

## THE 'INDO-PACIFIC' IDEA: ORIGINS, CONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND THE WAY AHEAD

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### **Abstract**

The Indo-Pacific concept—representing the maritime ‘underbelly’ of Asia—is being used increasingly in the contemporary geopolitical discourse. The paper examines the progressive genesis of the Indo-Pacific idea since the 1920s, along with the circumstances that led to its rebirth in 2006. Essentially, this was a result of the increased ‘security’ linkages between the two oceans, with China being a major factor. In the main analysis, the paper explores the strategic drivers, interests, approaches and perspectives of the key regional players and stakeholders—like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, China, the European Union (EU), Japan, and the United States of America (US), with a specific focus on India. Based on an exploratory research methodology, the paper analyses the current trends, deducing a policy-relevant prognosis for the regional countries and stakeholders. In particular, it examines the emerging Indo-Pacific multilateral architecture, and the leading role that the existing organizations like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) could play in it, along with the new Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad 2.0). The paper concludes with recommendations to meet the overarching objective of the Indo-Pacific vision: economic, material and societal prosperity of maritime-Asia. These are of much relevance for Indian policymaking, considering its long-overdue formal articulation of a national-strategy. In context of the Quad 2.0, it suggests that ‘security’ issues need not receive undue salience, since military strategy is merely a mechanism for ‘assurance’ and ‘insurance’ to achieve the ends of the Indo-Pacific vision.

**Keywords: Security, Regional Groupings, Multilateral Architecture, QUAD, Indo-Pacific vision**

### **1. Introduction**

Since 2010, the concept of Indo-Pacific has gained increasing prevalence in the geopolitical and strategic discourse and is now being used increasingly by policymakers, analysts and academics in Asia and beyond. The term Indo-Pacific combines the Indian the Pacific oceans into a singular regional construct.

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However, in geopolitical terms, the two regions are vastly dissimilar, including with regard to geoeconomics that shape such geopolitics, and even in terms of the security environment. If so, is the concept of Indo-Pacific a conceptual aberration?

This contemporary geopolitical 'aberration' did not exist up to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century AD because for many centuries before that, the civilizational ethos of India and China had a profound impact on Asia and beyond, and the two together contributed to more than half of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Premised on this historic fact, in 1920, a German geopolitician Karl Haushofer predicted Asia's resurgence, and sought to capture the historical narrative on the concentration of humanity and culture of the Chinese and Indian civilizational entities, and their roles on the future power relations in the 'Greater Indo-Pacific Ocean', which he called *Indopazifischen Raum* (Indo-Pacific Space). Importantly, he addressed the era when the two civilizations never had a continental interface. With Tibet separating them, India and China were linked via the sea, and, therefore, his narrative aptly reflected the reality of the bygone era.

Quite possibly, the contemporary Indo-Pacific idea is a reincarnation of the erstwhile spirit in a new form, though with new geopolitical realities. A 2011 report of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), titled 'Asia 2050: Realizing the Asian Century' avers that,

'Asia is in the middle of a historic transformation... By nearly doubling its share of global gross domestic product (GDP) to 52 per cent by 2050, Asia would regain the dominant economic position it held some 300 years ago, before the industrial revolution...'

Notably, in the past half-century, it is not only China and India, but also the other countries in the entire swath of the Afro-Asian rimland and Australasia that have developed more rapidly than the rest of the world and are still rising. The GDP of the countries in merely in the maritime underbelly of Asia is poised to surpass 50 per cent of the global GDP, much sooner than what was predicted in the 2011 ADB Report. An analysis indicates that the combined GDP (PPP terms) of the 36 countries of 'maritime Asia' already constitutes 48 per cent of the global GDP (2017). For the 62 Indo-Pacific countries of the Afro-Asian rimland—including Oceania—the proportion is 51.5 per cent. Furthermore, all 74 countries of the wider Indo-Pacific region (inclusive of the Americas) contribute to nearly 72 per cent of the global GDP. This indeed makes the 'Rise of Indo-Pacific'—rather than the 'Rise of Asia'—a more appropriate maxim.

However, as the ADB Report also says, 'Asia's rise (and therefore, of the Indo-Pacific) is by no means preordained... (and is fraught with)... multiple risks and challenges' in the coming years and decades. The process could be disrupted due to various factors, and encounters growing challenges, particularly in terms of good maritime order rooted in adherence to the established norms and international law. This led to the combined imperative of 'enormous liveliness brought forth through the union of two free and open oceans and two continents', as articulated by the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo during his address in Kenya in August 2017, which is now being referred to as the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy'.

In this context of the aforesaid, it is important for the regional countries and other stakeholders in the region to fathom these new geopolitical realities. Accordingly, this chapter seeks to examine the Indo-Pacific concept in terms of its genesis, drivers and the geopolitical interests and approaches of some key actors. Furthermore, based on current trends, the analysis presents a policy-relevant prognosis on the future relevance of the Indo-Pacific concept.

