

India: The “Western Beacon” of the Indo-Pacific Region

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Background

In a major policy statement before his visit to India in October 2017, Rex Tillerson, Secretary of State of the United States of America, said *“The Indo-Pacific, including the entire Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific and the nations that surround them, will be the most consequential part of the globe in the 21st Century. Home to more than 3 billion people, this region is the focal point of the world’s energy and trade routes. Forty per cent of the world’s oil supply crisscrosses the Indian Ocean every day, through critical points of transit like the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz. The US 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.”*¹

The reference by Secretary Tillerson to India as the “Western beacon” of the Indo-Pacific highlights the opportunity for India to pursue its core national interests in the western Indo-Pacific within the proposed overall architecture of peace, security and socio-economic development in the region. For this purpose, it is necessary to demarcate the outline of the western Indo-Pacific Region and identify India’s interests in it.

Taking Secretary Tillerson’s approach of looking at a map of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the western Indo-Pacific Region would begin from the eastern-most maritime boundary of India, where a distance of about 100 kilometers separates India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands from Sumatra in Indonesia. From this point, the western Indo-Pacific region would extend all the way across the Indian Ocean to the eastern littoral of Africa, from South Africa northwards to the Red Sea. Along the northern littoral

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of the western Indo-Pacific region are located the countries of the Gulf, Iran, South Asia and the ASEAN countries of Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.

Trade and Energy Routes

Secretary Tillerson's enumeration of the core characteristics of the Indo-Pacific region emphasises its energy and trade routes. The statistics for trade and energy flows through the western Indo-Pacific illustrate the significance of this region for India.

Trade accounts for 22 per cent of India's GDP. The biggest trading partner of India to the West is the European Union (EU), which accounts for 17.6 per cent of India's global exports and 11.3 per cent of India's global imports. India's second largest export destination is the United States of America, accounting for 16.1 per cent of its global exports, and 5.7 per cent of its global imports. In third place is the United Arab Emirates, accounting for 11.5 per cent of India's global exports, and 5.4 per cent of its global imports.² All this merchandise trade is transported across the sea lanes of the western Indo-Pacific region, underscoring the critical importance of these trade routes for India's growing economy.

India is a major importer of energy from West Asia. Saudi Arabia and Iraq supplied 58 per cent of India's total oil imports of 3.9 million barrels a day in 2015. The bulk of this oil is received by ports located on India's west coast. In 2015, India, the world's fourth largest Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) importer, received 62 per cent of its LNG from Qatar. Both oil and LNG imports by India depend solely on the trade routes traversing the western Indo-Pacific region.³

Although in his prepared statement, Secretary Tillerson mentioned two "critical points of transit", the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz, the western Indo-Pacific region has a third "choke point" which is relevant for India's interests in ensuring freedom of navigation as well. This is the Bab-el-Mandeb, the 35-kilometer wide strait leading from the Gulf of Aden into the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

The Bab-el-Mandeb sea route transports the bulk of trade between India and countries located to the West of the Suez Canal, including the EU and the United States.⁴ This waterway is

shared between Yemen, Djibouti and Eritrea, as well as Somalia (because of Somalia’s coastline along the Gulf of Aden). Of these three, Yemen has been destabilised by its war with a coalition of countries led by Saudi Arabia;⁵ Djibouti hosts naval bases of the United States, France and China;⁶ while Eritrea is under United Nations sanctions.⁷ The inherent volatility of this area needs the focussed engagement of the Indo-Pacific Project to sustain peace and stability in the region.

Connectivity in the Western Indo-Pacific

Though not seen as being of “critical” importance, the role played by major transit ports in the western Indo-Pacific area to promote connectivity with the land-locked states above the region’s northern littoral need to be included in discussions between India and the United States. Such connectivity is designed to overcome current barriers by Pakistan to closer overland interaction between the region’s largest economy with Afghanistan and Central Asia, both of which are priorities for India’s strategic policy. Two such transit trade ports are Chabahar and Bandar Abbas in Iran, located on the northern littoral of the western Indo-Pacific region.

