

NAVIGATING THE INDO-PACIFIC

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: QUAD and India

“Indo-Pacific” is today a buzzword that has been interpreted differently by various countries in their outlook or vision documents.

Back in 1971, when Sri Lanka proposed the notion of an Indian Ocean Zone of Peace (IOZOP), it was more about the presence of Western powers and establishment of foreign bases. Ironically, China then stood with countries like India in opposing bases in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Its position was that it did not have, nor did it seek bases anywhere. That is a far cry from its strategy now of actively foraging into the Indian Ocean and seeking bases in Gwadar and Djibouti and special arrangements elsewhere. India’s position has also evolved. If India earlier opposed the presence of foreign powers in the Indian Ocean, it now carries out joint exercises with a number of them to promote interoperability. It welcomes the presence of the US, Japan and other partner countries in the Indian Ocean as a counter to the growing Chinese presence.

In the Pacific Ocean, the debate was never about the presence per se of great powers. There, the US military presence on land and sea was taken for granted after World War II. The French and British too, as in the Indian Ocean, continued to have their colonies. The debate was about nuclear tests in places such as Bikini Atoll, French Polynesia and Christmas Island.

As a legacy state of the Soviet Union, Russia has never ceased to be an Indo-Pacific power. It avenged the humiliating destruction of its navy in the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese war by driving Japan out of the northern Korean Peninsula and taking South Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands in 1945. It enjoyed a key base in Cam Ranh Bay during the Cold War. Today, it holds joint exercises with China in the South China Sea and a trilateral exercise with China and South Africa in the Indian Ocean.

The situation in the South China Sea is more complex. Various claimants are pitted against one another, with China’s irredentist nine-dash line engulfing the Exclusive Economic Zone of several others. China has yet to produce a clear line with exact co-ordinates on a large-scale map in support of its claims. Earlier, in 1974, China took the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam, with a US in retreat turning a Nelson’s eye. Later, China took Scarborough in 2012 and used swarming tactics involving fishing boats at Thitu Island against the Philippines in 2019, the defence treaty between the US and the Philippines notwithstanding. In general terms, the scramble in the SCS is more about fishing rights, natural resources and the domination of trade and energy sea lines of communication.

There are many contradictions in the context of the emerging construct of the Indo-Pacific. For example, the US, like India, Japan, Australia and many others, advocates freedom of navigation and over-flight, and respect for the rule of law and international norms. It adheres to many tenets of UNCLOS without having ratified the treaty. China’s adherence to UNCLOS is more honoured in breach than in observance.

Arguably, the US concept of “freedom of navigation” is hard on friend and foe alike. The US conducted freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in 2017 against a large number of countries, including friendly nations like India, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Similarly, the US Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) of 2018, which embraces the Indo-Pacific as against Asia Pacific, describes China as a strategic and economic competitor. Yet, it also has an entire section that seeks to “promote US values in the Indo-Pacific region”. There is a reiteration

of the US commitment to upholding rights and promoting democratic values. Not only is China cited in this context along with Myanmar, but an alliance partner such as the Philippines is also in the cross-hairs.

On the other hand, China now justifies its increasing forays in the IOR, including with nuclear submarines, by claiming that it has “always” had a historical right to the Indian Ocean, citing the few voyages of Admiral Zheng He’s fleet more than five centuries ago. In fact, there was no Chinese presence in the intervening period because after the brief maritime interludes during the Ming dynasty, China was not a maritime power until recently.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is supposed to endure for half a century. Yet, the absence of a key neighbouring country like India, for very valid reasons, eroded its credibility. Now, many others are questioning the BRI.

The world today is undergoing a fundamental transformation. There are several facets to the emerging uncertainty. Traditional and non-traditional security threats have grown in magnitude. The spectre of terrorism, especially cross-border terrorism, continues to challenge peace and prosperity. Geopolitical considerations are increasingly driving trade and investment decisions; on the other hand, the geo-economic forces unleashed by China’s economic rise are redefining the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

There is no doubt that the US-China trade war has been disruptive. It has coincided with the waning of the global economy. No two rival powers are as interlinked by trade and investment as China and the US. Never before have all other countries been as intertwined in a web of relations with both China and the US. This makes for difficult choices. Power, whether economic, political or military, is fractured. No single country can dominate on all issues. Trade and technology are fiercely contested. Nationalism and regionalism are on the rise. There is less multilateralism but greater multi-polarity. Hedging and multi-alignment are part of every country’s strategic toolkit. The old consensus is fraying and a balance is yet to emerge. This calls for readjustments.

The “Asian Century” appears inevitable, but the question remains if it will be unipolar, bipolar or multipolar? Will it be a century of peace and development, or will it involve long-drawn contestations?

Asia is witnessing the simultaneous rise of several powers. Global engines of economic growth have shifted to Asia, first to the Asia-Pacific, and now, more widely, to the Indo-Pacific that includes South Asia. The continent, home to 60 per cent of the global population, has emerged as the new fulcrum for geo-economic and geostrategic realignment. One could argue that the natural evolution of trade, investment and energy flows favour the broader definition of the Indo-Pacific as against the narrower confines of Asia and the Asia-Pacific. The term Indo-Pacific is certainly more inclusive and better accommodates the growing aspirations of a wider constituency. However, the economic success in the Indo-Pacific region has not been matched by stable security architecture. The region has some of the highest military expenditures. Trade, territorial disputes and geo-strategic contestations are rampant. This places limitations on the region’s ability to engage in a process of give and take as seen in the [RCEP](#) negotiations.

There are fundamental disruptions to the existing equilibrium in the three sub-segments of the Indo-Pacific. The emergence of the US as a major energy exporter to Asia has eroded the importance of the Gulf oil producers in the Western Indian Ocean. In the South China Sea, the dependence of [ASEAN](#) on China for its prosperity and security assurances is growing. In the Pacific, there is a new contestation, which pits US programmes such as the BUILD Act, ARIA and Asia EDGE against the inducements offered by China to small island nations. Japan and

Australia have also joined hands with the US in the Blue Dot network to promote infrastructure and connectivity.

The Chinese harbour suspicions about both the Indo-Pacific and the Quad as US devices to contain its rise. It regards trilateral compacts involving US, Japan and India and US, Japan and Australia as adjuncts to strengthening the Quad. However, Chinese scholars and officials are beginning to resort to a wait-and-see approach, since ASEAN centrality is an opportunity to lean on them to shape favourable outcomes through the BRI project and the draft Code of Conduct.

India will have to manage its relations with China, no matter the challenges. Ties with Japan would remain a key component of India's vision for a stable Indo-Pacific and a cornerstone of its Act East policy. The Special Strategic and Global Partnership between India and Japan will be further strengthened during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit. However, India at this juncture does not have to make a binary choice in the Indo-Pacific between a development-centric agenda with ASEAN centrality and a security-centric outlook revolving around the Quad. Both are likely to remain parallel tracks with some overlap for the foreseeable future.

The writer was India's ambassador to Japan and currently director general, IDSA, New Delhi. Views are personal

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