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EXAMINE ROLE FOR INDIA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION



Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd) is a senior fellow in Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS). He joined CENJOWS in year 2009 after nearly 34 years of service in IAF. He has 26 years of working experience in air defence, in field, C&R inspection duties and staff assignments in an IAF command/ Air Head quarters. His areas of research in CENJOWS relate to the space and nuclear strategy.

Indo-Pacific /Asia-Pacific?

The concept of Indo-Pacific Region is gaining significance in the recent times in defence and security studies. The region comprises both Indian Ocean, and the Pacific Ocean. The South China Sea (SCS) is a peripheral sea with in this region. The use of term Indo-Pacific is not new. In the past, it was occasionally used in the early and mid-20th century.¹ In the recent times however, the use of the term has re-emerged in expert commentaries and official statements in preference to the term Asia Pacific which does not include the Arabian Sea and East African coast and the western choke points on the African coast. As against the Asia Pacific, the Indo-Pacific region ranges from East Africa, across the Indian Ocean, to the western and central Pacific, including Japan and Australia. It also includes the choke points in the sea both in the East and West of the Indian Ocean. Hence, its coverage is much larger than Asia Pacific. The geographical coverage of the latter incidentally matches completely with the area of responsibility of The U.S. Pacific command.

The 21st century is considered to be the Asian century. This perception is based on the sterling performance of some of the Asian economies. As a result of this, the region's strategic and economic significance is growing. The trade has surged in the region especially with the rise of Asian powers like China and India. The Indo-Pacific region incorporates

1 <https://thediplomat.com/2012/12/a-term-whose-time-has-come-the-indo-pacific/>

some of the busiest sea lanes in the world. The rise in commerce has created political and strategic interests, along with concerns that these interests may be under threat with the rise of China and its assertive maritime behaviour.



Indo- Pacific Region²

Challenges in the Indo-Pacific Region.

With the economic shift to Asia, the power balance has also shifted to Asia. In Asia, apart from China, India has emerged as a power centre due to its strategic location in the Indian Ocean region and its geographic size, economy and military power. Today, the entire Indian Ocean region has grown into an economic hub. The power struggle is already evident. With rise of China, U.S. power has relatively diminished. To maintain its power balance, a decade ago, the United States devised a policy of 'Pivot Asia' to enhance its military focus in the region with an aim to counter balance China which has laid claims on several group of Islands in the SCS essentially to access the oil, gas and other natural resources located in the region with total disregards to the conflicting claims by other littoral states in the SCS. With this approach, the U.S. also intended to equip and build capacity of the littoral states to face the Chinese Challenge. But, over time China has enlarged the size of the Islands with sea reclamation activity, built infrastructure and have now deployed surface air missiles and anti-shipping cruise missiles to challenge traffic in air and sea if required. The airfields on these Islands are regularly activated with the fighter aircraft to

firmly establish its claims on the region and ward off other claimants.

China depends for 80% of its energy needs from west Asian oil sources which is transported through the Malacca strait. The pipelines supply from its various external sources can just meet 20% of its energy need hence; its dependence on west Asian resource will remain. To ensure safety of its Sea lines of Communication (SLOCs), it would use its naval power which is growing exponentially. At the same time, the China is engaged in developing naval bases in the Indian Ocean. Its Navy has already gained some out of area operation experience by operating for anti-piracy role and maintaining a naval base at Djibouti and developing similar bases at Maldives, Gawadar/Jiwani in Pakistan, and Hambantota in Sri-Lanka etc. Chinese intent becomes clear with its deployment of submarine along with the naval ships in the Gulf of Aden in antipiracy role.



The Chinese Oil Flow³

The Chinese are critical of the U.S. dominance in the region and suspect their presence/engagement with other states in the Indo-Pacific region as interference in the region with the aim to check China's rise. To allay Chinese fears, that U.S. policy is not directed

3 Ibid



against China, it re-christened the 'Pivot Asia' policy to the 'Rebalance Asia' but, this has not removed China suspicion about U.S. intentions. At the same time, this policy has failed to check China's assertive behaviour in the region.

Of late, the rule-based global order is under tremendous pressure in the Indo-Pacific region by some countries which are violating established norms with impunity. North Korea's nuclear programme, developments in the South China Sea and increasing cyber violations are examples of this trend. Along with this, India's relationship with its giant neighbour in the North has been difficult. In past, both sides have been embroiled in a long, on-going border dispute that resulted in a war in 1962 which till today remains a source of tension that has resulted in occasional crises. This has perpetuated a sense of suspicion and mistrust between the two nations. In fact, during last two years, differences have grown considerably between China and India over issues such as the boundary dispute, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Indian membership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group, Chinese selective perspective on terrorism and China's presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The Chinese negative narrative culminated with Doklam standoff in 2017 which showed a real prospect of conflict between us.⁴ In that sense the informal summit between President Xi Jinping and PM Modi on 27-28 Apr 2018 at Wuhan, China was a useful, timely and necessary step to soften the negative narrative and reset the sour ties between us.

India can no longer remain a reticent nation in regional and global politics. We need to play larger role matching our aspirational outlook. PM Modi has set the tone for this in 2014 during his first visit to the U.S., **"India is already assuming her responsibilities in securing the Indian Ocean region. A strong India-U.S. partnership can anchor peace, prosperity and stability from Asia to Africa and from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. It can also help ensure security of the sea-links of commerce and freedom of navigation on seas."**⁵ We thus need to face the new realities and act befitting to our size while maintaining a co-operative and collaborative attitude in the region.

