

Assessing India's Role in the Indo-Pacific's 'Great Game'

Jay Maniyar¹

Abstract

India's vision/strategy of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), and endeavours like Neighbourhood First, Act East Policy, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) find resonance in the strategies, guidelines, and policies of many like-minded nations. India seeks to pursue and place the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) as a free, open, and inclusive region, based on the international rules-based order. While this may be seen as India seeking strategic parity vis-à-vis China, the approach will enhance mutually beneficial and rewarding ties with like-minded nations in the region and globally, and place India as a reliable power, friend, and partner. India has portrayed all the characteristics of emerging as an Indo-Pacific maritime power. It is all but clear that if there is indeed an 'Indo-Pacific Great Game', India appears to have positioned itself at the forefront, from accepting the penetration of the term 'Indo-Pacific', and defining it in geographic terms. Through initiatives such as an endorsement of a free and open Indo-Pacific (to which India added 'inclusive') and the Prime Minister's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) which is founded on several notable and necessary pillars, India has conveyed its Indo-Pacific inclinations to the region and the world.

The Paper aims to analyse how India will play out its endeavours in the Indo-Pacific's 'Great Game' to best serve its national interests, while retaining a focus on the inclusivity, stability, security, and peace of the IPR. The geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic goals of India as a major player in the IPR may appear apparent in their definition and scope, but the methodology of achieving them is slowly unfolding, and the final result may be difficult to ascertain. The Paper will also aim to assess the static, dynamic, and interlinking factors that are cause for India's fillip into the 'Indo-Pacific's 'Great Game', and offer some conclusive thoughts to support India's endeavours in the IPR.

¹ Jay Maniyar is a Research Associate at National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. This paper was presented by the author during the webinar on Emerging India from Maritime Perspective to commemorate National Maritime Day on 05 April 2021. The Event was co-hosted by EJSSS along with UGC Centre for Maritime Studies, Pondicherry University.

Keywords: India, Indo-Pacific, Great Game, SAGAR, IPOI, Vision, Strategy, Doctrine, Indian Ocean Region, Pacific Ocean

Introduction

The ‘Indo-Pacific’ is an emerging geographical spatial entity that is universally agreed upon by scholars as being the world’s most significant region in terms of geopolitical, geoeconomic, geostrategic, and even accommodational influence. It has been devised through the ages as a region befitting of a rules-based free, inclusive, open, and transparent semi-international order that involves a host, if not all, of the world’s major stagers. These are the United States of America, Great Britain, countries of the European Union such as France and Germany, and Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, and India, countries of Southeast Asia, as well as Australia.

Much has been written about the Indo-Pacific’s European origins (the German researcher Karl Haushofer’s 1924 usage of the term) in the fact that it was the erstwhile colonisers of a majority of the globe who were responsible for its inception. They identified the entwined Indian peninsula (and subcontinent), the Indian Ocean’s omnidirectional expanse (more prominently known as the Indian Ocean Region) and the Pacific Ocean (at least its western segment) as the geostrategic core of a world starved of strategically vital regions while those that were in existence receded in importance. It is yet arguable that regions such as the Arctic and those that lie in the southern world (the Antarctic and the South Pacific to name just two) are yet to attain the heights scaled by the Indo-Pacific.

Since 2007, the term has entered the academic lexicon with Capt. (Dr.) Gurpreet Khurana of the Indian Navy (and a former Executive Director of the National Maritime Foundation) having first used it for the purposes of a January 2007 paper for the defence think tank Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA).ⁱ Subsequently, the-then Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe quoted the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in his famous “Confluence of the Two Seas” address to the Parliament of India in August of the same year.ⁱⁱ In the following years, especially in the decade of 2010-2020 going into the next one, the term has gained increasing traction. It must be noted that, of late, as per the research undertaken at the Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries (RIS) think tank, various countries have produced coherent policy structures

to better explain their Indo-Pacific stances. The RIS, based in New Delhi, tracks the policy formulation with respect to the Indo-Pacific region (including policymaking by external players such as France and Germany) and attempts to give it some direction and meaning.ⁱⁱⁱ

