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Donald Trump's 'Indo-Pacific' and America's India Conundrum

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One of the new dynamics of the gathering geopolitical turbulence in Asia and its waters is the growing use of the term 'Indo-Pacific'. During his extended visit to Asia in November 2017, United States (US) President Donald Trump has defined the region as 'Indo-Pacific' rather than the customary 'Asia-Pacific'. Concepts of geopolitical space are never static, and Trump's emphasis on the Indo-Pacific underlines the rise of India, China's assertiveness and its expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean, as well as Washington's plans to elevate its strategic partnership with New Delhi. It involves America's strategic bet on India's future role in shaping the security architecture in the eastern hemisphere. Actively promoted in recent years by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Indo-Pacific conception can be traced back to the decision of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to invite India as a founding member of the East Asia Summit in 2005. The durability of the Indo-Pacific dynamic, however, will depend essentially on New Delhi's willingness to work with the US and its allies in the region.

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United States (US) President Donald Trump's use of the term 'Indo-Pacific' rather than the more familiar 'Asia-Pacific' during his first presidential visit to Asia during November 2017 has surprised many regional observers. However, the conception of the 'Indo-Pacific', as a coherent geopolitical space, has steadily gained traction in recent years amidst the rise of India, its deepening strategic ties with the US and Japan's advocacy of this idea. Although its predecessors had begun to use the phrase occasionally, the Trump Administration has embraced it with some gusto. It has made the idea of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific', first articulated by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the new anchor of its Asia policy. The Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct is likely to endure only if New Delhi begins to play a larger role in shaping the security politics of a vast region stretching from the east coast of Africa to the Western Pacific and is more open to collaborative arrangements for regional security such as the quadrilateral mechanism among the US, Japan, India and Australia.

US Definition of the Indo-Pacific

'India to the west and America to the east' – this was the essence of the idea of Indo-Pacific, according to a senior White House Official briefing the press on Trump's extended visit to Asia to participate in the forum for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and the East Asia Summit (EAS). His visit also involved substantive bilateral engagements with the leaders of Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam, the Philippines and others on the margins of the two summit meetings. Trump framed the region throughout his visit as the 'Indo-Pacific'.³ The official added that, "We have strong and growing ties with India. We talk about "Indo-Pacific" in part because that phrase captures the importance of India's rise". The official argued that America's security and prosperity depends on its maintaining access to this region for a free flow of commerce and that "a free and open Indo-Pacific speaks to that vision".⁴

Trump's National Security Advisor, General H R McMaster, defended the use of the concept in an interview with the China Global Television Network just before the president landed in

³ "“Indo-Pacific” over “Asia Pacific” reflects India's rise: US official", *Economic Times*, 5 November 2017. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indo-pacific-over-asia-pacific-reflects-indias-rise-us-official/articleshow/61519684.cms>. Accessed on 9 November 2017.

⁴ Ibid.

Beijing. Pointing to the growing economic integration between East Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, McMaster said the term better captures the new regional dynamic. “The idea of the Indo-Pacific and the proposition that India must be involved in shaping the Asian balance of power go well back in time. Before we trace the recent evolution of the concept, it is important to note that oceanographers use the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ to describe the biogeographic region comprising the warm tropical waters of the Indian Ocean and the western and central Pacific Ocean.”⁵

Relevance of the Indo-Pacific

Amidst the surge of geopolitical thinking at the turn of the 20th century, Alfred Thayer Mahan talked of the region stretching from Asia Minor to the Korean Peninsula emerging as a decisive theatre in global politics.⁶ The German strategist Karl Haushofer spoke of the Indo-Pacific space in the 1920s.⁷ The importance of this region during the Second World War was reflected in the Burma-China-India theatre where the British Raj, the nationalist China and the US joined forces to end the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia.⁸ The inward orientation of China and India after the war saw the erosion of the concept of Indo-Pacific. If the two oceans as well as South and East Asia were increasingly seen as separate entities, the rise of China and the slower emergence of India inevitably restored the interconnections between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans as well as East and South Asia.

One of the earliest proponents of the case for putting India in the East Asian matrix came from Singapore. In a prescient address at the launch of the Institute of South Asian Studies in early 2005, then-Singapore Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said, “India’s rise compels us to look at our environment in new ways. It will be increasingly less tenable to regard South Asia

⁵ “Donald Trump’s China visit: US defends “Indo-Pacific” concept”, *Economic Times*, 8 November 2017. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/donald-trumps-china-visit-us-defends-indo-pacific-concept/articleshow/61564716.cms>>. Accessed on 9 November 2017.

⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia: Its Effect Upon International Politics* (New York, 1900). Republished by Transaction Publishers, London, 2003, p. 66.

⁷ See Francis P Sempa, ‘Karl Haushofer and the Rise of the Monsoon Countries’, *The Diplomat*, 10 March 2015. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/karl-haushofer-and-the-rise-of-the-monsoon-countries/>

⁸ See Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain’s Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (London: Penguin, 2005). See also Srinath Raghavan, *India’s War: the Making of Modern South Asia, 1939-1945* (Delhi: Penguin, 2016).

and East Asia as distinct strategic theatres interacting only at the margins. Of course, US-China-Japan relations will still be important. But a new grand strategic triangle of US-China-India relations will be superimposed upon it, creating an environment of greater complexity.”⁹ Goh’s remarks came in the context of creating the new forum, the EAS, in 2005. Singapore extended strong support for admitting India as a founding member of the EAS.