The above situation continue to exist in backdrop of our "look East" policy of nineties which has been upgraded to "Act East" policy in this decade to re-establish and strengthen our religious, cultural and trade link with Southeast Asian nations which in the past had escaped our attention despite their importance to us largely due to our adversarial engagement with Pakistan. In back drop of this, and Chinese aggressive behaviour, the leaders representing Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Myanmar, Thailand, Brunei, Philippines and Malaysia readily accepted to be the chief guests at India's 69th Republic Day parade and to attend the India ASEAN meet. **After this, the ASEAN leaders gave a clear message that India is a very important component for peace, stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region.** There is an anxiety among the ASEAN member states about China at the strategic level. **What the ASEAN states are seeking is not a confrontation between India and China but, a balance in the Indo Pacific region and these find India fitting in that role. The new century now brings**

4 <http://cimsec.org/india-south-china-sea/35520>

5 <http://www.indiafoundation.in/emerging-challenges-in-the-indo-pacific-region/>

India face to face with these new realities. We need to face them because there is no other option.

Why the Indo-Pacific Region has become important?

The region has become important with shift in centre of economic drivers of the world from the West to East, **there is a general view among the economists that 21st century would be an Asian century as the emerging economic power houses China and India are in the region which has led to the economic and strategic significance of the region.** The key finding of the Price Water Cooper's recent report states that the world economy could more than double in size by 2050. In that the emerging markets share could grow around twice as fast as advanced economies. On an average, China would be number one followed by India in the second place and Indonesia fourth. The US could be down to third place in the global GDP rankings while the EU share of world GDP could fall below 10% by 2050. However, the caveat is that emerging economies enhance their institutions and infrastructure. The changes have come along with competitive and assertive maritime behaviour of China which is of serious concerns as it threatens the peace and tranquillity of the region and the world at large. From the Indian perspective, it is vital that Indian interests are safeguarded.

The terms Asia Pacific or Indo Pacific thus merely signify the area of interest in a competitive geopolitical environment. However, some strategists criticise the concept on the ground that term Indo-Pacific encompasses a very large area which precludes an emergence of coherent strategic system. Second, China sees this concept as conglomeration of nations ganging up against it.

Geopolitics of the Region

The Indo-Pacific comprises littorals marked by a multiplicity of cultures, ethnicities, religions, economic models and governance structures. A common link binding the diverse sub-systems within the Indo-Pacific is the sea. The maritime powers, such as Australia, China, Japan, India and the U.S., determine the pivot of the Indo-Pacific region. **The region represents the centre of gravity of the world's economic, political and strategic interests with connotation to the peace and security of the world at large.** Indo-Pacific region is rich in natural resources, especially hydrocarbons which can fuel the industrial engines of the world's economies. The established and emerging powers are competing over these resources. With the global economic power shift; it has swiftly emerged as a centre of international trade and investments. It indeed embodies a large market which is defined by nearly half of the world's population. The emerging trends and issues in the Indo-Pacific offer unique opportunities as well as daunting challenges to the nations.

In this context, regional peace and stability, freedom of navigation and maritime security have become very important as over 90 per cent of the world's trade by volume is by sea. Rise of the China and India should actually offers opportunity for growth to the world but, the Chinese in jest to move ahead have assumed attitude which has created mistrust and anxiety across the region, In a bid to achieve dominance in various realms it has flouted international norms with its aggressive approach in space, land, sea, air and cyber domains



creating tension in the region and world at large. It forced a 73 days border standoff with India at Doklam on the Eastern Sino- Indian border on Himalayas in 2017 where it tried to alter the status quo at tri-junction point of India, China and Bhutan border North of chicken neck area of East India to its advantage. If media reports are to be believed it has already built a road with its aim to gain dominance in the general area despite Indian opposition. This behaviour does not inspire confidence and leads to mistrust and suspicion about its intentions.

The Chinese assertiveness has led to a developing a sense of insecurity among the littoral states of South China Sea where china has laid own historical claims practically on all island territories and the marine resources around them. It has made unwarranted claims and reclamation activities on the islands, where it has located military resources and weapons to firmly control them in total disregard to their contiguity of the littoral ASEAN states, follows restrictive practices on free use sea and air space above with measures like unilateral declaration of ADIZ and specifying the need for notifications by ships and aircraft before their entry, denial of the maritime economic activities, and not following any code of conduct. This behaviour is being extended to the Indian Ocean region on ground of ensuring safety of its sea lanes of Communications (SLOCs) and the trade routes of maritime silk route. The region consists of many of the world's vital choke points for global commerce, which are very critical for the growth of world economy. In addition, the boom in port construction in this region has only heightened the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific and this in turn is likely to generate greater commercial traffic and the possibility for greater strategic competition. This competition could have followed a collaborative or a cooperative model instead the Chinese has turned aggressive, consequent to their economic growth and are building their military power at a furious pace. The recent satellite reports confirming deployment of several weapon systems on the SCS islands, are meant to threaten the other claimants of the islands and impose restrictions on free and unrestricted transit is an undesirable coercive action. Chinese justification of these deployments as its sovereign right is ridiculous and seriously impinges on the right of nation states from carrying out free navigation and passage in the South China Sea and in air space above.

The littoral states of the Indo-Pacific region are alarmed and searching for alternatives to protect their interests. This has led them to enhancing their capacities and exploring alliances to face the challenges. The concept of QUAD with India, US, Japan and Australia which was seen untenable in eighties may become a reality and is being explored by the prospective members to face the Chinese challenge. Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron who was on state visits of India and Australia called for the creation of a new strategic alliance among France, India and Australia to respond to the challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. This statement comes amid heightened tensions in the Pacific, where France has numerous interests.