## **2. Early Usage of Indo-Pacific Term**

Concepts like the Indo-Pacific that lead to creation of new mental maps of how countries view the world are rather profound, evolving over a considerable period of time. The process is an amalgamation of the thoughts of statesmen, think-tanks and the academia over many years and decades, and is underpinned by the imperatives of the geopolitical environment.

For long, the vast geopolitical dissimilarities between in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean littorals translated into the term Indo-Pacific being used merely by biographers to denote the commonality and interlinkages of marine eco-systems in the tropical swath of the Indian and Pacific oceans. However, the work of Karl Haushofer in 1920 (*Indopazifischen Raum*) was probably the first 'geopolitical' statement on the Indo-Pacific. Since then, 'Indo-Pacific' was often used in oral discourse, largely in Australia, which was largely premised on Canberra's two-ocean geo-strategic imperatives. Nonetheless, until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was rare, if any, formal academic articulation on the 'Indo-Pacific' concept.

In 2005, however, the Indo-Pacific concept began to take root once again. In the fall of 2005, the noted analyst of New Zealand, Peter Cozens wrote a paper in the *Maritime Affairs* journal, wherein he reflected upon sixty years of maritime developments in the Indo-Pacific region, which he described as a maritime-strategic continuum that "extends from the northern extremities of the Indian Ocean to include...South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australasia, the islands of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, and the eastern countries of Asia". Dr Cozens' thoughts having been triggered by the formation of the East Asia Summit (EAS), with its constituent membership stretching eastwards to include India, he very insightfully perceived the Indo-Pacific as representing the 'non-Atlantic view of the world', thereby rejuvenating the views of Karl Haushofer in 1920.

## **3. Contemporary Revival**

In contemporary geopolitics, the Indo-Pacific idea began to achieve traction following the speech made by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in the Indian Parliament in August 2007. It was based on the emerging geo-economic imperatives of the countries of the Asian rim-land, shared prosperity, and the attendant need for good order and strategic stability. The idea also necessitated exerting restraining pressures upon disruptive tendencies, of either state or non-state players. Therefore, 'security' became the driver for the reincarnation of the Indo-Pacific concept. The primal catalyst for this was the shared concern between India and Japan with regard to the increasing politico-military assertiveness of China. Consequently, Japan sought to enhance the security of its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). India was also wary due to the imminence of Chinese strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, as indicated by the Booz Allen Hamilton a

report on China's 'String of Pearls', which could potentially translate into Chinese military bases in the Indian Ocean.

In 2006, in tandem with the enhanced political interactions between India and Japan, the think-tanks of the two countries also intensified their exchanges. During the October 2006 Dialogue between the Indian *Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis* (IDSA) and the *Japan Institute for International Affairs* (JIIA) held in New Delhi, the author represented the IDSA as a maritime expert. During the discussions, the two sides noted the well-established geo-economic connect between the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Western Pacific in terms of the increasing dependence of the East Asian and Southeast Asian countries on the natural resources of the IOR. Such dependence had begun some decades ago with the growing industrialization of these countries. However, the security-connect was a new development. For instance, a couple of years earlier in 2004, the US had launched the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) to counter the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The PSI operated across the entire maritime swath stretching from West Asia (Iran and Syria) to Northeast Asia (North Korea).

During the Dialogue, China was also discussed. The Indians and Japanese were especially worried about China's new-generation Type 093 (*Shang*-class) nuclear attack submarines (SSN). The first 093 SSN was launched in 2002-03 and was commissioned a few months earlier in 2006. In addition, China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean was leading to a fluidity of balance of power in maritime-Asia, leading to questions as to how new balance will affect their respective strategic interests.

The Dialogue veered into China's strategic vulnerabilities. Ironically, these were expressed by the Chinese President Hu Jintao himself only three years earlier in November 2003 through his coinage of 'Malacca Dilemma', wherein 'certain major powers' were bent on controlling the strait. The reference to India was implicit, yet undeniable. The 'Indo-Pacific' idea was, thus, proposed by the author to showcase the Indian Navy's ability to choke China's jugular, and thereby dissuade its growing assertiveness. This led to the publication of his January 2007 paper titled '*Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation*' in the IDSA's *Strategic Analyses* journal. The paper began by introducing the Indo-Pacific concept and its geographical boundaries and stated that '... (although) the threats to SLOCs (Sea Lines of Communication) due to military conflicts have receded globally.... Exceptions, nonetheless, persist in the Indo-Pacific region'. It sought to highlight the vulnerability of SLOCs, with the aim of sending a subtle message to China that considering the Indian Navy's focus on SLOC-security and the "measures (that it has taken to) facilitate the monitoring of mercantile traffic in the Indian Ocean", China's own SLOCs could be targeted if it continued its politico-military assertion, and should thus reconsider its approach.

