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Emerging Trends in the Indo-Pacific Region

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ABSTRACT

In 2007, before the Indian Parliament, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe put forth the idea of a united Indo-Pacific bringing about prosperity and freedom. He also spoke of a 'Broader Asia' that broke away geographical boundaries. In context of the primary importance of the Indo-Pacific region, the last few years has formed the yolk of all foreign policy, economic, maritime, and political discussion in the region. Over the last about a decade, there have been two important developments that have altered the world's economic and strategic balance. First, the "Indo-Pacific" has replaced the Atlantic– Pacific combine, as the new financial and strategic centre of gravity. Second, the rise of local maritime powers has resulted in the presence of alternate 'power -hubs' within the broader Asia-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific region has evolved as a viable strategic construct with its progression from an idea that had limited acceptance to one that is now seen as a feasible strategic notion. The pendulum of global maritime significance has swung to the east, and that various markers of societal progress viz. interdependent economic activity, vital trade exchanges, energy flows, strategic resources development seem to all endorse the idea of a strategically integrated region. The shift in the strategic balance of power to the East makes it necessary to explore the emerging security imperatives in the broader Indo-Pacific region, amidst a rising constellation of economic and political stars such as China, Indonesia, Japan, Australia and India, on the geo-strategic horizon. The wider Indo-Pacific region is home to nearly 3 billion people and has a combined Gross Domestic Product of nearly $20 trillion. It has three of the four largest economies in the world i.e. China, India and Japan. It is in this context that the strategic import which the Indo-Pacific region holds cannot be missed. The Indo-Pacific is important because it represents the centre of gravity of the world's economic and strategic interests. As the world's most economically dynamic region, it is home to resources that can help power many developed and developing economies. The world's leading and rising economic powers such as China, India, Korea, Australia and Japan, etc., are principal constituents integrated space. Consequently, maritime trade flowing through the busy sea lanes of Indo-Pacific region is vital for the economic prosperity of the entire region and beyond. As global economic power shifts from the West to the East, the vast geo-strategic and geo-economic realm spanning the western Pacific Ocean right up to the western Indian Ocean along the eastern coast of Africa is rapidly eclipsing the once dominant Asia-Pacific as the centre of trade, investment, rivalry, competition and cooperation. Today, it makes more sense to think of this maritime region of interest as an organic and integrated strategic entity rather than as two separate distinctive geographic and strategic theatres i.e. the Indo- Pacific Region.

Introduction:

In a world undergoing dynamic transformation, few regions are changing more rapidly than the integrated Indian Ocean-Pacific Ocean region is aptly endorsed by Japanese PM Shinzo Abe in his address to the Indian Parliament in 2007 referred to the formulation of the "confluence of two seas" in what was perhaps a reference of the Indo-Pacific region which resonated widely in the policy discourse as well as in strategic circles globally. His idea of a united Indo-Pacific is for bringing about prosperity and freedom. He also spoke of a 'Broader Asia' that broke away geographical boundaries and eventually in the last few years indo-pacific topic has formed the yolk of all foreign policy, economic, maritime, and political discussion in the region. Over the last about a decade, there have been two important developments that have altered the world's economic and strategic balance. First, the "Indo-Pacific" has replaced the Atlantic–Pacific combine, as the new financial and strategic centre of gravity. Second, the rise of local maritime powers has resulted in the presence of alternate 'power -hubs' within the broader Asia-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific region has evolved as a viable strategic construct with its progression from an idea that had limited acceptance to one that is now seen as a feasible strategic notion. The pendulum of global maritime significance has swung to the east, and that various markers of societal progress viz. interdependent economic activity, vital trade exchanges, energy flows and strategic resources development seem to all endorse the idea of a strategically integrated region. The shift in the strategic balance of power to the East makes it necessary to explore the emerging security imperatives in the broader Indo-Pacific region, amidst a rising constellation of economic and political stars such as China, Indonesia, Japan, Australia and India, on the geo-strategic horizon.

