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EVOLVING DEFENCE POLICY LANDSCAPE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

BY DR HARSH V PANT

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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The significance of the Indo-Pacific region is an inevitable fact for its geographical location and vast resources. Strategically, the Indo-Pacific region is the connecting point between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Economically, the region is home to major economies, amounting to 60% of global GDP comes from the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, the cumulative annual trade volume of this region is worth USD 5.3 trillion. China does not acknowledge the term because of India's centrality, while the U.S. officially recognise the term 'Indo-Pacific'. Shinzo Abe, while speaking at the Parliament of India, in 2007, first time gives the concept of '*connecting two seas*', i.e., Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, becomes the Indo-Pacific region.

In this context, it is important to understand the regional dynamics, its challenges and the power equality of Indo-Pacific region.

Theoretical underpinnings

There are few prominent theories that can be incorporated in explaining the region's current situation. On one hand, China's mighty rise is unavoidable fact, on the other hand, the world is currently in a power transitionary phase under the 'Power Transitioning Theory', whereas simultaneously, the relative decline of the U.S, and the emergence of the multipolar world, there is no hegemon in the current world order. The arms race and capacity-building of the countries are the reflections of their 'security dilemma'.

Traditional and non-traditional challenges

Considering the existing traditional security challenges like territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and Taiwan Strait and the presence of multiple players including the U.S., Japan, South Korea, China, and India, the security environment of the region is constantly evolving. While, the boundary disputes are still there, the shifting towards non-traditional security issues like maritime piracy, terrorism, and marine ecosystem degradation has blurred the boundary of security issues.

There are two types of challenges in the Indo-Pacific:

Structure Challenges: Divergent national interests, diverse political systems, and limited regional security framework under a pan concept of Indo-Pacific. The region has some mini-lateral and trilateral security alliances and groupings. While groupings of like-minded countries such as QUAD and alliances like AUKUS will remain the key forces to shape the regional balances, the lack of institutional framework of these groupings is a major

drawback. ASEAN's centrality in the region, but institutionally ASEAN lacks robust mechanisms for collective conflict resolution.

Situational Challenges: It incorporates military escalation, supply chain disruptions, socio-political instability, and cybersecurity threats. In the context of military escalation, the arms race, and border side tension including the recent China's repeated incursions across the Taiwan Strait have made the region vulnerable.

Evolving defence policies of various countries

The contrasting security priorities of the U.S. and China are the key driving force behind the changing defence posture of both countries. While the U.S.'s defence posture shifting from an 'over the horizon' approach to a 'forward-leaning' approach, China is more focused on 'Grey Zone Warfare', and force projection. On one hand, this is a defining moment for great power dynamics, on the other hand, the role of emerging powers like India, and Japan, are crucial in the region. India's reiteration of 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and Japan's transition from a defensive defence system to an offensive one with an increased defence budget will play a key role in the region. India's shifting from the 'inward-looking' approach in South Asia and IOR to broader-based presence in Indo-Pacific will remain a key issue for China in the coming years.

Role of small players in the region

The crucial role of small player especially of the ASEAN countries will remain a key to shape the geopolitical scenario of the region. While the discussion of power dynamics is based on what approach will be undertaken by the U.S, China, India, Japan, countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore and Philippines will remain in key focus for the broad-based 'Balance of power' strategy. Among the ASEAN countries, the defence expenditure of the Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore is significant. The ongoing tussle between China and Philippines have tightened its ties with the US, whereas Vietnam's neutral 'NOs policy' will have a contrasting policy among small players in the region. The economic dependency of the ASEAN countries vis-à-vis China, as per the theory of liberalism, might deter to de-escalate the situation, but the key driver of the economic transactions will be the bilateral political trust.

Way forward for India

India needs to step up in the region:

1. India should increase its maritime presence in the region.
2. India should collaborate with the like-minded countries apart from its QUAD partners.
3. India needs to strengthen its relations with the ASEAN countries.

4. India needs to build the resilience network to deal with the non-traditional security challenges like maritime environment degradation.
5. India should utilise both the hard power and soft power to utilise its full potential.
6. India should promote its own model for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Analysis

Strategically, the Indo-Pacific region is a vital in terms of its bridging location and international trade. The presence of Malacca strait and Suez Canal has heightened the importance further. Every country has different definition for 'Indo-Pacific' as part of their national interest. The evolving defence policies of the emerging powers like India, Japan and the balance of the small ASEAN countries are constantly shaping the power dynamics in the region. While, the great power competition will remain a focal point in the coming years, but inevitably the other key and small players and their intertwined relations between the power transition and multipolar world order is a distinctive element of the region. China's assertiveness and the US's counter-strategy will remain the same, considering the role of emerging players of the region, the multipolar order of the Indo-Pacific will be the determining factor of future alliances and partnerships.