China plans to pursue maritime silk route as part of BRI supposedly for growth of trade, is being seen having strategic connotation with aim to enhance its influence across the continents in its quest to dominate the world which its leadership denies.⁶ India has raised

6 <https://thediplomat.com/2012/12/a-term-whose-time-has-come-the-indo-pacific/>

sovereignty concerns on China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a BRI project of China which links its Xinxiang region through an all-weather road to Gwadar, a Pakistani port on Baluchistan's coast on Arabian sea, through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir(PoK). China has also been facing an increasing backlash on BRI, not just from India but other countries in Europe and elsewhere for its lack of transparency and economic unviability. President Macron who is critical of the maritime silk route proposal of China, during his state visit of China warned Beijing that its new "Silk Road" initiative should not be "one-way."⁷

PM Modi in his address at the Shangri-La dialogue of 2018 at Singapore gave a new sense to the Indo-Pacific region which according to him should be free of big power rivalries. **"Asia of rivalry will hold Asia back whereas; the Asia of cooperation will shape the century. Competition is normal but, contests must not turn into conflicts. The differences must not be allowed to become the disputes"**.⁸

US Involvement.

The United States as global power has a dominant influence on the international affairs across the world including in the Indo-Pacific region. Now a number of countries with large populations and economies also share the stage with US. Among them, China along with other major and emerging powers such as Indonesia, India, Nigeria and Brazil are prominent. In Asia, China along with Japan, India and Indonesia are the other lead players. As compared to the past, Chinese leadership with Xi Jinping in the helm is now more assertive about its place in the global order and particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Even as China's power grows, it competing more directly with the United States regionally and globally. Even then, at least in the foreseeable future, United States will continue to retain its significant global lead in military and soft power except in the ASEAN region where China having gained dominance in the South China Sea(SCS) is challenging United States influence and military power.

The future balance of power in the Indo-Pacific largely depends on the actions of the United States, China and major powers such as Japan and India.⁹ In this, the U.S. is leading a group of countries in trying to give some firmness to Indo-Pacific geopolitics. In this strategic realignment, India has been accorded an important role in the Indian Ocean region of the Indo-Pacific. The US administration has been using the term Indo-Pacific for leveraging on its allies and partners in the region, the likes of India, Australia, South Korea and Japan to keep China's propensity in check. Hence, the Chinese charge that it is meant to checkmate the Chinese is correct to an extent particularly in SCS where it has laid claims virtually to the whole South China Sea along with frequent foray in the Indian Ocean region.

7 Macron Calls for Indo-Australia Axis to Stop China, The Quaint 03 may 2018 Accessed at <https://in.news.yahoo.com/pacific-tension-macron-calls-india-064136022.html>

8 PM Modi's address at Shangri-La dialogue 2018.

9 Australian white paper of 2015.



Several measures taken by Beijing have created mistrust and suspicion among nations across the world. The China has established an ADIZ over the East China Sea (“ECS ADIZ”) encompassing disputed maritime territory. Similar ADIZ in due course could be unilaterally be declared in South China Sea with an aim to control the entire region. The ADIZ and Chinese claims over the territorial waters of the islands could interfere in freedom of navigation of shipping in SCS and challenge military flights in the air space above it. The deployment of anti-shipping and surface to air missiles on these islands and their use could help the Chinese to enforce its sovereignty over the territorial waters and ADIZ.

Since the Indo-Pacific is primarily a maritime expanse. It has presence and influence of the United States blue-water navy. However, the nature of U.S. influence is certainly different from the time that Washington enjoyed cold war era. Differing from the period of unquestioned dominance, now it seeks supportive partners to achieve balance of power. In this effort, the U.S. has highly supportive partners (like Japan and Australia) and more reserved ones (like India). Its hesitancy notwithstanding, India will invariably find itself a part of this collective security framework, within which it will need to work with countries like the U.S., Japan and Australia. It is unrealistic to expect stopping China in asserting its influence. India will have to deploy some astute diplomacy to manage interests and look for areas for convergences. For instance, China will need to be given considerable freedom in the Indian Ocean region if India is expecting to enjoy unfettered navigation in the South China Sea. Indian PM recent bilateral summits with Chinese President Xi Jinping and President Putin indicate Indian effort to manage the divergent relationships.

India is strategically located in the Indian Ocean region and has the potential and willingness to shoulder regional security responsibilities but, lacks the strength and technology. The US can greatly assist India’s capacity building efforts. There is a commonality of purpose as both are in win-win situation with mutual benefits to both. To collaborate with U.S. India needs assurance that it will not withdraw after seeking its short term benefit. Earlier Obama and now Trump administration seems enthusiastic to collaborate but, this has to translate on the ground before it can be taken seriously. After signing of the nuclear deal with U.S., nothing substantial has emerged. All talks and agreements have turned to rhetoric and concrete evidence of real co-operation between India and United States is yet to fructify. The stumbling block in building relationship is seen to be the bureaucratic mind-set in both countries. U.S. bureaucracy still perceives India of the Russian block which hinders building closeness. The other reason is the U.S. requirement of signing of their foundational agreements by India which it considers are vital for deeper defence co-operation and sharing of defence technology to upgrade our capability.

Obama and even his successor President Trump believe in the free and open Indo-Pacific Strategy. Obama Administration was pre-occupied with Afghanistan and the Middle- East and could not pay much attention to the strategic requirements of the region. This gave China an opportunity to continue on its nefarious design. Now that China has deployed offensive and defensive weapons on some of the islands in the SCS, it is to be seen, how President Trump dissuades China from its destructive path. China in any case has

defended the deployment of weapons as an inherent right to protect its territory. Probably, U.S. can employ its economic clout being the largest trade partner. Sceptics do not believe that this will succeed as it could also harm US interests but, these fears appear to be overstated. However, worsening of trade situation with the U.S. and unpredictability of the President Trump has made the Chinese leadership nervous.

