific as highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his keynote speech at the Shangrila Dialogue in 2018.

What did Prime Minister Modi say at Shangrila Dialogue in 2018?

In his speech he had clearly indicated the geographical reach of India's idea of the Indo-Pacific starting from Africa to the Americas, which covers both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, in tandem with that of Japan.

He had also emphasized on a few major aspects which reflect India's policy perspective on Indo-Pacific, which included "inclusiveness", "openness", "ASEAN centrality" and that the concept was not directed against any country.

Similarly, while the US does not consider China a part of its Indo-Pacific construct, India has gone to great length to highlight it as an inclusive construct for the whole region, a fact also highlighted by Prime Minister Modi at the same Shangrila Dialogue. The other major powers which can shape the regional maritime environment like Japan, Australia, South Korea and the ASEAN nations too have differing perspectives.

The focus of the Indo Pacific initiative is on connectivity, enhancing maritime security, counterterrorism, non-proliferation and cyber issues. Last November, senior officials from the US, Australia, India, and Japan had met in Singapore for consultations on the Indo Pacific region. And all had re-affirmed a shared commitment to maintain and strengthen a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific in which all nations are sovereign, strong and prosperous. And shared support for a free, open and inclusive region that fosters universal respect for international law, freedom of navigation and overflight and sustainable development.

Indo-Pacific Maritime Cooperation

The major focus of the Indo-Pacific is based on oceans, which is the common thread that connects all. Countries including India, Indonesia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka, primarily maritime nations occupy the most important strategic positions in the Indian Ocean.

The government has introduced the concept of SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) and believes in an Indo-Pacific that is free, open and inclusive, and one that is founded upon a cooperative and collaborative rules-based order.

Indo-Pacific Maritime Dialogue & Exercises

In continuation of the process of engaging the global strategic community in an annual review of India's opportunities and challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, the second edition of Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue (IPRD) - 2019 was held in New Delhi in March this year.

The participating countries discussed five main issues including solutions for achieving cohesion in the region through maritime connectivity; what steps can be taken to attain and maintain a free-and-open Indo-Pacific; a regional approach to the region's transition from the existing 'Brown' to a 'Blue' economy; what are the opportunities and challenges arising from the maritime impact of 'Industry 4.0'; and India's 'SAGAR' and 'SAGARMALA' could be made mutually-reinforcing on a regional level.

Countries of the Indo-Pacific — Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Seychelles, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America participated. The theme of this annual dialogue is a review of India's opportunities and challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

Being extremely careful of its relationship with China, India has tried to keep away from several military and naval exercises.

From the economic point of view, relationship with China, as it is India's largest trading partner — and from a security perspective, the standoff in the Doklam valley which brought the two countries to a confrontation, followed by the Wuhan informal summit, efforts are on to improve ties.

Though it is one of the major Indo-Pacific powers, it has not allowed countries like Australia to participate in the annual, Indian-led multinational Exercise Malabar.

The first Malabar naval exercise was a joint Indo-US Naval exercise which started in 1992. However, there was a gap from 1998-2002 when the exercise was suspended due to India's nuclear weapons tests. Since 2002, every year there has been the naval drill and Japan became a permanent participant in 2015.

In the 22nd edition of the Malabar naval exercise in 2018, held for the first time in waters off the coast of Guam, involved aircraft and ships from the Indian Navy, the US Navy, and the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF). And once again India refused Australia's bid to take part in the drill.

The next round of Malabar Exercise is slated for late August-early September, where again it will be a drill involving India, US and Japan.

Also, later this year in November, a tri-service exercise `Triumph' involving the Armies, Navies and Air Forces of these three countries will take place. The Naval component of this exercise will take place at the Indian Naval base in Kakinada.

Australia on its own has been participating in various exercises in the region, which is driven by Canberra's 2016 Defence White Paper which talks about increased engagement in multinational exercises across the Indo-Pacific. And has been cautious in engaging in activities in the Indo-Pacific that may directly confront and anger China.

Hence while the Indo-Pacific construct is the US-led maritime initiative and is yet to find the right direction amongst its partners, it has actually been taken to heart by China which, in the meantime, has extended its naval footprint from Djibouti at the western extremity of the Indian Ocean where it has established a base to the eastern extreme of the western Pacific where it stakes a claim to the land and sea features.

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