

Introduction

The defining trend of emerging shapes and contours of the 'New World Order' is marked by gradual shift in the 'balance of power' from the Atlantic to Pacific and Indian Oceans. The phenomenon can be primarily attributed to the rapid pace of growth in the Asia-Pacific Region. This has led the US to review its strategy in rebalancing assets, in consonance with the evolving global geopolitical architecture.

'US-India Joint Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (IOR)' issued after the summit meet between Prime Minister Modi and President Obama, during latter's visit on the eve of this year's Republic Day, is an indication of perceptible makeover in the strategic partnership between the two nations.¹ The implications are far reaching, given the enormity of the canvas it covers; connectivity from Africa to Asia, economic development, maritime security, stability and multilateral engagements. PM Modi's visits to Japan and Australia last year followed by recent tour of three island nations in the Indian Ocean, manifest significant shift in India's foreign policy, as Delhi seeks to play a central role in the region.² The above process of transition is driven by numerous strategic imperatives which merit holistic overview, to facilitate pragmatic assessment of the emerging architecture and defining India's future policy options.

Strategic Imperatives

As a sequel to the strategic review undertaken by Thomas Donilon, former National Security Adviser to the US President, it became evident that there was glaring imbalance in the American power projection posture which was biased towards the West.³ This was to pave way for the announcement of 'pivot to Asia' strategy; the Obama Doctrine.⁴ President Obama during his address to the Australian Parliament on 17 November 2011 announced 'pivot to Asia' strategy; later referred to as 'rebalancing'.⁵ The key factors behind this 'broader shift' were China's rise and vast potential of Asia-Pacific Region.

Around the time President Obama was unfolding his Asia Doctrine, former Foreign Secretary Hilary Clinton articulating her assessment in Foreign Policy wrote; "As wars in the Middle East were winding down, it was necessary for the US to invest in Asia-Pacific, where new economic and security architecture was shaping up"; professing an integrated view of the Indian and Pacific Oceans". She defined Asia-Pacific as a region stretching from Indian Ocean to the Western shores of Americas, spanning two oceans; the Pacific and Indian, that are increasingly interlinked by shipping and strategic configurations.⁶

The US Department of Defence (DoD) 'Strategic Guidance Document' titled "US Global Leadership-Priorities for 21st Century Defence" published in 2012 reiterated the necessity to rebalance towards Asia-Pacific as America's economic and security interests were inextricably linked to the developments in the arc extending from West Pacific and East Asia into Indian Ocean Region (IOR).⁷ Even the former US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel in his speech at 'Shangri La Dialogue 2013' had enunciated that "Vision of Asia-Pacific was open and inclusive, wherein US was working to enhance the capacity of its partners and seeking to build relations with rising powers like China, India and Indonesia. The USA was looking towards India, as one of the leaders, in the broader Asia region".⁸

As per the 'rebalancing strategy', China is not to be considered an inevitable adversary but a potential partner and stabiliser in Asia-Pacific; at the same time, to be dissuaded from using force to resolve international disputes. Hilary Clinton had elaborated on the issue in her remarks at the US Naval Academy on 10 April 2012; "We are not seeking new enemies. Today, China is not the Soviet Union. We are not on the brink of a new Cold War in Asia....A thriving China is good for America and thriving America good for China, as long as both thrive in a way that contributes to the regional and global good".⁹

The renewed emphasis to link Indian Ocean with Western Pacific, in the wider geographic perspective has paved way for the acronym 'Indo-Pacific'. The term was first used by the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in his speech while addressing the Indian Parliament in August 2007.¹⁰ It also finds mention in the Australian 'White Paper 2013'.¹¹ Salient facets of the US 'rebalancing Asia-Pacific strategy' are:-¹²

- (a) Redeploy US military assets released from Afghanistan so that 60 per cent of the naval potential is allocated to Asia-Pacific by 2020. This implies adopting a flexible military posture, with both deterrence and punitive capability by optimising the limited resources. Maintenance of generational lead in military technology over China remains an inherent component of the strategy.
- (b) Revamp network of traditional alliances having shared economic and security concerns; besides accord priority to strengthen strategic partnerships with countries like India as also seek new partners in Southeast Asia. While maintaining credibility of alliances, escalation of conflict and tension in the region are to be avoided. Favourable strategic architecture in the area is to be ensured through existing organisations like East Asia Summit (EAS) and Association of South East Asian nations (ASEAN). Besides proposals like 'US-Japan-India triangle' or 'US-Japan-India-Australia quadrangle' are to be actively pursued
- (c) Economic revival and scaling up stakes in the region through initiatives such as TPP (Trans Pacific Partnership), alongside pursuance of ideological agenda.