India Ventures into the Indo-Pacific

The Republic of India, or India, purports to a considerably broad-ranging policy posture in regard to the Indo-Pacific region. The word ‘Indo’ may not signify the nomenclature of India the country owing to it still being a rising power in the international domain that is yet to convince in a vast array of working and developing areas, but it most certainly encompasses India’s neighbouring region. This neighbouring region is the Indian Ocean Region or the IOR. The IOR involves a number of resident and ex-regional actors that are keen on upscaling their IOR ruminations to the Indo-Pacific.

The IOR is known to be a staging ground for the eventual realisation of the Indo-Pacific for many countries, given its strategic similarity to the Indo-Pacific in terms of the vast multi-dimensional stretches and the accompanying interplay between land and water that has resulted in a branching of a participant’s capacities and capabilities to cater to prevalent and emerging interests. In contrast, the western Pacific region is a vast, purely oceanic expanse with little landmass. This region largely involves the maritime security interests of peripheral East Asian countries and China.

For India to be in the Indian Ocean Region, its first maritime gateway to the rest of the (maritime) world, is all but a given. Through its (mainly) maritime policies, propagations, and proponents, India has long identified the Indian Ocean Region as incredibly necessary as far as its seaborne trade, cross-seas connectivity, sea-hinged infrastructure (and assistance projects such as port development in Sri Lanka and Africa), maritime-naval preparedness, judicious material exploration and exploitation, and benevolent assistance/help to in-need nation-states are concerned. As will be discussed in the next paragraph, the Indian Navy’s primary interest areas which the IN identifies to be worth serving, which include a number of intended initiatives dependent on the prevalent situations, is the Indian Ocean Region. In this region, the IN aims to

be a net security provider and a first responder, with such roles subject to extension to the Indo-Pacific's entirety (and this includes even parts of the IOR that presently lie outside the IN's interests) depending on developing situations.

In addition to the IOR, a second region deemed to complete the Indo-Pacific construct is the western Pacific region. This is a strategically isolated region, which instantly begets the question of the viability of any nation's interest in the Indo-Pacific. India has few and insignificant interests in the western Pacific^{iv} region, which somewhat prudently restrict its entire gamut of outward interests to the immediate region in the IOR. The Indian Navy's official maritime strategy (last released in 2015) called *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, has marked^v the maritime area up to the boundaries of western Southeast Asia (from the western IOR) as being the Indian naval force's primary interest. This means that deployments, patrols, and assistive measures as far as disaster management is concerned will be undertaken by the Indian Navy in this area and that the Navy will play a vital role in strengthening the maritime security of its primary areas of interest. In this regard, India retains a focus on a large segment of the Indo-Pacific i. e. the entire Indian Ocean region from the west to the east as also the edge of Southeast Asia.

The Prime Minister's policy of Neighbourhood First is a more concerted and focussed view of the involvement of India's bordering geography towards development of South Asia as a whole. The importance of the many nation-states in its neighbourhood may result in South Asia emerging to be a crucial Indo-Pacific structure by itself. Having carved out a niche for being an underdeveloped region with considerable and credible potential and promise on offer, South Asia (inclusive of India, which is often talked of as a country far more capable than its South Asian contemporaries) is well-poised to make a statement for itself in the Indo-Pacific just as much as the IOR's centrality to the larger Indo-Pacific can't be ignored. These regions, including South Asia, features among them several water-bodies bearing an impact on seaborne trade, maritime security, disaster risk and vulnerability, coastal issues such as ports, fisheries, and migration, resource harnessing (in particular, energy exploration and gain), and connectivity partnerships premised on infrastructure.

