

Indo-Pacific: Developments and Future Challenges

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Introduction

The 'Indo-Pacific' is essentially the area of US Pacific Command's (PACOM) responsibilities. The region has also been variously referred to as 'Asia-Pacific' and 'Indo-Asia-Pacific'; basically, these expressions also cover PACOM's area of responsibility even as these include the continental landmass which the security system created by the US is envisaged to cover. The use of 'Indo' reflects a certain envisaged role for India in the US perspective in enforcing its security system in the region.

However, from the Indian point of view, it is worth noting that PACOM's area of responsibility, whilst covering most of the Pacific Ocean, does not cover the entire Indian Ocean where a line stretching from the India-Pakistan coastal boundary separates it from that of the US Central Command (CENTCOM). Again, in terms of India's maritime security priorities, one can think of five sub- regions; namely, western Indian Ocean, including the Persian Gulf as well as the Bab-el-Mandeb, eastern Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, East China Sea and Western Pacific up to Guam.

One needs to be conscious of these sub-regions because of their own dynamics and regional governance mechanisms which may overlap but are not inter-locked. Each of these sub-regions has its own power relationship with the 'local' and 'resident' powers. Whilst the security challenges may be similar, they do not have identical drivers for these dynamics which are mostly rooted in regional geopolitics. Amongst the enduring challenges driving the sub-regional geopolitics are, climate change, oceanic degradation,

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jihadist terrorism, transnational crime, piracy, human trafficking and state/sub-regional fragility. These challenges are serious with shortening time horizons which could gravely undermine any effort, national or multi-lateral, to develop a regional security order as they can only be handled on a collaborative, multinational basis with a certain sense of urgency. However, the sub-regional characteristics have another potent but variable driver in the form of an intensifying and increasingly volatile regional and global power contestation manifesting in accumulation of hard power capabilities for deployment of compellence diplomacy. This contestation manifests itself in military buildup, especially naval including submarine platforms, missiles (often nuclear capable) and offensive cyber capability. Oceanic chokepoints are part of the grand strategies of many stakeholder countries and the blocking of these chokepoints is the key element in such planning.

Major Strategic Developments in the Indo-Pacific

Chinese Geopolitical Ambitions. China's assertive behaviour, as witnessed in recent times, is the hallmark of its growing global ambitions with their regional implications. Its geopolitical ambitions seek to shape the *status quo* by pursuing its 'Belt-and-Road-Initiative' (BRI) and the 'Maritime Silk Road' (MSR) programmes. The Chinese assertiveness is especially evident in the development of infrastructure activities in the Spratly and the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea which can rapidly alter the regional balance of power should the leadership desires so. Also, the Chinese grand strategy to break out of the so-called 'First Island Chain' to counter US's containment strategy vis-à-vis China is being implemented through acquisition of requisite military capability with potential for friction in the foreseeable future. The latest Chinese military strategy, published in May 2015, envisages an expeditionary capability for the Chinese Navy for purposes of power projection in various parts of the world where China has developed strategic stakes. The Indo-Pacific ramifications of China's growing geopolitical ambitions partly, on account of the strongly nationalistic platform of the current Chinese President Xi Jinping for his domestic political consolidation finds elaboration in the subsequent paragraphs.

Stronger Japanese Leadership. The current Japanese leadership, represented by Prime Minister Abe, is also drawing up on a

nationalistic core as it aims to counterbalance China. It is strengthening the country's naval and coast guard capabilities. The on-going dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is resulting in nearly daily confrontation between Chinese vessels and the Japanese Coast Guard as well as the respective Air Forces. Japan is also facing the heat in the escalating crisis on the Korean peninsula. It is, therefore, taking a harder position on the nuclear and missile plans of North Korea; it is already in the range of this capability. On 29 August 2017, North Korea, threatening to launch missiles around Guam, 'tested' its *Hwasong 12* missile which flew over Japan as it broke into three pieces before falling into the sea; with a very short warning time, Japan's northern prefectures observed air-defence drills at the local community level.

South Korean Leadership's Conciliatory Policy. South Korea's current leadership, under the newly elected President Moon Jae-in, is following a conciliatory policy towards North Korea, aware that any conflagration in the Korean peninsula would affect it catastrophically. It is also the target of Chinese sanctions over the recent deployment of Terminal High Multitube Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile batteries. Although President Moon had expressed strong reservations about them during the Presidential election campaign and immediately thereafter; faced with growing military tension on the peninsula, he has taken steps to complete the entire deployment of these missile batteries despite Chinese and Russian opposition because of their potential capability to undermine the latter's nuclear deterrence systems. Notwithstanding, it is taking a position on the Korean crisis which is more moderate than that of the US and Japan.

