

India and the Asia Pacific Region: Challenges and Opportunities

Lieutenant General Kamaleshwar Davar, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)*

Introduction

The West, mainly Europe and the Atlantic region, largely was the centre of gravity in the momentous 20th century marked by two World Wars, the end of colonialism, a bitter Cold War rivalry between the two superpowers (USA and Soviet Union), gigantic economic and technological growth primarily in the West leaving their Asian rivals far behind in indices of human development, military power and thereby influence in the global arena. Nevertheless, the turn of the century witnessed an astonishing upsurge in the fortunes of Asia which today scripts a clear departure from the geopolitics and economic rise of various powers of the last century and has ushered relatively newer players out to exercise a more than eminent role globally. Most strategic analysts have thus dubbed the 21st century to be predominantly an Asian century.

Strategic Importance: Asia Pacific

Prior to an analysis of the strategic significance of a territorial or oceanic expanse, a theatre or a region, it is prudent to define its geographical boundaries, economic linkages and its myriad social and political inter-dependencies. Surprisingly, unlike the Middle East, Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia or SE Asia, the region being referred as Asia Pacific does not lend itself to a universally accepted geographical or a political definition or entity! Most security analysts surmise that this region got its name to facilitate the US strategic forays into Asia as it gradually increased its footprint in Asia. The vast and strategic expanse between the Gulf of Aden and the Straits of Malacca, that essentially is the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which carries over 70 per cent of the world's oil and 50 per cent of the container traffic, also gets tagged in a broader sense to the Asia Pacific. Interestingly, as defined by the UNESCO, 48 countries, big and some infinitesimally small, constitute the Asia Pacific region (including India, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China) but the US has been excluded from this list! Nevertheless, in current strategic discourse, Asia Pacific generally includes the countries of the Pacific Rim (including the USA and Australia), South Asia, SE Asia, East Asia, NE Asia, collectively a large conglomeration of peninsular countries, archipelagos, island nations and island chains. India which essentially is an Asian, South Asian and an Indian Ocean entity is firmly now categorised as a leading power in the Asia Pacific along with China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Singapore, Taiwan among the others in the Pacific Rim.

It is pertinent to note that Asia Pacific consists of nearly 4 billion people out of the world's 6 billion and accounts for nearly 60 per cent of the global GDP.¹ By 2020, seven of the world's ten leading economies are likely to be in the Asia Pacific region.² The United Nations, recognising the growing importance of this region set-up the ESCAP, namely, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Even at the height of the economic crisis the world endured a couple of years back, this region remained the fastest growing region globally, averaging overall 7 per cent growth with China growing at 9.5 and India at 8.3 per cent in 2010 respectively. Almost 50 per cent of the world's maritime trade passes through the confined straits and chokepoints in the archipelagic waters of Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. Thus this region which is of vital economic significance for the entire world lends itself not only to newer forms of regional and global rivalry but also varied forms of traditional and non-traditional security threats like maritime terrorism, sea piracy, poaching, access to territorial waters etc.

This region is also witness to dozens of outstanding and potentially dangerous territorial disputes. For example, those between China and Taiwan, between the two Koreas and nearer home, between India and Pakistan/ China are flashpoints for likely conflicts. *Asia Pacific could also become an arena for the new cold war with an emerging and consequently assertive China taking head-on the sole superpower; the USA, now somewhat weary and over-stretched with its global commitments and not so successful interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.* Some analysts feel that the world's maritime future is likely to be determined in large measure in the Asia Pacific, particularly by the developing relationship between the four major maritime powers of the area, China, India, Japan and the USA.³

Challenges for the USA in Asia Pacific

Since President Obama took office in 2009, the US administration has been consistently voicing the strategic significance of the Asia Pacific region for global stability and especially to the US interests. Obama's predecessor, George Bush, was largely preoccupied with the Middle East and West Asia with the US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan but President Obama's foreign policy priorities remain in the Asia Pacific region consolidating economic linkages, as also, to manage the growing Chinese naval resurgence in this region. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's first overseas visit after the Obama administration took charge, was not to Europe (their traditional starting point) but to Asia where she attended the meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) - the first by a US Secretary of State - and also signed a treaty with the 10 members ASEAN. Interestingly, President Obama consulted many Asian intellectuals and leaders prior to his Asian odysseys and was advised by the respected Singapore veteran Lee Kuan Yew that *"if you do not hold your ground in the Pacific, you cannot be a world leader."*⁴