The wider Indo-Pacific region is home to nearly 3 billion people and has a combined Gross Domestic Product of nearly $20 trillion. It has three of the four largest economies in the world i.e. China, India and Japan. It is in this context that the strategic import which the Indo-Pacific region holds cannot be missed. This can be best described by some of the findings of Australia's Defence White Paper for 2016. The paper in specific has termed the Indo-Pacific as a new region where by 2050; almost half the world's economic output is expected to come from.

However, the term Indo-Pacific has been generally used in the past, but with differing contexts. This term was often used in Australian foreign policy debates between the 1950s - 70s. Foreign policy scholars have been using the term to generally define a region encompassing the western portion of the Pacific and the eastern part of the Indian Ocean. The term has found place in US naval maritime strategy report; in the US Marine's 'core vision' document as well as in Australia's Defense White Papers. Since 2000s, there has been an American acknowledgement about India and Pacific Oceans constituting an interlinked geopolitical space, not only because of its importance to global trade and commerce but also because they impact on strategy.

A Strategically Relevant Space:

The Indo-Pacific is important because it represents the centre of gravity of the world's economic and strategic interests. As the world's most economically dynamic region, it is home to resources that can help power many developed and developing economies. The large market in the Indo- Pacific gets defined by nearly half the world's population inhabiting the region. The world's leading and rising economic powers such as China, India, Korea, Australia and Japan, etc., are principal constituents integrated space. Consequently, maritime trade flowing through the busy sea lanes of Indo-Pacific region is vital for the economic prosperity of the entire region and beyond. Needless to say, Maritime security in this region is expected to be a key factor in the development of many countries.

As global economic power shifts from the West to the East, the vast geo-strategic and geo-economic realm spanning the western Pacific Ocean right up to the western Indian Ocean along the eastern coast of Africa is rapidly eclipsing the once dominant Asia-Pacific as the centre of trade, investment, rivalry, competition and cooperation. Today, it makes more sense to think of this maritime region of interest as an organic and integrated strategic entity rather than as two

separate distinctive geographic and strategic theatres i.e. the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. More significance also accrues from the fact that this newly defined entity places security and commerce at the centre of Asia's strategic matrix. Of course, it connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans in a way that underlines the crucial role that the maritime environment is likely to play in the region's future economic development and strategic planning.

The Indo- Pacific contains close to half the world's population, including in its ambit the dynamic sub-regions of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia and the resource rich and sometimes volatile Middle East and Africa. The integrated region consists of several of the world's important choke-points for global commerce including the Straits of Malacca, through which almost a quarter of world trade passes and is arguably the most critical as the artery of the world economy. It is the transit passage for not just the bulk of China's trade, but also for the entire lot of east-bound commercial traffic and oil and gas shipments from Europe and the Middle East.

One reason for the growth of Asia in the past decade has been the increasing flow of raw materials, including energy from the Middle East. It has also led to an increase in the flow of Asian labour , capital, and consumer goods, particularly to the rich countries in the Arabian Peninsula. With growing trade, port infrastructure in the region has grown exponentially serving to expand economic ties. New ports, airports, roads, rail systems and pipelines now traverse Asia from West to East and are making access between the landmass of Eurasia and the Indian Ocean much easier. The pace and scope of infrastructure development has been so dramatic that sometimes entirely new ports have been developed on sites that were earlier little more than fishing harbours such as Gwadar in Pakistan or Hambantota in Sri Lanka. The boom in port construction has only heightened the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific and this in turn is likely to generate greater commercial traffic and the possibility for greater strategic competition.

Geo-strategically speaking, the Straits of Malacca dominates more than the commercial land economic lifelines into and out of the rapidly expanding economies of East Asia. The global strategic growth and expansion of aspiring powers can be contained and regulated through the mere control on the movements of their naval forces through these Straits. With more than 80000 vessels transiting through the Straits every year it is the world's hottest and most crucial strategic choke point and with new 'maritime trading hubs on the drawing boards in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand, use of the Straits will only grow once this new infrastructure is operational.

