

## The Indo-Pacific: Concept, Contestation and Cooperation

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**T**he Indo-Pacific is a region consisting of the western and central Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, excluding the temperate and polar regions of the two. They are connected by the seas surrounding Indonesia in South-East Asia. Since the beginning of the last decade, the term Indo-Pacific has been increasingly used. According to Rory Medcalf, the Indo-Pacific is an idea as well as an area. It is a geo-strategically vulnerable area that can lead to great prosperity in the world if the balance is kept. If states fail to maintain good diplomatic relationships, this region can also become the ground for major contestations and conflicts in the world (Medcalf 2020).

The increased salience of the term is evident in its growing use by many world leaders and the fact that this has also been formalised in official documents of agencies and branches of governments of various states across the region. Today, the Indo-Pacific is one of the world's most dynamic regions militarily and economically. The changing geopolitics of the world definitely has found its ripples here and, sometimes provided the very stage for it. The region can become the arena for much contestation and cooperation. It is for the countries of the world to decide through their actions whether they will contribute to extracting the most of the region's potential

through peaceful cooperation or drive it towards conflict. So, the essential question is, in this world with multiple types of polarity in multiple fields, what really are the best decisions for the Indo-Pacific? How can the pessimism of states regarding each other's conduct affect the dynamism of this vital region?

### The Concept of Indo-Pacific

The Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean are, today, highly connected through trade and commerce as well as by diplomacy and infrastructure. It can be said that the maritime map is now centred around Asia. This can also be attributed substantially to the rise of two Asian giants, namely India and China. Indo-Pacific is a term used to define this highly dynamic and significant region.

As we are aware, maps are read, interpreted and theorised differently depending on which region is intended to be highlighted. They are often used for ideological as well as political purposes. Defining a region through maps often serves such purposes more than those of navigation or exploration (Harley 1992). The case with nomenclature is similar. The term Indo-Pacific marks a specific region on the map. The revived usage of Indo-Pacific can be viewed in this light too because it indicates a conscious direction of attention, power as well

as resources to the region. This revival is a political phenomenon.

The Indo-Pacific in fact is an "imagined" region like any other region of the world. All geographical groupings have been made in the past by powerful states to suit their interests. The boundaries of these region also keep changing. Therefore, as the Indo-Pacific remains fluid in the conceptual sense, its physical contours also may change with the type of narrative a concerned state may wish to project.

### **Significance of the Indo-Pacific Region**

The shift in focus from the Atlantic region to Asia, both geopolitically and geo-economically, is of profound importance and the various global players are still only adjusting to this reality even as they try to broaden their access to it. Today it is the hub of global trade in terms of both transport of energy as well as of goods across the world. Two-thirds of the container trade of the world passes through this region. Sixty per cent of the maritime trade of the world transits through this region (Chaudhari 2019).

Today the idea of the Indo-Pacific carries different meanings for different states. The definition of the region challenges the monopoly that China may wish to establish there. It also challenges the position of the U.S. It similarly showcases the different types of polarities in power relationships and dependencies affecting its constituent member states. For instance, the world is largely unipolar militarily as the U.S. is the only power capable of projecting a global reach. While this is the situation today, this military unipolarity is changing with the rapid improvement of capabilities by China. Economically, the world is largely multipolar with the U.S. and China being its leading economies. A lot of what the political-economy of Asia looks like is determined by China (Menon 2020). The struggle of other developing nations like India, Indonesia, Australia, Japan and Russia to establish themselves as significant powers is also to be noted. Interestingly all of these dynamics can be seen playing out in the Indo-Pacific.

Both for the developing economies of the Indo-Pacific region that are highly dependent on trade, like India, China and others, as well as for the more traditional trading nations like the US, Japan, the European Union and even Russia, the Indo-Pacific region represents a significant passageway. It is flanked by two strategic choke points, namely, the Malacca Strait and the Bal al Mandeb. The Indian Ocean straddles the major trade routes of oil for all the major Asian economies.

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Across the centuries, the region has been playground of different kinds of world orders. In the post-colonial and post-Cold war period, it witnessed a U.S.-centric world order, which was the order most players in the region were accustomed to. The rise of China has led to the incipient emergence of a Sino-centric order, and a number of countries in the region appear to have decided to join the China bandwagon in its firm assertion of a rival standpoint. Meanwhile, a number of middle powers have joined in partnership to assert a new node to the multipolar order in the region.

