

India and the Allure of the 'Indo-Pacific'

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Abstract

This article looks at the attraction that the term 'Indo-Pacific' has gained in strategic discourse in and around the Indian government since 2010. A strong geopolitical and geo-economic sense of the Indo-Pacific has become apparent in this emergent Indo-Pacific discourse, which combines elements of India's 'Look South' and 'Look East' policies, and in which a core Indo-Pacific of the eastern Indian Ocean and western Pacific Ocean has particular strategic coherence. Not only have government leaders adopted the term Indo-Pacific at various times, diplomats, navy service chiefs, influential think tanks and persuasive voices like Shyam Saran and C. Raja Mohan have also been noticeable in their use of the term. India's bilateral and trilateral relations with Japan, Australia and the US have attracted particular Indo-Pacific associations in India. While a criticism of the term Indo-Pacific is that it has negative China-centric, balancing undertones, the article finds that although China-centric balancing frequently accompanies Indo-Pacific discourse, this is not an inherent part of the concept.

Keywords

India, Indo-Pacific, geopolitics, geoeconomics, strategic discourse

Introduction

This article looks at the India-related applications of what Sanjay Chaturvedi calls the 'geopolitical discourse of the "Indo-Pacific", and its underlying geopolitical visions' (Chaturvedi, 2013, p. 13). This is a strategic discourse and vision, with implications for strategy and policy that have become noticeable in India since 2010. It can be introduced with comments by Sureesh Mehta, the former Chief of Naval Staff and current Chairman of the National Maritime Foundation (NMF).

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At the NMF's Annual Maritime Conference in 2014, Mehta welcomed his audience with the following statement:

A few words about the emerging spatial construct of the Indo-Pacific, which is gaining ever greater traction amongst the strategic community. In my view, given the common threads of geo-politics, geo-economics and geo-strategy that are closely intermeshed across the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, this new conceptualisation needs to be given deeper consideration by all of us. (Mehta, 2014, p. 3)

The article sets out to give such deeper consideration to the term Indo-Pacific in India's strategic deliberations. The term points to Pacific actors like Japan and the US interacting with India in the Indian Ocean and India interacting with other Pacific Rim actors in the South China Sea and the South and Western Pacific. Aware of Priya Chacko's (2012b) caution about 'the contested nature of the Indo-Pacific', this article seeks to tease out convergence and divergence on the use of the term in Indian deliberations in and around government. India increasingly sees this region as a significant geopolitical arena for considering its strategic interests and shaping partnerships, and as a significant geo-economic arena for trade flows. The significance of India employing the Indo-Pacific as a framework (term) of analysis is that policy is being shaped within its parameters of such terminology. An example of this impact of terminology is that the maritime nature of the term Indo-Pacific generates Indo-Pacific naval deployments and Indo-Pacific naval exercises by India as a matter of policy. Consequently, close, deliberate and detailed scrutiny of what is being said as well as what is being done will be followed with regard to the Indo-Pacific concept's arrival into India's politics and attendant geography-geopolitical, trade-geo-economic, strategic geometry, maritime-naval and China-associated undertones of the term in Indian debate.

Into Politics

The first current Indian usage of the term 'Indo-Pacific' was by Gurpreet Khurana (2007) from outside government, who specifically linked the term to vigorous trade flows and possible military conflict. The call by the former Chief of Naval Staff, Arun Prakash (2011, p. 6), suggesting that 'it is time to coin a new term, the "Indo-Pacific"' was soon met. Even as he spoke, within government, the rising prominence of the Indo-Pacific as a term was signalled and further strengthened in Shyam Saran's (2011a) widely-noticed piece *Mapping the Indo-Pacific*. The reason the term Indo-Pacific acquired salience since 2010 was India's growing economic and security engagement with Southeast Asia, west and east of the Malacca Strait, and India's deepening security arrangements with other liberal democracies like Australia, Japan and the United States. It also reflects the growing Chinese maritime appearance in the Eastern Indian Ocean, South China Sea and Western Pacific.