Regional flux and Dealing with Regional Conflict:

The idea of the Asia-Pacific has now become almost ubiquitous in our understanding of the world as a game field of strategies and counter strategies. Since the region plays a key role in facilitating trade and oil flows, the Indo-Pacific is the principal theatre of geo-strategic competition between established and emerging powers. However, the sharply divergent interests of regional and extra-regional states – their contradictory strategic imperatives; the vast economic disparities and a myriad mix of cultural preferences in the region, present a unique challenge for security forces. The most significant maritime policy initiatives within the Asia-Pacific seem to have been taken by the US. Washington's Defence Strategic Review of Jan 2012 sought to address the strategic flux in the region by committing a bulk of American military assets to the region. To inject substance into its policy, the US has announced a 'strategic pivot' – the subject of much discussion and debate among policy makers and analysts. While many of the measures announced, haven't been fully implemented following cuts in the military budget, it is still a significant political move by the US.

The emerging dynamic in the region is about the simultaneous rise of three maritime powers: India, the US and China. Although the US still remains the most powerful nation in the world, both militarily and economically, the situation is rapidly changing due to China's growing comprehensive national power. Robert Kaplan, a prominent US security analyst aptly describes the strategic scenario in the Indo-Pacific as one "where the rivalry between the United States and China interlocks with the regional rivalry between China and India, and also with America's fight against Islamic terrorism in the Middle East, which includes America's attempt to contain Iran."

As analysts often point out, it is the slow erosion of American power combined with the rapid rise of China's military capabilities that is leading to an uncertain security situation in the Indo-Pacific. The new balance-of-maritime-power is what has resulted in the increased intensity of conflicts in the South China Sea – impacting regional maritime security at large. In the evolving security matrix, multiple hedging is the order of the day in that there is intense competition even between traditional allies and new partnerships are being seriously forged with old rivals. The security situation in the Indo-Pacific is complicated by maritime boundary disputes. As energy security becomes important for nations, maritime boundary delineation has turned into a potent source of international conflict. While potentially rich oil and gas resources lie within national maritime zones, they are inaccessible for exploitation so long as the hundreds of overlapping offshore boundary claims remain in dispute. While long standing maritime boundary disputes in the South China Sea attract much media attention, disagreements overterritorial waters and in the Bay of Bengal are also on the rise. India, Bangladesh and Vietnam today find themselves in the middle of such a dispute. There is a need for clear principles and mutually agreed upon framework on the basis of which such maritime boundary disagreements can be resolved.

Resultantly, for some time now there has been concern that the region could witness a major military surge by Indo-Pacific countries and China in particular, turning it into an arena of great power competition in Asia. The native states and countries of the region are varied in their international political ideology and behaviour. To balance the power, grouping of the countries is a common phenomenon which has led to militarisation of the region. Indo-Pacific countries are estimated to spend heavily and strategically on building defence capabilities: Within the broader Indo-Pacific region, in the next two decades, half of the world's submarines will be operating in the region. Within the same period, at least half of the world's advanced combat aircraft armed with extended range missiles and supported by highly sophisticated information networks will be operated by Indo-Pacific countries. Some regional countries will acquire longer-range precision-guided missiles, including ship-based missiles. Advanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems, including both space and high altitude capabilities, will be prevalent, reducing the effectiveness of stealth capabilities. The region will see more autonomous systems, such as unmanned combat vehicles, in operation in the sub-surface, surface and air environments.

Maritime developments in the Western-Pacific region continue to dominate headlines. The vital maritime zone spanning the Asian littorals in the South China Sea and the Western Pacific has been the focus of regional and global attention. Australia's fast-growing strategic partnerships, with countries such as Japan and India, reflect these dynamics. India's *Act East* policy, in which it is reaching out to new partners in the Pacific theatre, is the Indo-Pacific in action. China's *Maritime Silk Route* initiative, in which it is building new maritime pathways across the Indian Ocean, is merely the Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics. But we are still playing catch up in terms of understanding the strategic implications of these developments.