A few months later in August 2007, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited India and addressed the Indian Parliament. Drawing from the 1655 book authored by the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh titled, 'Confluence of the Two Seas', he proposed the formation of 'the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity' in 'the broader Asia', comprising 'an immense network, incorporating the United States of America and Australia', and enabled by a 'Strategic Global Partnership of Japan and India' located at the book-ends of the Indo-

Pacific region. He added that as maritime states, *both India and Japan have vital interests in the security of sea lanes* (emphasis added).’

Thereon, the term Indo-Pacific caught on to inspire acceptability in strategic discourse worldwide. Among the earliest of these references was carried in Robert Kaplan’s 2010 book *Monsoon*, wherein he demonstrates the criticality of Indian Ocean for the future of US power in the 21st century geo-politics of the Indo-Pacific continuum. Later that year, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke about ‘*expanding our work with the Indian Navy in the Pacific, because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce*. Her speech was significant on two counts. Firstly, it was a precursor to US President Obama’s impending visit to India. Secondly, while much of her speech maintained the reference of Asia-Pacific, the term Indo-Pacific was used only in reference to naval cooperation with India. In 2012, the noted Australian analyst Rory Medcalf wrote that he was convinced that ‘Indo-Pacific’ is ‘a term whose time has come’.

#### **4. Inadequacy of the Asia-Pacific Term**

The Indo-Pacific concept acknowledges the importance of the IOR in Asia’s geopolitical and security construct and thereby enables a more holistic comprehension and analyses in comparison to the term Asia-Pacific, wherein the IOR was never included, at least not explicitly. D. Gnanagurunathan of the *Indian Council for World Affairs* (ICWA), New Delhi writes,

‘Japan and Australia promoted [the term ‘Asia Pacific’](#) in the 1970s and 1980s to draw them closer to the United States and the economically burgeoning East Asia. India was far, geographically, from the region, and politically, economically and strategically remained uninvolved for inherent reasons.’

#### **5. The India Factor**

The coinage of Indo-Pacific has much to do with the increased eminence of India with the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It began in the 1990s with India’s impressive economic growth, and later, its nuclear weaponisation. In 2006, Donald Berlin wrote that the ‘rise of India’ is itself a key factor in the increasing significance of the Indian Ocean. India could no longer be excluded from any overarching reckoning in the Asia-Pacific; be it economic or security-related. For example, India was an obvious choice for inclusion in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996 and the EAS in 2005. Even for the PSI (2004), President Bush sought to enrol India as a key participant. However, even while being located in the area of responsibility of the US Pacific Command (PACOM)—now renamed as Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM)—to many analysts, India never belonged to the Asia-Pacific. During the Shangri La Dialogue 2009, India’s **former naval chief** Admiral Arun Prakash **highlighted** this contradiction, saying,

‘I am not quite sure about the origin of the term Asia-Pacific, but I presume it was coined to include America in this part of the world, which is perfectly all right. As an Indian, every time I hear the term Asia-Pacific I feel a sense of exclusion, because it seems to include north east Asia, south east Asia and the Pacific islands, and it terminates at the Melaka Straits, but there is a whole world west of the

Melaka Straits....so my question to the distinguished panel is ... do you see a contradiction between the terms Asia-Pacific, Asia and the Indian Ocean region?’

The Indo-Pacific concept helped to overcome this dilemma by incorporating India in the affairs of maritime-Asia, even though the ‘Indo-’ in the compound word Indo-Pacific stands for the ‘Indian Ocean’, and not ‘India’.

National geostrategy cannot be formulated without factoring geographical realities, and a nation’s geography is never perfect. One cannot alter geography, but can modify its geo-strategic orientation, which India attempted nearly three decades ago through its Look East Policy of 1991. However, India was not too proactive in its pursuit of this Policy. The Indo-Pacific concept of 2007 was, therefore, also a subconscious effort of Indian academia to give wind to India’s languishing easterly geo-strategic reorientation. This gained strength in 2014, with the Act East articulation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which is now providing policy ballast to the Indo-Pacific idea within India. India’s strategic rationale was largely driven by its geo-economic objectives. Towards this end, New Delhi sought to ensure a benign environment in its extended maritime neighbourhood, but that was not all. India also sought to stretch its geostrategic frontiers eastwards to reinforce its ‘strategic deterrence’ against China.

This led to a strategic convergence with the Washington, which was more than willing to partner with New Delhi. During her visit to Perth, Australia, in November 2012, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lauded India as ‘an important player in the Indo-Pacific region’ that needs to play a larger role in the region’s affairs. She applauded the upswing in Australia’s bilateral ties with the ‘world’s largest democracy’ India and encouraged Canberra to strengthen its military cooperation with New Delhi.

