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Embedding India in Asia Reaffirming the Indo-Pacific Concept

*Chietigj Bajpae**

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical frame of reference is embedded in the growing strategic importance of the maritime domain and the rise of states that have demonstrated the ability to 'transcend' their respective subregions. However, the Indo-Pacific remains a concept in its infancy, as evidenced by the fact that it continues to compete with alternative conceptions of regional space in Asia. This article argues that India has a vested interest in the survival of this new strategic geography as it serves to reinvigorate the momentum of its post-Cold War re-engagement with Asia under the aegis of its 'Look East' and 'extended neighbourhood' policies. In this context, India should continue to cultivate the Indo-Pacific concept and ensure its embrace in the region's evolving strategic vocabulary.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the 'Indo-Asia-Pacific' as a new geopolitical frame of reference has realigned India's place in Asia by redefining the geopolitical boundaries of the region. The Indo-Asia-Pacific, or the Indo-Pacific in its abbreviated form, is a reflection of several overlapping strategic developments. This includes the rise of major regional powers, including India and China, and their concomitant ability to 'transcend' their respective subregions amid their growing regional interests and material capabilities. The growing strategic importance of the maritime domain as a bridge linking together the subregions of Asia has been a further

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catalyst for the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical space. This has been undergirded by the United States (US) strategic 'pivot' or rebalancing towards Asia, which has an inherent maritime orientation while it calls on regional powers to share the burdens of regional security.

However, these same factors also present challenges for the sustainability of the Indo-Pacific concept. Namely, the Indo-Pacific is undermined by its maritime focus that neglects the geopolitics of continental Asia, as well as facing scrutiny from the convergence and equivalency of the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans. This comes amid the persistence of competing conceptions of Asia's strategic geography, including the Asia-Pacific or Pacific Rim, Indian Ocean Region, and the delineation between East and South Asia. This alludes to the fact that the Indo-Pacific remains a concept that is still in its infancy and will require a concerted effort by countries that have a strategic interest in its survival. This includes Australia, Indonesia and Japan that played a prominent role in facilitating the emergence of the Indo-Asia-Pacific concept. However, it also includes India which has the most to gain from the emergence of this new geopolitical space as a means to reinvigorate its post-Cold War re-engagement with Asia under the aegis of its 'Look East' and 'extended neighbourhood' policies.

This article begins with a discussion of the evolution of the 'region-building' process in Asia before tracing how Indian political elites have framed India within the context of the region. It then goes on to note how the blurring divide between the South and South-East Asian subregions has facilitated the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new strategic geography for Asia. It concludes by noting the need for India to ensure the embrace of the Indo-Pacific concept in Asia's evolving strategic vocabulary. This will entail dispelling the so-called flaws of the concept, including acknowledging the continued strategic relevance of continental Asia despite the growing strategic importance of maritime Asia; extending the geographic scope of the Indo-Pacific space to include West and Central Asia; and getting 'buy-in' for the concept from states that are less receptive to it, such as China. Doing so will consolidate India's position as an integral rather than peripheral member of Asia's strategic geography.

EVOLUTION OF ASIA AS A REGION

Conceptions of regional space are not static but rather constructed and moulded by shifting geopolitical dynamics. As Singh notes, the 'region-

building' process is a function of 'the power of discursive constructions of regional places'.¹ In other words, conceptions of regional space vary depending on who is defining it and for what purpose, which can result in 'deep conflicts over the geographical scope of the region and the values it is held to represent.'² Asia is unique in this context given that 'no other region in the world has been carved up into so many transnational units'.³ In the post-colonial period, the concept of an 'Asia for Asians' dominated regional discourse initially, as noted by early regional initiatives such as the Bandung Conference in 1955.⁴ However, this campaign for a 'pan-Asian identity' lost momentum as the region fractured along the Cold War divide and global powers inserted themselves into the regional space resulting in the formation superpower-led regional initiatives, such as the US-led Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO).⁵

Towards the end of the Cold War period, the 'Asia-Pacific' came to dominate regional discourse, 'stemming from a desire to stress the surging economic interconnectedness of East Asia and North America' by countries along the periphery of the region, namely, the US, Japan and Australia, and through such initiatives as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).⁶ This competed with a narrower conception of an East Asian community espoused by countries in South-East Asia under the banner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁷

EMBEDDING INDIA IN ASIA

These varying interpretations of regional space are rooted in the role of political elites as 'region builders' and their proclivity to 'identify their own politically expedient representations of regional identity and space as the expression of the states in whose name they speak.'⁸ With respect to India, 'representations of its regional space over time can be related to how Indian political elites have sought to negotiate Indian state identity.'⁹ For instance, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, promulgated a pan-Asian identity as a means to promote a distinct civilizational identity for India through fusing 'India as Asia's "centre"'.¹⁰

