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# India and the Indo-Pacific

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The term Indo-Pacific has found resonance in the Asian strategic lexicon and represents the maritime space encompassing the Indian and the Pacific Oceans albeit with different geographical imagination and national interest. Although the term was introduced to the strategic literature by Karl Haushofer who coined the '*Indopazifischer Raum*' and expounded that 'dense Indo-Pacific concentration of humanity and cultural empire of India and China, which . . . are geographically sheltered behind the protective veil of the offshore island arcs'<sup>1</sup>, its socialization among the Asian strategic community, however, has been quite recent. The term has now found reference in Asian politico-diplomatic discourse, national policy documents, White Papers, national defence and security strategies and it has generated a rich body of academic literature.

Australia incorporated Indo-Pacific in a defence White Paper published in 2013<sup>2</sup> and the US' National Security Strategy (NSS) released in 2017, uses the term 'Indo-Pacific'.<sup>3</sup> As far as Japan is concerned, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe alluded to 'Confluence of the Two Seas' during a speech at the Indian Parliament in August 2007.<sup>4</sup> The Indo-Pacific has also appeared in the official speeches of a number of countries including Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam.

In the context of India, Indo-Pacific has been routinely used in strategic literature since the 2000s. At the diplomatic level, in 2012, Former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh used the term Indo-Pacific a number of times: while addressing the Plenary Session of the

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence W. Prabhakar, "The Emergent Vistas of the Indo-Pacific" in Rajiv K. Bhatia and Vijay Sakhujia (eds.) *Indo-Pacific Region: Political and Strategic Prospects*, (New Delhi: Vij Books India Private Limited, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> "Defence White Paper 2013", [http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2013/docs/WP\\_2013\\_web.pdf](http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2013/docs/WP_2013_web.pdf) (accessed 20 September 2018).

<sup>3</sup> "National Security Strategy of the United States of America- December 2017", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> p.46, (accessed on 21 September 2018).

<sup>4</sup> "Confluence of the Two Seas", *Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan* at the Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html> (accessed 7 September 2018).

India–ASEAN Commemorative Summit in New Delhi he stated “a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity”<sup>5</sup>; and while addressing the Japan–India Association in Tokyo in May 2013.<sup>6</sup>

A clear articulation of Indo-Pacific by India has been through two recent events involving the state visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Indonesia in May 2018, where along with President Joko Widodo they released the ‘*Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*’.<sup>7</sup> The document lists out priorities for the two maritime neighbours in the Indo-Pacific region, and commitment to “further cooperation in maritime sector which can be a force of immense stability in the region.” Soon thereafter in Singapore, in his keynote address<sup>8</sup> at the Shangri-la Dialogue, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, laid out India’s vision for the Indo-Pacific. From New Delhi’s point of view, there are at least eleven key issues concerning the Indo-Pacific and these are illustrative of its policy and praxis, as also expectations from the region.

First, the Indo-Pacific is a ‘natural region’ and blends the established cartographic delimitations of the Indian Ocean with the geographical understanding of the Asia Pacific region. In New Delhi’s mental map, the region encompasses sea space from the western Pacific Ocean to the western Indian Ocean along the east coast of Africa.

Second, Southeast Asia connects the Indian and the Pacific Oceans and during ancient times the region served as the gateway that facilitated maritime commerce, movement of people, exchange of ideas and transmission of cultures among the Arabs, Indians and the Chinese. In contemporary times, several Southeast Asian countries continue to serve as entrepôt to the Indo-Pacific and facilitate rendezvous among China, India, Japan, South Korea, the United States and ASEAN countries.

Third, the region offers enormous opportunities and also a present variety of challenges that impact the destinies of states including those that have stakes in the Indo-Pacific region. India has a positive and all-encompassing view which supports ‘a free and open’ region and it embraces pursuits which enable progress and prosperity for the people clearly signifying the inclusive nature of its approach for the region. The Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj has stated that India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific has deep sense of “building bridges of trust, based on mutual respect, giving due regard for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, transparency, viability and sustainability,”<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, India neither sees the Indo-Pacific as a ‘strategy’ nor as an ‘exclusive club’ of few selected members. Instead, ‘inclusiveness’ is at the heart of India’s understanding of the

<sup>5</sup> “Opening Statement by Prime Minister at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit”, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/20981/> (accessed 20 September 2018).