Australian Ambivalence. The Australian Prime Minister Turnbull has taken a strong anti-Chinese stance, as evident in the recent Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore, which also evoked a strong response from Chinese media. However, the extent of translation of this rhetoric into capability sufficient to put strategic pressure on China still remains to be seen. Australian White Paper (February 2016) shows a certain ambivalence towards China which was also evident in granting, in November 2015, of the 99-year lease on the Darwin Port to the Chinese company 'Land Bridge' (with direct ties to the Chinese Army) with the clearance of the Australian Ministry of Defence, but without consultation with the US which is

to use this port for rotating troops and stationing other military assets as part of its 'rebalance' stance vis-à-vis China. This decision drew a sharp retort from the US President himself.

The Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN-created strategic framework is shaky and the earlier euphoria about it being in the 'driving seat' in shaping of the security architecture in South-East and East Asia seems to be over. The extensive economic ties between the countries of the region and China make it difficult to have a strong anti-China stance which would have prevented the weakening of the cohesion of the organisation. There has been low-key approach to the Spratly issue despite favourable arbitration panel judgement in the case brought up by the Philippines under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As a result of this judgement, there has been accelerated activity for the adoption of the framework for negotiating a Code of Conduct. The Chinese Foreign Minister said at the August ASEAN meetings in Manila that the negotiations may start if "outside parties" would not cause a major disruption following the summit-level meeting in November 2017. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Manila joint communiqué mentioned, in a somewhat stronger language, that land reclamations have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions may undermine the peace and stability of the region. A factor affecting the regional stability in the ASEAN region are the domestic developments in some of them; the domestic challenges with intra-ASEAN ramifications range from the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the conduct of military operations against Abu Sayyaf in Marawi city (Philippines), and the growing trend of jihadist terrorism in Indonesia, Malaysia and the insurgency conditions in the southern region of Thailand.

New US Administration.

- (a) A major strategic development is the advent of the US administration under President Trump. Despite his taking a stronger stance towards North Korea and China, the conflicting signals emanating from the administration at different levels, including the President himself and his key ministers, have created an atmosphere of uncertainty. Having declared the end of the policy of 'strategic patience' on North Korea, the implementation of this policy has only added to further

uncertainty as to the US intentions and the capacity to do so. President Trump's approach to policy issues, domestic or foreign, is transactional and is characterised by an eagerness to claim victory due to his domestic pressures. There is no sign that the US is willing to change its strategic stance in the Far East and Southeast Asia inherited from the previous administration but there is still no clarity, given the conflicting signals, about the ability of the US to restore strategic balance in the region to reassure its traditional allies. For the US President, the trade relations with both South Korea as well as China are being used as bargaining chips to resolve the Korean crisis but this approach seems to have only increased the level of distrust with these key countries on which the President must depend to resolve the crisis. After initial pause in the US Navy's 'Freedom of Navigation Operations' (FONOPs) in the South China Sea due to the Chinese sensitivities, these have now been resumed raising the prospect for further encounters between the US and the Chinese Navies and Air Force.

(b) President Trump claimed early victory when he suggested that North Korea did not carry out a nuclear test under US pressure when the North Korean President had accelerated missile launching activities after President Trump assumed office. Thereafter, his strong language about readiness to inflict "fire and fury", in the event of North Korea firing missiles around Guam, created an uneasy stalemate with US President and the North Korean President both claiming victory. Yet, each act of escalation on the Korean peninsula has led to frequent conversations between the US and the Chinese Presidents; US President and Japanese Prime Minister; US and South Korean Presidents and the South Korean President and the Japanese Prime Minister. Most recently, Chinese and Russian interactions have intensified and Russian President Putin has been directly engaging with the Japanese and the South Korean leaders. In parallel, there has been the US, Japanese and South Korean military mobilisation as there has been on the part of the Russian as well as the Chinese. Although each escalation by the North Korean President, determinedly pursuing his nuclear (latest being the detonation of a "hydrogen" bomb) and missile programmes to bring the

US mainland in their range, has brought out the fissures amongst the allies and tensions amongst the adversaries, the US is pressing hard for ever stronger sanctions against North Korea whilst building up the military capabilities around the Korean peninsula. This mobilisation is also suggestively aimed at China, including its vastly expanded military infrastructure in the Spratly and the Paracel Islands, accompanied by economic pressure in the form of sanctions against Chinese firms and thorough investigation of its intellectual property rights violations. The initial bonhomie between the US and the Chinese Presidents seems to have ended although the two leaders remain in contact with each other as the situation on the Korean Peninsula continues to be volatile. The US has also announced sales of weapons (missiles and torpedoes), worth USD 1.4 billion to Taiwan. The potential for instability in this region will have serious implications for India as well.

The Indian Ocean Region

(a) The Indian Ocean waters are, by large, placid although beset by a large spectrum of challenges, both 'traditional' security issues as well as 'non-traditional' security issues. These are likely to be aggravated on account of the tensions of the adjacent waters spilling over into the Indian Ocean from both sides, i.e. the South China Sea and the Mediterranean. Tensions can arise if the nature of Chinese Navy's entry into the Indian Ocean is such as to disturb the existing balance of power. The sensitivities of countries to protect Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) are likely to grow in the absence of any ground rules for them.