The recently expounded US National Military Strategy (NMS) opines that the international order has attained 'a strategic inflection point'.⁵ It states that as the USA still endeavours for success in Iraq and Afghanistan, the fastest rising region in many ways is Asia with two rapidly rising powers namely; China and India, dangerous states like North Korea and Iran, and various vibrant and emerging economies all set to play a greater role regionally and globally. Not surprisingly, China's rapid growth militarily in the region has been a source of much worry to the US for the last few years. The NMS declares that the US will closely follow the modernisation of the People's Liberation Army especially with regard to the military balance across the Taiwan Straits. In addition China's— "assertiveness in space, cyberspace, in the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea"⁶ will be also monitored. In addition the NMS expresses concern about China's expanding 'anti-access and area-denial capabilities.... to constrain the US and international freedom of action'.⁷ Without specifically mentioning it, the allusion is clearly to China's development of the Dong Feng 21D anti-ship ballistic missile, anti-satellite weapons, cyber-strike capabilities, emerging long-range precision strike

systems and other military-related technologies. The Pentagon, however reiterates its preparations to ‘safeguard the US and partner nations interests.’ The US acknowledges a ‘responsible leadership role’ for China and the NMS, at the regional level and cites the utility of working with China to ‘counter WMD proliferation, maritime piracy and instability in the Korean peninsula.’ Finally, the US hopes that its defence diplomacy with China will help ease tensions in this region and ‘prevent miscalculation.’⁸

The recently conducted large scale Exercise Key Resolve by the US and South Korean forces primarily to war-game their preparedness against any misadventure by the North Koreans had invited a severe reaction from North Korea. The latter threatened an “all out war” with “unprecedented all-out counteraction”⁹ that would turn South Korea’s capital Seoul into a “sea of flames”.¹⁰ The US and its allies especially South Korea and Japan will have to factor in North Korea’s continuing belligerent behaviour in this region towards them.

China’s Military and the Asia Pacific

China’s military growth, in real terms, commenced in the early 1990s with military spending rates up by over 10 per cent each year.’ Its modernisation was primarily in the protection of its core interests in Taiwan, Tibet and Xingjiang. Its major efforts have been to discourage Taiwan from moving towards independence and also make it operationally problematic for the US to intervene militarily. As it lacked advanced technologies for state-of-the art weapon systems it imported a number of these from Russia. However, concerted efforts by the Chinese over the years have borne fruit and it has vastly improved its abilities to manufacture modern weaponry indigenously. Only recently China unveiled its first indigenously manufactured stealth jet fighter and the Dong Feng 21D anti-ship ballistic missile. Though not yet a true blue water Navy, the Chinese naval force is feverishly working towards it by going in for the manufacture of two to three mid size aircraft carriers, developing a new class of nuclear submarines, better frigates and destroyers. It has now close to 50 modern diesel submarines and China has built new naval bases and has increased its patrolling in the waters not only close to its shores but all across the Indian and Pacific oceans much to the consternation of its maritime neighbours and the USA. Chinese capabilities in ballistic missiles are rapidly improving and it is capable of striking not only across the Taiwan Straits but targets as far off in Japan, India and South Korea. Consequently, China has become more politically and diplomatically assertive along its periphery notably in the East China Sea, South China Sea and the Yellow Sea, and endeavours, off and on, to intimidate other claimants in the region. The shooting down of its communication satellite (the first by any power in the world), naval ships in the Somalian waters, live firing exercises in the South China Sea and expression of strongly worded statements against the US and Japan are all examples of China’s not so ‘peaceful rise.’

Meanwhile, though the overall number of US forces deployed in the Pacific has gone down, the US has also responded to Chinese naval build-up in the region. It is increasing its capability to operate in Asia by deploying more forces in Guam, coordination with Japan in interoperability, sale of advanced weapon systems to Taiwan, deployment of anti-missile systems and increasing surveillance of Chinese naval deployments. Overall, most Asian countries prefer the US to maintain a strong presence in the Asia Pacific region to ensure a degree of deterrence to Chinese ambitions in the region. Though the US remains the predominant maritime power in the Asia Pacific with its ability of deploying a large number of both naval and air expeditionary forces in the region from Hawaii to the Persian Gulf based on nuclear capable carrier battle groups, the growing Chinese capability will now make it difficult for the US to operate in this expanse with impunity especially in the area around Taiwan Strait.

India and the Look East Policy

Though it was way back and prior to our Independence that an Asian Relations Conference was held in New Delhi in 1946 on Jawaharlal Nehru’s initiative, India appeared to have fallen behind in taking any worthwhile Asian community initiatives as it did on the lines of NAM (Non Aligned Nations) movement. Appreciating *the dynamics of this vital region, it was only as late as 1991, that India made amends and embarked on a well thought policy initiative dubbed as the Look East Policy (LEP)*. It underscored a major shift in India’s perspective of the world and Asia both strategically and in nurturing closer economic bonds with its Asian neighbours. The geographical proximity and economic potential of India’s North East region with the countries of East and South East Asia was an important factor for embarking on the LEP apart from China’s growing assertiveness and all encompassing engagement of this region. Initially the thrust of India’s LEP was to, primarily, forge closer economic ties with ASEAN member states. Consequently, India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner in March 1993, a Full Dialogue Partner in 1995, a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 1996 and finally a Summit Level Partner in 2002. Commencing 2003, cooperation in various fields was heralded by states extending now from Australia to East Asia. India subsequently signed the ‘Long Term Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity with ASEAN which is the cornerstone of India’s LEP and finally formalised the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with ten members of ASEAN in August 2009. In 1997, a sub-regional economic grouping called BIST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation) was established to reinforce India’s LEP. Subsequently with the addition of Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal this grouping was enlarged as a political and economic forum to bridge Southeast Asia and South Asia at India’s initiative in 1997 and is now known as BIMSTEC. India encourages BIMSTEC to forge economic linkages with peninsula member countries of the ASEAN to boost the development of its seven North East states. As another extension of India’s LEP, India is also a member of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Project which includes Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam.