Maritime security lies at the heart of any recourse by India and South Asia to the Indo-Pacific given the plethora of coast-bearing nations in the South Asian setup. Maritime security requires a country to work towards nurturing and enforcing its security outlets such as a navy and a coast guard and other state-sanctioned systems. Assuming that the Indian Navy in the medium and long term scales up to the heights of the United States Navy, its much-heralded counterpart in the maritime domain and the world's foremost presence across the entire spectrum of 70% of the earth's surface, India is likely to not just participate in and enforce but even shape the coveted rules-based Indo-Pacific order. This is exemplified by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the re-expanded MALABAR exercises (Australian ascension to the MALABAR since after 2007 has served to indicate that the southern island-nation is keen on determining and shaping the Indo-Pacific order), Indian deployments towards soft and hard ventures across its interest areas in the Indo-Pacific.

The 'GREAT GAME' of the Indo-Pacific

A 'Great Game' has been alluded historically to the events that involve an interplay between a host of major players and participants in a predetermined geographical region, on the basis of their respective power proponents. These include military strength, geopolitical influence, strong and decisive leaderships, and the ability to carve a result for oneself in the circumstances of the 'Great Game' being played out, whether on the terrestrial or maritime domains or both (or even other domains such as outer space and cyberspace in the ultramodern context). The 'Great Game' is a much misused term as regards history. It differs in meanings but is universally known to mean a perennial rivalry that leaves behind a strong geopolitical on those involved and even on others that may be directly or indirectly involved, or even not involved at all.

As per Malcolm Yapp, 'the Great Game' was academically first used by H. W. C. Davis in the twentieth century (1926).^{vi} Conflicts internal to European powers in the past centuries (especially between the British and Russian empires in overpowering each other to the top of a strategically lucrative Central Asian territory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), the Cold War of 1945-1989, and even the interplay for economic supremacy in the twenty-first century's relatively peaceful environs. The latter refers to the quest for the global economic crown in the time-frame

of the beginning of the twenty-first century to 2050. The new 'Great Game' is unfolding between the US, China, and powers of promise such as India, Russia, Brazil, and many African countries (such as Nigeria). The original 'Great Game' was called *Bolshaya Igra*, which is what 'Great Game' means in Russian.

The strength of the new 'Great Game' which includes a large chunk of the Indo-Pacific (if believed that the entire world is involved in barring its eastern and southern extremes, is believed to lie in raising cooperation amid the facilitation of a steady decline and the eventual death of confrontation and conflict. However, the presence of China in the Indo-Pacific mix, a reality left unattended to even by the Chinese themselves, has swung the balance in favour of conflict as a norm alongside peaceful overtures between belligerent nation-states. This has convoluted the 'Great Game's' cause for everlasting peace to be achieved through coexistence and cooperation chiefly. The status-quo is indicative of a Chinese rise meant to deride and discard the Indo-Pacific as an inconsequential term doing the rounds of an isolated academic constituency.

The Indo-Pacific in itself has become the strategic home of a new 'Great Game' surmised on a scenario involving one major belligerent power in the Peoples' Republic of China (China) and a number of equally crucial rule enforcers such as Japan, the United States of America, Australia, European countries, and India. However, the characteristics of this 'Great Game' are equally divided between attention-grabbing conflicts and conflict-deterrent cooperation. The latter, formulated along the lines of friendly, liberal, internationalist, purposeful, mutually-beneficial economic cooperation between two, three, four, all the way up to even twenty (the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership of 2020) entities or groups such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and allied formations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit.

When describing an Indo-Pacific 'Great Game', there could be ample agreement on one definitive theme i. e. an arrogant China (a country which has publicly derided the term 'Indo-Pacific' in the past) against a host of existent and external players with a diverse set of interests in the region. It is apt to divide this theme in two major lines – conflict between China and all that are antithetical to its security interests and cooperation between China and all who stand to benefit from Chinese

participation in their economic visions, improvements, or upheavals. The Indo-Pacific also stands to be influenced by other actors such as Russia, the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) and countries with volatile domestic environments such as Myanmar and other dictatorships. This begets a concerted effort by the major players and the chief determiners of the flow of the 'Great Game'.