Emerging Architecture

In view of several political, economic, security and socio-cultural factors that are simultaneously at play in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean makes the region an arena of intense rivalry between the competing powers. The US remains

a dominant player in the region although it faces serious challenge in coping with rising China. Due to trappings in Iraq and Afghanistan, America has been confronted with severe resources crunch as well. Its core interests are to ensure regional stability, continued dominance, economic prosperity with unhindered access to markets, freedom of navigation and peace time engagement including forward presence to enable calibrated response in the event of a crisis situation or conflict.

People's Republic of China (PRC) has always considered Asia-Pacific its area of influence. As per PRC 'National Defence paper 2013', "Asia-Pacific region has become an increasingly significant stage for world economic development and strategic interaction between major powers".¹³ After redefining earlier 'periphery policy' incorporating the concept of 'extended neighbourhood', there has been marked increase in the Chinese activities in this region. China declaring 'Air Defence Identification Zone' has led to heightened tension in Asia-Pacific. As per the 'US Department of Defence China Report- 2012', PRC is developing 'Anti-Access' and 'Area Denial' (A2/AD) capabilities.¹⁴ Beijing's strategic objectives in the Asia-Pacific region are to seek sovereignty over South China Sea while working towards diminution of US influence. Its rapid military modernisation with yearly double digit increase in the defence budget (allocations for 2015 stands at \$ 140 bn although unofficial figures could be two times) particularly accretion in the naval potential, is in line with its growing stature as a global power.¹⁵

Today, Russia is more concerned with its immediate periphery and does not have the capacity to engage in Asia-Pacific power play. However, China and Russia seeking closer partnership to advance their mutual interest in Asia-Pacific, remains a viable option.

For Japan, China's assertiveness and North Korea's nuclear programme pose serious security concerns. Prime Minister Abe is determined to restore Japan's primacy. He is reported to have proposed a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan and the USA form a 'diamond' to safeguard the maritime space, stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific.¹⁶ In the altered scenario, Japan is focussing on India as a security partner. Mr Modi during his visit to Japan last year spoke of two countries being natural allies. Clearly, India-Japan relations are important in the context of Peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. The Japanese 'New Defence Policy Guidelines' aim to re-craft its military strategy. It plans to spend as much as US \$284 bn, during the period 2011 - 2015, to modernise its Self Defence Forces. Tokyo has removed 1 per cent GDP cap on defence spending. Its defence budget for 2015 is pegged at US \$42 bn, a rise of 2.8 per cent.¹⁷

South Korea remains deeply concerned as it faces volatile security environment with respect to North Korea and China's continued support to Pyongyang. Seoul is also sceptical about the limitation of the US support in the wake of growing Chinese military power. It has launched a 15 years military modernisation programme, allocating US \$550 bn; almost one third set aside for arms purchases.¹⁸

Although historically aligned with dominating Anglo-Saxon power, initially Great Britain and later the USA; presently, Australia sees opportunities for itself in the so called "The Asian Century". While deepening relations with China, it is also building its own defence capabilities and supporting the US rebalancing to Asia-Pacific. It regards Indian and Pacific Oceans as 'one strategic arc'. While seeking trilateral partnership with the US, Japan and South Korea, it takes cognisance of Delhi's growing strategic footprint and perceives India's special role in the context of 'Indo-Pacific'.¹⁹ To prepare for the new security challenges, Canberra has proposed substantial boost in the defence spending, amounting to \$72 bn over the coming two decades.²⁰

The ASEAN has emerged as a formidable economic force with a combined GDP of over US \$2 trillion. Taking pragmatic view of the geopolitical realities, ASEAN have sought to put their act together to resolve disputes through consensus and dialogue, while maintaining organisational centrality. These nations have enhanced cooperation with the USA to check Beijing's growing influence. The mistrust between China and ASEAN is increasing because of South China Sea dispute, with Vietnam and the Philippines directly involved in it. As per data released by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), there is strong evidence of ensuing arms race in the region. Between 2005-09, Singapore's arms imports jumped by 146 per cent, Indonesia's 84 per cent and Malaysia's by an astounding 722 per cent.²¹ Whereas Vietnam does not have the economic potential to match China's arms acquisitions, it has opened its prized military asset; the deep water port in Ran Cam Bay, in the hope of drawing foreign navies, thus enhancing the security of shipping lanes.