Says Oak, "Another order that exists in the region is an ASEAN-conceived order. This order is mostly convergent with the US-led order." (Oak 2020). Given its critical geographical vantage point, the call of the ASEAN state for an ASEAN order is also significant. Clearly, the Indo-Pacific, as a dynamic strategic region, has become an arena for a tug of war between different powers.

### **China and the Indo-Pacific**

The Indo-Pacific, as a term, brings discomfort to China, as it is perceived by that state to encapsulate the interests of a multitude of other states. These include Indonesia's struggle to prove itself and have a say in the geo-political space, India's endeavours to emerge as a

significant power, Japan's desire to be influential in the region, the U.S efforts to contain the growth of China and so on. China is thus cautious about using the term. Wang Yi (王毅), the Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China has even said that the Indo-Pacific is just like any other idea which grabs media attention and dies out eventually. (Amane, 2020) China prefers the term Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific as the latter was primarily coined by its two rivals, U.S. and Japan. However, China is also expanding itself through this region which is further cementing the usage of the term as well as significance (Medcalf 2020). As Medcalf notes, the decisions made with respect to the region and the operation here are a reflection of how other powers handle or are planning to manage the rising power of China.

Although, as discussed above, China might have apprehensions about the nomenclature of the region, the broader idea of regional assertion by Asia does not seem disagreeable to it. After being a continental power for a very long time, China is now expanding its influence and becoming a maritime power. This expansion is taking place in the Indo-Pacific. The Maritime Silk Route and BRI are examples of the same. China has also shown it can assert its power stridently across the region in particular and the world in general, by rejecting the ICJ ruling on the South-China Sea issue (Phillips 2016).

Meanwhile, China is a paradox when it comes to economy. It is dependent on the world and at the same time has a significant economic influence over it (Menon 2020). There is high demand for Chinese goods from the world but China is dependent on other countries for crude oil. The Chinese economic machine works on trade but is projected to be the largest energy importer in the recent years. In twenty years, the import of crude oil by China is expected to increase by ten percent. (Workman 2020) The transport of oil through the maritime route from West Asia to China passes through many strategic choke points in the Indo-Pacific. China's economic security is closely tied to maritime trade security because sixty per cent of its trade value travels by sea. Much of the trade between Europe and China enters the

South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca. Similar is the case with the trade between China and Africa. (Team 2017) This means that China cannot afford to lose its hold in the region as any form of control of these choke points or the region will disrupt Chinese trade and potentially paralyse its economy.

The Belt and Road Initiative is the greatest means by which China has showcased its strength. The sheer size of this project reflects China's ambitions as well as its capacities. The pragmatic nature of China's planning comes out in the way it tweaks the plans according to the circumstances, capacities and difficulties. It is interesting to note that the ports that are constructed as a part of this gigantic project, are all on the Indo-Pacific region and are connected to China through roads, pipelines and so on. This is evidence of the very apparent fact that this region is extremely important to China.

China cannot, however, have full control of the region. Therefore, it is necessary to have a co-operative relationship with the other stakeholders. The ASEAN countries lie at the centre of the Indo-Pacific. They have recently emphasised their own importance and say in the region through the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific. ASEAN as an association has been very influential in the region. Some states within the organisation are littoral states on strategic choke points like the Malacca Strait. Therefore, a cordial ASEAN-China relationship is as important for China as it is for ASEAN. Although the regional organisation has been a little sour regarding the Chinese approach towards South China Sea, it shares a very amicable relationship with China. They have dialogues on security and politics through the ASEAN plus One mechanism. Various agreements on establishing partnerships in trade, infrastructure, maritime co-operation, soft power and so on have been made (*Overview of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations* 2020). This is beneficial to China.

