



ISSUE BRIEF

*"Advancing the Strategic Potential of India-US
Relations, Accelerating India's Economic Development"*

Vol. 3, Issue 3

October 31, 2013

Reimagining the Region: "Asia-Pacific" or "Indo-Pacific"?

by Amb. Hemant Krishan Singh



As the 20th century progressed, the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans – on both sides of the United States – became equally critical to global maritime strategies.

With the economic resurgence of Asia, the importance of the maritime domain and related security challenges in the Indian Ocean has grown steadily over the past decade.

As a consequence of this ongoing shift in the diffusion of global economic power, there is a growing realization that the Atlantic-Pacific combine is being gradually replaced by the Pacific-Indian Ocean continuum as the geo-strategic and maritime centre of gravity.

The so far unsettled debate on "Asia-Pacific" or "Indo-Pacific" largely reflects the priorities and alliances of western powers which have long dominated the strategic discourse on security in the Western Pacific – Indian Ocean regions. The predominant approach which they have pursued towards regionalism and regional institutions since the 1980s has been of a practical and functionalist nature, with marginal regard for historical or cultural contexts related to Asia's past and its future prospects.

This is also largely echoed and validated by the reasoning advanced by various scholars in support of the new terminology of the "Indo-Pacific":



"Indo-Pacific Asia, or the Indo-Pacific for short, is a more credible and contemporary name than the Asia-Pacific or some more narrow East Asian or Western Pacific formulation... ..It is an

This Issue Brief has been adapted from remarks by Amb. H.K. Singh at the India-Australia Track 1.5 Dialogue held at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, on October 17, 2013.

"Issue Brief" is produced by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), an autonomous, policy-oriented, not-for-profit economic policy think tank. ICRIER's main focus is to enhance the knowledge content of policy making through research targeted at improving India's interface with the global economy.

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emerging Asian strategic system that encompasses both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, defined in part by the geographically expanding interests and reach of China and India, and the continued strategic role and presence of the United States in both...the realities of growing Indo-Pacific interconnectedness.¹

- “Asia-Pacific seeks to combine a continent with an ocean which is unrealistic. Indo-Pacific has a far more geographically inclusive connotation than the Asia-Pacific label.”
- “At its essence, the Indo-Pacific means recognizing that the past decade’s rapid growth in energy, economic and security connections between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region has created a single strategic system.”²
- “The Indo-Pacific as a strategic space incorporates the growing role of India which has tended to be seen as an outlier in the strategic concepts pertaining to the Asia-Pacific.”
- “The notion of Indo-Pacific also celebrates ASEAN Centrality. In the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN is the geographic centre with the US and India taking up positions at the two ends of the spectrum.”
- “The Indo-Pacific accounts for two-thirds of global trade and is home to the world’s largest navies.”³

Crossroads of the Indo-Pacific

World’s third-largest maritime trade area



However, seen from a broader perspective, this manifestly pragmatic debate is in fact symptomatic of two divergent trends: the natural process of a reviving historical regionalism within Asia and the co-existing trend of functional regionalism favoured by Western powers. Or, in other words, a predominantly “inter-Asian” process versus the “trans-Pacific” approach, long pursued by the US and its allies.

Through the 20th century, the focus of US strategists was on developing a “Pacific” architecture incorporating much of Asia. In 1937, Australia suggested a “Pacific Pact” including the US, Britain and Japan.⁴ In 1966, Australia, Japan and others mooted an “Asian and Pacific Council”, which went nowhere. Finally, APEC was proposed in 1988 and a short while later there was an Australian-Canadian proposal for an “Asia-Pacific Security Conference” (which ASEAN reshaped into the ARF).

Despite being regarded by some as a “strategic” and not merely an economic cooperation body, there has in reality been little prospect of APEC turning into a full-fledged regional community in Asia. It has drawn its salience mainly from US opposition to any plan “that drew a line down the middle of the Pacific

and placed the United States on the other side of the line.”⁵ Similarly, Kevin Rudd’s more recent idea of an “Asia-Pacific Community” (APC) spanning the “entire Asia-Pacific region” and engaging in a full spectrum of dialogue and cooperation found little traction in Asia, which presumably was central to the concept.⁶ Even among the strong proponents of a continuing US engagement with Asia, the “Asia-Pacific” does not instill a compelling sense of a regional community within Asia designed for the 21st century.

In contrast, historical regionalism within Asia has survived repeated body blows over the past 100 years and, in my reckoning, is becoming stronger. Led by Japanese and Indian intellectuals like Okakura and Tagore in the early 20th century and projecting the unity of Asian values, this historical and cultural strand spread to China and Southeast Asia. After Japan’s military defeat in 1945, Nehru and Sukarno strongly propagated Asian regionalism, albeit with limited or short-lived success. India withdrew into a shell after 1962, even though it had long been the geo-political and military anchor for the stability of Southeast Asia and the IOR littoral under British rule.



Eventually, this historical Asian regionalism saw its first notable success in 1967 with the creation of a sub-regional entity in Southeast Asia, ASEAN, which has prospered by asserting its own “Asianism” through the “ASEAN way.”

Since 1967, ASEAN has demonstrated its staying power by incorporating all regional states irrespective of their political systems and economic disparities, building norms and institutions, and bringing together ASEAN+8 partners under the EAS and ADMM+ mechanisms. No other regional organization in Asia can claim a similar record of success.

Political commitment to ASEAN is growing, even as the interdependence of security interests and concerns among “Indo-Pacific” states grows stronger.

Along the way, initiatives for regional economic integration launched by Mahathir in 1990 have survived despite intense opposition from the US, as is evident from ongoing progress towards an ASEAN+6 Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), planned for conclusion by 2015.

India’s leaders have buttressed this trend by supporting an “Asian Economic Community” since 2003-2004.

I do not wish to minimise Asia’s inherent challenges and contradictions, ranging from ideology to diversity to territorial disputes. However, it appears more than likely that the future security architecture of the Asian region will be structured around a “dynamic equilibrium,” regional norms and habits of co-operation created by ASEAN.

Southeast Asia today is the critical hinge of the Indo-Pacific, towards which the attention of China, Japan, India and the US “rebalance” is pivoting. It is here that adverse security trends and the lagging management of strategic competition are waiting to be collectively and multilaterally addressed through accepted rules of the road, in order that region-wide economic interdependence, connectivity and co-prosperity can be steadily advanced.

Asia’s regional security architecture will eventually bring together both historical and functional strands of



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**ISSUE BRIEF
Vol.3, Issue 3
October 2013**



regionalism. It will be more inter-Asian in motivation but also reflect a geographically open regionalism to include the US.

The tide of history appears likely to favour the Indo-Pacific construct as providing the basis for an organically interlinked economic and security community.

What remains to be seen is whether the US will align its economic and security policies in Asia, which still tend to follow divergent tracks.

And even more importantly, whether China will accept regional architecture building, multi-polarity and multilateralism or continue to insist on exclusionary strategies based on narrow definitions of its own security interests. China has difficulty in accepting the "Asia-Pacific" label which draws the US into Asia, and even more so the "Indo-Pacific" which creates a triumvirate of regional powers by including India.

For India, the emerging Asian order, built around regional institutions and norms, economic integration and maritime security cooperation, will need to rest on three basic tenets: no containment, no hegemonism and no condominium.

To conclude, recognition of the Indo-Pacific as the new geo-strategic theatre for Asia can provide the basis for constructing an inclusive and balanced regional security order, comprising a framework of overlapping regional institutions and centred around ongoing ASEAN initiatives.

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