The Indian Ocean has emerged as a region of immense strategic importance in the maritime domain. Home to nearly 2.6 bn people, it is being seen as an integrated entity stretching from the West coast of Australia to the Indian subcontinent. The access to the Indian Ocean is primarily through Gulf of Aden, Strait of Hormuz and Strait of Malacca. It is a global highway with 66 per cent oil and 100,000 ships transiting its waters every year.²² Half of global container traffic and 70 per cent of oil trade passes through Indian Ocean.²³ Any interruption in the free flow of oil arteries or trade would have catastrophic effect on the region. Therefore, security and stability of the IOR is of critical importance.

Given its geographic location, natural resources and markets, South Asia naturally integrates into Indo-Pacific region. India, historically a maritime power is seen as an important player in the region, given its geostrategic location. India's 'Look East Policy' alongside strategic engagement with the Gulf region and other smaller island states in the South-Central Indian Ocean is in keeping with its emergence as one of the power centres in the new world order.

China perceives India to be a rival, trying to exercise control over the Indian Ocean, seeking hegemony in the region, besides posturing to contain it. Beijing has taken pains to invest in South Asia and IOR, considering the area to be its extended periphery; as also to reduce dependence on the Malacca Strait, given that 40 per cent of its oil and gas imports pass through Indian Ocean. Beijing's aims to project itself as a resident power in the Indian Ocean, as part of its grand design to play greater security role in the Indo-Pacific. It has adopted deliberate strategy to secure the 'sea lanes of communications'. China has taken numerous initiatives to squeeze India's strategic space. India is definitely concerned about China's posturing and extended reach into its neighbourhood.

India's Strategic Options

The US policy of rebalancing Asia opens wide array of strategic options for India. As a long term strategy, India must seek a role in shaping of political, economic, social and security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. South China Sea is vital for India not only as shipping gateway to East Asia but also a strategic maritime link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It profoundly impacts India's strategic vision, given its expanding economic and security interests.

India enjoys high credibility in the ASEAN region and East Asia. It needs to further deepen the current level of strategic partnership. India's North East Region and Andaman & Nicobar Islands should be brought within the framework of India-ASEAN relations. Indo-Japanese strategic partnership is steadily developing in the backdrop of emerging geo-economics and security environment in the Asia-Pacific. Security cooperation has emerged as an important component of the bilateral relations; institutional framework for which was set-up in 2006.²⁴ The navies of the two countries held first ever joint exercise in June 2012, off the coast of Japan. Negotiations are in progress for the purchase of Japanese US-2 amphibious aircraft.

As India began to shed its continental mindset in the 1990's with the opening of economy, its strategic engagement got revived with increasing dependency on the Gulf region for its energy requirements. Over the years, IOR has emerged as India's geopolitical nerve centre with the island states (Maldives, Mauritius, Sri Lanka and Seychelles) figuring prominently in Delhi's Indian Ocean policy. It was in February 2013, at a seminar in Rhode Island under the aegis of 'Brown-India Initiative', India's then Ambassador to the US had stated; "India's vision apparently is to create a web of interlinkages for the shared prosperity and security in the India Ocean and Asia-Pacific and develop it into a zone of cooperation".²⁵

Prime Minister Modi has rightly focussed on cementing strategic ties with countries in South/South East Asia and Indian Ocean. His recent visit to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka has scaled up the level of engagement, by building on the process of interdependencies with the island states. India needs to play a pro-active role to counter China's grand design of dominating the IOR through initiatives like the 'maritime silk road project' and 'string of pearls' strategy.²⁶

To emerge as a key player in the Indo-Pacific, India ought to leverage its strategic potential to cope with the emerging challenges. Mr Modi has proposed 'collective cooperative' mechanism for the region which entails formulation of integrated policy involving politico-economic initiatives alongside dynamic defence diplomacy. Potential of private sector, military and diaspora ought to be fully optimised.

Given the ongoing phenomenon of the geopolitical shift, Asia-Pacific and IOR are going to be the scene of intense competition and rivalry, as part of fierce balance of power game, driven by national interests. The US 'rebalancing strategy' offers India excellent opportunity to leverage its geostrategic position as a key player in the Indo-Pacific. How it succeeds will largely depend on its calibrated approach in simultaneously engaging with its immediate neighbours to ensure peaceful periphery and extended neighbourhood to pursue its larger strategic interests.

Endnotes

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