<sup>6</sup> “Prime Minister’s address to Japan-India Association, Japan-India Parliamentary Friendship League and International Friendship Exchange Council”, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/mbErel.aspx?relid=96257> (accessed 20 September 2018).

<sup>7</sup> “Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29933/Shared\\_Vision\\_of\\_IndiaIndonesia\\_Maritime\\_Cooperation\\_in\\_the\\_IndoPacific](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29933/Shared_Vision_of_IndiaIndonesia_Maritime_Cooperation_in_the_IndoPacific) (accessed 20 September 2018).

<sup>8</sup> “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)”, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018> (accessed 20 September 2018).

<sup>9</sup> “Indo-Pacific must be free, open and inclusive region: Sushma Swaraj” <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indo-pacific-must-be-free-open-and-inclusive-region-sushma-swaraj/articleshow/65060360.cms> (accessed 21 September 2018).

region; and as a corollary, Indo-Pacific is not 'directed against any country', nor is it a 'grouping that seeks to dominate'.<sup>10</sup> The inclusive approach and understanding of the Indo-Pacific was reiterated by Prime Minister Modi during the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018 where he enunciated a positive vision for 'an inclusive and open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region'.

India sees enormous opportunities for China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific. During the India-China Maritime Affairs Dialogue in 2018, India laid out a clear vision of Indo-Pacific as articulated in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's keynote address at this year's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Modi-Putin meeting at Sochi is symbolic of New Delhi's assurance that Indo-Pacific is built around 'partnerships on the basis of shared values and interests' and may well serve as an encouragement. Apparently Russia is keen to explore the Indo-Pacific for its free-trade zone of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, India does not support any democracy led QSD that may target any country, ostensibly China.<sup>13</sup> In this context, India, though a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) along with Australia, Japan and the United States, is keen to engage China politically, diplomatically, economically, and militarily in its own way. India and China have set up over 30 bilateral dialogue mechanisms in diverse areas such as politics, economics, regional and international affairs, and culture.<sup>14</sup> In 2017, both sides agreed to a 'strategic dialogue' to develop a substantive discourse about important global issues and the May 2018 Wuhan Consensus<sup>15</sup> is a significant development for India-China relations.

Sixth, for India, ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific is given and it "has been and will [continue to] be central to its future". New Delhi "seeks to cooperate for architecture for peace and security in this region". This has been amply assured on various occasions, and in July 2018, Sushma Swaraj, India's foreign minister, noted that "India has been working with ASEAN towards evolving a regional security architecture which is focused on ASEAN's centrality".<sup>16</sup>

Seventh, India cherishes and promotes 'multilateralism and regionalism' and has launched a sophisticated web of intersecting and also diverse relationships through diplomatic and security dialogues with a number of countries. These are christened '2+2 dialogues' and serve

<sup>10</sup> "Indo-Pacific Region Not a Club of Limited Members: Modi" <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/indo-pacific-modi-asean> (accessed 21 September 2018).

<sup>11</sup> "India-China Maritime Dialogue: New Delhi puts forward its vision on Indo-Pacific to Beijing", <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/world-beijing-india-proposes-its-vision-of-indo-pacific-to-china-during-second-india-china-maritime-affairs-dialogue-452583> (accessed 27 September 2018).

<sup>12</sup> "Modi-Putin meet: Sochi throws up non-bloc security for Indo-Pacific", <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/modi-putin-meet-sochi-throws-up-non-bloc-security-for-indo-pacific/articleshow/64281884.cms> (accessed 27 September 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Vijay Sakhuja, "Is Democratic Quad a Viable Construct", <https://www.vifindia.org/2018/july/02/is-democratic-quad-a-viable-construct> (accessed 27 September 2018).

<sup>14</sup> "India-China Strategic Dialogue: Jaishankar Must Prioritise Talks on the Bilateral and Avoid the P-word", <https://www.firstpost.com/india/india-china-strategic-dialogue-jaishankar-must-prioritise-talks-on-the-bilateral-and-avoid-the-p-word-3295830.html> (accessed 27 September 2018).

<sup>15</sup> "Wuhan consensus will be implemented: China envoy", <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/wuhan-consensus-will-be-implemented-china-envoy/articleshow/64036062.cms> (accessed 27 September 2018).

