

From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific Change of Name or Change of Strategy?

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Introduction

In the opening week of June 2018, the topic of concern in the security and geo-political realm was the emergence of the phrase “Indo-Pacific” in a prominent manner. While this terminology has been prompted for quite some time from at least 2007, it is creating the buzz in 2018 with the United State’s proposed policy of adopting a more India-centric security approach in the maritime realm. The previously dominant discourse, “Asia-Pacific”, has been overlooked by the Donald Trump Administration in favors of “Indo-Pacific”. However, change of nomenclature does not necessarily translate into a complete change of strategic vision, although there are several indications for the vision and its growing importance in contemporary times. The question, therefore, remains - how much of the policy is rhetoric, and how much comprises of actual commitment? Also, if there is the implementation of the policy - who seeks to gain, and who stands to lose?

Origins

One of the earliest persons who coined the term “Indo-Pacific” was Gurpreet Khurana. The 2007 January issue of the esteemed journal *Strategic Analysis*, published by the joint effort of Routledge and Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA, India), saw Khurana’s articulation of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ referring to “the maritime space stretching from the littorals of East Africa and West Asia, across the Indian Ocean and western Pacific Ocean, to the littorals of East Asia.”

Khurana’s title, "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation", was later picked up in spirit by the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzō Abe. In his speech to the Indian Parliament in August 2007, Abe talked about the "Confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans" as "the dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity" in the "broader Asia" region. Moreover, in the same year, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was initiated by Abe, comprising of India, Australia, Japan and the United States. Informally known as “The Quad”, the dialogue was seemingly short-lived as the then Australian

Prime Minister had to withdraw from the strategic partnership due to Beijing's negative concerns.

Development of the Notion

From 2010 and onwards, the Indian Government has been using the term with deliberateness. It had spread beyond the Indian borders from about 2011 and so forth, as strategic analysts, high-level government and military leadership in various states have denoted this region. The most prominent usage can be seen through the rhetoric's of Australia, Japan and very strongly in the recent times, by the United States. Since 2011, the term 'Indo-Pacific' is being used increasingly in the global strategic and geopolitical discourse. An official documented notion of the term "Indo-Pacific", however, had to wait till 2013, when it first appeared in Australia's Defence White Paper.

Kites Flying High

While it has been debated as to whether the idea of "Indo-Pacific" will lead to any change in popular "mental maps" of the understanding of the world by the strategic realm, the recent actions of the United States have led towards the thought among many that Indo-Pacific may have broken the cocoon of being a mere rhetoric and now is flying high for being regarded as a coherent policy, focusing on strategic stability.

While the Barack Obama Administration had shied away from using "Indo-Pacific" while favoring the landmass-based notion of "Asia-Pacific", the Donald Trump Administration is not showing any remorse for reviving the idea. A sign could be seen in 2017 when the Quad had resurfaced by dint of the United States National Security Strategy. It pledged to increase quadrilateral co-operation with Japan, Australia and India. In November 2017, some senior officials from these states informally partook on sideline discussions with one another during the East Asia Summit in Manila, on the issue of achieving common goals and overcoming challenges for making "Indo-Pacific" a viable reality. But New Delhi did not explicitly mention upholding a rule-based order and international law, freedom of navigation and over flight or maritime security in the region, unlike the actions of Canberra, Tokyo and Washington D.C.

In 2017, US officials started using the term "Indo-Asia Pacific", which indicated the shifting of America from the previous "Asia-Pacific" notion towards a more "Indo-Pacific" approach, while keeping intact a geographic inclusiveness.

Name Change? Or Strategy Change?

A break from such neutrality was noted when the term “Indo-Pacific” got a mention in the joint statement issued by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and United States President Donald Trump on 26 June 2017 during the former visit to White house. Priority was given to the two states’ co-operation as central to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region with the vision of expanding and deepening strategic partnership that is necessary in advancing common objectives like combating terrorist threats, promoting stability across the Indo-Pacific region, increasing free and fair trade, and strengthening energy linkages.

Many would argue that the transformation of the term “Asia-Pacific” into “Indo-Pacific” is more than a semantic phenomenon. As a concept Asia-Pacific is too vast , relying mostly on intangible elements comprised of relevant states and institutional actors, the strategic concepts and the actor’s possible actions. It encompasses energy, trade and investment ties with the Middle East, Africa and South Asia.

However, the term “Indo-Pacific” specifies an integral link between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. This term, as proposed, perceives these two oceans as one strategic theatre - at least so has been thought by Australian and Japanese strategic modes of thought. During the Shangri-La Dialogue 2017, organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Australian and Japanese high officials asserted the existence of “Indo-Pacific”, but the Secretary of Defense of the United States, James Mattis, refrained.

Possibilities

The year 2018 provided a significant departure from the previous view. Just some days prior to the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, the title of the formerly United States Pacific Command in Hawaii was changed into the United States Indo-Pacific Command. The name suggests the growing relationship between the United States and India, while underlining a gambit to undercut China’s growing dominance in the region, especially in the context of maritime security.

The words of the US Secretary of Defense James Mattis had also taken a significant departure from the ones of last year, as he directly protested against China’s revisionist ambitions and strategic competitiveness. China’s aggressive manoeuvres (military and economic alike) in the South China Sea was suggested as “predatory” by Mattis. However, Mattis also welcomed China if it decided to play by the rules.

Criticisms

Any rhetoric needs sound backing up of willingness and capability to transform into a sound policy. This is where the announcements of Mattis need deeper implications, as he promised to implement the Indo-Pacific strategy by renewing American investment, working to create rule of law, focusing attention to the maritime region and deepening alliances. Although it is heralded as a sign of broader strategy and regional engagement, gaps are still seen between pledges and ground reality, i.e. the absence of a real strategy, policy enumeration, implantation plan, resourcing and budget. Moreover, the United States's pendulum policies towards North Korea leaves worries for the US allies that the American President might not be yet ready to take on a delicate and hugely consequential negotiation.

The 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue had provided insights on approaches to the "Indo-Pacific", but had also left things in vagueness. In the keynote address, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had emphasized on a principled "Indo-Pacific" - which is a strong return from the vague read-out of 2017. While the issues of a rules-based order was settled - where building a free and open system upholding the rights of states and rule of law gathered importance, New Delhi and Washington are not exactly on the same page as to how to defend such order. Modi walked a fine rope as he stated that Indo-Pacific was a geographic region and not a strategy directed against any state - which was seen as a victory from the Chinese side. This diplomatic manoeuvre was also seen in Modi's avoidance of any specific mention of the Quad - which is regarded as the most concrete manifestation of the Indo-Pacific strategy thus far - and puts the whole concept under scrutiny.

Implications: What Lies Ahead

In the absence of coherent policymaking, the Trump administration may fall under the same fallacy of the "Pivot to Asia" rebalancing of the preceding regime. Moreover, the withdrawal from Trans-Pacific Partnership, with no visible plan to counter the Chinese multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, the credibility of America in terms of real trade, economic and security strategy in the region still remains questionable.

However, one aspect of the US countering the Chinese threat was seen in disinviting China from the 2018 Rim of the Pacific Exercises (RIMPAC), which is the largest

international maritime warfare exercise in the world. This sort of policy has implications if followed in the long run. The democratic states revolving around the notion of the Quad, like Australia and Japan, as well as states like South Korea, Indonesia and Singapore are going to welcome the notion. But China, along with its allied states may still harbour reservations against the Indo-Pacific terminology. It can be concluded that if Trump requires the realization of the idea, solid backing of the policy through financial and military capabilities that can compete with the scale and grandeur of the BRI is a must.

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