One key set of issues addressed is understanding Japan's growing security role across the Indo-Pacific. This is driven by concerns over the security of Japan's sea lines of communication through the Pacific and Indian oceans, perspectives on the need for new maritime security partnerships with countries such as Australia and India, and

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debates about Japan's future roles in the Indian Ocean. The Indo-Pacific is also forcing countries such as India and Indonesia to re-examine traditional perspectives on maritime security partnerships in the region, including with Australia. With much diplomatic wrangling and military maneuvering for maritime zones and efforts by multilateral governance institutions have failed to find acceptable common ground for aviable framework for governance and dispute resolution. Against this backdrop, East Asian countries have begun beefing up their naval power. From Vietnam to Philippines and Indonesia to Japan, regional navies are all looking to build their offensive and defensive maritime capabilities. Many of these states have expressed fears about China's growing blue water capability and its dominance of the South China Sea and its islands. They have also supported India in its aspiration for naval outreach in South East Asia.

Indo-US-China matrix:

Well aware of Beijing's efforts towards looking to exploit the string of pearls, the term is used only as a colloquial term for Chinese-funded ports and related infrastructure along the Indian Ocean littorals, to keep Delhi off-balance. China's Defence White Paper for 2015 clearly signalled China's ambition to become a maritime power and one not confined to East Asian waters. "The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned," the document noted. It is in this context that in the region, the United States and China and the relationship between them will continue to be one of the most strategically important factors.

As China strengthens its ties with Indian Ocean rim countries India has sought to promote economic growth; this was done through the Look East Policy under the leadership of then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. 'Look East' was further enhanced when it was understood that India is expected to play a significant role in upholding the security and stability of the region, that is when under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India evolved from Look East to 'Act East' and hence improving its naval and security cooperation with countries of East Asia including Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines and Japan. This is discernible through Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Australia; the visit was the first by an Indian Prime Minister in 28 years; Fiji (the first visit in 33 years) and Mongolia, which hosted the Indian Prime Minister for the first time ever. By aligning India's Act East Policy with the U.S. through a Joint Strategic Vision, India seeks to expand its geo-strategic space.

During his visit to India in January 2015, President Obama implicitly endorsed the Indo-Pacific concept in the formulation of his joint statement with Prime Minister Modi, which recognized "the important role that both countries play in promoting peace, prosperity, stability and security in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region." The US on the other hand has reached out to the ASEAN to build an Indo-Pacific region and has also talked about India's desired role to preserve maritime transportation routes in the Indian Ocean. "As a regional power that is committed to advancing the rules based international order, India has become a key and important player in advancing maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.", said Nisha Biswal, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, to an American think tank in Washington which preceded Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US in April 2016.

To counter this narrative, in 2013, China under President Xi Jinping promoted the Maritime Silk Road also known as the One Belt One Road initiative also known as the Belt Road initiative as a way to define its economic and diplomatic engagement across the Indian Ocean and beyond. A commentary in Global Times, a Chinese daily which is also the mouth piece of the Communist Party of China advocated the need for China and India to overcome both foreign and domestic problems so that "Indo – Pacific era" can commence. It further said that, this can happen with the pursuit of the "Indo-Pacific" geo-economic plan that includes the establishment of the Silk Road economic belt, as well as the complementary 21st Century Maritime Silk Road aimed at the massive Asia-centred development of Eurasia. However, India's strategic leverage in East Asia is not comparable with China's significant clout in the Eastern Indian Ocean, gained primarily on the basis of its huge maritime infrastructure. These facilitiesmay be commercial outposts at present but have a considerable scope for military application. We need to acknowledge that China's ability to put India under strain in the Indian Ocean is a growing factor shaping the broader dynamic of Asian security.

Worries have also been expressed about the developing relationship of great power competition between US, China and India. It is sometimes suggested that the intense rivalry between India and China will result in an India-US alliance to counter China. India has realised the strategic implications of the presence of super powers added to the fact that it also has to face hostile neighbours. This is, it must be said, not the most accurate portrayal of the trilateral relationship as there are elements of cooperation and confrontation apart from collaboration between India and China that are rarely spoken about. Indeed, India's official take on its bilateral relationship with China is that there is space enough in the region for both nations to co-exist and grow.

