

INDIA, RUSSIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: A SEARCH FOR CONGRUENCE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Russia

[More from the author](#)

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's recent uncharacteristic statement of "India being an object of the Western countries persistent, aggressive and devious policy" to "engage in anti-China games by promoting Indo-Pacific strategies"¹ has reignited the debate on India and Russia's increasingly divergent outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Lavrov at the 2020 Raisinia Dialogue had expressed confidence of India "being smart enough to understand" the Western "trap" of the Indo-Pacific and "not get into it".²

The tone, tenor and timing of Lavrov's December 2020 statement insinuates Russia's apprehensions of a fundamental shift in India's foreign policy playbook which traditionally has placed a premium on strategic autonomy, with Russia as one of its key pillars.

These developments have the potential to cast a shadow on India-Russia bilateral ties. The pertinent question is whether New Delhi and Moscow can find common ground in the evolving geo-strategic construct.

India and Russia's divergent outlooks appear to stem from the latter's rejection of the Indo-Pacific construct in favour of Asia-Pacific. This is predicated on Kremlin's assertion that the Indo-Pacific is primarily a US-led initiative designed to contain China and Russia.³

Russia has viewed attempts to formulate a new rules-based Indo-Pacific order as a Western strategy to override international law, thereby circumventing the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) where Russia holds veto power.

Russia's Indo-Pacific opposition is also based on its perception that it undermines the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality, an organisation with which Russia has intensified its engagement.⁴ Russia also holds that the construct is limited in its geographical scope as it excludes Africa and the Persian Gulf, regions where Russia has increased its strategic footprints in recent times.⁵ Seeing no tangible gains from this redefined construct, Russia continues to emphasise on the Asia-Pacific.

However, when viewed critically, Asia-Pacific remains limited in its scope and geographical reach. It does not reflect the shift in the centres of growth and influence from the Asia-Pacific to regions beyond East and South-East Asia encompassing South Asia and Africa.

Notably, Asia-Pacific excludes India, a nation of 1.3 billion with a \$3 trillion economy and a sprawling coastline that includes the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which straddle the Malacca Straits. This makes India a key stakeholder in the maritime commons of not only the Indian Ocean but also the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, it is questionable whether the Indo-Pacific really is an American construct. Christened by an Indian scholar and structured by Japan's former-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Indo-Pacific and its adoption by several stakeholders who appear to maintain an independent foreign policy, is a reflection of its inclusive character and wide acceptance. This includes the ASEAN states, earlier seen as the fulcrum of Asia-Pacific.⁶

There also does not appear to be any appetite among these stakeholders to view the construct through the American lens of Great Power rivalry and contestation. This is unsurprising given their economic interdependence with China. A strategy of containment and confrontation with China appears passé. The recently concluded Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, whose signatories include China, ASEAN countries and two QUAD members (Australia and Japan), reflects the same.

The overriding consensus among the Indo-Pacific stakeholders appears to be the joint construction of a stable and inclusive security architecture that promotes peace and harmony. This reflects the new economic and security realities which are anchored in the recognition of the Indian and Pacific Oceans being interconnected and interdependent, particularly given the indivisible nature of security.

Therefore, developmental partnerships that eschew unilateralism and coercive behaviour would be in the shared interests of the majority. A corollary of this would be the shared concerns of its stakeholders about China's peaceful rise. Pertinently, this is a concern that is prevalent even among Russian experts.⁷

The Indo-Pacific stakeholders' strategy appears predicated on putting diplomatic pressure on Beijing to strengthen the foundations of peaceful co-existence. The strategy, however, may not necessarily be China specific. Moreover, majority of stakeholders view expansion of the Indo-Pacific's frontiers to the east-coast of Africa and ASEAN centrality as intrinsic to the construct.

In relation to the QUAD, Russia maintains that it is a military alliance designed to contain China and Russia. An alternative view to this would be that the QUAD is a plurilateral dialogue mechanism designed to complement the Indo-Pacific in building synergies in infrastructure, capacity building, connectivity and tackling non-traditional security threats. Perhaps, the QUAD Plus collaborative framework may help in overcoming its image of offering exclusionary membership.

In these circumstances, opting to remain outside the Indo-Pacific tent is likely to prevent Russia from participating in these nascent attempts to create a stable regional security architecture.

Even as it rejects the Indo-Pacific, Russia's growing stakes in the region tell a different tale. This is reflected in its new partnerships with ASEAN, SAARC, African and Gulf countries, anchored in its weapons and natural resources diplomacy. The jurisdiction of its Pacific Fleet extends from Vladivostok right up to the Persian Gulf, effectively highlighting Russia practising an Indo-Pacific strategy.

