

The Growing Confluence of Gaining Hegemony & Economic Superiority in Indo-Pacific Region

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On November 2017, the concept of Indo-Pacific region came into focus with the initiative taken by four democratic countries (Japan, Australia, United States, and India) that were anxious of China's rise. The Indo-Pacific region since then is a prominent subject of debates and discussions on International Relations and Security Studies in all the important regional and international forums. With China's ever-increasing intention of expanding its sea and land horizons in its quest to become a global power, dominance of seas and littoral areas has become a vital part of its expansionist strategy. The hunger of People's Republic of China to increase its clout and grow its influence to control trade, traffic, and seas in Asia-Pacific region per-se have made its neighbouring countries and several others directly or indirectly affected by its rise to start thinking to counter its moves. Indo-Pacific region has thus become one of the most active regions in the global political panorama.

Visions and strategic viewpoints may differ for the nations against China's designs of hegemony, but the key idea for all of them is to counter China's maritime Silk Road dominance. With enormous actors involved, the political landscape in this region is in state of flux as the race for gaining strategic upper-hand and economic superiority is underway. The Indo-Pacific region holds almost half of the world's population, and with six nations in this region possessing nuclear weapons, seven large standing armies, nine busiest seaports in the world and the large volume of sea-trade, it becomes mandatory that the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) remain open at all times to ensure free trade and smooth movement of logistics and power equilibrium is maintained to ensure peace in this region.



Geographically, the Indo-Pacific refers to the Indian and the Pacific Oceans between the east coast of Africa and the American west coast and their several littoral countries.² The Indo-pacific region is emerging as the economic and geo-political centre of gravity of the world. It is a maritime zone which is shaping the foreign, defence and economic policies of various countries.³ The United States of America whose self-confidence and clout is on a decline would like to reassert itself as a reckoning power by gaining dominance in this region and capping the increasing influence of China.

China's declaration on its combativeness has heaved upon a whole pattern of problem in the sphere. Like its barbaric ploy around the South China Sea and against Taiwan; political and cultural dominance by Beijing over Hong Kong; trade war/dispute with the United States and Australia and the unresolved Indo-China border dispute since 1962, and overall, China's designs for economic and military supremacy has raised alarming bells among the Quad grouping. However, its mere façade is crumbling especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. China is reluctant and unwilling to follow the international law.

Several countries have different stakes and their unique positions for the Indo-Pacific region. The interest of the United States in the region began with the application of Rebalance Policy of 2012; India may like to limit the intentions of China as also showcase itself as a contender in this region rather than its frequent temporizing the issue; Japan is back on track from its political palsy and economic torpor and looking for its rightful pie in the region; the other littoral nations viz. Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei and others have their own stakes in South China Sea whereas Australia may like to align itself with USA and EU and Russia on the other hand cannot remain as a bystander. For China, it is likely to use this region as a bulwark after controlling it to consolidate its position and challenge USA as a supreme power. The advancement of the United States to hoard in more countries in G7 grouping and transform it into G10 or G 11 is an indication of its plans to alliance with other countries to counter China.

¹ Angelo Wijaya, (2018), "Reconfiguring Foreign Policy Focus: time for an Indo-Pacific region", Available at: <https://medium.com/@angelowijaya/refocusing-strategy-time-for-an-indo-pacific-region-deae9b1ba6d1>

² <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/the-geopolitics-of-indo-pacific-explained-how-india-and-others-interpret-the-term-5807991/>

³ David Scott (2019) "Taiwan's Pivot to the Indo-Pacific", Asia-Pacific Review, 26:1, 29-57

With such a dynamic geo-political milieu in this region wherein several local, regional, and global factors have interplay, how the Indo-pacific region will remain stable is to be seen in the coming decades. The balance of power in this region will completely depend on the major actors which are shaping the waters - Australia, China, Japan, the United States, India, and South East Asian countries. Also, the cooperation by the island countries in South East Asia will be important.

The Asian waters have become a contested and complex issue over the years. The list doesn't end with the struggle for power, there are also traditional and non-traditional security contentions such as maritime and land border disputes. The region's seas and air space is also becoming contested, cybercrimes are phenomenally rising, various illegal environmental activities are taking place, security risks related to Sea Lines of Communication and freedom of navigation are under challenge in parts of the region⁴, piracy, maritime terrorism and illegal trafficking are the foreshadowing obstacles which the world faces. According to the sea power theory by Alfred T. Mahan, a peaceful use of sea can be regulated by - "*Control of the sea by maritime commerce and naval supremacy means predominant influence in the world.....is the chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations*" (Alfred Thayer Mahan, 1918)

To secure the maritime zone, from small states to middle power states, they all need to balance the power to maintain the cooperative system in the ocean. With the notion of "Free and Open Pacific" in place and honoured by all, the countries can pursue economic development without fearing about their own sovereignty. In order to bring this notion on paper, all countries should abide by the international rules and norms on the seas and thus fair opportunities of trade, traffic and logistics can be provided to all on the SLOC.

The protocol which the United States has taken towards the Indo-Pacific region - the *National Security Strategy* and *National Defence Strategy* aims at a more lethal Joint Force with a more robust constellation of allies and partners.⁵ With the recent tussle between the United States and Beijing regarding the selling of three weapon system to Taiwan has led the USA to make stronger security ties with India to balance the regional influence. With sharing of sensitive information and encrypted communications between U.S and India, it could be of greater help for the region. On 21st October 2020, India drafted the final accord on *Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement on Geospatial Cooperation*. This accord will help both the countries along with their allies like Japan and Australia with a range of topographical, nautical, and aeronautical data and advanced navigational aids.

In the Indo-Pacific region, the security issue is driven by the political differences and from a realist perspective, a struggle for power. All the nations should aim for sharing and defending the shared values. Among the Joint forces and allies, there should be trust and respect for sovereignty, fair and reciprocal trade, and the rule of law. While India lacks a formal vision of the Indo-Pacific, it does have an 'Act East' policy, which provides New Delhi with a Pacific

⁵ The Department of Defense (2019), "*Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnership and Promoting Network Region*", United States

horizon.⁶ Cordial relations among all on strategic measures to deter the threat will help in making the Asian waters Freer and more Open Indo-Pacific.

Two thirds of the entire world oil shipment pass through the Indo-Pacific Ocean, which has led the two oceans with chock points, the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca, which makes it an important trade corridor. With the partnership between “Quad” envisaging security partnership to preserve and shield the maritime concerns from the tentacles of China’s interest, Quad’s coalition has become essential in the Asian Waters. Its biggest challenge is to maintain strong ties with ASEAN nations before it falls under the trap of China’s debt.

The Indo-Pacific region might face a sort of cold war or a greater strategic rivalry between China on one hand and many other nations, on the other. Hence, the region has to be a multipolar region where peace, cooperation stability, security and prosperity can be maintained rather than conflict. The Quad grouping has to bring in the other European powers like France, U.K and Germany and also need to accommodate them in the Malabar Naval Exercises which is currently being held between the United States, Japan, and India towards balancing the region which can be an asset to uphold the stability.

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