Inside government, the usage of the term 'Indo-Pacific' has certainly become quite noticeable. Salman Khurshid, Minister for External Affairs, stated that 'we are already beginning to talk about [the] Indo-Pacific' (Khurshid, 2013e). Other figures at the Ministry of External Affairs using the Indo-Pacific term have included former Foreign Secretaries like Shyam Saran, Kanwal Sibal and Ranjan Mathai, as well as Secretary (East) Sanjay Singh. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh deployed the term 'Indo-Pacific' for the first time in December 2012 at the India–ASEAN Commemorative Summit. This led Narendra Kaushik to comment that the Indian Prime Minister had thereby, at the highest of levels, 'picked up and legitimized use of the new term "Indo-Pacific"' (Kaushik, 2013; also Bagchi, 2012c).

On the diplomatic front, the Indo-Pacific term has been used by ambassadors to the US like Nirupama Rao (2011–2014) and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (2014). The ambassador to South Korea, Vishnu Prakash, straightforwardly identified India as an 'Indo-Pacific nation' (Vishnu Prakash, 2013, p. 2). Service figures have also embraced the term, notably Chiefs of Naval Staff like Arun Prakash, Sureesh Mehta and Devendra Joshi, as well as Mihir Roy, the previous chief of the Eastern Naval Command. Joshi felt that in this 'relatively new term, "Indo-Pacific"... the phraseological fusion "Indo-Pacific" signifies the metamorphosis of two vibrant regions into a singular geo-political entity, with a strong maritime character blended by Indian and Pacific Oceans' (Joshi, 2013b). Kamal Davar, the former Chief of the Defence Intelligence Agency and Deputy Chief of the Integrated Defence Staff has also contend that 'in the long run, India's national interests primarily lie towards and beyond its eastern flanks to South East Asia and the new geographical and strategic construct, namely Indo-Pacific Asia' (Davar, 2013).

A look at the bibliography shows how widespread the Indo-Pacific term has been used outside government by political commentators and in strategic discourse. C. Raja Mohan (2011a, b, c, e) has been a frequently heard Indo-Pacific voice, while the Indo-Pacific term has also readily appeared across the Indian media. The semi-official NMF has become a ready platform for Indo-Pacific rhetoric circulating around government as have other bodies like the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), as well as the Aspen Institute India (AII), the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), and the Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

From Geography to Geopolitics

As a term, we need to define where the Indo-Pacific is. In a broad, generalized sense, the term involves both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. However, Indian usage has tended to focus more on the narrower zone of the East Indian Ocean and Western Pacific (Mattoo and Malik, 2012)—which is how the term has been used

in marine biology. A clear official sense seems evident with Nirupama Rao's (2013) description of the 'stretch of oceanic space that links the Indian and Pacific Oceans', as the 'core Indo-Pacific' (Rao, 2013a) encompassing the Bay of Bengal, Strait of Malacca, South China Sea, Philippine Sea and Western Pacific. Such a core Indo-Pacific of the eastern Indian Ocean and western Pacific is more meaningful than merely lumping together the Indian and Pacific oceans, which would give an unwieldy stretch of waters from California to Kenya. In such a smaller, but more manageable, sense was Arun Prakash's (2013a; Roy, 2013, p. 22) definition of the Indo-Pacific as the area, 'on both sides of the Malacca Straits' stretching from India to the Western Pacific. Vibhanshu Shekhar defined the 'Indo-Pacific world' as the 'triangular space between India, Japan and Australia, connecting two maritime systems of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean', which was also reckoned by him to constitute 'a much more integrated unit of analysis, when compared to the rather huge and unwieldy classification of Asia-Pacific' (Shekhar, 2012, p. 1).

Geographical categorization has moved into geopolitical implications. At the official level, Nirupama Rao argued that 'the term 'Indo-Pacific', which is increasingly defining the cultural, economic, political and security continuum that straddles the Indian and the Pacific Ocean regions' is 'fast becoming a geo-strategic construct to comprehend the common opportunities, the intersecting maritime and security interests, and challenges' (Naidu, 2013, p. 12; Rao, 2013a; Shaunik, 2013) facing India. Outside, but close to government, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses succinctly says that the 'Indo-Pacific is the new geopolitical reality' (IDSA, 2012b).

