

The Indo-Pacific: A Realist Indian Perspective

by Hemant Krishan Singh and Arun Sahgal



Introduction

In his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 1, 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the Indo-Pacific as “a natural region” extending geographically from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas. He also set out India’s vision for a free, open, inclusive, stable, secure and prosperous “Indo-Pacific Region”.¹

In the midst of ongoing debates regarding the Indo-Pacific among strategic communities stretching from the United States (US) to Asia, it is important to examine the conceptual and geographic underpinnings of the “Indo-Pacific” and identify where India’s interests lie and what policies serve these best.

Miles’ Law² holds that “where you stand depends on where you sit”. The security and economic perceptions of nations depend on where each nation “sits”, its historical experience and its own specific interests. India’s central location at the crossroads of Asia dictates that it is both a Eurasian continental power as well as an Indo-Pacific littoral power.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivering his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 1, 2018. Source: Reuters/DNAIndia

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Second, the concept of geographic space in international geopolitics is a constantly evolving phenomenon. Changing power dynamics result in the emergence of new geographic spaces or impart increased salience to an existing geographic construct. Growing currency of the term Indo-Pacific recognises both the emergence of India as a major power and the role of the Indian Ocean as a vital connector of the global economy.

Third, a nation's interests expand with its growing comprehensive national power. India's economic and security interests now extend beyond the eastern Indian Ocean into the western Pacific.

Adoption of the "Indo-Pacific" by the US highlights the limitations of its erstwhile East Asia-centric Asia-Pacific strategy to meet the core challenge of China's economic and military assertiveness and its manifest desire to create a Sino-centric Asian order. It also underscores the fact that former President Obama's "rebalance" strategy failed to re-establish the eroded centrality of a divided ASEAN, ensure adherence to the rule of international law and prevent China from building artificial islands and militarising the South China Sea as its own "blue water territory" based on a "historical" Nine-Dash Line.



The then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh attends the Inaugural East Asia Summit in Kuala Lumpur on December 17, 2005. Source: Press Information Bureau, GoI

Since the start of the Trump Presidency, there has been a growing consensus among the US strategic community, policymakers and Congress to raise the stakes for "revisionist" China, challenge its regional assertions and step up diplomatic and military efforts to maintain a favourable balance of power in Asia. Seen in this context, the Indo-Pacific construct is an attempt to reassert US power and influence and establish a stable status quo in conjunction with allies and partners. In his remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue, US Defence Secretary Mattis left no room for doubt by asserting: "Make no mistake: America is in the Indo-Pacific to stay."

The US National Security Strategy (NSS, December 2017) describes India as central to America's Indo-Pacific strategy and an important component of Indo-Pacific security architecture, sitting astride seamless connectivity between the two oceans and dominating critical sea lanes of the Indian Ocean. The US views the Indo-Pacific as more security architecture than geographical space, as it is aimed at creating a stable balance of power, ensuring freedom of navigation and rule of law and reassuring ASEAN and other regional players against Chinese coercion. The Quadrilateral, or Quad, is likewise seen as a possible enabling instrument.

However, the new reality that India has now to contend with is that President Trump is coming into his own as the driver of an American foreign policy which is shifting inexorably from upholding the global liberal order to asserting "America First" interests worldwide. Under pressure, China is reaching out to India (and Japan) and whether tactically or not, offering the prospect of lowered tensions and stabler bilateral relations. Hopefully, India will utilise these Chinese overtures not merely for gaining short-term respite but also for seeking long-term solutions of intractable issues, including the boundary dispute. What is the true face of China: Doklam or Wuhan?³ Thus far, it is far from certain that India and China will be able to "work together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each other's interests".⁴

Finally, there is ASEAN. Under pressure from China, hamstrung by US-China rivalry and internally divided since 2012, ASEAN has been underwhelming in upholding its "centrality" in existing security architecture anchored in ASEAN-led mechanisms. Whether ASEAN can successfully contend with the wider challenges of the Indo-Pacific without supplementary architecture – including US alliances, multiple Trilaterals and the Quad – is an open question.