The historic summit between President Trump and President Kim Jong Un on 12 Jun 18, could have implications in the Indo-Pacific region. The détente between North Korea and US could result lowering of US focus in the region with stopping of bilateral exercises and possible reduction of troops from South Korea may help China to further enhance its dominance. How this changed situation will play out is yet to manifest in future.

For some time now, United States and many countries have argued that India should assume a role of the so-called “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean and across the Asia-Pacific. To show India’s importance to the region recently, US even changed the name of its Asia-Pacific command at Hawaii to Indo-Pacific command, which just has a symbolic connotation. By use of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ United States intends to showcase the Indian Navy’s capability as a “Net Security Provider” in Indian Ocean region to moderate China’s behaviour, thereby dissuading its future aggressiveness.¹⁰ This aim is also highlighted in the United States “Asia Pacific Maritime Security Strategy” which notes that United States is “seeking to reinforce India’s maritime capabilities as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean region and beyond.”¹¹ Same was reiterated by the Australian Defense Minister Kevin Andrews who during his September 2015 visit said, “**Australia recognizes India’s critical role in supporting the security, stability, and prosperity of the Indian Ocean region and the stability of a wider, rules-based global order**”. India has accepted its responsibility but has different interpretation to this term. Prime Minister Modi in his address at Shangri-La Dialogue 2018 described our vision of Indo-Pacific in one word – SAGAR, which means ocean in Hindi. And, SAGAR stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region.... Our interests in the region are vast, and our engagement is deep. In the Indian Ocean region, our relationships are becoming stronger. We are also helping build economic capabilities and improve maritime security for our friends and partners. We promote collective security through forums like Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.”¹²

Does India has role in the Indo Pacific ?

Many from the strategic community question the relevance of India’s role in the Indo-Pacific region. The main fear is that it would annoy China which could influence the events in the world against the interests of India. In support of this, there is a common reference to the China’s negative collusive and collaborative role with Pakistan and negative interference in International forums on the Indian interests such as, designation of Masood Azar, a known Pak terrorists who had a role in Mumbai attack in UN, China’s obstructive role in Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) and reforms of United Nations.

10 <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-origin-of-indo-pacific-as-geopolitical-construct/>

11 <https://pace.pk/pacific-ocean-and-indian-preparations/>

12 Excerpts from PM, Modi’s address at Shangri-La dialogue 2018. Accessed from <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=179711>



In particular, questions are raised on India's role in South China Sea which is not contiguous to India. This is a myopic view. The GDP forecast suggests that by 2030 India along with China, Indonesia and Japan would be a major economy. In PPP terms, it would rank third with \$20.9t in size after United States (\$24.0t) and China (\$42t). Nearly 55% of our current sea borne trade passes through the South China Sea hence, as India grows it will seek greater role in the geopolitics including in the Indo-Pacific region.¹³ Till then, India has to manage interests and look for areas for convergence with China.

As a democracy, we have always supported a free and open order in the world. Now, we have the potential as well as some capability, and then diffidence in our approach merely raises questions on validity of our desire to be recognised in the world matching our size and strength. This has been supported by our history in particular on our ancient linkage with South East Asia.

Prime Minister Modi in his address at the Shangri-La dialogue has set at rest the sceptics on relevance of Indo-Pacific to India. He gave altogether a novel perspective to the concept of Indo-Pacific by shifting it from rivalry and high handedness by few to cooperation between all stake holders of the region. In his keynote address at Shangri-La dialogue, PM Modi had said an "Asia of rivalry" will hold the region back while an Asia of cooperation will shape the current century." He admitted that India China relations have many layers. His prognosis was that Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together with trust and confidence while being sensitive to each other's interests." "We should all have equal access as a right under international law to the use of common spaces on sea and in the air that would require freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law"¹⁴

