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WHAT DOES INDO-PACIFIC MEAN TO INDIA?

BY

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Even as the Indo-Pacific gains popularity as a new geostrategic framework of analysis, the discourse on it has evoked mixed reactions. There are those who enthusiastically welcome it as the most appropriate tool not merely to understand current developments across the region, but also because it is a better reflection of the emerging realities, while others dismiss the very idea of the Indo-Pacific either as one of those passing fads that it is unlikely to be an enduring aspect, because its geographical purview is vague and undefined and geo-economic significance it represents is exaggerated. Further, the argument goes, it is an attempt to undermine the growing salience of the Indian Ocean (and hence India's) and/or is aimed at containing China. As explained below, these assumptions could not be further from the truth.

True, there is a lot of confusion on what exactly constitutes the Indo-Pacific in terms of its geo-strategic contours and the implications of employing this idea for India and the rest of the region. Doubts have also been raised whether it is merely an extension of the well known Asia-Pacific, or does it really symbolise a fundamental shift from the existing frameworks such as East Asia, Asia-Pacific, etc.

Creation of Regions

To answer the above questions, one should remember that the formation of regions, as history demonstrates, is a dynamic process and their geographic boundaries are subject to change. Consequently, regions are constructed either socially or politically or due to economic exigencies. For instance, a variety of nomenclatures have been coined to refer to the present Indo-Pacific region without clearly defining its geographic boundaries, such as the Far East, Asia and Pacific, Asia-Pacific, Pacific Asia, and more recently East Asia. Even as recently as the early 2000s, doubts persisted whether or not India belonged to East Asia, but not now. Hence, instead of worrying too much about clearly delineated geographic boundaries to define a region, we should be concerned whether applying a particular nomenclature captures unfolding geostrategic and geo-economic environment or not. By this logic, at present the Indo-Pacific constitutes the East Indian and West Pacific Oceans, i.e., from India to Australia and from China to Indonesia and the geostrategic and economic fortunes of the sub-regions in this vast geographic continuum are becoming inseparable from each other.

In other words, the artificial geographic boundaries of sub-regions, primarily created by the European colonial powers for their convenience, are no more tenable, is manifest if one looks at the way countries are forging both bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation agreements and region-wide mega trading blocs such as Regional Comprehensive Economic Cooperation (RCEP) comprising ASEAN plus six of its close economic partners or for that matter even the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Similarly, it is acknowledged that the security of a sub-region is invariably linked to the security of the other sub-regions. In this backdrop, for instance, it is inconceivable to imagine the heralding of an Asian Century without factoring in the Indian Ocean.

Two, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe must be credited for broaching the idea of the 'confluence of two seas' during his speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007. He also averred how "the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity." Yet, fascinatingly there is nothing new about the Indo-Pacific if one takes even a cursory look at the history of this region. Before the onset of colonialism, the international relations in their true sense actually took place here. For more than two millennia, it had thrived as one common region interacting closely, and the sub-regions benefitting immensely from each other. Skills and knowledge were transmitted across the region and civilisations, cultures, languages, religions, and ideas flowed back and forth from one end to the other, besides thriving commercial interactions.

Before the Atlantic gained prominence, consequent to the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the European metropolitan powers, and later the United States at the turn of the 20th century, the Indian Ocean was the principal conduit and theatre of global activity and overwhelmingly this activity was between India and its eastern parts. In particular, the region from India to Northeast Asia was the hub for much of these exchanges, with implications beyond this region. That is how the Arabs and Europeans joined later on.

Rise of Indian Ocean

Three, contrary to the misgivings, the Indo-Pacific not merely emphatically underscores the rise of the Indian Ocean but highlights its criticality to East Asia's prosperity and security as well.

For long the Indian Ocean was seen primarily in terms of the trade routes carrying energy to the East Asian countries. That has dramatically changed with the rise of virtually the entire Indo-Pacific.

What is noteworthy is that the Indian Ocean region is emerging as a major growth centre in its own right. Besides India, the entire rim is economically one of the most dynamic regions in the world endowed, with vast natural resources and rapidly expanding markets. This region is home to 2.6 billion people, almost 40 per cent of the world's population, accounting for 14 per cent of global GDP — and increasing rapidly. More than 40 percent of global trade passes through the Indian Ocean making it the most important ocean for commerce. The combined GDP of the rim countries rose to nearly US$ 9 trillion in 2013 from US$5.7 (in nominal terms) in 2010. There is also a security dimension, as this region unfortunately is also the biggest source of non-conventional security threats such as religious radicalism, maritime terrorism and piracy aside from numerous traditional security concerns.

The rapidly growing interface, interdependence and geostrategic linkages between the Indian and Pacific Oceans cannot be overstated even as East Asia's economic dynamism gets firmly hinged to the Indian Ocean's resources, especially energy, markets, trade routes, etc. These developments have been instrumental in catapulting Indo-Pacific concept in a big way.

Indo-Pacific as Geostrategic Framework

Finally, the contention that the Indo-Pacific is an American invention or it is designed to marginalise China or is an attempt to undermine ASEAN is erroneous. The U.S. is unlikely to gain any ostensible geostrategic advantage due to the Indo-Pacific. It needs to be kept in mind that the age of containment is over and that China will remain a pivotal player in the Indo-Pacific just like all other great powers, including the U.S. and Japan. Southeast Asia is at the heart of it and hence ASEAN will gain considerable strategic heft due to Indo-Pacific. Little wonder Indonesia is gung-ho about the Indo-Pacific idea.

Since great power interests converge sharply in this region, the vastness of Indo-Pacific, in fact, offers a lot more latitude for them to accommodate each other's interests rather than be

concerned about stepping on each other's toes, which seems to be the case in East Asia. Further, the Indo-Pacific also presents enormous scope for ASEAN-led regional multilateralism to play a more substantial role than the case so far.

Of course, India can hope to play a role commensurate with its growing economic and military stature, as its interests grow exponentially. It has the requisite naval capabilities, a rapidly expanding economy and the vantage position of geography to become a net provider of security in the maritime region of the Indo-Pacific.

Thus, in the present circumstances, Indo-Pacific is the most appropriate framework to understand the current geostrategic and geo-economic dynamics in the backdrop of the rise of Indian Ocean and its rapidly growing inter-connectedness with the West Pacific.

Once it is recognised that neither economic cooperation and shared prosperity nor security challenges are sub-regional in nature but span the entire region, the Indo-Pacific will be better appreciated.

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