This manifested in India's role in trying to forge an 'Asiatic Federation of Nations' during the post-colonial period through the country's prominent role in early regional initiatives. This includes the Asian Relations Conference, which was held in New Delhi in April 1947 and served as the earliest attempt by India to orient itself towards Asia within the framework of the modern nation-state system. Nehru took the helm of the campaign to forge an Asian identity by combining Asia's struggle

against Western imperialism and decolonization with the principles of socialism, national sovereignty, equality and developing-world solidarity. This phase of Nehruvian 'Asianism' also found expression in Nehru's offer to serve as mediator during the Korean War and French–Indochina War and opposition to Dutch police action in Indonesia in 1948. This was followed by India's 'retreat' into South Asia after its defeat in the 1962 war with China, which was accompanied by a desire to stay out of Cold War rivalries amid a policy of strategic non-alignment, preoccupation with security problems in its immediate neighbourhood and desire to keep extra-regional powers out of its subregion.¹¹

In the post-Cold War period, Indian elite conceptions of the region have undergone further change amid a reassessment of 'a central pillar of Indian state identity since independence—that of national sovereignty based on notions of economic self-reliance.'¹² This has led India to embrace globalization and economic liberalization as the cornerstone of the country's re-engagement with the East Asia region. In this context, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, who launched India's 'Look East' policy in the early 1990s, referred to the Asia-Pacific as 'India's springboard for our leap into the global market place'.¹³ This linkage between India's 'Look East' policy and the country's embrace of economic liberalization has persisted as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the country's re-engagement with East Asia as a 'strategic shift in India's vision of the world and its place in the evolving global economy'.¹⁴

BLURRING SOUTH/SOUTHEAST ASIAN DIVIDE

Undergirding India's 'return to Asia' is the eroding significance of the divide between South and South-East Asia. For instance, Buzan and Waever note that 'India is steadily transcending its longstanding confinement to South Asia, and beginning to carve out a wider role as an Asian great power.'¹⁵ Thayer echoes this view, noting that 'the boundaries between South and Southeast Asia are becoming blurred. India can no longer be viewed as merely a subcontinental power; instead, it is an emerging power with strategic interests in the security of Southeast Asia.'¹⁶ Meanwhile, Rajiv Sikri notes that it is 'increasingly untenable, illogical and detrimental to India's long-term national interest to regard South Asia and East Asia as separate strategic and economic theatres interacting only at the margins.'¹⁷

Raja Mohan goes a step further by arguing that 'the perception that South and East Asia are two very different geopolitical entities...

is of recent origin.¹⁸ Rather, he notes that the emerging configuration of a combined South and East Asian region is merely a reversion to its earlier state given that 'India was very much part of the early expression and popularization of Asian identity' when 'South and Southeast Asia were not always seen as separate geopolitical entities.'¹⁹ Sandy Gordon also notes that the notion of a 'fundamental separation between South and Southeast is derived from comparatively recent history.'²⁰ This is confirmed by Jasjit Singh referring to the geopolitical space of 'Southern Asia' in the mid-1990s, which 'comprises not only South Asia and Southeast Asia but also China, the southern Soviet-successor states and Western Asia.'²¹

This alludes to the fact that definitions of Asia are not static but rather a manifestation of shifting geopolitical dynamics. These overlapping definitions of the Asian region have traditionally complicated India's interaction with the region. For instance, some countries have regarded India as an outsider to the 'East Asian Community', defined as the states comprising the ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, South Korea), while others have favoured a broader Asian community-building process within the ASEAN+6 and East Asia Summit framework, which includes India.²²

EMERGENCE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

The conception of regional space is now undergoing further change as its nomenclature has shifted to the 'Indo-Asia-Pacific', which serves to further enmesh India into the region. As Singh and Inderfurth note,

keeping pace with (the) ongoing shift in economic and strategic clout, the regional nomenclature is changing from East Asia to the Asia-Pacific and now to the Indo-Pacific... (which has emerged) as an inter-linked and integrated geo-political and geo-economic space from India to the Pacific.²³

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific is embedded in two key strategic developments: the growing strategic importance of the maritime domain; and the rise of states that have demonstrated the ability to 'transcend' their respective subregions amid their growing regional interests and material capabilities. Medcalf echoes this with his definition of the Indo-Pacific as a 'maritime super-region centered on Southeast Asia, arising principally from the emergence of China and India as outward-looking trading states and strategic actors.'²⁴ He adds that 'the Indo-Pacific means recognising that the accelerating economic and security connections

between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region are creating a single strategic system.²⁵ In doing so, the Indo-Pacific concept ‘breaks down the artificial idea of East Asia and South Asia as separate strategic settings.’²⁶