ASEAN-led regionalism and India

India's historical outreach in the Indo-Pacific suffered severe disruptions during two centuries of European colonization of Asia. On achieving independence in 1947, India made a promising commitment to lead Asia's resurgence, but for a variety of reasons became a marginal player in Asia for three decades (1962-1992).

It was during this period of India's long economic and strategic absence that ASEAN-centric and other Asia-Pacific regional initiatives evolved, without India's participation in any till 1992.

Founded in 1967, ASEAN stands out as the most successful exponent of Asian regionalism. The early regional architecture debates within ASEAN were led by Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad, who proposed the idea of an East Asia Economic Group (EAEG) in 1990 to include the ten countries of ASEAN plus China, Japan and Korea. EAEG was later rechristened the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). The United States, which was by then pursuing the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) initiative mooted by Australia in 1989, responded sharply to EAEC by stating that it would oppose any plan that "drew a line down the middle of the Pacific and placed the United States on the other side of that line".⁵ Failure to factor in regional and global power dynamics of the time dimmed the prospects of EAEG/EAEC.

However, in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, during which the role of the US and the IMF was widely criticised, the idea of ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and South Korea) as a platform for regional cooperation and economic integration re-emerged and this time took firm root, leading to discussions of an East Asian Community (EAC). The period 1999-2005 saw intense contestation over the agenda and membership of the future East Asia Summit (EAS) between proponents of closed regionalism within ASEAN and members like Indonesia and Singapore who argued for a more inclusive EAS. Against strong resistance from China and Malaysia, who favoured retaining ASEAN+3 as the "core" of East Asian regionalism and relegating India to the second tier, the inaugural EAS summit admitted India, Australia and New Zealand as founding members.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other EAS leaders at the 12th East Asia Summit in Manila on November 14, 2017. Source: Ministry of External Affairs, GoI

The United States and Russia were later invited to join the EAS in 2011, even though the US had paid scant attention to the EAS since its inception. This put to rest China's "Asia for Asians" proposition but also inserted great power rivalry into the EAS forum.

Having strongly argued during years of this intense diplomatic tussle in favour of open, transparent and equitable regional architecture, India's accommodation in an inclusive, ASEAN-led East Asia Summit was a transformative event. Attempts to exclude India or the United States based on closed definitions of geographic space could not be sustained in view of the continuing role of the US as a resident power in Asia and India's growing economic dynamism and regional relevance.

It is often forgotten today that India's admission to the EAS as a founding member was among the most significant contributions of Indian diplomacy in the early 21st century and effectively marked the dawn of the Indo-Pacific era.

ASEAN centrality and the EAS

While the East Asia Summit had both the mandate and the potential to become the premier, leaders-led regional institution for political and strategic issues and eventually the centre of regional security architecture, this promise was never fulfilled, and appears an even more remote possibility today.

Reassuring platitudes apart, ASEAN as a platform for projecting South East Asia's international influence is increasingly under challenge for a variety of reasons. These include the absence of ASEAN unity; growing divergence of political and economic interests among its members; pressures from an increasingly assertive China; US attempts to reassert influence; and sharpening US-China rivalry. This prevailing scenario is undermining ASEAN's effectiveness in the geopolitical landscape of Asia and it remains far from certain that ASEAN can continue to assert its centrality in the midst of internal feuds and pressures from powerful external actors. These issues, therefore, merit deeper examination.

Post-WWII, the mainstay of a stable Asian security order was US resident power and US alliances. However, after the end of the Cold War, ASEAN took the lead with new initiatives to approach security in a cooperative and inclusive manner, even though the US-led "hub and spokes" system continued to remain a stabilising force.⁶ The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) constituted in 1994 provided a multi-track platform to address security issues, but ARF's disparate membership became a significant obstacle to generating consensus on

preventive diplomacy and eventually prompted consideration of new security architecture better attuned to the needs of what was then largely known as East Asia. ASEAN turned its attention to operationalising the EAS. However, intensifying strategic competition among major powers and the rise of an assertive China soon began to expose the fragilities of the EAS, limiting its capacity as a multilateral forum capable of shaping the behaviour of member states. ASEAN's ability to remain central to regional security architecture was severely compromised after its unity collapsed in 2012 under China's pressure. ASEAN cohesion has not been restored since.