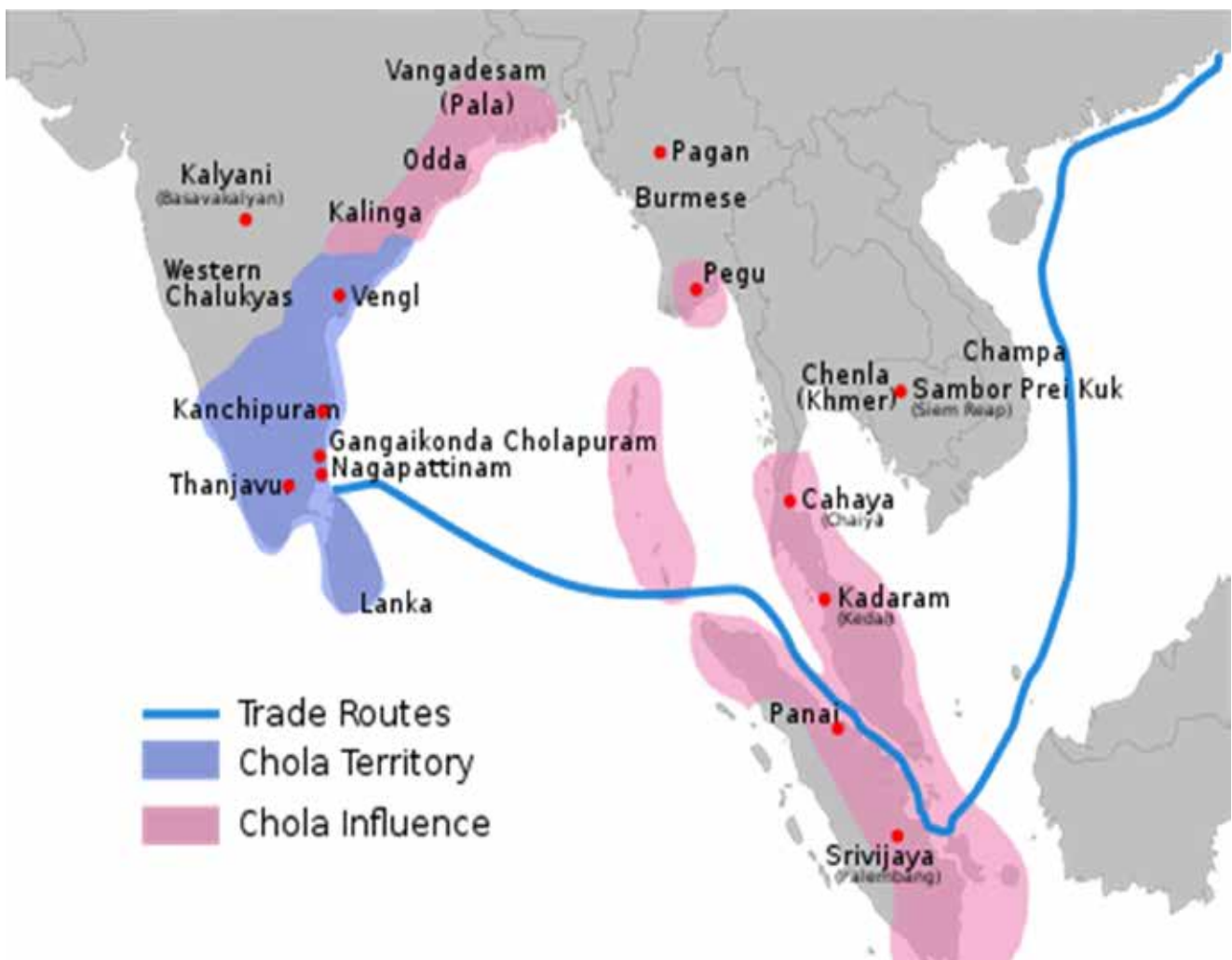
Historical perspective

Historical India's links with Indo-Pacific are not new. Since ancient times India had a deeper trade and religious and cultural links with South Asian states. Entire South East Asia, Japan, Korea, Central Asian states and China were under Indian Buddhist influence starting around 200 BC until around the 15th century. Kingdoms in the Southeast coast of the Indian subcontinent had established trade, cultural and political relations with Southeast Asian kingdoms in Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Malay Peninsula, Cambodia and Vietnam. The excavation of world oldest tidal dock at Lothal on the coast of Gujarat proves our ancient external trade links with West Asian nations. The recovery of artefacts from the archaeological excavation sites in Mesopotamia, Bahrain, and Oman show that these had trade links with Indus Valley civilisation. In the middle ages, the Cholas, Chera, Pandya and Pallava dynasties of South India carried out extensive trade with South eastern nations. Thus, in the past, India prospered politically and socially because of its seafaring trade with West Asia, South East Asia and Europe. This is true even in the present times. Up to 97% of the India's international trade is seaborne. In that, nearly

13 <https://thediplomat.com/2013/08/reaffirming-indias-south-china-sea-credentials/>

14 Excerpts from PM, Modi's address at Shangri-La dialogue 2018. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=179711>

half of it is through South China Sea (SCS). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) constitutes one of India's largest trade partners, with total trade valued at \$71 billion in 2016/2017.¹⁵ How can then India ignore the safety of its sea trade? It is essential that we are able to carry out unrestricted sea trade without any threat from sea piracy or inimical powers which would impose limitations as an instrument of their state policy. India therefore, shares ASEAN's vision for peace and prosperity through a rules-based order for the oceans and seas. Respect for international law, notably UNCLOS is critical for this. Hence, whether nudged by United States or not, Indo Pacific region encompasses India's area of interest. We therefore, must co-operate with likeminded nations to ensure this. A spectacular ASEAN-India commemorative summit, which ended with all 10 ASEAN heads of state who attended as chief guests of the Republic Day parade on 26 January, is an effort to build such relationship. To maintain close cultural, religious and trade links with South East Asia we followed a "look East" policy which is now upgraded to "Act East" policy for seeking much closer interaction with the South Asian states.



Indo- Pacific Region ¹⁶

15 An article in Indian Express 06 May 2018 Accessed at <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/jan/28/asean-calls-for-stronger-trade-partnership-1764495.html>

16 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14661123>



India,s vision of “Indo-Pacific”

Since 2010 when the Indo-Pacific idea gained currency, statements by India’s apex political leaders indicate that New Delhi has found promise in the idea including on its rationale and objectives to further India’s national interests in its extended Eastern maritime neighbourhood. PM Modi in his address at the Shangri-La dialogue has asserted that India does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or as club of limited members. His depiction of the Indo-Pacific region is a positive one and has many elements:-

- (a) It stands for a free, open and inclusive region which embraces us all in common pursuit of progress and prosperity.
- (b) Southeast Asia is at the centre. ASEAN will be central to the future.
- (c) Our common prosperity and security require us to evolve, through dialogue, common rules–based order for the region and it must apply equally to all global commons Such an order must believe in sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as equality of all nations irrespective of size and strength. The rules must be based on consent of all and non-dependence on force.
- (d) Have equal access to use the common spaces on the sea and in the air that would require freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the international law
- (e) Support rule based, open and balanced and stable trade environment in the Indo-Pacific region.
- (f) Connectivity is vital for enhancing trade and prosperity. But such initiatives must be based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability. Promote trade and not strategic competition.
- (g) Competition among the stake holders is normal but it should not be allowed to become disputes¹⁷

The “Indo-Pacific” construct provides India a valuable opportunity to partner with the resident countries and major stakeholder powers of Indo-Pacific, with whom these interests converge.¹⁸ China has posed a challenge to littoral states in the South China Sea in all above elements and slowly extending its influence towards the Indian Ocean region. Going by its past conduct, its behaviour in IOR is not expected to be benign. Therefore, India also seeks to develop a credible strategic deterrence against China. The country’s geographic location allows it to assert itself in the Indian Ocean region in a manner that exceeds its capabilities. India’s long Eastern coastlines provide access and command over the Bay of Bengal, while its Western coast provides access to the Arabian Sea. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located close to critical sea lines, provide comfortable access to the Malacca Straits and the Southern reaches of the Indian Ocean.