In this context, it is not surprising that the Indo-Pacific concept has found its most frequent usage among countries with a maritime orientation, or growing maritime orientation, that have sought to project power beyond their immediate subregion. Contemporary use of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept in the context of geopolitical discourse was first made in an article by Gurpreet Khurana espousing India’s expanding maritime aspirations and the need for greater cooperation between India and Japan in the maritime domain.²⁷ In the article, Khurana referred to the Indo-Pacific as the ‘maritime space comprising the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific’.²⁸ In official discourse, the first reference to the Indo-Pacific concept came from Japan when Shinzo Abe, during his first term as Prime Minister, referred to the prospect for a ‘broader Asia’ rooted in the ‘dynamic coupling’ of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.²⁹ The Indo-Pacific concept has also gained usage in both official and broader strategic elite discourse in Australia. The country’s *Defence White Paper 2013* was notable for being the first time any government had defined its region as the ‘Indo-Pacific’ by noting that Australia’s region is the ‘Indo-Pacific strategic arc’.³⁰ Rory Medcalf notes that Indo-Pacific ‘suits Australia’s two-ocean geography and expanding links with Asia’ and is a ‘valid and objective description of the greater regional system in which Australia now finds itself.’³¹

To be sure, the Indo-Pacific concept does not imply that subregional security dynamics have become irrelevant. As Medcalf notes, the Indo-Pacific is a ‘strategic system insofar as it involves the intersecting interests of key powers such as China, India and the USA, although the Indo-Pacific subregions will retain their own dynamics too.’³² Thus, while there continue to be distinctions in the security dynamics of East and South Asia, this does not negate the validity of the Indo-Pacific concept.

INDIA’S ASIAN CREDENTIALS

A key catalyst of the Indo-Pacific concept is the rise of regional powers and their concomitant penetration of adjacent subregions, which has facilitated the merger of the South and East Asian subregions. As Kurt Campbell, former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, notes, ‘at one time, most Asian nations were primarily

concerned by developments playing out in their immediate region'.³³ However, now 'many Asian nations (have) developed an "out of area" perspective and (become) much more actively engaged in the diplomacy, development challenges and security matters of the Middle East and south Asia.'³⁴ The US think tank, the Center for New American Security, echoes this perspective, noting that 'as India and other centers of power also emerge, the region itself is transforming from an Asia-Pacific to an Indo-Pacific region.'³⁵

Focusing on India, there is ample empirical evidence of the country's growing participation in East Asia. This includes India's stepped-up economic interactions with the region (as manifested by the conclusion of a plethora of bilateral free trade agreements with Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea and Japan, and multilateral agreements with ASEAN and under the framework of the broader Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership [RCEP]); membership of regional forums (including several initiatives where India plays a prominent role, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar [BCIM] Forum); and security interactions (such as joint military exercises and counter-terrorism cooperation with several East Asian states). This has been accompanied by a concerted effort by several East Asian countries to draw New Delhi into the growing web of regional multilateral initiatives (including the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asian Summit and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus).

This has prompted changes to India's identity as an Asian power. Bajpai has posited that India's growing linkages with the region has pushed the country 'in the direction of an East Asian identity'.³⁶ Dabhade has echoed this position by noting India's growing acceptance of East Asian norms such as 'cooperative security' with security management handled through 'consensual and cooperative means'.³⁷

India's emergence as a pan-Asian rather than merely South Asian power has, in turn, been a catalyst for the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical space. As Stephen Smith notes, 'so significant is India's rise that the notion of the Indo-Pacific as a substantial strategic concept is starting to gain traction.'³⁸ In this context, the Indo-Pacific concept has also gained usage in Indian strategic elite discourse.³⁹ For instance, the 2004 *Indian Maritime Doctrine* notes 'the shift in global maritime focus from the Atlantic–Pacific combine to the Pacific–Indian Ocean region',

while former Chief of Naval Staff Arun Prakash has pushed for 'having the "Asia-Pacific" label replaced by the term "Indo-Pacific"'.⁴⁰ Similarly, former Chief of Naval Staff Sureesh Mehta has noted the 'particularly strong maritime connectivities between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and consequently, the term Indo-Pacific would find more relevance'.⁴¹ Raja Mohan has also noted that 'a number of developments have begun to compel a more integrated view of the Pacific and Indian Oceans'.⁴² Meanwhile, Vijay Sakhuja has noted that 'maritime interoperability with the Indo-Pacific region will be India's enduring and viable leverage of power'.⁴³