Two high-profile geopolitically-orientated conferences in 2013 received official support. One was the Indian Council of World Affairs' conference, *Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region*, held because it felt 'the Indo-Pacific region is the new spatial formulation that is resonating among the strategic community' (ICWA, 2013). There, Sanjay Singh, the Secretary (East) from the Ministry of External Affairs, acknowledged that 'since the last couple of years, the term "Indo-Pacific" is being used increasingly during discussions amongst policy makers, strategic thinkers and think tanks' (Mishra, 2013a; Sahil, 2013; Singh, 2013). Another high profile conference held in 2013 was the NMF conference, *Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: The Next Two Decades* (Ramsay, 2013). At the conference, the new Chief of Naval Staff (CNS), Devendra Joshi, used the term Indo-Pacific sixteen times in his address on the 'Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region', reflecting his belief that 'the fact that the term "Indo-Pacific" finds increasing mention in strategic discourse today is evidence of the growing prominence of the region as a geo-strategic entity' (Joshi, 2013a, p. 1). The Chairman's Address by former CNS Sureesh Mehta similarly stressed that 'the integrated arena of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, which has more recently come to be referred to as the Indo-Pacific, has become a key strategic arena in the 21st century' (Mehta, 2013). As such he argued that that 'the Indo-Pacific region—this vast geo-strategic and geo-economic realm ... is

rapidly eclipsing the once-dominant "Asia-Pacific" as the centre of trade, investment, rivalry, competition and co-operation' (Mehta, 2013).

India is attracted towards the term Indo-Pacific because it points to 'India'; 'India puts the Indo in "Indo-Pacific"' (Gupta, 2011), with 'the "Indo-Pacific Century", clearly a branding win for India' (Srinivasan, 2011). At the official level, Nirupama Rao (2013a) noted, 'the earlier concept of the Asia-Pacific had sought to exclude India—today the term, Indo-Pacific encompasses the subcontinent as an integral part of this eastern world. We are glad'. From his naval background, Arun Prakash (2013a, p. 283) similarly noted that such terms 'impinge on [the] prestige and standing' of India; and that the term and region *Asia-Pacific* (namely the Pacific Basin and Pacific Rim) tends to 'marginalize India'. In contrast, the term *Indo-Pacific* points most clearly to India as one of its central state components.

In terms of Indian engagement in the region, the Indo-Pacific term fits easily into India's existing geopolitical formulations, combining as it does the *Look South* (Indian Ocean) and *Look East* (Pacific Ocean) settings used in India's 'extended neighbourhood' framework (Scott, 2009). This extended neighbourhood framework is one where interests are there to be gained, maintained, and defended by India. Arun Prakash (2012b, 2013b) consequently argues for the need for an 'Indo-Pacific perspective' on maritime security matters facing India. In a move towards neighbourhood extension, the External Affairs Minister, Salman Khurshid (2013d), pointed out that 'beyond ASEAN, we are actually looking at the Indo Pacific now' (also see Sahil, 2012, p. 2). Such neighbourhood extension is why Subha Chandran (2013a, b) sees the Indo-Pacific as a 'Look East 3.0' on the part of India, a pivot by India 'from Look East to Indo-Pacific'. The economic emphasis of India's initial ASEAN-directed Look East policy has been applied to other fields through an Indo-Pacific framework. Uday Bhaskar (2013) considered that 'the time has come for India to purposefully add the security component to its Look East policy and an appropriate geo-strategic formulation needs to be identified', in which the 'invoked phrase "Indo-Pacific" may be the appropriate choice for India'. India's Indo-Pacific outreach matches the outreach of other actors. Swaran Singh (2013) argued that there was conceptual-strategic convergence between 'Australia's Look West policy and India's Look East policy and the whole issue of the Indo-Pacific region'. Similarly, the former Indian Ambassador to the US, Ronen Sen (2013, p. 8), reckoned that 'there is a clear convergence between India's Look East policy and the more recent US rebalancing in the Indo-Pacific region'.