If Singapore was quick to see the renewed relevance of India for the Asian security architecture, Japan embraced the concept whole-heartedly and articulated the concept of Indo-Pacific. Addressing the Indian Parliament in August 2007, Abe talked about the ‘confluence of the two seas’. “The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A ‘broader Asia’ that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability – and the responsibility – to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas”.¹⁰

After Abe, then-US President Barack Obama’s Administration began to use the phrase occasionally. While some used the concept of ‘Indo-Pacific’, others began to use the term ‘Indo-Asia-Pacific’.¹¹ However, the essence of the idea was similar – there was growing integration between the two oceans and that a rising India will have much to contribute to peace and prosperity in the region. Beyond the Indian factor, the framing of a space spanning the two oceans found quick resonance in two countries – Australia and Indonesia – which are located at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.¹² The debate on the problems and prospects for the new geopolitical construct gathered much intellectual steam in the second decade of the 21st century.¹³ While there was much support, there was also much criticism,

⁹ Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, Keynote address at the launch of the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, 27 January 2005. <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=2005012701.htm>. Accessed on 8 November 2017.

¹⁰ PM Shinzo Abe, ‘Confluence of two seas’ Address to the Indian Parliament, 22 January 2007. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>. Accessed on 8 November 2017.

¹¹ See Rory Medcalf, ‘The Indo-Pacific: What’s in a name?’, *The American Interest*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2013.

¹² See Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, ‘An Indonesian Perspective on the Indo-Pacific’, speech in Washington DC, 16 May 2013; Department of Defence, Australian Government, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra, 2013).

¹³ See, for example, Michael Auslin, ‘Tipping point in the Indo-Pacific’, *The American Interest*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2011; C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012); Chietgj, ‘Embedding India in Asia: Reaffirming the Indo-Pacific Concept’, *Journal of Defence Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2014, pp. 83-110; Rory Medcalf,

especially from Beijing. The argument was that the Indo-Pacific was an artificial super-region being constructed to isolate China.¹⁴

The View in New Delhi

Like in many other countries, there was some hesitation in New Delhi about embracing the idea of Indo-Pacific. While some saw the opportunity for India to expand its global footprint, others saw it as a likely attempt by the US to draw India into a containment ring against China. While India's former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh occasionally used the term Indo-Pacific, not everyone in the government appeared convinced. If it was an ideological problem for some, others questioned the practical utility of the concept. Singh's National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon pointed to the problems with defining the 'Indo-Pacific' as a single space, "The reason I cavil about calling the Indo-Pacific one space is because if we do, there is a danger of prescribing one medicine for the different security ailments that afflict the Indian Ocean, the seas near China, and the western Pacific."¹⁵

The government of Narendra Modi, which took charge of the nation in May 2014, began to adopt the term 'Indo-Pacific', slowly but surely. In the vision statement issued by Modi and Obama in January 2015, the two leaders referred to the region as "the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean".¹⁶ A year later, New Delhi was beginning to use both the terms 'Asia-Pacific' and the 'Indo-Pacific'. In his address to the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2016, India's then-Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar said, "For India, located as we are at the centre of the Asian landmass astride the Indian Ocean, any reference to Asia implies its fullest geography ranging from the Suez to the shores of the Pacific." Since 2017, there has been a more frequent usage of the term Indo-Pacific by Modi and his advisers. The meeting between Trump and Modi in Washington at the end of June 2017 framed the Indo-US partnership in

'Redefining the region: The Indo-Pacific Idea', in Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment, 2015, (London: IISS, 2015).

¹⁴ For a set of representative views, see Chengxin Pan, 'The "Indo-Pacific" and geopolitical anxieties about China's rise in the Asian regional order', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2014, pp. 453-69.

¹⁵ Shivshankar Menon, Remarks at the launch of the book, *Samudra Manthan* in New Delhi, 4 March 2013.

¹⁶ 'US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region', New Delhi, 25 January 2015. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>. Accessed on 8 November 2017.

the context of the Indo-Pacific. “As responsible stewards in the Indo-Pacific region, President Trump and Prime Minister Modi agreed that a close partnership between the United States and India is central to peace and stability in the region.”¹⁷

New Delhi has also endorsed the conception of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ articulated by Abe. At the end of their meeting in Gujarat in September 2017, Modi and Abe underlined their “strong commitment to their values-based partnership in achieving a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international law are respected, and differences are resolved through dialogue, and where all countries, large or small, enjoy freedom of navigation and overflight, sustainable development, and a free, fair, and open trade and investment system.” The two leaders also pledged to “align Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy with India’s Act East Policy”, including through enhancing maritime security cooperation, improving connectivity in the wider Indo-Pacific region, and strengthening cooperation with the ASEAN.¹⁸

Towards the end of 2017, the US, too, is adopting the theme of a free and open Indo-Pacific. In his speech in October 2017, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called for a hundred-year partnership in the Indo-Pacific between the US and an India that was ‘rising responsibly’. “The world’s center of gravity is shifting to the heart of the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. and India – with our shared goals of peace, security, freedom of navigation, and a free and open architecture – must serve as the eastern and western beacons of the Indo-Pacific. As the port and starboard lights between which the region can reach its greatest and best potential.”¹⁹ Tillerson was signalling that Washington has put the ‘Indo-Pacific’ firmly in the American strategic lexicon.