Countering Piracy in the Western Indo-Pacific

India’s ability to contribute in a substantive manner to peace, security and freedom of navigation in the western Indo-Pacific region, based on the rule of international law applicable to the maritime domain, is illustrated by its participation in the international effort to contain piracy off the coast of Somalia. On 16 Dec 2008, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a United States-drafted Resolution (1851) authorising an “international cooperation mechanism” to counter the threat posed to shipping lanes off the coast of Somalia by pirates.⁸

The Security Council Resolution was designed to uphold the rule of law as codified by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas or UNCLOS. It is worth emphasising that India as a state party to UNCLOS has consistently upheld the application of UNCLOS in the maritime domain. This was most recently demonstrated when India accepted a verdict from an UNCLOS tribunal awarding 76 per cent of territory disputed in its maritime boundary with Bangladesh in July 2014.⁹

UN Security Council Resolution 1851 resulted in the Contact Group on Piracy off the coast of Somalia or CGPCS being set up as a group of interested and affected nations, industry associations and multilateral agencies to take pro-active steps for checking piracy in the Indian Ocean region. India has been an active participant in the CGPCS, along with US-led Combined Maritime Forces, the EU, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea.

Piracy disrupted shipping along the SLOCs in the western Indo-Pacific. It also impacted the almost 22,000 ships calling on and leaving Indian ports, passing through the High-Risk Area (HRA), drawn at the Indian Ocean area west of 78 degrees E longitude, which had to pay an additional premium to insurance companies, most of whom were based outside India. According to estimates, India paid around US\$1.3 billion during the period 2010-2016 because of this premium, called the Additional War Risk Premium (AWRP).

To protect Indian ships and Indian citizens employed in seafaring duties, the Indian Navy commenced anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden from 23 Oct 2008. In addition to escorting Indian-flagged ships, ships of other countries have also been escorted by the Indian Navy. More than 25 Indian Navy ships are deployed for patrolling, escorting ships and in anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden. To maintain the high degree of alertness in the region, around 19 coastal security operations and exercises have been undertaken by the Indian Navy and Coast Guard in 2016 alone.¹⁰

The New Indo-Pacific Bilateral Dialogue Mechanism

India's description as the "Western beacon" of the Indo-Pacific implies its participation on an equal footing when it comes to decision-making on "peace, security, freedom of navigation, and a free and open architecture" in the region.¹¹ In the first instance, this requires an interface between the security and policy structures of the United States and India on the western Indo-Pacific, especially in respect of the waterways of the Bab-el-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz. Such an interface will enable both countries to understand and accommodate each other's core interests with respect to both the trade and energy routes of the western Indo-Pacific, as well as their bilateral engagement with the littoral countries of this region.

This must be the core agenda of the new “2-by-2 ministerial dialogue” established in August 2017 by the leaders of India and the United States to enhance “peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region”.¹²

At the heart of the western Indo-Pacific region lie the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, the North Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. The United States has designated its Central Command as the structure to deal with this area’s peace and security.¹³ The fact that three of the top advisors to President Donald Trump of the US have served in the US Central Command (CENTCOM) (Defence Secretary General John Mattis,¹⁴ Chief of Staff in the White House General John Kelly,¹⁵ and National Security Adviser Lieutenant General HR McMaster¹⁶) will play a critical role in this context.

Ultimately, for existing US security structures in the Indo-Pacific to become effective contributors to the shared interests of India and the US in the western Indo-Pacific region, the coalescing of the US Pacific Command or PACOM,¹⁷ the US CENTCOM, as well as US AFRICOM,¹⁸ which also deals with the eastern seaboard of Africa, at both operations and policy-making levels, would need to be considered in the framework of the ambitious Indo-Pacific Project.

From the Indian side, engagement in the newly launched “dialogue” mechanism on the Indo-Pacific region should include, apart from the traditional central ministries of external affairs and defence, operational Indian entities tasked with providing security in the western Indo-Pacific region. These include India’s national security structures, in addition to its four Naval Commands¹⁹ and the Indian Coast Guard,²⁰ which has been significantly upgraded following the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks launched from the maritime domain.