<sup>16</sup> "Remarks by External Affairs Minister at Delhi Dialogue X (July 19, 2018)", [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30138/Remarks\\_by\\_External\\_Affairs\\_Minister\\_at\\_Delhi\\_Dialogue\\_X\\_July\\_19\\_2018](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30138/Remarks_by_External_Affairs_Minister_at_Delhi_Dialogue_X_July_19_2018) (accessed 27 September 2018).

as the bedrock of its proactive foreign policy. Currently, this mechanism is operational for engagements with Australia, France, Japan, Russia and the US.

Eighth, New Delhi has a 'principled commitment to the rule of law'. It expects and promotes a 'common rules-based order for the region' that is internalized and practiced by all countries and stakeholders in the region. At the heart of this belief is that 'consensus' and not 'force' should be the tools for engagement among states, and all uphold 'sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength'.

Ninth, India advances the idea of 'equal access as a right under international law to the use of common spaces on sea and in the air that would require freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law.'<sup>17</sup> Further, 'sea lanes will be pathways to prosperity and corridors of peace; and States must collectively 'prevent maritime crimes, preserve marine ecology, protect against disasters and prosper from blue economy'.

Tenth, India promotes and expects a 'rule-based, open, balanced and stable trade environment in the Indo-Pacific Region' based on a balance among trade, investment and services under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). New Delhi acknowledges the urgency among the ASEAN countries for early RCEP negotiations and is excited to join the grouping. Although a negative perception of India prevails on its offer of limited and differentiated tariff liberalization at the RCEP, the ASEAN must also show flexibility in following a comprehensive approach to the negotiation process.

Eleventh, connectivity in the Indo-Pacific is vital for regional prosperity and should be devoid of strategic competition. The Indian approach on this issue is based on a belief that connectivity projects should be based on 'respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability' and 'not place them under impossible debt burden'.<sup>18</sup> For instance, India's infrastructure initiative in Chabahar, Iran, is a good example of enhancing connectivity for the land locked and war-ridden Afghanistan. Similarly, "Shared Vision on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific between India and Indonesia" which would act as a catalyst to develop "further cooperation in the maritime sector which can be a force of immense stability in the region." Both partners decided to develop Sabang into a maritime hub that can contribute to the Blue Economy and development of the Aceh region in western Indonesia and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal and support India's Act East Policy and Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum.

However, India is concerned about Chinese infrastructure projects in South Asia and other smaller Indian Ocean states. These are labelled as 'debt traps'<sup>19</sup> and many attract serious security concerns for India. Among these, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will pass through Kashmir, occupied by Pakistan. Similarly there are concerns in New Delhi over the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka currently on 99-years lease with China. The

<sup>17</sup> "Narendra Modi calls for unimpeded trade, access in Indo-Pacific, cautious on China", <https://in.reuters.com/article/asia-security/narendra-modi-calls-for-unimpeded-trade-access-in-indo-pacific-cautious-on-china-idINKCN1IX566> (accessed 27 September 2018).

<sup>18</sup> "Jibe at OBOR? PM says need bridges of trust, not just infra", <https://www.pressreader.com/india/the-times-of-india-new-delhi-edition/20180602/281831464416325> (accessed 27 September 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Vijay Sakhuja, "China's Maritime Infrastructure Projects in the Indian Ocean: Lend and Lease Agreements", <https://www.vifindia.org/print/4681?via=at> (accessed on 28 September 2018).

Indian government is confident that ‘Sri Lanka will continue to keep in mind India’s security concerns and sensitivities’.<sup>20</sup> In Maldives, there may be some relief for India given that the new government has plans to review the contracts with China signed by the previous government.

Finally, like any other new idea, the Indo-Pacific is not immune to critique and analysis. There are visible signs of euphoria attached with the concept but it is fair to argue that it can at best be described as ‘work in progress’. There remain a number of issues that need to be clearly defined or understood to ensure that the concept is collectively accepted. Issues such as common understanding of the geography and delimitation of the Indo-Pacific, who would lead and manage the idea, issues of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, the fear of the concept being held hostage to geopolitical competition and containment, and several other such issues need to be addressed. But a dialogue on the vision and purpose of Indo-Pacific can potentially steer the concept into calmer waters.

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<sup>20</sup> “India expects Sri Lanka to keep its security concerns in mind, says MEA”, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-expects-lanka-to-keep-its-security-concerns-in-mind-says-mea/articleshow/62074024.cms> (accessed on 28 September 2018).