¹⁷ ‘Prosperity through Partnership: US-India Joint Statement’, Washington DC, 27 June 2017, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28560/Joint+Statement++United+States+and+India+Prosperity+Through+Partnership>. Accessed on 9 November 2017.

¹⁸ ‘Japan-India Joint Statement: Towards a Free, Open and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’ Gandhi Nagar, 14 September 2017. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000289999.pdf>. Accessed on 9 November 2017.

¹⁹ US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, ‘Defining our relationship with India for the next century’, Washington DC, 18 October 2017. <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/10/274913.htm>. Accessed on 9 November 2017.

The Quadrilateral Coalition

That the Indo-Pacific is not amenable to a coherent regional architecture has been one of the main criticisms of the concept. However, the advocacy of the Indo-Pacific construct has been accompanied by the call for the creation of a coalition of like-minded democracies in the relevant region. In his speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007, Abe argued that the ‘broader Asia’, to be formed by the strategic partnership between Japan and India, “will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely.”²⁰ The quadrilateral seemed to perish after just one round of consultations among senior officials of the four countries in the summer of 2007 amidst protests from China.²¹ In 2008, the newly elected Australian government, led by Kevin Rudd, publicly rejected the concept of the Asian quadrilateral.²²

That was not the end of the quadrilateral, though. After he returned as the Prime Minister of Japan at the end of 2012, Abe sought to revive the quadrilateral. In an article for the mass media, Abe confessed that he had significantly underestimated the pace and scope of China’s maritime rise when he addressed the Indian Parliament in 2007. Amidst China’s assertiveness in the East and South China Seas and its power projection into the Indian Ocean, Abe envisaged a strategy “whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific. I am prepared to invest, to the greatest possible extent, Japan’s capabilities in this security diamond.”²³ Abe certainly kept his word and stepped up maritime activism in the Indo-Pacific and pressed India, the US and Australia to revive the quadrilateral. Although the

²⁰ Abe, ‘Confluence of two seas’, 2007, op cit, n. 9.

²¹ Siddharth Varadarajan, ‘Four power meeting drew Chinese demarche’, *The Hindu*, 14 June 2007; <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/Four-power-meeting-drew-Chinese-d%C3%A9marche/article14777286.ece>>. Accessed on 9 November 2017.

²² Greg Sheridan, ‘How to lose friends’, *The Australian*, 8 May 2008. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/archive/news/how-to-lose-friends/news-story/51ca371624d11e9342420c79b05897c6>. Accessed on 9 November 2017.

²³ Shinzo Abe, ‘Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond’, *The Mint*, 31 December 2012. <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/viqg2XC8fhRfjTUIcctk0M/Asias-democratic-security-diamond.html>. Accessed on 9 November 2017.

Indian leaders across the political spectrum had special warmth for Abe, they seemed reluctant to revive the quadrilateral.²⁴

Amidst the deteriorating relationship with China in 2016 and 2017, and the persistent calls from Washington and Tokyo to resurrect the quadrilateral, New Delhi appears to have made a fresh calculation on the pluses and minuses of joining such a forum. When Japan, on the eve of the EAS in November 2017, called for the quadrilateral again, New Delhi signalled its willingness to start consultations on the purposes of the renewed quadrilateral dialogue.²⁵ Senior officials from the four countries are expected to meet on the margins of the 2017 EAS in the Philippines. These consultations must be viewed as a first step in a long journey that is bound to face many bumps on the road. The competing priorities and interests of the four partners, and their separate stakes in a reasonable relationship with China are likely to complicate the construction of a coalition. Nevertheless, Washington's decision to firmly fit India into its Asian strategy and New Delhi's readiness to shed the reservations about the quadrilateral have certainly improved the prospects for the Indo-Pacific as a credible geopolitical construct.

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²⁴ For a discussion of the Indian calculus on the quad, see Rohan Mukherjee, 'A democratic quadrilateral in Asia?' Gateway House, Mumbai, 14 February 2017. http://www.gatewayhouse.in/a-democratic-quadrilateral-in-asia/?utm_content=buffer8c087&utm_medium=social&utm_source=plus.google.com&utm_campaign=buffer. Accessed on 10 November 2017.

²⁵ See C Raja Mohan, 'What the return of the quadrilateral says about India and emerging Asian geopolitics', *Indian Express*, 29 October 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/in-fact-what-the-return-of-quadrilateral-says-about-india-and-emerging-asian-geopolitics-4912740/>. Accessed on 10 November 2017.