During his address at the 2018 *Shangri la Dialogue*, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi clearly indicated the geographical swath of New Delhi’s conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific to stretch from Africa to Americas, thereby covering the entire Indian and Pacific oceans, in tandem with that of Japan. He, however, emphasised on a few key facets reflecting New Delhi’s policy perspective on Indo-Pacific, which included ‘inclusiveness’, ‘openness’, ‘ASEAN centrality and that the concept was not directed against any country. These are indicative of the Prime Minister’s policy guidance that ‘strategic deterrence’ needs to be reinforced in tandem with more ‘gentle’ persuasive and dissuasive pressures upon China.

## **6. Interests and Approaches of Other Key Players**

### **1.1 Australia**

Since long, Australia has realized its geo-strategic centrality in the Indo-Pacific continuum, but never formally articulated it. As soon as the concept began to gain acceptance in the early years of the current decade, the Australian government made haste to articulate it in its Defence White Paper of May 2013, which therefore, became the first-ever ‘official and formal’ statement on the Indo-Pacific in the contemporary times. The White Paper notes two key contributing factors in the emergence of concept: first, the emergence of India ‘as an important strategic, diplomatic and economic actor, looking east, and

becoming more engaged in regional frameworks'; and second, the 'growing trade, investment and energy flows across this broader region (that) are strengthening economic and security interdependencies...(with both factors) increasingly attracting international attention to the Indian Ocean'.

Commenting on the White Paper, Rory Medcalf endorsed India's centrality in the Indo-Pacific construct stating that 'Australia's new defence policy recognises India's eastward orientation'. The Australian conception is also reflected in the writing by a renowned Australian analyst David Brewster. Interestingly, however, unlike Japan, Australia has envisioned a 'free and open Pacific', but Canberra's geo-strategic conceptualisation does not encompass Japan, and stretches merely from India to the Western Pacific.

## **1.2 Indonesia**

Indonesia is another country, whose geographical centrality in the Indo-Pacific holds much geopolitical significance for the region as much as for the Jakarta. This led to President Jokowi embracing the new concept with much optimism. In his address at the 9<sup>th</sup> EAS Summit in Myanmar in November 2014, he stressed on maritime cooperation with Indonesia being the '*Porus Maritime Dunia*' (Global Maritime Fulcrum)... in determining the future of the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions (the Pacific and Indian Ocean Region - PACINDO).' In May 2013, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Marty Natelegawa, highlighting the fact that it was indeed Jakarta's initiative to include Australia and India in the EAS, the Foreign Minister even went to extent of proposing an 'Indo-Pacific wide Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation', which would further strengthen the EAS.

With Indonesia being an active member of both EAS and IORA like Australia, it could potentially play a major role in larger geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the military-strategic significance of Indonesia's geographical location and disposition cannot be ignored. As an archipelagic State overlooking the four key maritime chokepoints, it virtually controls the movement of strategic commodities and military communications between the Indian and Pacific oceans.

## **1.3 United States**

Sometime about 2009-10, the US began to realize the inadequacy of the Asia-Pacific term to meet its geopolitical objectives in Asia. Most likely, the key reason was that China's military-strategic footprint had begun to expand into the Indian Ocean, beginning with its anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden launched in December 2008. This led the US to seek India's proactive role in the pan-Asian security architecture, as evidenced by the statement made by the US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in his address at the 2009 *Shangri La Dialogue*. He said that the US looked to India to be a partner and 'net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond'. In 2010, the US officially recognized Indo-Pacific for the first time through the address by US Secretary of State Hillary on 'expanding our work with the Indian Navy in the Pacific because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce', as mentioned earlier. However, until 2011, the US conceptualisation remained confined to the 'Asia-Pacific',

which, unfortunately for Washington, was tied to President Obama's 'Rebalance to Asia'. As Evan Feigenbaum writes,

'For Washington, the problem is at once intellectual, strategic, and bureaucratic. Intellectually, the United States still has three separate foreign policies in Asia one for East Asia, another for South Asia, and a third for Central Asia... As Asia reintegrates, then, the United States is too often stuck in an outdated mode of thinking'.

The US geostrategic reorientation began sometime in 2012, leading the dilation of the 'Asia-Pacific' formulation to 'Indo-Asia Pacific'. In his 2013 posture report to Congress, Admiral Samuel Locklear, the then Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command referred to his area of responsibility as the "Indo-Asia-Pacific". As **Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt of the US Centre for Naval Analyses (CNA)** explains,

'Indo-Asia-Pacific was necessary to make sure that India was "connected" to a traditional Asia-Pacific policy orientation, and the U.S. government's military, policy, and diplomatic policy organs were better oriented to adapt to the contours of a more integrated Asia, to become more effective in helping manage US interests in the region's future.'