The many plans within the Chinese inventory to reinvigorate Chinese enterprise and attain past glories. These can be witnessed through the unfolding of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Maritime Silk Route (a determining development in an important ground of the Indo-Pacific's active half) and concerted funding of such initiatives through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Even the unresolved and long-running South China Sea disputes have the potential to stymie the progressions in the Indo-Pacific's strategic surroundings. These disputes involve China and a few of its Southeast Asian neighbours in their contested island areas and have the potential to cause the Indo-Pacific to emerge as a vulnerable region for strategic gameplay since these historical contests lie at the heart of the Indo-Pacific.

While there is an apparent convergence between these aspects and the SAGAR doctrine of the Indian PM, the differences between India and China continue to stand tall amidst expressions of positivity and optimism. The Indo-Pacific is poised to lead the twenty-first century's rise (and a post-Coronavirus recourse) in a multitude of domains not limited to economics and security. Even China and India portend to mutual interests such as bilateral trade and doing away with the stigma of non-state actors such as terrorists and pirates. The next few paragraphs assess the range of factors that are driving India's Indo-Pacific fillip and are also responsible for a confident India as far as Indo-Pacific policymaking and attentive implementation are figured.

Static Factors:

A lot to do with the maritime domain involves the **geographical position** of a country. India is perceived to be an important cog in the Indo-Pacific's wheel owing much to its IOR presence as a sea-facing nation. Through its vast peninsular landmass which looks into the Indian Ocean, India is at the centre of the IOR and by extension, the Indo-Pacific.

Traditional military cooperation remains a static factor, and an important one at that, owing largely to the necessity afforded to military cooperation even in times of peace in view of the construct of nations as self-serving and insecure forms, as per the realist theory of International Relations. In this context, naval exercises, coast guard interaction, preparedness, interoperability, and other such aspects have retained their centrality as far as a nation's security affairs are concerned.

Military Trade: Military trade is perceived to be the increasing likelihood of the trade of military equipment, materials, spares, and technology for the purposes of improving the overall security environment of a region through the countries (and their military wings) present. It also appears to be the case that by strengthening military trade, informal alliance-building is taking shape with the sellers of equipment bearing an indirect influence not just on the sales but also on the security situations manifest.

Even Japan, a genuinely defence-minded country of the Indo-Pacific, purports to defence arrangements meant to facilitate cooperation and exports with countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and India. Japan has eased Southeast Asian security concerns through contributions/sales of patrol crafts and surveillance equipment to countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines in a covert bid to assuage Chinese exertions. India's very own *atmanirbharta* campaign, another flagship of the ruling government, based on what the indigenous Indian manufacture can afford to prospective customers in the realm of defence, inclusive of the maritime domain.

Security of Seaborne Trade: The security of maritime trade (maritime, because the Indo-Pacific is perceived to be a largely maritime region or a region encompassing several dimensions with primacy afforded to the maritime domain above all others) is linked to the security of the sea/shipping lanes that are responsible for the transit of this trade. The security of these passageways which can also be vulnerable in both the open oceans and in the natural construct of a chokepoint/strait constitute a factor that has existed since time immemorial. An Indo-Pacific outlook on this aspect is desired.

Dynamic Factors

The **Blue Economy**: While deemed to be lacking in scope and direction, the Blue Economy is an important area given that it is everything to do with the maritime domain inclusive of relative factors such as events in the terrestrial domain which bear influence on the maritime one. These domains are increasingly being linked to the Blue Economy, a term coined by Gunter Pauli through his book *Blue Economy*, which lays a strong emphasis on and highlights the importance of a maritime economy in a nation's progress and rise. Cmde Somen Banerjee, in a monograph titled 'Maritime Power Through Blue Economy in the Indian Context'^{vii} has written about how the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 are linked to the Blue Economy and it matters that the Blue Economy of Indo-Pacific countries will determine the success of the Indo-Pacific itself.