INDO-PACIFIC AS A MARITIME REGION

Complementing the rise of major regional powers and their ability to project power beyond their immediate subregion is the growing strategic importance of the maritime domain. This has come amid the pivotal role of seaborne trade to regional economic growth, which has been facilitated by the region's deepening resource interdependence. The numbers speak for themselves. Some 95 per cent of India's total trade is conducted by sea, including over 70 per cent of the country's oil imports, while more than 60 per cent of China's exports are seaborne, including 85 per cent of its oil imports.⁴⁴ With the Middle East being home to 65 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves and 45 per cent of its natural gas, the symbiotic relationship between East and South Asia as major sources of oil demand and West Asia or the Middle East as the pre-eminent oil supplier is set to grow.⁴⁵ West Asia already accounts for 50 per cent of China's oil imports and 70 per cent of India's oil imports.⁴⁶ This resource interdependence has made the maritime domain a bridge linking together the East, South and West Asian or Middle Eastern subregions. This has led to the emergence of 'the seas of the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean' as a 'single integrated geopolitical theater' centred on maritime Asia.⁴⁷

Maritime territories have also emerged as depositories of vital resources ranging from fish stocks to minerals and offshore oil and gas.⁴⁸ The South China Sea, for instance, is estimated to hold some 10 per cent of the global catch of fish as well as 11 billion barrels of oil in proved and probable reserves and 190 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of gas.⁴⁹ This has fuelled an escalation of tensions related to maritime territorial disputes which are tied to goals of protecting freedom of navigation, accessing offshore energy resources, and protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity. While these goals are not new, the growing strategic importance

of seaborne trade and dependence on imported energy resources to fuel the economies of the region, coupled with the region's expanded naval capabilities and growing inter-regional linkages, has increased both the likelihood and intensity of an armed conflagration between states in the maritime domain.

The region's expanding maritime security interests have also manifested in the emergence of more assertive naval doctrines by regional powers. In China, growing dependence on imported resources has prompted concerns over the so-called 'Malacca Dilemma', while revealing opportunities through a so-called 'Maritime Silk Road'.⁵⁰ This has led the country's maritime strategy to move beyond its traditional focus along the first and second 'island chains' and increasingly into the realm of 'far-sea operations'.⁵¹ Meanwhile, India has declared ambitions to develop 'a brand new multi-dimensional Navy', with 'reach and sustainability' extending 'from the north of the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea'.⁵²

In this context, some have viewed the Indo-Pacific maritime theatre as a platform for competition and potential conflict. As Yoshihara notes, 'as New Delhi and Beijing look seaward, both powers will jostle for influence and advantage across the entire Indo-Pacific maritime theatre'.⁵³ However, the security dynamic in the maritime domain has not been purely competitive, as evidenced by the establishment of a bilateral maritime security dialogue between China and India in April 2012.⁵⁴ As Shivshankar Menon notes, 'over the last decade an Indian presence in the waters east of Malacca and a Chinese presence west of Malacca have become the new norm. Both have happened simultaneously and without apparent friction'.⁵⁵

CEMENTED BY THE US 'STRATEGIC PIVOT/REBALANCE'

Finally, the US 'strategic pivot' or 'rebalance' towards Asia has served to reinforce the Indo-Pacific concept by consolidating its two key components, namely, the growing strategic importance of the maritime domain and the proclivity of certain regional powers to transcend their respective subregions.⁵⁶ As Medcalf notes, the US pivot towards Asia was 'very clearly a pivot into the Indo-Pacific—the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific—rather than more narrowly to East Asia or the Asia Pacific'.⁵⁷ This is reflected in growing usage of the Indo-Pacific concept in US strategic elite discourse. For instance, the US Department of Defense (DoD) has noted that the US' 'security interests are inextricably linked

to developments in the arc extending from the western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia.⁵⁸ Robert Kaplan has also noted that the US 'is attempting to pivot its focus to the geographical heart of the global economy: the Indian and Pacific oceans.'⁵⁹

The maritime component of the 'pivot' or 'rebalance' is well established. As the region's predominant maritime power and 'sea-based balancer', the US remains a key architect and facilitator of the maritime security architecture in Asia. In this context, the US has elevated the strategic importance of the maritime domain by shoring up its maritime presence in the region. This includes a commitment to devote 60 per cent of the US naval assets to the region by 2020, including six aircraft carriers; the forward deployment of advanced littoral combat ships to Singapore; the establishment of a permanent rotational US marine taskforce in Darwin, Australia, by 2016; and unveiling the Joint Operational Access Concept and integrated Air–Sea Battle Operational Concept, which aims to build an integrated long-range strike capability to overcome the growing 'anti-access, area-denial' (or 'counter-intervention') capabilities of China.⁶⁰

However, the US 'rebalance' or 'pivot' towards Asia has also entailed supporting regional powers to adopt more assertive positions on issues of regional security.⁶¹ In other words, the US is as much 'rebalancing' within the region by burden-sharing with regional allies as it is 'pivoting' towards the region by reiterating its commitment to the Indo-Pacific. This process began before the formal proclamation of the US 'pivot' strategy during the Obama administration. As Kurt Campbell notes, 'one of the important contributions of the Bush administration's Asia policy was to recruit the rising players of the east to play a more active role in helping to address the challenges to their west.'⁶² This has led to the transformation of the regional security architecture in Asia from the US-led 'hub-and-spokes' bilateral alliance model towards a 'spokes-to-spokes' multilateral security system.