17 Excerpts from PM Modi’s address at Shangri-La Dialogue 2018 accessed at <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements>.

18 <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-origin-of-indo-pacific-as-geopolitical-construct/>

Its naval limitations aside, India's contributions in fighting maritime piracy both off the Horn of Africa and in Southeast Asia are noteworthy. The Indian navy's performance during natural calamities and in search and rescue operations (SAR) after the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the Maldives Fresh water crisis of 2014, and during SAR operations for MH370, demonstrate its strength.

The term "Net Security Provider" does not mean domination of the other states of the region rather as PM Modi described our engagement with other states of the region in the Shangri-La dialogue 2018 in one word "SAGAR", which stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region. The Indian Navy, has clarified the term "Net Security provider" in its maritime security document (IMSS-2015) as maintaining "the state of actual security available in an area, upon balancing prevailing threats, inherent risks and rising challenges in the maritime environment, against the ability to monitor, contain and counter all of these". This definition however, does not include the geographical scope of the region where India would pursue the above defined role. But, it could be considered in the region where we have the latent capacity, leaving area which is beyond our immediate strategic considerations.

It is in this backdrop, there has been in formal dialogue between India, US, Japan and Australia to look at the possibility of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD or QUAD). The dialogue was initiated in 2007 by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan but, did not progress due to withdrawal by Australia and reservation by India too. This diplomatic and military arrangement was widely viewed as a response to increased Chinese economic and military power. The Chinese government responded to the Quadrilateral dialogue by issuing formal diplomatic protests to its members. During the 2017 ASEAN Summit, once again effort has been made to revive the quadrilateral dialogue in face of growing tensions in the South China Sea primarily caused by China and its territorial ambitions. While India does not seek formal military alliance as is seen between US, Japan and Australia but, it is not averse to partnership with the like-minded nations to balance Chinese aggressiveness which apart from the strategic reasons is also guided by bilateral issues such as an unresolved border dispute between India and China, its claim on India's Arunachal Pradesh, India's opposition to China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is part of the Belt and Road Initiative(BRI).

The Indo-Pacific region covers three distinct regions, Pacific Ocean, South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Pacific Ocean

United States maintains nearly **800** military bases in more than **70** countries and territories abroad. In Indo-Pacific, U.S. forces are located at Guam, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore and Hawaii besides, at some island territories in the Pacific. Its Pacific command controls naval interests of U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region from Hawaii which covers roughly 52 percent of the Earth's surface, stretching from the waters off the west coast of the United States to the west coast of India, and from the Arctic to the Antarctic.



The U.S. Navy suffered decline with a 40 percent reduction in surface warships and attack submarines from 1990 to 1996. The Navy's Pacific posture weakened further over the next two decades, as the focus of naval deployments shifted to wars in the Middle East. Despite this, U.S. continues to be a dominant power in the Indo-Pacific region and effectively counters Chinese challenge in the Pacific and South China Sea. Pursuing "Pivot Asia" strategy of 2009 which was re-christened to "Rebalance Asia" had military and economic angle. The concept had essentially three approaches. One, redeploying 60% of naval resources from Europe and the Middle East toward East Asia in the Indo-Pacific region to counter the Chinese challenge. Second, U.S. sought to establish Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free trade agreement without China with an aim to seek closer ties both militarily and economically in the years ahead with the Pacific Rim countries. Third, U.S. joined ASEAN security architecture ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). U.S. meanwhile has withdrawn from the TPP. The concept of Pivot Asia (Rebalance Asia) has not contained the rise of the China instead; it has made China more aggressive. This was due to half-hearted and inconsistent approach on the issue by the American leadership. The recent developments like location of anti-aircraft and anti-shipping missiles and other defence infrastructure on the disputed south china islands by China Sea support this perception and it has damaged the faith of the ASEAN states in U.S. capacity to restrain china. In spite of all this, US is dominant power and can alone act along with the littoral states. **India neither has the capacity or wherewithal to take any meaningful role in the Pacific region. United States and the Pacific Rim states are better suited to take on any strategic role in the Pacific.**

South China Sea (SCS)

The South China Sea is the largest marginal sea in the West Pacific region. It is located south of mainland China and is bounded by ASEAN states like Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. It connects the Pacific through the Bashi and Balintang channels in the northeast, and the Mindoro and Balabac straits in the southeast; joins the Java Sea through the Karimata and Gaspar straits, and is linked with the Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca in the southwest. The sea plays an important role in the economic development of the coastal countries which probably is the reason for the claims and counterclaims of the littoral states. The South China Sea contains over 250 small islands, atolls, shoals, reefs, and sandbars. The prominent among them are the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, the Pratas Islands, and Scarborough Shoal. The region is rich in fisheries resources and oil and gas reserves. U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates that the South China Sea holds the modest amount of 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas¹⁹.