The **Gamut of Relationships**: The tunes being sung loud as regards the Indo-Pacific are centred, to an extent, on a number of bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral and other (such as the India-led Indian Ocean Naval Symposium meant to facilitate dialogue on maritime security) relationships. These are well positioned to assume a dynamic bend with associations such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD, QSD) open to more partners for like-minded Indo-Pacific democracies. The dynamism on offer is also highlighted by cooperative endeavours which even involve countries such as India and China. Multinational trade agreements have also retained a sense of dynamism in that they remain open to alterations and new members. Security is a cause of conflict between many Indo-Pacific actors. As can be garnered from this hypothesis, relationships are to be well-managed and their evolution to serve better purposes and aid inclusive behaviour in the Indo-Pacific are also to be encouraged.

Other factors that bear a dynamism and can be a cause of worry are the unpredictable events of disasters (natural and man-made) that are caused by the sea. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones, and typhoons and man-made ones such as oil spills, fallouts from poor resource exploration, and maritime accidents are to be addressed within the Indo-Pacific's strategic confines. Already, India's assistance diplomacy is being undertaken by the Mission SAGAR,

which adds to India's Indo-Pacific profile and makes a case for India as a future Indo-Pacific power to be welcomed instead of shunned.

Interlinking Factors

The prevalence of factors such as port connectivity, military basing, infrastructure funding and assistance, a reliance on assistance in other areas such as those where much development is to take place, can all be deemed to be interlinking factors for Indo-Pacific nations. A country like India and many other Indo-Pacific countries such as South and Southeast Asian ones are in dire need of all of the above. In this regard, there needs to be a synergy between those who are in a strong position to provide what is desired and those who desire what is open to being provided. The interlinks will involve strong strategic and economic partnerships that must be dynamic and continue to adopt to

The most central entity that may even be deemed to be responsible for the importance afforded to the Indo-Pacific as far as a number of consternating scenarios such as politics, relations, security, economic rise, development, connectivity, and benevolent assistance are concerned, is the Peoples' Republic of China. China's fast growing self and its wide-ranging rise have resulted in a number of, if not most, nations forced to wake up from an inertia in dealing with Chinese endeavours vindicated by the rapid pace of its 'peaceful' rise.

Indian Policy Making and the Indo-Pacific: How India is Playing the Indo-Pacific's 'Great Game'

India has deployed in its governing ranks a vast Indo-Pacific apparatus that is inclined to identify and introspect upon India's Indo-Pacific policymaking. This is not necessarily a reference to official policymaking such as a much discussed 'Modi Doctrine' (which preceded SAGAR, and was famously attributed to by Dr C. Raja Mohan when the PM assumed his first term in 2014) in regard to India's Indo-Pacific visualisations but to official functioning in place within the Government of India (and even otherwise through dedicated research departments in universities

and colleges and affiliated/un-affiliated think tanks that are producing commendable and critical work in the Indo-Pacific's academic erudition).

The Government of India's most field of view venture is the Ministry of External Affairs' (MEA) Indo-Pacific division.^{viii} This dedicated department of the MEA was formed a year ago, in April 2019. This division particularly aims to, as per the MEA, consolidate India's Indo-Pacific vision and foster credible policy formulation as regards India's Indo-Pacific outreach and achieve credible results over time. It is an exclusive department of the central government. Although the workings of ministries are intended to be highly confidential with public dissemination restricted, it is worth pointing out that a division dedicated to an unofficial geographical construct i. e. the Indo-Pacific, is worth lauding as this indicates a shift in focus in Indian official policymaking towards the Indo-Pacific. Policymaking by this division aptly attributes the importance of the Indo-Pacific to India as a region housing significant countries with individual and mutual interests that are in India's self-interest, too. More importantly, the division aims to look into bringing together multilateral groups such as the East Asia Summit and the Indian Ocean Rim Association in a move to help them look at the Indo-Pacific in glowing terms.