In this context, the US is actively seeking to draw India deeper into the security architecture of East Asia.⁶³ For instance, the US 2010 *Quadrennial Defence Review* proclaimed India 'as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond'.⁶⁴ The 2012 'Defense Strategic Guidance' echoes this, identifying the 'long-term strategic relationship with India' as a source of regional security.⁶⁵ Ben Rhodes, US Deputy National Security Advisor for strategic communication, has also noted that 'just as the United States, as a Pacific Ocean power, is going to be

deeply engaged in the future of East Asia, so should India as an Indian Ocean power and as an Asian nation'.⁶⁶ Even the US President, Barack Obama, has called on 'India to "engage East"', while the joint statement reached between both countries has noted a 'shared vision for peace, stability and prosperity in Asia, the Indian Ocean region, and the Pacific region.'⁶⁷

Moreover, the US–India strategic cooperation is now inextricably linked to the Indo-Pacific concept. McDevitt notes that growing US–India security cooperation has 'led US government policy officials to begin thinking about the interconnectedness of the Pacific and Indian oceans.'⁶⁸ The US Senate Committee on Armed Services has also noted that 'combined naval exercises, conducted between the United States and India, have become a vital pillar of stability, security, and free and open trade, in the Indo-Pacific Ocean.'⁶⁹ Similarly, Nancy Powell, former US Ambassador to India, stated that 'we see India as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific region', while US Deputy Secretary of State, William Burns, has noted that 'India's strong presence across the Indian and Pacific Oceans is a source of comfort and affirms its potential as a net security provider in the maritime domain.'⁷⁰ Hillary Clinton has also noted that 'India straddling the waters from the Indian to the Pacific Ocean is, with us, a steward of these waterways.'⁷¹ Meanwhile, former US Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, has noted that 'India is the lynchpin' of US strategy 'in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia.'⁷² In this context, US strategic commentators have begun 'looking at the India and Pacific oceans as a single theater...that clearly underscores the importance of India.'⁷³

India's strategic elites have also taken note of the linkage between growing strategic cooperation between India and the US and the consolidation of the Indo-Pacific concept. Nirupama Rao, former Minister for External Affairs, has noted 'an increasing convergence of (Indian) interests with the United States...linked to the Indo-Pacific region.'⁷⁴ Raja Mohan also notes that the 'traditional differentiation between these two theatres is likely to rapidly disappear' as 'the United States is now seeking a strong security partnership with India in the Indo-Pacific.'⁷⁵

CHALLENGES TO INDO-PACIFIC CONCEPT

Thus, the 'Indo-Pacific' concept has gained prominence amid the US strategic pivot, which has elevated the importance of the maritime

domain while also pushing regional powers to transcend their respective subregions amid sharing the burdens of regional security.⁷⁶ However, the Indo-Pacific concept is not without criticism given that it ‘emphasises maritime over continental dimensions; stresses perceived integration between the Indian Ocean and Pacific theatres; and implies an equivalence of priority between the two oceans.’⁷⁷

First, the Indo-Pacific concept gives priority to the maritime domain over continental concerns. While this captures the strategic reorientation of many of the region’s major powers from the continental to maritime domain, it neglects the fact the many of Asia’s major strategic rivalries remain land based. The Sino-Indian relationship is the best example of this where the disputed land border remains the root of frictions in the bilateral relationship. This was demonstrated most recently by the standoff between both countries in eastern Ladakh in April 2013.⁷⁸ Thus, while it is valid to recognize the ongoing reorientation of China and India’s strategic interests from the continental to maritime domain, ‘naval relations between the two countries (China and India) are largely set by continental concerns.’⁷⁹ In this context, ‘the Indo-Pacific axis cannot be isolated from continental dynamics and from other maritime environments beyond the Indian and Pacific Oceans.’⁸⁰

Another criticism of the Indo-Pacific as a single integrated geopolitical space is the divergent security dynamics of the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. Medcalf recognizes this, noting that ‘much of what happens in one part of the region will not necessarily be of critical importance to the other parts.’⁸¹ This is rooted in claims that the Western Pacific is immersed in intra-state conflicts, as noted by the plethora of maritime territorial disputes that scatter the region, while the threats facing the Indian Ocean emanate primarily from non-state actors, such as maritime piracy. As Bisley and Philips note, ‘whereas Northeast Asia manifests problems arising from state strength, the security challenges prevalent through the Indian Ocean littoral largely derive from state weakness.’⁸² Menon adds that the Indo-Pacific space creates ‘a danger of prescribing one medicine for the different security ailments that afflict the Indian Ocean, the seas near China, and the western Pacific.’⁸³

Finally, it is important to note that not all major powers within the Indo-Pacific space accept the validity of the concept. As Bisley and Philips note, ‘policymakers formulate grand strategies using mental maps that depict a country’s strategic geography by situating their state’s interests, commitments and vulnerabilities within an imagined space.’⁸⁴ In this

context, it is not surprising that maritime powers such as Australia and Japan have been strong advocates of the Indo-Pacific construct given the inherent maritime orientation of the concept.