In terms of critical geopolitics (position/place as aspirations), there are a battery of aspirational hopes for eminence and pre-eminence coming out from Indian commentators. For one Indian commentator, 'the term 'Indo-Pacific' has suddenly gained currency acknowledging India's growing stature in Asia' (Gokhale, 2013). For another commentator, it was indicated that 'India is an essential cornerstone of the emerging architecture of the Indo-Pacific region' (Nehru, 2013, p. 5). Such undertones of aspirational pre-eminence can also be seen in Former

Chief of Eastern Naval Command, Mihir Roy's contention that 'the region is more cohesive to be termed as Indo-Pacific with India taking the lead in IOR-ARC and ASEAN' (Roy, 2013, p. 23).

Trade-Geo-economic Undertones

Within this emerging debate around the term Indo-Pacific, geopolitics leads to geo-economics, with Hemant Singh envisaging 'the Indo-Pacific as an inter-linked and integrated geo-political and geo-economic space from India to the Pacific' (Singh and Inderfurth, 2012).

At the official level, Ambassador Rao has argued that words like Indo-Pacific reflect wider shifts: 'we live in an age of redefinitions, as the economic centre of gravity has shifted towards the Indo-Pacific region' (Rao, 2013a, b). She has been a powerful official Indian voice on this economic angle. In particular, she continues to argue that for India, 'the continuance of economic growth and prosperity ... is in many ways linked to the Indo-Pacific region', and that 'we have a stake in a stable, prosperous and secure Indo-Pacific region' (Rao, 2011). Her vision for the Indo-Pacific included 'the creation of an inclusive, participatory network of inter-dependence, co-operative trade, economic development, security and stability in the Asia of the Indo-Pacific' (Rao, 2013a). Elsewhere in government, the External Affairs Minister, Salman Khurshid (2013c), argued that 'economic growth and prosperity and a common future ... has to be secured not just within the new security and economic architecture of the Asia Pacific but also the Indo-Pacific'. In his first public deployment of the term 'Indo-Pacific', it is significant that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stressed the term's cooperative economic side: 'our future is inter-linked and a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity' (Singh, 2012).

India's naval chiefs have also picked up on the economic significance of the Indo-Pacific rhetoric. Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Joshi was very sensitive to the geo-economic nuances of the Indo-Pacific, and contends that 'the Indo-Pacific is rich in natural resources' (Joshi, 2013a, pp. 4–5), that the 'market gets defined by nearly half the world's population inhabiting Indo-Pacific' and that 'the maritime trade flowing through the busy sea lanes of Indo-Pacific region is vital'. His predecessor, Sureesh Mehta (2013) similarly stressed that as 'a maritime region', the 'Indo-Pacific is important because ... as the world's most economically dynamic region ... the Indo-Pacific region ... is rapidly eclipsing the once-dominant "Asia-Pacific" as the centre of trade'. This followed earlier comments by Mehta that the 'Indo-Pacific is a geographic entity and the incidents in the South China Sea have great bearing on trade flows through the Malacca Straits. India needs to pay attention to these developments' (Exim, 2012).

Governments are receiving Indo-Pacific economic messages. Vikram Nehru's testimony to the US Senate House Committee on Foreign Affairs (Subcommittee

on Asia and the Pacific) stressed such possibilities; 'the Indo-Pacific region incorporating East Asia and South Asia—driven by the unrelenting logic of markets and geography—has the potential to become the world's economic powerhouse' through the 'Indo-Pacific arc of strengthened trade and investment links' (Nehru, 2013). Further, catch phrases are being coined, such as the *Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor*, invoked by the Aspen Institute India at the India–Japan–US Track-II strategic dialogue meeting in May 2013. This trilateral meeting included agreed language on 'the Indo-Pacific concept as an economic corridor based on the unobstructed flow of goods in an open and secure maritime domain' (AII, 2013).