The flagship announcement by the Prime Minister of India has been the much-touted Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative, IPOI. The IPOI was declared by a buoyant India during the fourteenth East Asia Summit in November 2019.^{ix} Subsequent to the announcement was the enunciation of the IPOI as encompassing seven critical maritime pillars devised by India for the Indo-Pacific meant to instigate development and enervate many ills. These are 1) maritime security, 2) maritime ecology, 3) maritime resources, 4) capacity building and resource sharing, 5) disaster risk reduction and management, 6) science, technology, and academic cooperation, and 7) trade, connectivity and maritime transport. Even a glance at these pillars and the presence of the word 'Oceans' in the IPOI are enough to convey India's Indo-Pacific intentions and how the maritime domain lies at the crux of the Indian argument.

The next instance of India's Indo-Pacific role is best understood through its Act East Policy (AEP). The eastern regions of Asia have been identified by India as not just destinations for itself and its strategically vital and economically backward northeast region, but as a two-way street inviting

eastern countries to India, too. The Act East Policy did not bear a direct linkage to the Indo-Pacific, and still may not in a conclusive manner, but has eventually become central to India's policy directions. The Act East Policy (2014, an upgrade to the Look East Policy of the 90s and beyond) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative bear a likelihood with each other as the AEP offers an in-hand and experienced policy proposition to further the IPOI's several initiatives. More so, the AEP covers a huge segment of the Indo-Pacific region and this works well for India in improving its Indo-Pacific profile. Going ahead, the aforementioned policies must be synchronous with prosperous Indo-Pacific countries such as Japan and its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision/Strategy and the US' Indo-Pacific strategy.

As can be discerned from the above, India is clearly policy-ising its way in an orderly manner towards forming and sustaining its presence in the Indo-Pacific region. It is clear that the Narendra Modi government is busy translating conveyed thoughts into actions and imperatives for all to witness. These initiations set the tone for India's fillip into the Indo-Pacific. However, it will be a matter of concern given the immense investments in time and resources by India towards the Indo-Pacific were its foray into the region, the lack of which is demonstrated through India's geographical location playing no role in its outlook on a free and open Indian Ocean region, let alone the extended region and other faraway sea areas.

India's Role in the Indo-Pacific

For a country to play a role has come to mean that it will undertake a dedicated and responsible dispensation of duties, necessitation aimed at easing prevalent concerns, healthy cooperation and other related aspects, and develop its profile to be then open to judgement. Several important countries have played a role in either worsening a security standing or working towards improving it by quelling and exterminating threats and matters of concern. A role eventually also encompasses soft aspects such as benevolence leading to an identity and character which are then associated with the country in question. In this regard, it is important to note that India's role is not easy to define but attempts must be made to define it anyway.

As far as India's role in the Indo-Pacific is concerned, before going further, it is worth attributing to all that is rooted and stems from India's policymaking. The SAGAR Doctrine, India's Indo-Pacific policy proponents such as a Vision (a critical guide and oversight to policymaking and its eventual implementation in a disciplined and time-bound manner), a Concept, a Strategy, an oversight, principles, partnerships, unilateralism (where feasible) and multilateralism. In fact, India's approach to the vast canvass of the Indo-Pacific has been aptly alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister as to not be limited by a mere strategy. These were some of the first officially spoken words by PM Narendra Modi at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018.^x These eventually led to India's diverse set of visualisations of the Indo-Pacific.

In the formal domain, India's Indo-Pacific strategy appears to be centred upon the SAGAR doctrine, as emphasised by the Indian Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, during a talk at the London-based Policy Exchange think tank on India's vision for the Indo-Pacific.^{xi} This talk took place a year after the announcement of the IPOI. This ascertains that the keyword 'Region' in the abbreviation 'SAGAR' is indeed the Indo-Pacific. The announcement by PM Modi of 'SAGAR', then a mere few words in an official speech, was made on a trip to African countries in March 2015.

It has been mentioned that while the SAGAR vision/doctrine is focussed on the two pillars of all-encompassing Security and all-inclusive Growth, other aspects that are critical to the strategy have also been highlighted. These are respect for one another who geographically occupy key strategic spaces in the Indo-Pacific and are linked to other similar spaces in the region, the encouragement and endorsement of a rules-based, free, and open order, and the need to ensure supply chain resilience (especially during times of crises exemplified by the novel Coronavirus).