On the other hand, China has been less receptive of the Indo-Pacific concept as it would serve to widen East Asia's strategic geography and thus dilute China's self-perceived role as the dominant power in the region. For instance, the Indo-Pacific would allow India to expand beyond the confines of South Asia while legitimizing the country's growing strategic presence in China's backyard.⁸⁵ This would serve to justify India's involvement in issues affecting China's strategic interests, such as maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas and instabilities on the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Strait.

Moreover, the Indo-Pacific provides a platform for India to reach out to Beijing's strategic rivals, including Japan and the US. The fact that the first mention of the 'Indo-Pacific' was in the context of an article discussing the need for India–Japan maritime cooperation is evidence of this.⁸⁶ Brahma Chellaney also notes that deepening military cooperation between India and Japan 'undergird(s) peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.'⁸⁷ Ashley Tellis has also noted the linkage between China's growing maritime power projection capabilities, India–US maritime cooperation and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical space: 'Beijing's recent appearance in the northern Indian Ocean has effectively unified the Indo-Pacific strategic space in a way that strengthens New Delhi and Washington's already converging interests.'⁸⁸ Scott has echoed this perspective by noting 'a common Indo-Pacific maritime challenge emerging from the People's Republic of China to India in the Indian Ocean and to the United States in the Pacific Ocean.'⁸⁹ Scott also notes that 'US–India formal agreements and informal understanding are being constructed and carefully calibrated in the Indo-Pacific with China considerations very much in mind, even if not in official speech.'⁹⁰ This alludes to India–US strategic cooperation being cemented by a common threat perception of China in the Indo-Pacific and the emergence of a joint approach in addressing the rise of China as a major maritime power.

Unsurprisingly, most of the proponents of the Indo-Pacific concept also maintain amicable relations with the US. This includes Japan and Australia but also countries that are not formal alliance partners of the US, such as India. As such, some have noted that the Indo-Pacific concept appears to signify the re-emergence of the short-lived 'arc

of democracies' or quadrilateral initiative in which the region's major maritime democracies 'take a leading role in shaping the economic and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific' by allaying 'widespread regional concerns about China's growing assertiveness.'⁹¹

Chinese scholars have taken note of this inherently anti-China characterization of the Indo-Pacific. Chengxin Pan notes, for instance, that 'the "Indo-Pacific" is designed primarily to enable the USA and its regional allies to "naturally" strengthen and expand their existing regional alliance network in order to hedge against a perceived China-centric regional order in Asia', adding that if this concept is 'put into practice, it could have undesirable consequences for regional stability.'⁹² In this context, China continues to cling to alternative, narrower conceptions of regional space in Asia, such as East Asia or Northeast Asia, as well as regional forums that propagate these conceptions, such as the ASEAN+3. China's aversion to the Indo-Pacific concept has also manifested in China's opposition to the presence of the Indian Navy in East Asia.⁹³

REAFFIRMING THE INDO-PACIFIC CONCEPT

The preceding section demonstrates that while the Indo-Pacific is an increasingly popular concept, the process of defining a regional space in Asia is a constant work in progress. As a report by the Washington D.C.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) notes, 'the Indo-Pacific is a region whose definition is still evolving.'⁹⁴ As such, the consolidation of the Indo-Pacific concept will require a concerted effort by countries that maintain a vested interest in its survival.

In an ongoing competition over conceptions of regional space in Asia, the victory of a particular discourse over another can serve to legitimize or delegitimize India's strategic interaction with the region. As Nirupama Rao has noted, 'the earlier concept of the Asia-Pacific had sought to exclude India', while 'today the term Indo-Pacific encompasses the subcontinent as an integral part of this eastern world.'⁹⁵ Thus, India's place in the region will be marginalized if alternative conceptions of regional space such as the Asia-Pacific, Pacific Rim or East Asia retain dominance in Asia's strategic discourse.