Inherent Threats:

The security of the Indo-Pacific, however, goes beyond a mere consideration of emerging political equations. Recent developments in the region have shown that maritime security challenges in the region straddle the gamut of traditional and non-traditional issues. These include the scourge of piracy and armed robbery in the Western Indian Ocean and the Malacca Straits; a simmering maritime conflict in the Persian Gulf; terrorism in South and Southeast Asia; drugs, arms and human trafficking; and territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the East Sea.

While the Indo-Pacific's centrality to oil trade renders its stability critical, the looming threat of maritime crime and environmental crises in the region make it an area of vital concern for maritime forces. Even as trends with worrisome security implications continue to evolve in the region, there is a distinct possible that the maritime challenges could prevail over the international and regional community's ability to effectively respond in a sustained and effective manner.

In any security assessment accounting for asymmetric threats and defining an appropriate response strategy against such threats is particularly challenging, as use of the trade routes has grown, so has the prevalence of crime and illicit activity, turning the region volatile and increasingly unstable, leading to a need for greater maritime security. The presence of extra-territorial elements and non-state actors in the region has only complicated the security matrix. Each regional State today finds itself combating elements that threaten not just its own maritime security, but also that of its contiguous neighbours. For its part, India has been coordinating joint patrolling with Indonesia and Thailand in the Andaman Sea, cooperation that has led to the curbing of arms smuggling and drug trafficking. These are steps aimed at creating common stakes in the maintenance of peace and stability in the region.

Moreover, key economic challenge facing the Indo-Pacific region is the paucity of employment opportunity. Low Industrial output in several countries in East and Southeast Asia, weak overseas demand, shrinking of export-oriented manufacturing economies are forcing populations into high-risk and vulnerable forms of employment. Among the principal challenges in the region, therefore, is uplifting masses from poverty. The need of the hour is to promote economic growth, and support the full development and participation of communities in economic, social and political life to ensure a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Conclusion - Managing 'Change' in the Region

Dealing with security in the Indo-Pacific requires states to come to terms with its altered dynamics. For this, nations need to adopt a 'change management' approach in tackling the various challenges.

While on the one hand, policy-makers need to account for the growing dangers in the maritime domain - threats from terrorism, trafficking, and piracy – on the other, they must also deal with economic and human security issues of trade, employment, connectivity and climate change. The magnitude and complexity of the challenges, demands policy coherence, imagination, resources, and sustained efforts.

To enhance regional diplomacy, a case does exist for greater regional cooperation amongst the Indo-Pacific community for greater coherence in regional efforts to establish a community of stakeholders. In recent days there have been efforts by countries in South and South East Asia to revive the Indian Ocean Rim Association forRegional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) giving it an expansive and ambitious mandate that includes security. The idea of such a community is to form an integrated neighbourhood, which could pave the way for the formation of a comprehensive regional economic and security partnership. Such regional cooperation would indeed be fruitful in reducing tensions between the littoral states.

The nations of the region share many of these common concerns. Most of us accept the need for greater multilateral and bilateral cooperation and therefore choose to constantly engage each other in addressing our concerns. But there is also the need to harmonize ourselves in such a way that we can effectively address the multidimensional challenges of the future. It is for this reason that we need to take a collective consideration of future strategies that would help address the many security challenges in the Indo-Pacific and identify the trends that are likely to shape the Asian strategic landscape over the next two decades.

The fact that how eager India is to be at the forefront of the Indo-Pacific region was clear when the country's defence minister Manohar Parikkar stated at recent the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore that the Indo-Pacific region will remain the driver of global prosperity for decades to come. As the region's fastest growing economy, he said, India will be a significant factor in ensuring this. With this it would be safe to say, that the Indo-Pacific era has begun.

It is therefore, an opportune time to undertake a comprehensive analysis of issues relevant to the security of the Indo-Pacific. Such an exercise might prove critical in identifying areas of mutual understanding and cooperation and the exploring of possibilities to enhance collective problem-solving that may affect the prosperity of the Indo-Pacific over the next few decades.

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