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India and the Indo-Pacific

An Emerging Regional Vision

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Key Points:

- There have been three major responses to the 'Indo-Pacific' concept in India.
- Some Indian commentators have embraced the idea of an 'Indo-Pacific' region as a way to contest established foreign policy traditions, namely non-alignment – the rejection of military alliances with any country or group of countries – and position India within a counter-hegemonic regional security architecture, which is designed to balance China's growing power.
- Other commentators reject the concept and argue that non-alignment, and the multilateral engagement of a number of countries through existing regional institutions, is the best way of achieving India's strategic objectives.
- The Indo-Pacific is also starting to appear in official government statements in the context of establishing a 'plural, open and inclusive' security architecture and this approach combines aspects from the positions of both proponents and opponents of the Indo-Pacific idea.
- India's focus in designing this new architecture is primarily to further its domestic economic restructuring through the creation of regional stability, issue-driven regional governance mechanisms and the cultivation of key trade and investment linkages while non-alignment, re-framed as 'strategic autonomy', remains a core tenet of foreign policy.
- Understanding the domestic dynamics of India's desired security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, especially its focus on non-traditional security, issue-driven cooperative ventures and the maintenance of its strategic autonomy, will be key to achieving the broader and deeper level of engagement that Australia seeks with India.

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of trade, investment and production linkages in the area spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the shift of economic power from the Trans-Atlantic to Asia has given rise to a push by commentators to have the 'Indo-Pacific' region recognised as a single geo-strategic arc. Yet, the concept remains politically contested and there has been insufficient attention paid to the geopolitical and geoeconomic drivers behind its emergence in particular national contexts. Among the most prominent promoters of the 'Indo-Pacific' have been commentators and state actors in the United States, Australia and India. This policy brief analyses the debate on the Indo-Pacific in India, in particular, and suggests that the adoption of the Indo-Pacific terminology by Indian officials is a reflection of the dominance of domestic economic imperatives in the making of contemporary Indian foreign policy. This is at variance with the driving motivation behind the promotion of the term by officials in the United States and Australia and suggests that the common adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept does not mean a convergence in foreign policy priorities.

The Indo-Pacific concept has been embraced by members of the US administration – it has appeared in speeches by Hilary Clinton and in the Defense Department's 2012 strategic plan – and by Australia's Defense Minister Stephen Smith and its incoming Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Peter Varghese. For the United States, shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region, with regard to security, trade and governance is vital to the maintenance of its global leadership and for Australia, the region is one that encompasses its key strategic partner, the United States, its top trading partner, China, and its preferred regional institution, the East Asia Summit (United States, 2012; Clinton, 2011; Smith, 2012). For both the United States and Australia, adopting and shaping the 'Indo-Pacific' as a key geo-strategic category helps them negotiate the shift of power to Asia in ways that maintain the status quo in relation to existing international rules and norms and their positions in the global order as a great power and middle power respectively.

The Indian response to moving from an Asia-Pacific regional conception to an Indo-Pacific construction reveals rather different preoccupations related to India's economic and political rise. In India, there have been three major ways of approaching the Indo-Pacific idea among commentators and state actors. The first approach embraces the notion of the Indo-Pacific in an attempt to bring about a change in the direction of Indian foreign policy; the second rejects it as potentially being detrimental to India's foreign policy goals; and the third seeks to appropriate Indo-Pacific regionalism to further domestic economic imperatives while upholding existing foreign policy traditions. This third approach is appearing in official Indian government statements and policies and suggests that although India is adopting the 'Indo-Pacific' idea, its motivations are quite different to those of the Australian and United States governments.

Debating the Indo-Pacific

Several Indian analysts and former diplomats, in particular those who want India to abandon its traditional non-aligned stance or who see China as a strategic threat,

have embraced a vision of the Indo-Pacific in which India, together with the democracies of the region, like the United States, Australia and Japan, take the lead in shaping the economic and security architecture of the region (Chellaney, 2011; Singh and Inderfurth, 2011; Mohan, 2011: 4).

Other commentators however, have expressed skepticism about Indo-Pacific regionalism, arguing that adopting the 'Indo-Pacific' terminology is unnecessary and could mean that India would align too closely with American interests and be taken on a path which it is not ready to follow (Gupta, 2011). For these commentators, the maintenance of India's autonomy to decide which countries to engage with remains integral to its foreign policy, and India's strategic objectives are best met through engagement with countries in the region using forums such as the East Asia Summit and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), rather than new military partnerships. In this view, 'the unwitting adoption of a geopolitical categorisation might send a wrong, if not false, signal to other countries about India's intentions and actions' (Gnanagurunathan, 2012).

These Indian debates on the Indo-Pacific, therefore, reflect a broader foreign policy debate in India, which intensified in the 2000s, over the place of non-alignment in India's foreign policy and the nature of India's relationships with the United States and a rising China.

India's Emerging Indo-Pacific Regionalism

Despite the contestation over the merits of the Indo-Pacific idea, Indian officials and leaders are increasingly using the notion of an Indo-Pacific region in statements and speeches. As a former Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran, puts it, the US acknowledgement of the Pacific and Indian Oceans as an 'inter-linked geopolitical space' reflects 'how we [Indians] perceive our own role in the region' (Saran, 2011).