The Indo-Pacific concept serves to further embed the country into the region and consolidate India's post-Cold War 'return to Asia'. In this context, the Indo-Pacific is a continuation of India's earlier narratives of regional engagement. As Shyam Saran notes, the Indo-Pacific constitutes

a 'seamless stretch of ocean space linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans' that provides a 'logical corollary' to the country's 'Look East' policy.⁹⁶ Priya Chacko adds that 'the emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept is partly a product of the regional integration produced by the Look East and extended neighbourhood policies, and its adoption in India signals a greater focus on regional architecture-building.'⁹⁷

In this context, there are several corrective actions that could consolidate the Indo-Pacific concept. First, the maritime orientation of the Indo-Pacific reflects the fact that it was initially propagated and embraced by maritime powers such as Australia, Indonesia and Japan as well as the US' proclivity to 'pivot' towards maritime Asia following its bitter experience in several protracted land wars. However, the concept's maritime roots need not confine the Indo-Pacific to the maritime domain. Rather, sea power and land power should be viewed as 'an interactive dyad in geostrategy' that 'depicts Asia as an increasingly interdependent geopolitical whole.'⁹⁸ This interdependence between sea and land powers is especially relevant for countries such as China and India that are 'hybrid powers' seeking to strike a 'balance between continental stability and maritime projection.'⁹⁹ In other words, the rise of China and India as countries that are both major continental and emerging maritime powers makes the sea power/land power divide increasingly irrelevant in the Asian context. This is demonstrated by the potential for 'horizontal escalation' in the Sino-Indian relationship with tensions along their disputed land border leading to potential frictions in the maritime domain.¹⁰⁰

Notably, the inclusion of the land-locked regions of Russia and Central Asia in the Indo-Pacific strategic space may serve to correct the maritime bias of this concept. Shyam Saran notes, for instance, that a 'more active Russian role in the newly emerging theatre of the Indo-Pacific could help in creating a more balanced security architecture in this region.'¹⁰¹ Broadening Asia's strategic geography would also complement India's own strategic orientation given the country's geographic position at the crossroads of several regions, including East, West and Central Asia, and its interests in all of these regions.

Ensuring that the 'Indo-Pacific' gains prominence in the region's strategic vocabulary will also require challenging the divide between the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans.¹⁰² It is over-simplistic to claim that the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans have divergent security dynamics, with insecurities in the former rooted in intra-state conflicts, while emanating from non-state actors in the case of the

latter.¹⁰³ In recent years, concerns over maritime piracy have re-emerged in Southeast Asia, with over 150 reported attacks in the Malacca Strait in 2013.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, the maritime piracy threat in the Indian Ocean Region appears to be receding with attacks on only 28 vessels in 2013.¹⁰⁵

Other non-state security threats remain prevalent in the Western Pacific, ranging from natural disasters (including the 2011 Pacific Ocean tsunami) to the smuggling of people and goods (such as the illicit shipping of North Korean nuclear materials and arms).¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, the Indian Ocean has its share of intra-state threats, including maritime territorial disputes, such as the long-standing dispute between India and Pakistan over Sir Creek in the Rann of Kutch marshlands.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, insecurities in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans are not mutually exclusive, as evidenced by the impact of 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami on several East Asian countries. In this context, the convergence and equivalency of the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans, as proposed by the Indo-Pacific concept, does not seem far-fetched.

GETTING 'BUY-IN' OF THE INDO-PACIFIC CONCEPT

Gaining acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept by the region as a whole will also entail giving strategic reassurance to China that India's stepped-up engagement with Beijing's periphery is not part of a broader policy of encirclement. As such, India should ensure 'buy-in' from Beijing on the Indo-Pacific concept while challenging claims that the Indo-Pacific is part of a US-led containment strategy of China. This will 'promote the notion of an open, balanced and plural regional architecture.'¹⁰⁸

In this context, China may become more receptive to the Indo-Pacific over time as the concept gains acceptance in regional discourse and reflects China's own conception of its strategic geography.¹⁰⁹ As Chengxin Pan notes, 'although China has so far remained cool on the "Indo-Pacific" notion, its interests in the Indian Ocean and its geopolitical anxieties and policy responses have nevertheless contributed to its emergence as a strategic centre of gravity of sorts.'¹¹⁰ Medcalf also notes that China is the 'quintessential Indo-Pacific power' given the 'expansion of China's interest, diplomacy and strategic reach into the Indian Ocean that most of all defines the Indo-Pacific.'¹¹¹ He adds that 'as China's economic, strategic, diplomatic and soft-power reach continues to extend across the Indian Ocean as well as into South-East Asia, it will become increasingly hard for Chinese officials to avoid thinking or articulating along Indo-

Pacific lines.¹¹² In this context, 'the Chinese debate may shift towards partial acceptance of Indo-Pacific constructs alongside Asia-Pacific and East Asian ones, despite suspicions about its association with the US rebalance to Asia.'¹¹³ In other words, despite China's apprehensions of the Indo-Pacific concept, its growing strategic interests in the space extending from the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean gives it a vested interest in the concept.