As Prime Minister Modi implicitly pointed out in his Shangri-La Dialogue address, this unity has a correlation with ASEAN centrality. Post 2012, ASEAN has failed to bring institutional coherence to ASEAN-led cooperative security processes, establish the central role of the EAS for decision-making on strategic and security issues, or to define the regional security principles and norms which EAS member states must uphold.⁷

There is no question that India (and several other EAS members) acknowledge ASEAN's foundational role in evolving cooperative security mechanisms, such as ARF, ADMM+ and the EAS, as well as regional integration initiatives like ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Plus Three and RCEP. Beyond that, the emerging reality does not look so promising for ASEAN.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and ASEAN Heads of State and Government at the 15th ASEAN-India Summit in Manila on November 14, 2017. Source: DD News.

ASEAN members have modest maritime military capability and have not established robust ASEAN-centric collective security mechanisms beyond certain elements for meeting non-traditional challenges. This has already been seen in the South China Sea, which is now available to ASEAN claimants only on China's terms. ASEAN's failing quest for a binding Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea with China is another element of ongoing concern, which can only get amplified if ASEAN concedes a non-binding COC which legitimises the

status quo of Chinese occupation and militarisation of SCS features. (For India, it is a worrisome sign that Sri Lanka is also coming up with China-sponsored proposals for a "code of conduct" for the Indian Ocean within IORA.)

It would be fully understandable if a united ASEAN pursuing "strategic equilibrium" has no desire to be caught up in great power rivalry but strongly upholds a balanced and effective regional architecture. However, if ASEAN is united today, it is largely so in acquiescing to Chinese pressures emanating from both economic and military coercion. To India's discomfiture, Singapore is the latest ASEAN member to fall in line, which virtually leaves only Vietnam and Indonesia outside the tent of China's camp followers. ASEAN centrality cannot become synonymous with China's centrality.

Indo-Pacific and ASEAN centrality

As various concepts related to the Indo-Pacific have recently been embraced by Japan and the US, as well as by India, there has been a surge of motivated propaganda linking the Indo-Pacific to denial of ASEAN centrality and the containment of China. This campaign appears to have had a strong impact on ASEAN. The Quadrilateral, which we will discuss later, is similarly being projected as a vehicle for confronting China, marginalising ASEAN centrality and propagating the Indo-Pacific.

The fact is that the Indo-Pacific is neither an exclusive Quad template nor is the Quad claiming to be its anchor.

Indonesia, which is the maritime fulcrum of the two oceans and ASEAN's largest state, has joined hands with India in affirming a "Shared Vision of Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific".

Both India and the US appear to have been put on the defensive by these misleading assertions of smart power. PM Modi, in his Shangri-La address, credited ASEAN with laying the foundation of the "Indo-Pacific Region" through its EAS and RCEP initiatives, and held "ASEAN centrality and unity" at "the heart of the new Indo-Pacific". Rather surprisingly, he went on to deny that the "Indo-Pacific Region" is a "strategy" or a "club" that seeks to "dominate", or is directed at any country. At the same time, he observed with some degree of reticence that it is "normal to have partnerships on the

basis of shared values and interests” and India “will work with them, individually or in formats of three or more, for a stable and peaceful region”. Then again, he made it clear that such “friendships are not alliances of containment”, effectively downplaying their significance for moderating China’s regional assertiveness.

Similarly, US Defence Secretary Mattis made it a point to stress “ASEAN centrality” during his Shangri-La participation. Shortly thereafter, the meeting of the Quad at the official level held in Singapore on June 7, 2018 was fulsome in its support for ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific, as well as the indispensable role of ASEAN-led mechanisms in regional architecture. Among the separate statements issued by members of the Quad, there were noticeable differences between those of the US and its two allies (Japan and Australia) on the one hand and India on the other.