The above, however, are subject to not just change but even a re-envisioning on the basis of a sunrise leading to unexpected and unpredictable developments. A rise in non-state threats, other malicious actors, regularity in disasters in vulnerable zones are all likely to result in a US-China-India trilateral security statement (for example) with the latter two compelled to join hands with each other and the United States. Such a scenario will call for a new and cooperative Indo-Pacific framework, with none existing so far on these lines.

In sum, it can be assessed that India's role is complex while it appears to be simple because the country is aiming to position the Indo-Pacific as a prime region in a bid to become a magnet for regional and external countries insofar as an entire compendium of its maritime interests are concerned. India's role is active and passive, it involves an attempt to salvage the best of the Indo-Pacific through constructive and results-oriented policymaking (regional cooperation centred on innumerable aspects, affability between like-minded nations, and a keenness to involve more nations and bring them to the Indo-Pacific table), and positions India as the go-to country of the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion – India in the Indo-Pacific

The analysis above presents a plethora of evidence as to India's definitional but yet evolving, relatively uncertain and the much desired role in the Indo-Pacific region. The region is a geographical enumeration of principles, priorities, and of course, policies that have been set in place across its encompassment by a number of involved and important countries. Even structural groupings such as the ASEAN and informal goal-driven organisations such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of four Indo-Pacific countries have found themselves in the Indo-Pacific jamboree.

It's easy to judge all of the following and conclude comprehensively in the wake of India's extra-maritime positioning in the Indo-Pacific. They are those of a major player, a middle actor, a potent force, a rising entity, a promising participant, a nation deserving of regional and global ignorance due to unfulfilled growth agendas, a welcome enforcer and an upholder of a rules-based order, or (least likely in the present situation) a burgeoning superpower. Narratives forged, by scholars and others alike, for all of the above are more or less convincing to the point that, in sum, they emphasise and endorse India's Indo-Pacific construct. This construct is of India the country in the Indo-Pacific and not India's attempts to forge its own Indo-Pacific construct. While the latter matters to a significant extent especially since the SAGAR vision encourages India to eschew unilateralism in favour of a seamless understanding to envisage and achieve common objectives, the former is emphasised.

India's time-tested and principled stances on criteria such as the non-export of freedom-enhancing and open democracy to non-democratic but willing nations and the long-stated position of non-interference in the internal affairs of all countries which runs synonymous with non-alignment (this tenet appears to be rather subdued since the turn of the century) since as an instrument of state policy can also be assessed with respect to the Indo-Pacific. A non-interfering power such as India may appear to be contrarian in its role as an enforcer of law and rules in vast maritime spaces with an endorsement of openness and inclusiveness potentially upsetting and causing scepticism among countries of the Indo-Pacific's many regions and sub-regions. In this case, India may be advised to tread a fine line as far as maritime law enforcement on its part is concerned while figuring the interests of Indian involvement, intervention, interjections and even intrusions into foreign territory.

The realist and even other schools of International Relations have long emphasised that a state's unitary interests factor above all other interests even in the United Nations-led world order of peace, mutual cooperation, and furthering liberal and cooperation ideals up and above self-interest which can result in permanently conflict-causing and security-weakening scenarios. India, more as a civilisational entity and a participant nation-state in a modern era that appears to be free of large-scale conflict especially between nations, is no different from nation-states that prioritise survival over anything else. Such an approach would also boost India's strategic autonomy and position it, again, in the non-aligned camp, a stance that is still coveted by many countries despite the palpable rush to form alliances, and forge friendly relations and behaviour.

In hypothetical scenarios of conflict between India and countries such as China, India may yet be compelled to betray all norms of peaceful coexistence were its territorial integrity to be threatened by a superior adversary. India may yet be in the Indo-Pacific for self-serving reasons above all others. That said, India is not a rampaging superpower as far as the world in general and the Indo-Pacific in particular are concerned. This works well for the region with India's inclusion and participation likely to be a calming influence as opposed to one that may unsettle the region and destroy its promise.