During his Asia tour in November 2017, however, President Trump further altered the 'Indo-Asia-Pacific' formulation to 'Indo-Pacific', making repeated mentions of the newer term, and contextualizing it with the 'partnership' with India, which was expected to play a more active security role. It led the media, the strategists and the policymakers worldwide scrambling, trying to delve deeper into his intent and its ramifications. Analysts averred that President Trump had implied a new '[alliance](#)'. Whether or not it was a reincarnation of the 'Rebalance to Asia', the tone and tenor indicated a desire for an anti-China partnership, thereby polarizing the Indo-Pacific region, and distorting the original 'Indo-Pacific' idea, which, in the author's view, was not constructive. This led to his op-ed in the *Washington Post* titled 'Trump's new Cold War alliance in Asia is dangerous'. The write-up expressed the concern on the contemporary 'Indo-Pacific' idea having drifted away from the original constructive India-Japan proposition of a geopolitical amalgamation of the Indo-Pacific towards regional stability.

As Australia's former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd also averred that the 'bifurcation of the region between Chinese and American spheres of influence (will lead to)... [brittle, binary strategic choices](#) (being thrust upon) the regional governments'. It may be recalled that the former Australia-India-Japan-US Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) established in 2007 collapsed following the withdrawal of Australia during the tenure of Mr Kevin Rudd as the Prime Minister. Nonetheless, within days following President Trump's 'Indo-Pacific' articulation, [Australia, India, Japan and the US held their first joint-secretary level meeting of the Quadrilateral Dialogue \(Quad\)](#). This may have been timed to enhance the pressure upon Beijing, but contributed further to constricting the strategic options of the regional countries, especially the smaller ones.



#### **1.4 Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)**

Consequent to the US President's articulation and its temporal coincidence with the revival of the Quad, collectively, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was initially averse to the 'Indo-Pacific' idea. From the ASEAN perspective, the US President's conceptualisation would force smaller countries to take sides between the US and China, leading to weakening of the ASEAN. However, driven by their respective national interests, some key ASEAN countries like Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore embraced the Indo-Pacific construct, albeit careful not to accentuate the fault-lines in the ASEAN. To assuage the ASEAN, during the ASEAN+ Foreign ministers' meeting in August 2018, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo emphasised that ASEAN would be central to Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Finally, the ASEAN is now aboard the Indo-Pacific idea. The 34<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit at Bangkok (June 2019) culminated in adoption of the document named 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' (AOIP). Based on the traditional principles of ASEAN – notably, norm-building, dialogue and inclusivity – the AOIP builds a perspective and provides a narrative on how ASEAN should be driving the region in the midst of global uncertainty and major powers' rivalry, mainly referring to China and the United States (US). The AOIP does not take sides between major powers. This conforms to India's own conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific of being neither a club of limited members, nor a (military-) strategy directed against any country.

#### **1.5 European Union**

The initial reaction of the European Union (EU) to the US President's articulation was similar to that of the ASEAN. From the EU's perspective (as one German analyst puts it), 'A strategic alignment of the Indo-Pacific Quad is tempting (but) involves a quasi-military alliance, which would run counter to the EU's approach of strengthening regional solutions and cooperation'. Therefore, the concurrent launch of the Quad did aggravate the polarisation of the region. However, alike some ASEAN countries, some major European powers like France and the UK are more amenable to strategic partnerships in the region under the rubric of the Indo-Pacific.

#### **1.6 China**

China was silently circumspect about the Indo-Pacific idea since it was first noted by Beijing in 2012. In October 2012, Australian writers Nick Bisley and Andrew Phillips wrote,

'...Viewed from Beijing, the idea of the Indo-Pacific...appears to be to keep the US in, lift India up, and keep China out of the Indian Ocean... the Indo-Pacific concept has (therefore)...received a frosty reception in China...'

A year later in 2013, Chinese analysts prodded Beijing to integrate itself within the Indo-Pacific to secure its own national interests. In his June 2013 article titled '*The Emerging Strategic Triangle in Indo-Pacific Asia*', Minghao Zhao wrote,

'...And it is true that a power game of great significance has unfolded in Indo-Pacific Asia. The US, India, Japan and other players are seeking to collaborate to build an "Indo-Pacific order" that is

congenial to their long-term interests. China is not necessarily excluded from this project, and it should seek a seat at the table and help recast the strategic objectives and interaction norms (in China's favour).'

However, Beijing was evidently more inclined to adopt the contrarian view, such as one of the Chinese analysts, Zhao Qinghai Zebian, expressed around the same time in July 2013. He set forth his analysis of Indo-Pacific concept in Mandarin language, which when translated into English, read 'India too concept and its implications for China'. The analysis avers that the Indo-Pacific concept 'promotes India's strategy' to the detriment of China. The following year, in December 2014 (six months after the new Modi-led government assumed power in New Delhi), the Chinese government's *People's Daily* ran an exercise in strategic communications, which appeared in the *Global Times*. The write-up said that Mr. Modi 'wants a peaceful and stable periphery that will allow him to concentrate on domestic economic structural reform and infrastructure building'. It further stated that the 'Indian government and scholars have not endorsed the Indo-Pacific geo-strategy scripted by countries such as the United States and Japan to use India with the aim to balance and even contain China's increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific region and the Indian Ocean'.