From an overall strategic perspective, the best that can be said is that it continues to be important for India and other major powers to bolster ASEAN unity first and foremost and then affirm ASEAN’s continued centrality to existing regional architecture, but such argumentation should not be construed as endorsing China’s centrality by another name. ASEAN would do well to recognise that members of the Quad, whether acting individually or in concert, are actually seeking to bolster ASEAN centrality which is fast eroding to the advantage of China.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcoming the ASEAN Heads of State and Government at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit to mark the 25th Anniversary of ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on January 25, 2018. Source: IndiaWest.

For India, ASEAN centrality has been a cornerstone, but neither the security architecture nor the economic integration components of ASEAN-centric mechanisms are doing particularly well. Expectations from the EAS are fading, and the likelihood of India signing on to RCEP during the course of this year looks remote, which could lead to its exclusion. As such,

ringing endorsements of ASEAN centrality to the broader Indo-Pacific would appear to be misplaced. This is all the more so as the constricted geographic space ASEAN centrality implies corresponds only partially to India’s definition of the Indo-Pacific.

US Pivot from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

The predominant “end of history” presumptions in America’s strategic calculus post 1991 and two decades of benign neglect of China’s emergence as a strategic competitor lie behind its slow journey from the Asia Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. US involvement in conflicts in West Asia since 2001 and its primary focus on countering terrorism allowed China the luxury of an uncontested period to extend its strategic footprint, even as its economic power grew on the back of WTO membership as well as trade, technology and investment flows from the West. China also seized the opportunity post the 2008 global financial crisis to use its economic clout and military heft to enhance Chinese influence in South East Asia and thrust itself into the maritime spaces of the East China Sea and South China Sea.

It was during this period that the US began to look upon India with greater purpose as a potential partner in its Asia Pacific rebalancing strategy. With growing Chinese influence, TPP in limbo, ASEAN centrality in jeopardy, US allies in Southeast Asia wavering and increasing signs of the loss of US strategic influence, the Trump administration finally embraced the idea of a more inclusive and expansive Indo-Pacific security architecture in Asia.

However, it is important for Indian policy makers to note that thus far, usage of the term Indo-Pacific is intended more to draft India into the existing Asia Pacific security architecture rather than to recognize the growing strategic salience of the Indian Ocean itself, which is critical to India’s maritime security interests. This implies that while the US would like to see greater security contributions from India to its east, India on its part would like to see a credible US footprint in the Indian Ocean, on which there is negligible US commitment thus far.

With the second postponement of the India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, bridging conceptual and operational gaps over the Indo-Pacific has unfortunately been delayed. However, India is clearly leaving the room

open for making further progress in its potential Indo-Pacific security alignment with the US. As Prime Minister Modi declared at the Shangri-La Dialogue: “India’s global strategic partnership with the United States has overcome the hesitations of history and continues to deepen across the extraordinary breadth of our relationship. It has assumed new significance in the changing world. And, an important pillar of this partnership is our shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”.

It remains to be seen how matters will progress but significantly, India has invited US President Donald Trump to be the Chief Guest at its Republic Day celebrations in January, 2019.

Quadrilateral: 3+1

First proposed in 2006, the Quad has essentially been a Japan-led initiative for integrating Asia’s major maritime democracies based on common values and security convergences. The Quad today, revived after a decade of dormancy in November 2017, emerges from three separate trilateral security dialogues: India-US-Japan, Japan-US-Australia and India-Japan-Australia.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets President Joko Widodo of Indonesia at Istana Merdeka in Jakarta on May 30, 2018.

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, GoI

Since its very inception, the Quad has had a rather tenuous existence. While Quad members might share the desire to moderate China’s unilateral and hegemonic assertions, each of them have different thresholds for accommodating or hedging against China. This tends to provide China considerable leverage over Quad members. Looking over the shoulder to see how China might react has stopped the Quad dead in its tracks in 2007 and can do so again.