This does not mean that China can have untrammelled access and full control of the region. Important powers like the U.S., European Union, Russia and others will not

allow this. The recent U.S. involvement in the Indian Ocean, Malacca Strait and the South and East China sea poses structural constraints on China. According to China, the United States is trying to intimidate China and contain it in order to gain strategic advantage for itself and its allies. This is perceived to be done by blocking strategic choke points, and working with its allies and regional partners. (Saeed 2017) China is also suspicious about the Quad between India, Australia, Japan and the U.S. Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) is a list of countries made as a part of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to ensure that the poorest countries of the world are not overwhelmed by indebtedness that may have become unsustainable and unimaginable. It is an initiative where the World Bank, IMF and other creditors reduce the debt of the countries that meet strict criteria. (*Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative* 2018)

China takes the access to resources, ports and so on as the collateral for these loans. It is not a surprise that these small countries are unable to pay the debts and China gets access to these. Many observers suspect China's BRI project as a means to gain access to major strategic points and resources rather than developing a transnational trading route for the world. This in turn has reduced the trust that many smaller countries have on China. But their needs also force them into borrowing from China and cooperating in the infrastructural projects. The countries in the Indo-Pacific are also caught in this dilemma. The ASEAN countries are engaging with China in various levels and the relation with ASEAN is evidently improving. (*Overview of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations* 2020)

China makes deliberate effort to avoid use of the term 'Indo-Pacific'. It sees the pro-active measures taken by other states to popularise it as an effort to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative and thereby weaken China's growing influence in the region. Therefore, although the region is important for China, the usage of the term is not favoured. But the term is more favoured by the regional countries than Asia-Pacific or even East Asia and China might have to take note of this.

## ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific

ASEAN made its stand clear on the Indo-Pacific region through the 'ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific', which is a comprehensive document that clearly lists out ASEAN's stands, considerations and preferences pertaining to the region. This document is the result of a year-long process of negotiations at the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting which was concluded on 20<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> 2019 in Bangkok. An ASEAN style Indo-Pacific is described in the Outlook. The ASEAN style Indo-Pacific focuses on ASEAN centrality as well as inclusivity.

It was Indonesia that first envisioned the ASEAN-centric Indo-Pacific region and also spearheaded the discussions that lead to the adoption of the ASEAN stand on the region. Jakarta had proposed a meeting of all Foreign Ministers of the regional association which then culminated in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. This has in fact helped Indonesia in improving its own position as a primary power in ASEAN as well as the region. For other countries of the association, this has paved the way for utilising the significance of the region to their own benefit as their location within the region grants them profound say in the same according to the Outlook.

The ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific however, does not aim at an ASEAN controlled Indo-Pacific. It reflects the demand of the ASEAN states to be included in the decisions and activities pertaining to the region which has not always been the case. Although the ASEAN states are at the centre of the region, they have been largely excluded by larger states that involve with the region (Saha 2019). The majority of the world trade passes through the region. The trade war between the U.S. and China had negatively affected the economies of these countries and they were being forced to take sides.

ASEAN does not want to completely side with either China or U.S. It does not want China to dominate in the region. Instead it wants cooperation and a zone that is controlled by none and available to all. It is not in agreement

with the US approach which is perceived to be a plan to completely exclude China. Therefore, ASEAN aims for a neutral Indo-Pacific. It wishes to be the driver of discourse in the region. ASEAN looks for more say and involvement in the region and emphasises this through the ASEAN-centric approach that it advocates.

### **The United States, the Indo-Pacific Strategy and Containing China**

U.S has maintained a significant presence and engagement in the Indo-Pacific over the years. It has USD 1.9 trillion trade through the region and is the largest Foreign Direct Investor here as of 2019. Nearly all of the non-NATO bilateral defence alliances of NATO are in this region. It is also advocating for free and open trade in the region. The U.S. is trying to engage in the region by making allies and partners. It has continuing and strong engagement with regional organisations like the ASEAN and the Pacific Island countries and increasing ties of strategic partnership with countries like India. The Quad that has been formed by India, Japan, Australis and U.S. is an example of this. The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is in fact channelling a lot of resources from the U.S. to the region (*A Free and Open Indo-Pacific* 2019).

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The Indo-Pacific Strategic Report issued in June 2019 by the U.S. Department of Defence states that the strategic competitions which are defined by geopolitical rivalries between “free and repressive world orders are the greatest security threat to the U.S. It is clear which world orders were referred to in this statement. U.S. is also of the opinion that China is trying to alter the region through military modernisation and investing in other countries (*Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019* 2019). The naval capacity building as well as huge and

ambitious projects like the Belt and Road Initiative are seen as an effort from China to assert its dominance in the region. The U.S. also sees the greater connectivity and infrastructural development that will be achieved through these projects as a way to push the U.S. out of the region (Saeed 2017). It is true that it is the military and infrastructural superiority that the middle powers of the region need is what largely legitimises the U.S. presence in the region. U.S openly criticises China over Taiwan and claims of China bullying the island.