The concern among Chinese analysts rose palpably after President Trump's 'Indo-Pacific' November 2017 articulation. The Chinese language *People's Daily* analysed this as a reincarnation of the erstwhile US 'Rebalance to Asia' strategy to 'restrict China and weaken its influence in Asia-Pacific, wherein India would be the strategic pillar'. It added that the complexion of US-India partnership has changed from 'diplomatic-plus-trade during the Obama presidency, to defence-plus-security under President Trump'. The analysis also alluded to the Quad, saying that,

'the US is actively promoting India's Act East policy, which is deeply integrated with the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US and Japan, and gradually forms the Asian security architecture dominated by the United States, India, Japan and Australia'.

In March 2018, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi dismissed the 'Indo-Pacific' as 'an attention-grabbing idea' that would 'dissipate like ocean foam'.

Interestingly, a section of the Chinese think-tanks has lately proposed an alternative view. Based on the Chinese saying, 'It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice', these academics seek to turn an adversity into an opportunity. They have been prodding Beijing to capitalize upon the Indo-Pacific idea, which was supposedly meant to 'restrict China and weaken its influence in Asia-Pacific', by reinforcing its geopolitical connects with the IOR countries. Accordingly, much academic literature in China has been referring to the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative as 'Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics. The MSR was augmented by the Chinese government's approval for Hainan Free Trade Zone and Port (by 2025-35), which is being seen by the Chinese analysts as the 'Indo-Pacific gateway'.

China's geo-economic focus in its regional approach still appeals to many countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Even though many of these countries have realised the pitfalls of the MSR, if Beijing plays its cards well, the Indo-Pacific concept could potentially bolster the rationale of MSR, and even the legitimacy of Chinese military presence in the Indian Ocean. If so, the key countries endorsing the Indo-Pacific concept—Australia, India, Japan and the US—may become victims of their own conceptualisations.

## 2. The Emerging Regional Architecture

The prognosis of the Indo-Pacific concept, and the way ahead to achieve its envisaged objectives remain key questions for all stakeholders in the region, particularly for the 62 countries of the Afro-Asian rimland, including Oceania. Though the answers are not yet available, these will emerge from the broader regional architecture, and the manner that it is fleshed out. The notional architecture is beginning to emerge, with a hierarchical structure represented by the triangle, as shown in Figure 1 below. It illustrates the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision at the apex. The key to the Indo-Pacific vision are the complementary adjectives 'Free' and 'Open', which are being interpreted differently by various countries based on the prioritisation of their interests. However, in the context of the Indo-Pacific vision, to put it in the simplest terms, 'free' stands for the lack of barriers of any sort to use the seas for prosperity of all countries, which may be extrapolated to include freedom from security threats arising in and from the sea. The term 'open' stands for an environment that facilitates sea-going enterprise enabled by inclusiveness of the comity of nations that seek to meet their national ends through the fairness of such enterprise.