OPERATIONALIZING THE INDO-PACIFIC CONCEPT

Finally, the Indo-Pacific concept needs to be operationalized by being reflected in the evolving regional architecture. For instance, the APEC and Trans-Pacific Partnership reflect a Pacific Rim conception of Asia's strategic geography. Meanwhile, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA) have an inherently continental orientation, while neglecting the maritime dynamic of Asia's strategic geography.

At present, the Indo-Pacific concept is manifested primarily through a string of ad hoc 'minilateral' strategic dialogues, such as between the Australia, Japan and the US and between India, Japan and the US. Track-2 dialogue between India, Japan and South Korea and Australia, India and Indonesia also demonstrate an Indo-Pacific orientation. However, there is no overarching, inclusive forum that captures the strategic convergence of the Indian Ocean Region and Western Pacific that is espoused by the Indo-Pacific concept. Medcalf attributes this to the fact that the 'scale of the region would seem to preclude a cohesive institution.'¹¹⁴

However, the ASEAN-centric process of regionalism may serve as such a platform. As Kaplan notes, the Indo-Pacific is an 'organic continuum' with its 'maritime heart in the South China Sea.'¹¹⁵ One could even argue that the true origins of the Indo-Pacific concept was in the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996 and East Asia Summit in 2005, which embraced a broader conception of the Asian region through the inclusion of such countries as India and Australia that had been historically marginalized from the region-building process in Asia.¹¹⁶ In this context, ASEAN centrality could serve as the bedrock to expand the region's strategic geography. This has already been evidenced by the expanding membership of several ASEAN-led forums, including the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF).

CONCLUSION

The Indo-Pacific is embedded in the growing strategic importance of the maritime domain for regional trade, resource imports and economic growth, and the rise of major regional powers that have demonstrated the ability to 'transcend' their respective subregions. This has been facilitated by the US strategic 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' towards Asia that has reinforced the Indo-Pacific concept through its maritime focus as in calling on regional powers to share the burdens of regional security. The Indo-Pacific region presents both opportunities and risks as it 'looms as the most important and vibrant region in the coming decades',¹¹⁷ but also 'the most militarized area in the world'.¹¹⁸ However, the Indo-Pacific remains a concept in its infancy and as such, continues to compete with alternative conceptions of regional space in Asia.

India has a vested interest in the survival of this new strategic geography given that it serves to further embed the country into a broader conception of Asia. In this context, the Indo-Pacific serves as an extension of earlier concepts of India's 'extended neighbourhood' and 'Look East' policies. Thus, India should continue to cultivate the Indo-Pacific concept and ensure its embrace in the region's strategic vocabulary. This will entail challenging the false narrative of a divide between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific; acknowledging the continued strategic relevance of continental Asia despite the growing strategic importance of maritime Asia; and extending the geographic scope of the Indo-Pacific space to include West and Central Asia.

India will need to be in the drivers' seat of cultivating this new strategic geography if it is to be more than an ephemeral concept. It cannot afford to rest on the false sense of security arising from other regional powers embracing the concept. For instance, Japan and Australia remain just as committed to an Asia-Pacific orientation of strategic space as they are to the Indo-Pacific conception. Similarly, Indonesia is as committed to a narrower conception of Asia's strategic geography that is confined to ASEAN. Finally, the pressures of fiscal austerity could prompt the US to cut short its so-called 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' towards the Indo-Pacific as it seeks to reduce its global military footprint. As Bisley and Philips note, 'an Indo-Pacific framing of the rebalance risks expanding America's security commitments at a time when fiscal austerity conversely demands a more disciplined and focused grand strategy for the United States.'¹¹⁹

Moreover, it is not in India's interest for the Indo-Pacific to be so closely tied to the US strategic 'rebalance' when it is seeking buy-in

for the concept from other regional powers that have so far been less receptive of it, such as China. Gaining 'Chinese acceptance of this (Indo-Pacific) term would assist in developing a shared strategic vocabulary and perspective in Asia.'¹²⁰ In ensuring greater 'buy-in' from all of the region's major powers, the Indo-Pacific concept becomes more inclusive. Not doing so risks other conceptions of regional space supplanting the Indo-Pacific concept, which could serve to marginalize India's place in Asia's strategy geography. In the worst-case scenario, this could even lead to India being regarded as a mere South Asian actor, as had occurred during the later Cold War period.

As discussed at the beginning of this article, conceptions of regional space are not static but rather discursively constructed and vary depending on who is defining it and for what purpose. As Menon notes, 'when we in India call for a plural, inclusive and open security architecture in the Indo-Pacific we are well within a tradition and culture of thought which was relativistic, idea driven and omni-directional.'¹²¹ The dominant conception of regional space will determine the nature of the regional architecture in Asia and India's role in shaping that architecture. Thus, India's ability to facilitate the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the dominant strategic geography of Asia will consolidate its position as an integral rather than peripheral member of the strategic geography of the region.

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