Many analysts like Robert Kaplan, who study geo-politics had predicted that the U.S. will be concentrating on the Indian Ocean and Asia Pacific after 2010. The full extent of this prediction has yet to be materialised. The U.S believes that its engagement is important for the region to ensure peace and cooperation and improvement in trade, capital, resources and security. For the U.S., the region is geopolitically, economically and strategically important. It in fact envisions itself in the centre of affairs in the region (Campbell 2016). Having a strong hold on the Indo-Pacific is vital for the U.S to be able to keep a check on the growing power and influence of China.

### **Middle Powers and Partnerships**

The middle players offer a promise of multipolarity in the region by forming partnership. This partnership is also to counter the Chinese influence in the region (Medcalf 2020). India, Japan and Australia are part of a quadrilateral cooperative arrangement with U.S. They participate in joint military exercises. These middle powers use the U.S’ capacity as well as their joint capacities to derive strength which they might not have individually. The presence of regional countries in the Quad gives some legitimacy to the U.S. too. But the U.S. does not need them as much as they need the U.S. The presence of U.S. in the alliance is delicate enough to change depending on the domestic politics in U.S. However, the U.S. has few alternatives in this case.

Indo-Pacific is the seat of the conflict between Japan and China. Japan also advocates in the

similar lines to the U.S. in fact, it is the U.S and Japan that popularised the usage of the term. It also wants a free and open Indian-Ocean region. Rule of law, assistance for infrastructure and development, and free trade are some of the ways in which Japan sees this as being possible. Owing to the territorial disputes, especially with China, Japan emphasises the importance of maritime security as well as freedom of navigation as important elements to ensure peace in the region (*Towards Free and Open Indp-Pacific* 2019). India takes a more conscious stand in the region and does not openly criticise China. It has taken a more diplomatic stand towards the so called 'China threat'.

Countries like India, Australia and Japan support an Indo-Pacific with ASEAN as its centrepiece. All of these states advocate for a free and open Indo-Pacific. They are all vigilant about China's expanding power in the region, as they desire to see the region available to everybody for use and to benefit from. They want cooperation and partnership in maritime and cyber security, development of infrastructure, counterterrorism and connectivity in the region to achieve this goal. None of these countries seek to dominate the region. They wish to use the strength of their partnerships to seek a say in any negotiations regarding the future of the Indo-Pacific. But most of these countries take a cautious stand without completely aligning themselves with either China or U.S. who are the contesting powers in the region.

## Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific undoubtedly is the seat for security contestations among different powers of the world. It is of utmost importance to all of these states due to innumerable reasons like economy, territory, maritime security and so on. It is strategically one of the most important regions of the world.

If a single state could control the entire region, that state would undoubtedly be the most powerful and single most important country in the world. This is due to the fact that, in such a scenario almost all the other countries would be dependent on it for majority of their

maritime activities. However, this is a highly hypothetical situation and does not seem probable anytime in the future.

It is true that the power and capacity of different states vary in the Indo-Pacific just like any other region. But there is not a single state in the world that can claim to completely control the region. China has been constantly expanding here both infrastructurally as well as militarily. Most countries of the world are sceptical about the economic expansion and naval build up by China. The world needs to recognise ASEAN as an important driver of discourse in the region as its legitimacy in doing so can be derived from its geographical location.

The Indo-Pacific having the geostrategic importance that it does is an arena for geopolitical contestations. No country can have complete control of the region as there are others trying to balance it out. It is the need of all the countries to keep the Indo-Pacific free from escalation in contestation and ensure healthy competition. The best option that the countries have is to maintain a cordial relationship among themselves. This is necessary to maintain the Indo-Pacific as a zone that belongs to all the countries of the world to exercise peaceful and environment friendly activities to foster development and prosperity and maintain peace. The Indo-Pacific is central to global security as well as prosperity and should be a region of co-existence, cooperation and collective action.

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