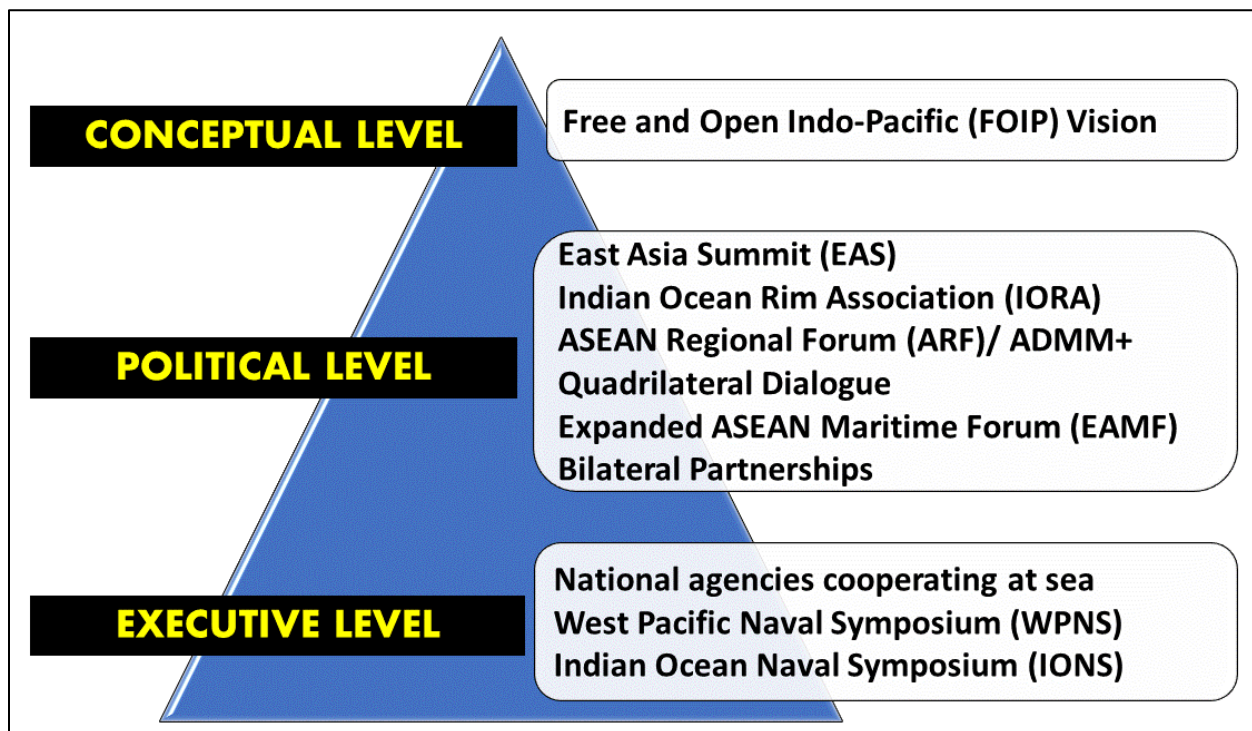


Figure 1 – The Emerging 'Indo-Pacific' Architecture (Notional)

Midway in the hierarchical triangle lies the Political Level, and at the bottom lies the Executive-Level representing functional cooperation. The functional issues at the Executive Level are presently uncertain, and yet to be firmed up. The future contours of the regional geopolitical and security environment will be based upon how the 'Indo-Pacific' concept is materialised through the cooperative structures at the Political Level, and what functional activity supports it at the Executive Level. The regional architecture will need to be shaped appropriately by acknowledging a few key geopolitical imperatives.

## **2.1 Key Geopolitical Imperatives**

The **First** is the need to maintain ASEAN centrality in Indo-Pacific multilateralism. This implies that the ASEAN-centred EAS would need to take the lead at the political level, with the IORA also having a major role to complement the EAS. Also, even though the Quad does not incorporate the ASEAN, it is required to supplement the EAS and IORA, since it also does not incorporate China, and is therefore, valuable as a means of dissuading Beijing, and preventing its aggressive behaviour, if required. However, the Quad would also need to incorporate the views of ASEAN, which may be represented in Quad meetings as an observer.

**Second**, will the Quad 2.0 (2017) glue hold after Quad 1.0 (2007)? This question is being asked by many. The region cannot afford to witness the regional uncertainties that emanated from the collapse of the (former) Quad 1.0 in 2007. Soon thereafter, China renewed its militarisation of the South China Sea and also established a permanent naval presence in the IOR. The narrative surrounding the Quad of 2007 was tied up almost exclusively in democratic values. Shared values are important instruments of statecraft but cannot alone form the basis of policy-formulation, and therefore the narrative needs to incorporate the element of 'shared interests' as well.

**Third**, the focus of the United States on 'hard' military cooperation to preserve its global interests is unhelpful. The current trend of the United States' military disengagement with the Chinese – for instance, China's exclusion in the 2018 RIMPAC exercise and the proposed establishment of a US-led 'multi-national Standing Indo-Pacific Maritime Group (SIPMG)' alike the Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMGs) – though driven by the functional imperatives of the US INDOPACOM, may harden China's stance and reverse the process of regional confidence building.

**Fourth**, China is winning the game of regional influence vis-à-vis the United States. This is accompanied by an emerging geopolitical environment, wherein the role of the US is uncertain. This is unhelpful for a stable balance of power in the region, and thus necessitates a more proactive role of the other regional powers like Australia, India and Japan. It is in this context that in 2014, Raja Mohan and Rory Medcalf averred the role of 'middle power coalitions' to respond to the 'Indo-Pacific rivalry'.

**Fifth**, the foremost aim of the Indo-Pacific concept has always been to achieve 'freedom and prosperity'. Towards this end, moderating the behaviour of China is only a way-point, not the ultimate end-

state. While the core objective is common, each Quad member is driven by differing interests. China is likely to react to the actions of Quad within the Indo-Pacific concept. One could expect its reaction to be carefully calibrated to exploit the fault-lines among the Quad members, in terms of their respective levels of sensitivity to Chinese reactions.

### 3. The Way Ahead

The functional cooperation with the Indo-Pacific architecture at the Executive Level need to be undertaken as per objectives, which are to be prioritised as indicated in Figure 2 below. For instance, the highest priority needs to be accorded to fulfilling the objectives of geo-economic and confidence building. The lower priority objectives would need to be achieved without undue visibility and symbolism.