Chinese Propensity in South China Sea (SCS)

Several countries have made competing territorial claims over the South China Sea. Such disputes have been regarded as Asia's most potentially dangerous point of conflict. Both People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC, commonly known

19 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/05/how-do-you-say-drill-baby-drill-in-chinese/>

as Taiwan) claim almost the entire body as their own, demarcating their claims bounded within the nine-dotted line. Besides, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore are making conflicting claims on some group of Islands / straits countries making competing claims. ASEAN states are keen that the territorial disputes within the South China Sea do not escalate into armed conflict. China favours bilateral dialogue but, fearing of being bulldozed in discussion ASEAN States favour multilateral dialogue. Smaller nations can gain leverage over China only if they force it to negotiate in multilateral forums. The South China Sea is thus the biggest flashpoint for potential conflict between China and neighbours like Vietnam, Philippines, and others.



South China Sea Region



Indian Interests in the South China Sea

India is the third largest oil consumer in the world after China and America. India imports more than 80% of its energy needs making it the energy source with the highest import dependency.²⁰ It is likely to grow further by 4.2% annually with push towards manufacturing. India therefore, would need to secure new energy sources. India has been continually involved in offshore energy development projects in the SCS since the early 1990s and would look for new oil and gas blocks and conducting oil exploration in the region. China objects to the oil exploration by ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) in SCS on Vietnam's invitation, claiming that this infringes China's legitimate rights and interests in the SCS, a charge which is rejected as untenable as our oil exploration project in SCS is bilateral and commercial in nature. Moreover, if China could justify its involvement in CPEC in POK then Indian oil exploration projects in South China Sea have similar connotation. India, which is ramping up ties with Vietnam, calls for freedom of navigation in the SCS through which trillions of dollars of trade happens every year. With half of our maritime trade passing through the Malacca Straits, any instability in the SCS would adversely affect the shipping lanes and have a knock-on effect on India's economy. Similarly, should a potentially hostile power come to control this region, it could threaten India's access to this vital waterway. New Delhi's involvement in the SCS thus, focuses on three objectives. **First**, to ensure peace and stability in the region and keep the vital sea lanes open; **second**, to maintain cordial relations with regional powers; and **third**, to ensure that no potentially aggressive external power comes to dominate the region. However, India lacks capacity to enforce this. The region is best looked after by the littoral states, U.S, Japan and Australia. India in past has refused to participate in joint patrols suggested by Admiral Harris, Commander US Pacific Command in the SCS during Raisina dialogue 2016.

Chinese Quest for Domination beyond South China Sea.

China is building a blue-water navy and creating its overseas bases in the Arabian and South China seas. In its 2015 white paper, it categorically states that "The traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned, it is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security." Though the force it contemplates will hardly compete with the U.S. Navy's global presence, China seems determined to dominate a significant arc of waters around Asia, from the horn of Africa, across the Indian Ocean to all the way to Korea. In the process, it is building a strong naval force which will have capacity to carry out "sustained blue water operations" and "multiple missions around the world," including full-spectrum warfare. By 2030, China should have enough aircraft carriers to ensure that the South China Sea will become what the Pentagon has termed a "Chinese lake."

20 <https://qz.com/247213/why-india-is-spending-330-million-a-day-on-imported-oil-and-gas/>

As on now, China has two aircraft carriers. Chinese first aircraft carrier **Liaoning** was acquired as unfinished Soviet Kuznetsov-class carrier from Ukraine in 1998. It was successfully retrofitted in a naval dock yard at Dalian and launched in 2012. China has recently launched its 2nd carrier(**Shandong**) at Dalian for sea trial. It was built in record five years. China's third aircraft carrier is under construction and is likely see several technological improvements over the country's first two. The carrier known as 002, has been under construction since 2015. It is likely to be larger than her predecessors and sport an electromagnetic launch system for aircraft, facilitating operations by a larger, heavier aircraft to conduct longer distance flights with more weaponry.²¹

China is building two new submarines every year, it has already assembled a fleet of 61 both diesel- and nuclear-powered, and their number is projected to reach 80 soon. Each of its four nuclear submarines carries 12 MIRV missiles that can hit anywhere in the United States²². China already has a modern navy of 320 ships, backed by land-based missiles, jet fighters, and a global system of surveillance satellites. In addition, Beijing has launched dozens of amphibious ships and coastal corvettes, giving it naval dominance in its own waters. It has an aim to build over 500 ships for its navy. Its current anti-ship ballistic missiles have a range of 2,500 miles and so could strike U.S. Navy vessels anywhere in the Western Pacific. Beijing's aims to extend its capacity and project its power beyond, has since 2011 began acquiring overseas bases. It has invested almost \$250 million at its first overseas base at Gwadar, Pakistan. In 2016, it began building a major military facility at Djibouti on the Horn of Africa. In Aug 2017, Djibouti became the first overseas base which has given its navy access to the oil-rich Arabian Sea. Simultaneously, at Sri Lanka, which is located at a midpoint in the Indian Ocean it has settled its multi-billion-dollar Sri Lanka debt and have acquired a strategic port at Hambantota, which has potential for a future military use.²³

Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

The Indian Ocean is geo-strategically, geo-politically and geo-economically important in the current global security landscape, with a contest for power and influence among major powers in the region and beyond.

China's Navy entry into the Indian Ocean occurred around 2009, mainly to counter piracy in the Horn of Africa. Piracy in the Horn of Africa, which held the world merchant marine fleet to ransom, is near zero at present. But the navies continue to be in the Indian Ocean.

21 <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a15392390/chinas-next-aircraft-carrier-002/>

22 The Type 094 submarine (Jin-class) is believed to have long ranged JL-2 missile, which has an 8,000 km range that can carry 3 to 4 MIRVs.