In the 1960s when Asian regionalism began to emerge, India rejected membership in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the basis of concerns that ASEAN would primarily function as a US-centred bulwark against communism, which would run counter to its non-aligned Cold War stance. Its interest in the Asia-Pacific began to increase in the 1980s when East Asia's economic rise became the object of admiration for sections of the bureaucracy and political leadership, and it spiked in the 1990s, when India initiated economic reforms to begin the process of liberalization. As its economic integration with Asia and beyond escalated, India articulated a conception of an 'extended neighbourhood' spanning the 'countries in the ASEAN - Pacific region, Central Asia, the Gulf, West Asia and North Africa, and the Indian Ocean Rim', which is neatly aligned with an Indo-Pacific regional construction (India, 1999).

The 'Indo-Pacific' terminology is now starting to appear in official government statements in the context of establishing a 'plural, inclusive and open security architecture in the Indo-Pacific' (Menon, 2012). The idea of an 'open security architecture' is one that has been promoted by state actors in the United States, Japan and Australia, however, the motives for using the concept and its meanings tend to be distinctive and dependent on the national context (Tow and Taylor, 2010).

In the Indian context, the idea of an open security architecture is one that allows India to maintain established foreign policy tenets, namely non-alignment, which has been recast as 'strategic autonomy' in official discourse, and which creates a stable regional environment that is conducive to the cultivation of key trade and investment linkages for India's domestic economic development (Chacko, 2012).

While India supports established regional groupings like ASEAN and the East Asia Summit and established norms related to the freedom of navigation and the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes in accordance with international law, its focus in the Indo-Pacific is not confined to a top-down structure built on multilateral institutions or alliances but appears to be taking the form of bottom-up, issue-driven regional cooperative arrangements together with a broad collection of 'strategic partnerships' with individual countries (Mathai, 2012).

India's key areas of concern when it comes to creating and participating in regional governance arrangements are being determined by the imperatives of its domestic economic development and the increasingly important role that growing trade, investment and production linkages across the Indo-Pacific play in this economic restructuring. India's national security advisor, Shivshankar Menon, has cited security challenges from non-traditional sources as requiring particular attention. This is because 'the issues that we face in dealing with the changes in Asia are different from those that we see in historical analogies of rising powers in the past' (Menon, 2011). Traditional security problems, like border issues and inter-state conflict, while 'real and worrying', have been adequately managed and have 'not prevented the stupendous transformation that has resulted in the accumulation of power and wealth in large parts of Asia' (Menon, 2011). Problems of regional instability from non-traditional sources, such as weak state capacity in key parts of the Indo-Pacific, pose a significant challenge to India's economic development.

For instance, the importance of India's maritime trade in resources across both the Indian and western Pacific Oceans has resulted in a focus on securing sea-lanes and maritime governance through regional initiatives such as the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which involves the Indian navy and coast guard. India also contributes to the African Union Mission in Somalia and has begun bilateral and trilateral naval coordination and patrolling with countries in Asia – namely China and Japan – and in Africa, in particular, Kenya, Madagascar and the Seychelles. As its trade in resources, investment and commercial links with African countries grow more important, India's focus on cooperative partnerships with regional organisations in Africa are deepening. Arrangements for cooperation in agriculture, agri-business and infrastructure, also key areas of economic restructuring in both Africa and India, involves collaborative projects between African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the African Union's New Partnerships for African Development (NEPAD) and India's Exim Bank and Indian government agencies and departments.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which was established in 1997 to bring together countries in South and Southeast Asia, namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Nepal, has also seen a flurry of activity recently, leading to the release of a regional

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Poverty Plan of Action and the establishment of a BIMSTEC Energy Centre. The Mekong-Ganga initiative, launched in 2000 and involving India, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam has recently expanded its ambit to include trade, investment, energy, food, health and highway connectivity. To be sure, these are all incipient initiatives but it is significant that India is expending both diplomatic and financial resources to reinvigorating them at this point in time, and this gives an indication of its current priorities and the forms of regional governance it currently favours.

Conclusion

Commentary in India on the emerging notion of an Indo-Pacific region has reflected broader debates on the direction of Indian foreign policy. Quite separate to this debate on the merits of adopting an Indo-Pacific regional construction, however, there is an emerging vision of the Indo-Pacific in Indian foreign policy. Rather than promoting a top-down institutionalised regional security architecture, recent official statements and actions suggest that India is seeking to maintain its strategic autonomy and fashion a bottom-up, issue-driven set of regional governance mechanisms that reflect the demands of its domestic economic restructuring, and the regional challenges that it regards to be most potentially disruptive to its economic development.

Rather than bringing India closer to the strategic outlooks of Australia and the United States, the adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept by Indian officials serves to highlight continuing divergences. In particular, while Australia and the United States are wedded to shaping the Indo-Pacific in ways that maintain existing international rules and norms so that the United States remains the world’s foremost rule-maker, the domestic economic imperatives currently driving India’s foreign policy and India’s continuing adherence to the principle of strategic autonomy implies that no such commitment by India to the status quo can be assured.

The Australian Government’s recent *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* highlighted India as one of the countries with which Australia should have a broader and deeper engagement. Understanding the domestic dynamics of India’s desire for a plural and inclusive security architecture in the Indo-Pacific – and, in particular, its focus on non-traditional security and issue-driven cooperative ventures – rather than assuming that India will essentially share Australian and American preoccupations in the region, will be key to achieving a more substantial level of engagement.

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A primary focus of our research agenda is on political dynamics of governance and institutional innovations in the provision of public goods and regulation especially as it relates to economic and social development in the region.

This will address issues relating to the organisation of markets and politics, and their effectiveness and fairness in addressing complex economic and social problems. It will also include an examination of the transformations of political organisation and authority at various scales – global, national, and regional – which have a bearing on the complex multilevel governance of the delivery of public goods and regulations.

The centre has a particular focus on the global and regional challenges arising from the shifting tectonic plates of economic and political power to the Indo-Pacific region.