Countering Terrorism in the Western Indo-Pacific

The Mumbai terrorist attacks of 26 Nov 2008 focussed on a major concern of India related to protecting its national security and economic interests from terrorist threats originating in the western Indo-Pacific region. In the trial of one of the Pakistani terrorists produced before the Indian judicial structure, it was established that these attacks on Mumbai were orchestrated from Pakistan.

These attacks took the lives of 166 innocent persons, of which 137 were Indian nationals, and the rest were from 16 other countries, including the US, Israel, Germany, Australia, Canada, France, and the UK. Hundreds of innocent persons were injured by 10 terrorists belonging to the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) of Pakistan, handled by operatives of the Pakistan Army's Inter-Services Intelligence or ISI.²¹ For the first time, cyber technology was used for executing the terrorist attack through Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP).

India's pursuit of effective counter-terrorism measures will contribute to the resilience of the Indo-Pacific Project, and contribute to countering the terrorist threat to US interests in Afghanistan and the wider western Indo-Pacific region.²² In this context, the new dialogue mechanism will be critical to ensure that the Indo-Pacific Project addresses some of the ambiguities arising from the conflicting security interests of the US as far as countering terrorism in India and Pakistan is concerned. The most relevant illustration of this ambiguity is the David Headley case.²³

Peace and Stability in the Gulf

Peace and stability across the western Indo-Pacific region is a major objective of Indian strategic policy for other reasons as well. One of the most important aspects of India's interest in the region is the stability of the Gulf economies. These countries, especially those belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman), host approximately eight million Indian nationals, who are employed in the energy-driven economies of the region. Indian nationals in the GCC remit annually about US\$ 38 billion directly into the Indian household economy. It is, therefore, in India's interest to work actively within the western Indo-Pacific region to ensure the stability of these economies, so that the significant contributions made by the Indian diaspora are maintained, and the GCC countries continue to prosper.²⁴

This perspective should be integrated into the new dialogue mechanism between India and the US on the Indo-Pacific. Diplomatic initiatives within this framework could be conceptualised for bringing the armed conflict in Yemen to an end, as well as for bridging the growing political polarisation between Qatar and several of its GCC neighbours. The objective would be to ensure recognition of India's core interests in the welfare of millions of its

citizens, the inward flow of remittances to the Indian economy, an assured stability of India’s trade and energy flows, as an integral part of the Indo-Pacific Project.

Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)

India’s awareness of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, especially the areas demarcated as the western Indo-Pacific earlier in this article, has been articulated forcefully at the highest level ever since the new government took office in India in May 2014. During his visit to Mauritius on 12 Mar 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised that India sought a future for Indian Ocean that lived up to the name of SAGAR – Security and Growth for All in the Region. Five priorities are the core of SAGAR:-

- (a) India’s role as a net security provider in the western Indo-Pacific region. This would involve both safeguarding India’s territory, including its islands, as well as securing the larger Indian Ocean Region.
- (b) Active engagement with friendly countries in the western Indo-Pacific region. India would continue to enhance the maritime security capacities and economic resilience of these countries.
- (c) Developing a network of cooperation to take effective collective action for advancing peace and security in the region. Such a network would be instrumental in creating a mutual understanding of, and response to, challenges from the maritime domain.
- (d) A more integrated and cooperative focus on the future of the western Indo-Pacific, which would enhance the prospects for the sustainable development of all countries in the region. This would include sectors such as trade, tourism and investment; infrastructure development; marine science and technology; sustainable fisheries; protection of marine environment; and, overall development of ocean or Blue Economy.
- (e) The primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the western Indo-Pacific region would be on those “who live in this region”. India would continue its engagement with other nations which had strong interests

and stakes in this region through dialogue, visits, exercises, capacity building and economic partnership.²⁵

Conclusion

India's perspective on the western Indo-Pacific region underscores the importance of building peace, security and prosperity in the region in a holistic manner. Using this region as a frame of reference, India has signaled its willingness to engage with other stakeholders by contributing its views and resources, through an atmosphere of trust and transparency, respecting the principles and provisions of International Law. To effectively address the challenges and opportunities inherent in the Indo-Pacific initiative, the ground realities in both the littoral and maritime domains of the region must be taken into account.

Endnotes

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