23 <https://www.thenation.com/article/is-a-modern-chinese-navy-a-threat-to-the-united-states/>



Chinese maritime infrastructure projects started taking place in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Chinese funded ports, highways and bridges and economic zones are coming up in multiple places in the region. China maintains that it does not have any strategic and military objectives in investing in these projects and that they are purely of an economic or commercial nature. But, this is taken with a pinch of salt by the strategists in India and by the West. China's economic entry into Sri Lanka has thrown open its doors to military entry also, at least tentatively for now. This apprehension has led to the militarization of the Indian Ocean region.

According to South China Morning Post, China has established an underwater surveillance network which will help its navy track target vessels more accurately and give it a cutting edge in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The system collects information about the underwater environment, particularly water temperature and salinity, which the navy can then use to more accurately track target vessels as well as improve navigation and positioning, the Post says. "A network of platforms -- buoys, surface vessels, satellites and underwater gliders that gather data from the South China Sea, and the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans. That information is then streamed to three intelligence centres, in the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, the southern province of Guangdong, and a joint facility in South Asia where it is processed and analysed for use .

Through the Act East policy, India is seeking to intensify its engagement with ASEAN states. Besides, increased economic engagement, strategic cooperation was expanded through joint naval exercises, generous lines of credit, military training, and sales of military hardware with regional states. Moreover, the enhanced presence of Indian military assets in the area not only served to protect the sea lanes, but also provided 'domain awareness' of potential regional developments. The multilateral "Milan" and the "Malabar" series of exercises involving the U.S., India, Japan and Australia are major steps towards integration of the non-Chinese forces in the region. In addition, India holds bilateral naval exercises like the SIMBEX, SLINEX and JIMEX with Singapore, Sri Lanka and Japan respectively.

To counter China, the US, India and Australia are exploring a strategic alliance called the Quadrilateral or Quad for short. India has embarked on the ambitious multi-million-dollar "Sagar Mala" development project to develop its ports along the Eastern and Western coasts consistent with the name of the project which is Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). The engagements with regional and extra regional powers like US, Japan and Australia could serve to counter China's growing influence in the region. France too is keen to develop close cooperation with India about the emerging challenge from China in the Indian Ocean.²⁴

24 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-france-security-accord-has-china-in-mind/articleshow/63245472.cms>

In 2016, India rejected a proposal from the chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Harry B. Harris that the navies of Japan, Australia and India could join the U.S. in preserving freedom of navigation in the contested waters of South China Sea. The Indian Ocean region holds priority for India besides, it will fritter away the naval resources at faraway place than being usefully employed in own region. Navy even lacks the capacity for engagement in two regions moreover, If India and the U.S. have not contemplated similar kind of patrol in Indian Ocean, what could justify India and U.S. patrolling waters of South China Sea.

While we are preparing to play our role in the Indo- Pacific, there are serious structural and operational handicaps it has overcome. Indian navy is the smallest service with smallest budget of among services. Would it be able to manage the new defined role in the Indo-Pacific is moot question . It would have to grow and that too fast. China has launched its second aircraft carrier in record time of just five years. In contrast India's carrier is years away from becoming operational. Our second carrier INS Vikrant is in making since 2013 and is likely to be ready for sea trial in 2022 now. Our Andaman Nicobar command the first tri-service command with the best location for the Indo-Pacific region remains underequipped and needs to be strengthened²⁵ .

Conclusion

India has embraced the Indo-Pacific concept including the extended strategic opportunities and responsibilities which go along with it . India along with its partners is committed to a free, open, transparent and rule based peaceful , prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty, territorial integrity, freedom of navigation and aircraft over flights are allowed without any restrictions India's neighbourhood is demonstrating changes under China's influence.

There has been a constant Chinese strategic presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). At the multilateral level, it has invested significant capital to push ahead its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which has strategic connotation but, same is being denied by China however, India and European nations do not trust china's claims. This was expressed by the French President during his visits of China as well as India. The sudden revival of the QUAD and the overt display of its militarisation show how serious the members of the QUAD consider the Chinese threat. U.S. will play a major role in the QUAD as the most powerful country in the world and its support is required for effective rule-based order.

The National Defence Strategy (NDS) and the National Security Strategy (NSS) released recently by the U.S. lay considerable focus on the 'Indo-Pacific'. It stresses India to play a weighty role in the Indo-Pacific. India can take the responsibility for the security of the Indian Ocean which it considers as its primary area of interest. The new US national security



strategy states that it supports India's leadership role in the security of the Indian Ocean and throughout the broader region. This will allow the U.S. which has major presence in the IOR to allocate more naval assets in the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. This will help India as it will force the Chinese Navy to allocate more resources in those areas than expand its footprint in the Indian Ocean.

No single country in the Indo-Pacific region can rise to the challenge posed by China. A co-operative partnership among the likeminded nations can help to face the challenge. India has historically been averse to any military alliance directed against any other country. Hence, co-operative and collaborative approach with stake holders including the China can help. Recent informal summit between PM Modi and President Xi Jinping provided another option to look at the issue and should not be misread by the strategists as any change in Indian approach to the problem. The summit in fact provided an opportunity to both leaders to understand each other concerns and interests and reflect on multiple problems faced by two nations and set goals. While no formal commitments were made in the summit but, a collaborative approach does help in scaling down the tempers. This however, in no way should lower our caution and building of an effective deterrent to avoid conflicts must remain in the focus.

Disclaimer : Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES (CENJOWS)

Kashmir House, Rajaji Marg, New Delhi-110 011

Tele. No. : 011-23792446, 23006535, 23006538/9 | **Fax** : 011-23792444

Website : <https://cenjows.gov.in> | **E-mail** : cenjows@yahoo.com