A significant aspect of India’s LEP has been enlarging cooperation on security issues both bilaterally with ASEAN nations as well as through multilateral groupings like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which also brings in important non-ASEAN countries of Asia. India has taken the lead in the ARF to initiate dialogue and cooperation on various security aspects like border security, maritime security, energy security and counter terrorism aspects. In keeping with its intensive engagement with nations of the Asia Pacific, *India took over as the co-chair, from Australia, of the Asia Pacific Regional Review Group of the Financial Action Task Force which sets international standards to combat money laundering and terrorist financing*. In addition, during the visit of the Japanese Prime Minister to Delhi in Dec 2009, both nations agreed on measures to enhance security cooperation. The ASEAN quest for a suitable regional security architecture has led to the formation of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus Eight forum. The first meeting of

this forum is being organised in Oct 2011 at Hanoi. This body has as its members, nations of the ASEAN and six members of the East Asia Summit namely India, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and there is a move afoot to include the other major stakeholders, i.e. the USA and Russia too in this forum.

India's LEP, however, can only be successful if its regional cooperation initiatives are backed by adequate military preparedness especially with a formidable three dimensional capable blue water Navy and an Air Force with a transcontinental capability to operate in both the Indian and Pacific oceans simultaneously. The Indian Navy must strive for better interoperability with the other navies in the region with additional 'Milan' type of exercises as it has been doing earlier. India's new initiative, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, provides it a new leverage for its soft power for convergent security in the region. *India's naval preparedness will be of much consequence for ensuring the maritime balance of power in Asia Pacific.*

Australia's Initiatives in Asia Pacific

Sensing the growing significance of the Asia Pacific region, Australia has sought a leading role for itself, openly seeking India's support. Though there have been marked differences between the two countries as regards the Australian stand, of not supplying uranium for Indian reactors or earlier its aircraft 'buzzing' Indian naval ships on training cruises in the Pacific as also its racist treatment of Indian students, Australia now wishes India to take the lead *in forging an Asia Pacific community on the lines of the European Union*. During his visit to India last year, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd expressed that India was central to Asia-Pacific community and Australia and India ought to be natural partners in this region where big power rivalries would have to be 'harmonised and reconciled.'¹¹ Australian Deputy Secretary (Strategy), Peter Jennings, recently stated that Australia had shared interests with India contributing to the regional security architecture¹². A positive step in this relationship was the signing of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in Nov 2009 between the two countries. However, India has to move with caution vis-à-vis Australia as the latter's dealings on earlier occasions have bordered on a display of arrogance towards India while it has no compunction in supplying uranium to a totalitarian regime like China.

The Necessity of Regional Cooperation

Problems affecting most nations today are multi-faceted terrorism, sea piracy, natural disasters, health pandemics, drug trafficking, money laundering, climate change, environmental degradation among others. These problems are generally beyond the capability of a single nation to resolve and calls for genuine cooperation between nations. Certain problems are best resolved regionally; either bilaterally or multilaterally pooling in expertise, resources, information and intelligence. With problems now taking on a formidable and in certain cases a sinister dimension like nuclear terrorism, the adverse fall-out will affect more than one nation and perhaps the region itself. Thus it is incumbent upon all those who are part of a regional entity to resolve all such issues in a spirit of sincere cooperation beyond narrow partisan interests. India's diverse albeit cooperative initiatives are welcome pointers towards this end. Efforts thus must continue to bring on board, China, to join the Asia Pacific mainstream for regional cooperation. China's gigantic economic leaps will make it more energy hungry and as nearly 80 per cent of its oil imports pass from Middle East/West Asia through the Indian Ocean, it can ill afford to have a confrontation with the other nations of the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

Asia Pacific with the Indian and Pacific oceans and many healthy and emerging economies on its rim, apart from the new powers, China and India, is slated to play a pivotal role geo-politically and economically globally. India with its genius and a rapidly growing economy has a vital role to contribute to the stability and prosperity of this region in keeping not only with its aspirations but the expectations of the world towards India. Since the last few years, India has made not only a promising start with its Look East Policy but has been proactive with its many initiatives pertaining to the regional economic and security architecture in Asia Pacific. An enlightened policy based on our accelerating economic growth backed by adequate military muscle will enable India to contribute to peace and stability in the region in cooperation with the USA, Japan and Australia.

***Lieutenant General Kamaleshwar Davar, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)** was commissioned into 7th Light Cavalry on 30 June 1963. He commanded a Corps in Punjab and was the DG Mechanised Forces. He raised the Defence Intelligence Agency in 2002 and retired as the Deputy Chief of the Integrated Defence Staff (Intelligence) on 31 Jan 2004.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLI, No. 583, January-March 2011.