(b) Although the Bay of Bengal region is less touched by the rivalries elsewhere, with maritime boundaries amongst the littorals having been settled, the geopolitics in the region is quickening in the wake of the opening of Myanmar to the outer world and, following the Doklam stand-off, of the possibility of an India-China maritime contestation developing there. India-Bangladesh maritime boundary delimitation has opened the opportunity for greater bilateral maritime cooperation. The Chinese expanding footprint is evident in the BRI and MSR in this region. There is an ongoing discussion

on the 'Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar' (BCIM) mechanism envisaging considerable infrastructure in this area, including port development and SEZs. Besides Sittwe in Myanmar, several others are operational with Chinese involvement, namely, Kyupkyu, Dawei, and Hambantota. The Chinese pipeline to Kyupkyu is already operational. As Myanmar is opening up, there is the presence of other big powers as well including the US, Japan etc. India is also pursuing its policy of building the infrastructure, for military use, in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Another notable nascent feature, in the Bay of Bengal region, is the acquisition of submarines by littoral countries like Bangladesh and Thailand (sourced from China) or the intention to purchase (on the part of Myanmar).

(c) The Chinese 'MSR' activities are in evidence in Sri Lanka, Pakistan (Gwadar), Maldives, Iran (Chabahar), Djibouti and the East African littoral. The Gulf regional and the wider Middle Eastern orders are experiencing considerable uncertainty which also has a critical maritime dimension. The various regional governance mechanisms, already in place for the last several years, lack capacity to address the entire spectrum of challenges mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. As these developments have significant potential balance-of-power dimension with an existential aspect, India would have to find its own strategic approach given that the previous fault lines in the Gulf region are widening. India-Pakistan relations remain perennially fraught and there is also the growing sea-based threat to India with the Pakistani decision to acquire eight submarines from China. The declared Pakistani policy of placing its nuclear weapons on its sea-based platforms not only poses a balance-of-power complexity for India but also a larger global threat of these weapons becoming 'loose nukes at sea; if we recall near-success operation by Al Qaeda to capture *PNS Zulfikar* (in 2014). India's stakes could not be higher in the unfolding events in the Gulf region involving Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, UAE, Qatar et cetera.

(d) The unfolding situation has been summed up in the 'Strategic Survey 2016: The Annual review of the Affairs', IISS, London, where it says in its opening lines, "the underpinnings of geopolitics have splintered so much in the

past year that the foundations of global order appear alarmingly weak. The strategic earthquakes have created a situation in which world leaders are in a constant state of crisis control.”¹

Future Challenges

In the different sub-regions outlined above, the common nature of the problems being faced is quite manifest. Yet, the degree of their aggravation and trajectory of development is specific to each individual sub-region. In East Asia and Southeast Asia, the tension could not have been higher for a variety of reasons, including the perceived uncertainty of the US policy towards the region. Whilst US relations with North Korea are witnessing increased tension, the uncertainty in the relationships between US-China, US-Japan and US-South Korea is quite considerable and that increasing brinkmanship between the players can serve as a flashpoint if some aggravation is not properly handled. In the South China Sea, the massive expansion of the existing infrastructure in the Chinese controlled land features can invite stronger US involvement and greater regional instability.

The regional governance mechanisms have become weaker, and there is no agreed ground rule for navigation where the issue of freedom of navigation and overflight is a subject of constant international discourse. These have implications also for the management of common challenges, such as climate change, maritime security and oceanic degradation. Neutralising these challenges cannot wait any longer as they can potentially destabilise the existing maritime order in the Indo-Pacific.

The situation in the Indian Ocean Region provides a window of opportunity for a more stable maritime order even as the challenges to it are constantly growing in the traditional security as well as non-traditional security domains. The capacity enhancement of the various governance mechanisms, such as, IORA, IONS, BIMSTEC et cetera demands urgent attention. The relatively stable maritime order in the Indian Ocean provides the opportunity for better exploitation of the ‘Blue Economy’ potential for India. The Bay of Bengal regional situation is easier from India’s point of view, given the presence of friendly foreign navies of the littoral countries. However, this may change after India also carries out maritime cooperation activities to enhance maritime domain

awareness as well as coordinated patrols with friendly navies; this still needs to be scaled up. India also carries out active naval diplomacy by hosting the 'MILAN' exercises as well as the 'Malabar Exercise' with the participation of US and Japan taking place alternately in the Western Pacific and the Bay of Bengal. The Gulf as well as the Bab-el- Mandeb regions remain tense due to growing regional tensions and conflicts in the Middle East. In this region beset with widening ethnic and denominational fault lines, the Indian diplomacy has to be more nuanced because its interests do not fall four-square with those of the US on account of divergent approaches despite agreement on shared challenges in the region.

Endnote

¹ Strategic Survey 2016 : The Annual Review of World Affairs, IISS, London, September 2016, p.9.