Figure 2 – Prioritised Cooperative Approach in 'Indo-Pacific' Architecture

The **Tier-One** constitutes the foremost priority for cooperation within the existing regional mechanisms – including the Quad. It encompasses geo-economics, including maritime connectivity models through port development, as viable alternatives to the Chinese MSR. Towards this end, cooperation at the existing multilateral organizations like the EAS and IORA is valuable. The India-Japan Growth Corridor (AAGC) needs to be fast-tracked. The regional countries also need to be assisted in capacity-building for sustainable development of marine resources and ocean economy in general, under the concept of Blue Economy. To facilitate geo-economics, the regional structures would also need to focus on strengthening maritime safety and maritime security vis-à-vis maritime crime, which is not only benign objectives, but also much due to the rapidly increasing maritime activity in the Indo-Pacific. The cooperative endeavours at this

level would also need to achieve enhanced through confidence-building among maritime-security forces, such as extending the WPNS Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) to the IONS.

The **Tier-Two** priority would be to consolidate the existing inclusive multilateral mechanisms, particularly the EAS and IORA, with more proactive participation of member States who are more vocal in their cohesive approach to meeting the objectives of the Indo-Pacific vision. The Quad as the only non-inclusive mechanism would also need to be active, albeit being maintained as an informal consultative mechanism, without a formal institutionalized structure. The Tier-Two would also involve coordination among major powers towards capability enhancement (including capacity-building) of the regional maritime-security forces to reduce power asymmetries vis-à-vis China and maintain a stable regional balance of power.

The **Tier-Three** priority objective would be to counter China's emerging narrative of its historic maritime claims in the South China Sea through rigorous fact-finding analytical research. The regional countries would also need to reach a consensus on the interpretation of UNCLOS with regard to freedom of navigation and overflight, thereby preventing China from exploiting these fault-lines in the prevailing international law. It would also entail politico-diplomatic persuasion and dissuasion of China, such as by encouraging countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam to subject China to international legal arbitration.

The **Tier-Four** priority would need to be 'hard' military cooperation as a mechanism for assurance, deterrence and insurance against disruptive tendencies of States. Towards assurance, calibrated pressures need to be exerted upon China through multilateral mechanisms like the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), linking up the activities of the two. It will enable a coordinated approach to exert subtle pressures upon China through multilateral exercises like the RIMPAC involving the IOR navies and coastguards under the IONS.

Towards insurance, although India does not seek a military alliance or a collective security agreement with any of the other Quad members, it could nonetheless partner with them in some key areas, which will also enable the Quad to respond collectively to adverse contingencies. The first area is achieving situational awareness at the strategic and operational levels. In this context, India has operationalised 'white shipping' information-sharing agreements with the US and Australia and is likely to enter into a similar agreement with Japan. The second key area is enhancing maritime-military sustenance through a web of logistic agreements among the Quad members. In this regard, India has operationalised the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US and is likely to enter into a similar agreement with Japan. The third key area is developing operational compatibility (inter-operability) through the combined naval exercises like the India-US Malabar-series, which Japan joined in 2014. and Australia seeks to join it as well. The signing of the India-US Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in September 2018 is another step in this direction.

## **Conclusion**

Undeniably, China has been the key factor in the contemporary revival of the 'Indo-Pacific' concept about a decade ago. However, there lies a nuanced—albeit important—difference between the original conceptualisation of Indo-Pacific in 2006-07, and the current one envisioned by the President Trump in 2017. In the mid-2000s, China's increasingly assertive behaviour was causing anxieties both in India and Japan. For the Japanese, the 'Indo-Pacific' provided a notional assurance from India as an emerging power in the wider 'maritime Asia'. On the other hand, India was seeking Japan's help to make its own strategic assessments on China. Also, following futile efforts by New Delhi to persuade Beijing to adopt a conciliatory approach, India was compelled to scale up its outreach to Japan in order to moderate China's behaviour through 'dissuasion'. In contrast, President Trump's re-interpretation of the 'Indo-Pacific' construct amounts to partnering with India to create a China-specific alliance, and its temporal coincidence with the revival of the ['Quad'](#) is not very helpful for shaping a benign and stable environment in the wider region.

Notwithstanding the above, as trends indicate, the Indo-Pacific concept is likely to increasingly gain acceptance, even while differences persist among the key players in terms of their respective geostrategic interests, and the attendant interpretations of its geographical scope. However, the effectiveness of 'Indo-Pacific' in meeting its original objective of freedom and prosperity will depend much upon how the regional structure is fleshed out at the political level, and for functional cooperation among the key stakeholders, including the regional countries. Towards this end, the stakeholders will need to factor three key imperatives.

**First**, even though ASEAN centrality is valuable for Indo-Pacific multilateralism, and should be upheld, the lead role of EAS would need to be supplemented by the IORA and the Quad. **Second**, while moderating the behaviour of China remains a way-point to the overarching objective of 'Indo-Pacific', the cooperative endeavours would need to avoid military focus and exclusivity. **Third**, the emphasis would need to be laid on geo-economics, maritime safety and good order at sea, including freedom of navigation. **Fourth**, China is winning the game of regional influence vis-à-vis the United States. This is unhelpful for a stable balance of power in the region, and thus necessitates a more proactive role of the other regional powers like Australia, India and Japan.

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