To summarise, India's Indo-Pacific role is one that balances soft aspects such as cooperation, diplomacy, continued workings over economic cooperation (such as improved and new economic partnerships to facilitate a mutual and complementary rise among participating states and even agreements involving multiple states), with hard ones such as military power (even that that is utilised to maintain, sustain, and enforce a rules-driven balance and order such as naval and coast guard patrols through suspect and vulnerable waterways). In doing so, India will position itself as an involved, interested, concerned, and a trading country (economics as a mechanism for a new deepness in the Indo-Pacific) with a benevolent mind-set accompanied by a non-compromise on undertakings that exemplify hard security and endorse Indian strategic prowess (while also formulating India's promise, profile, and posture in this area).

The Prime Minister has clearly made a strong case for India's development in and of the Indo-Pacific region as incomplete without taking along committed and interested partners on a journey meant to effect India's many Indo-Pacific policy propagations (ranging from the SAGAR vision to the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative). This inclusive approach and attitude evidently stands to benefit one and all and not just India itself, but the question remains as to whether unforeseen circumstances, difficult security developments, and how an unpredictable China confronts the Indo-Pacific^{xii} will result in an unpredictable India itself.

India's role in the Indo-Pacific, henceforth, is well-defined by its governing leadership but may also be subject to change. This would be not just because of new and emerging security threats or a relegation of the Indo-Pacific to the past or to an insignificant level, but because of the broad scenarios, situations and the sheer scope and depth of the Indo-Pacific as far as Indian interests (which generally tend to absorb newer ones) are concerned. Also, the Indo-Pacific may not be as kind to India as the latter appears to be to the former.^{xiii}

References

ⁱ Khurana, Gurpreet S. (January 2007). Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation. Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA). Retrieved from

-
- https://idsa.in/strategicanalysis/SecurityofSeaLinesProspectsforIndiaJapanCooperation_gskhurana_0107.
- ii Abe, Shinzo (August 2007). Confluence of the Two Seas. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Japan (MOFA). Retrieved from <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.
- iii Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries (RIS). Retrieved from <https://www.ris.org.in/>.
- iv It remains the case that scholars remain divided between conclusively noting whether the ‘Pacific’ in the Indo-Pacific includes the entire Pacific Ocean region or just its western portion (approx. 82 million sq. km. if one assumes it to be exactly half of the Pacific).
- v Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015 (January 2016). Retrieved from https://indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf.
- vi Yapp, Malcolm (2000). The Legend of the Great Game. Proceedings of the British Academy (pp 180-181). London, England. Retrieved from <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2491/111p179.pdf>.
- vii Banerjee, Cmde Somen (2018). *Maritime Power through Blue Economy in the Indian Context*. New Delhi, India: Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF).
- viii Indo-Pacific Division Briefs. Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India. Retrieved from https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf
- ix Sarangi, Cdr Subhasish (November 2020). Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative: India's Indo-Pacific concept translated into action. The United Services Institution of India. Retrieved from <https://usiofindia.org/publication/cs3-strategic-perspectives/indo-pacific-oceans-initiative-ipoi-indias-indo-pacific-concept-translated-into-action/>.
- x Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018). Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India. Retrieved from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.
- xi Shringla, Harsh Vardhan (n.d). India's Vision for the Indo-Pacific. Policy Exchange. Retrieved from <https://policyexchange.org.uk/pxevents/indias-vision-of-the-indo-pacific/>.
- xii This point is a double-edged sword for countries with vested interests in the Indo-Pacific, neutral and observant entities, and China itself. A differing China and an entire set of committed partners led by key democracies such as those of the QUAD may be left a world apart with no conclusive element to this two-sided non-conformity.

^{xiii} The usage of the term Indo-Pacific appears to uncertain owing to a reluctance by powers such as China and the United States to actively encourage its spread. The term holds immense geostrategic heft