Some Indian analysts are forgetful of how America as a great power unceremoniously dumped the Quad after 2007, while Australia was even more egregious in publicly denouncing the Quad, both willy-nilly leaving Japan and India to “share the blame” and face Chinese ire. India must remain conscious that this scenario can repeat itself, the more so with Trump’s transactional America on the one hand and elections due in Australia that can upend its current foreign policy on the other.

The Quad is essentially a 3+1 forum as India is not in alliance with the others. India’s perspective within the Quad is quite distinct from that of the US and its two allies, Japan and Australia: it upholds multipolar stability and an equitable regional order based on cooperation and not dominance.

Furthermore, despite the embrace of the Indo-Pacific as regional architecture, the US and its two allies are focused mainly on Asia Pacific security; their operational deployments also correspond to the Asia Pacific. There is little or no presence of Quad members other than India in the Indian Ocean. None of the other Quad members share unsettled land borders with China. The US, Japan and Australia play no supportive role in meeting India’s continental challenges.

Prime Minister Modi’s abundant caution on the Quad is thus well advised. In his Shangri-La address, he made it clear that India would uphold the principles and values of peace and progress and reject the “assertion of power over recourse to international norms”, but would not be part of “alliances for containment”. He sought to invoke a spirit of self-restraint by both major and middle powers and reached out to ASEAN as a close partner in shaping an Indo-Pacific order.

Since the revival of Quad meetings in 2017, it can be said that security dialogues among Quad members are well advanced and there is commonality among them on rules-based order, freedom of maritime commons and principles for connectivity. However, a joint response by Quad members to meet identified security and connectivity challenges is far from established.

While the Quad appears to have limited traction for India at the present time, alongside India’s existing and future Trilaterals,⁸ the Quad can still play a useful role in modifying China’s behaviour. If the continuing convergence of security interests among members of

the Quad can in the future lead to a joint Indo-Pacific strategy with a concrete roadmap of objectives and mutually reinforcing actions, including across the maritime geography of the Indian Ocean, there may be room for real progress. Till that happens, for India, the Quad can at best be seen as an instrument for asserting the multipolar reality of the Indo-Pacific.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets with US President Donald J. Trump on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Manila on November 14, 2017. Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Gov.

Meanwhile, in the Indian Ocean, the area of India's primary concern, Australia and France might well offer better prospects for operational maritime security partnerships than the US or Japan.

Conclusion

With his determined pursuit of a proactive and pragmatic foreign policy over the past four years, Prime Minister Modi has successfully projected India as a new pillar of the multipolar global order, capable of deftly navigating emerging geopolitical fault lines.

A consistent posture of strategic independence (no alliances), strategic realism (self interest) and strategic resilience (national power and resolve) should continue to guide Indian foreign and security policy in the Indo-Pacific.

Endnotes

- ¹Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Keynote Address at Shangri-La Dialogue (June 01, 2018), http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime_Ministers_Keynote_Address_at_Shangri-La_Dialogue_June_01_2018
- ²Rufus E Miles, Jr, was an Assistant Secretary under the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. For the origin and meaning of Miles' Law, see https://www.jstor.org/stable/975497?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
- ³Doklam was the location of the 73-day long India-China faceoff from June 16 to August 28, 2017. Wuhan is the Chinese city where President Xi Jinping hosted Prime Minister Narendra Modi for an informal summit on April 27-28, 2018.
- ⁴Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Keynote Address at Shangri-La Dialogue (June 01, 2018), http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime_Ministers_Keynote_Address_at_Shangri-La_Dialogue_June_01_2018
- ⁵"Asia's Arc of Advantage" India, ASEAN and the US: Shaping Asian Architecture, Chapter V, "The Evolution of the East Asia Summit" by Sanjay Pulipaka.
- ⁶CSCAP Memorandum No. 26: "Towards an Effective Regional Security Architecture for the Asia Pacific", June 2014.
- ⁷*Ibid.*
- ⁸India's existing Trilaterals are India-Japan-US and India-Japan-Australia. The future Trilaterals to which reference is made may include India-Indonesia-Australia and India-Indonesia-Japan.

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