This nascent network of new relationships could help fulfil Russia's long-cherished dream of gaining access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Interestingly, Russian maritime expeditions made frequent port calls in the region in the 19th century, marked by a full time consulate at Batavia, the capital of Dutch East Indies Company.⁸

Russia's vocal opposition of Indo-Pacific appears tactically linked to its necessity of an entente with China. With Beijing's support being critical to overcome Western pressure on its policies, the Kremlin as quid pro quo appears to increasingly back China in its core areas of strategic concern by doing the diplomatic heavy-lifting.

However, its advocacy seems to be tempered with a selective approach. For instance, instead of supporting Beijing on the issue of the South China Sea, Russia has called for preventing the dispute's internationalisation.⁹ Similarly, Russia has qualitatively stepped up its engagement with the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam — countries who have long-running

territorial feuds and sovereignty claims with China.

Therefore, Russia appears to be performing the deft balancing act of not upsetting the Chinese applecart while continuing to pull at certain apples sensitive to China, creating a strategic space for manoeuvre.

The Indo-Pacific, on the other hand, can likely be one of Russia's tools to stay relevant on the global stage. Today, an increasingly bipolar US-China global narrative runs the risk of leaving Russia in its trail, given Moscow's relative decline. This necessitates Russia adopting independent positions in one of the world's most dynamic regions to project the image of a pole in global affairs.

Being China's junior partner undermines Kremlin's great power ambitions. Russia, therefore, likely stands to gain from the multipolarity and multilateralism that the Indo-Pacific seeks to promote. A strategic repositioning could not only help Russia overcome Western attempts to isolate it but also broaden the horizons of its pivot to Asia beyond China.

It, therefore, makes strategic sense to explore congruence with the nuanced Indo-Pacific vision of non-American stakeholders, including the QUAD members. Notably, Russia appears to enjoy stable relations with all the key stakeholders, with the exception of the US.

However, this is likely predicated on Russia's willingness to reimagine a new geo-strategic maritime role for itself. Russia's unique geographical position of straddling the Heartland and Rimland at a time when the Indo-Pacific's emphasis has been on visualising the continental and maritime areas of the two oceans as a seamless strategic space does seem to provide it the necessary tools. Russia remains as much an Asian power as it is a European one with 2/3rds of its territory and 15 per cent of its population based in Asia.

At a time when Russia is recalibrating its identity from a European to a Eurasian one, its Greater Eurasia construct, envisioned as a harmonious strategic space from Lisbon to Jakarta, seems to aptly complement the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰ Interestingly, the core content of the Greater Eurasia construct appears similar to Indo-Pacific, with its emphasis on being open and inclusive, stress on dialogue and building developmental partnerships and connectivity, respecting international law, and eschewing confrontation.

With the Russian Far East being the connecting tissue between Greater Eurasia and Indo-Pacific, Russia could tap into the expertise and resources of Indo-Pacific countries beyond China, so as to develop its Far East. This region remains one of Russia's least developed regions. Similarly, exploring congruence in building of new regional supply chains in Indo-Pacific could help Russia overcome its Achilles heel – its weak global economic competitiveness.

A framework of India-Russia strategic cooperation in this space already exists, as outlined by Prime Minister Modi in the seminal 'Act Far East' policy launched in Vladivostok in 2019.¹¹ This was seen as the lynchpin of harmonising the two countries strategic outlook. However, Lavrov's recent outburst, seen largely through the prism of tensions in Russia-West ties, seems to suggest a continuing gap between the Indian and Russian viewpoints.

Inevitably, the push and pull of Russia-US confrontation has complicated India's foreign policy options. Similar to Russia's strategic necessity of an entente with China, a closer partnership with the US appears to be in India's interests.

However, it is likely that India will continue its independent course of action anchored in multi-alignment. Russia remains India's traditional partner and a pillar of India's strategic autonomy.

The challenge will likely be to convince Russia of India's long-term independent Indo-Pacific vision.

It is, therefore, essential to continue to strive for congruence. What can possibly bridge the gap are both nations' similar but as yet parallel visions of a stable security architecture and shared concerns over hegemonism.

India's vision of Indo-Pacific appears to not only accommodate Russia's clamour for ASEAN centrality and inclusion of East Africa but also complement the Greater Eurasia construct.

A Russia-India-Japan trilateral could be a new vector, given the fact that India and Japan's Indo-Pacific visions seem to be the closest to Russia's strategic comfort. This trilateral holds potential with Japan seeking a new *modus vivendi* with Russia. This was reflected in ex-Prime Minister Abe's speech at the Eastern Economic Forum in 2019, an event where Indian and Japanese premiers were the guests of honour.

As India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar had stated in 2019, "Russia is a Pacific Power which has Indian Ocean interests" while "India is an Indian Ocean power with very strong and growing Pacific interest".¹²

The litmus test of this traditional partnership will be to harmonise each other's viewpoints, to the extent possible, and ride out the storm. Perhaps, a logistics sharing pact, long in the offing, could provide the much needed momentum.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

Crack