Economic vistas have been entwined by associated diplomatic undertones. Ambassador Rao's (2011) sense of India–US links was partly economic, 'Indo-Pacific maritime trade co-operation will be beneficial for both the countries'. Similar sentiments on India–US links were then expressed by the then Foreign Secretary, Ranjan Mathai: 'our partnership is important for building a stable, prosperous and secure Asia-Pacific region—or, as some here have begun to call it, the Indo-Pacific' (Mathai, 2012). A year later, Mathai (2013) was talking again in Indo-Pacific strategic terms about how 'we see India's growing interests converging with US strategic outlook'; in which 'enhanced American economic, diplomatic and maritime engagement in the development of the Indo-Pacific region ... synchronizes with India's own enhanced engagement with our extended neighbourhood'.

These economic vistas also have military implications, particularly naval. With regard to safeguarding the flow of commerce along the sea lanes, Saran argued that India's 'legitimate interest in the freedom of navigation and security of sea lanes in the interconnected Indo-Pacific region' (Saran, 2012c), from the disruption of piracy and suchlike, necessitated active deployment of the Indian navy to various Indo-Pacific choke points like the Gulf of Aden and Strait of Malacca. Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) security also involves energy security considerations for India. Here, Indian commentators like Yhome and Shekhar (2012) noted 'India's strategic positioning in the Indo-Pacific region' amid 'the increasing geopolitical tussle among major powers over energy resources and maritime security in the Bay of Bengal region and the South China Sea'. In Chandran's (2013a) mind, 'the need to secure maritime traffic will make not only the Malacca Straits but also the entire Indo-Pacific the most important area' for Indian strategy. Mohan (2013c, p. 40) noted that 'the acceleration of India's economic growth and strategic interests in the Pacific has now led the increasing use of the term, "Indo-Pacific"'.

Strategic Geometry

Strategic geometry here concerns the way that interactions and interconnections between India and other political actors in the Indo-Pacific region can be seen in terms of geometric patterns of strategic configurations that involve defence-security

cooperation and partnerships. This reflects the government's professed drive to 'build partnerships across the Indo-Pacific' (Khurshid, 2013c). It is also reflected in Mehta's (2014, p. 4) assertion that "most of our strategic relationships and partnerships, besides our strongest linkages with regional organisations, are located across the Indo-Pacific". Although the Indian government is reluctant to use the term balancing, such partnerships involve soft balancing logic on the part of India with other China-concerned actors across the Indo-Pacific in bilateral and trilateral formations.

Commentators outside government have been more than ready to fill in official (undiplomatic) silence. Hence, the contextualization from the IDSA that 'the conception of geopolitics is not fixed and it changes with the changing balance of power', in which 'the Indo-Pacific Ocean is a new term and reflects the realities of contemporary Asian order. Even if geopolitics is dependent on geography, it is created based on imagination of the threat and opportunities' (IDSA, 2012b). Questions of hopes and fears bring with it responses by India towards other actors in the Indo-Pacific. When Pranay Sharma (2011) noted that 'the Indo-Pacific [is] a term underlining the centrality of India in the new balance of power game', it raised the further question of whom India might envisage balancing with as well as balancing against. It is also why, in October 2013, Raja Mohan (2013a) talked about the 'Indo-Pacific balancing act' facing India, and Harsh Pant (2013b) wondered about 'India's ability to emerge as a balancer in the larger Indo-Pacific'.

Balancing generally involves choices in strategic geometry, with diplomatic and security cooperation and coordination ensuing. Joshy Paul (2013) for one has speculated on 'the Indo-Pacific region, [as] the next venue for alliances and counter alliances' involving India. Consequently, Indo-Pacific formulations are now frequently being used for various 'allies, amongst like-minded maritime nations of the Indo-Pacific Region' (Arun Singh, 2013) like Indonesia, Australia, Japan and the United States. Such balancing options involve defence cooperation and defence agreements, which is why Naidu (2013) argues that 'defence diplomacy is emerging as a key dimension of India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region', and Rajoram Panda (2013) talks of India deepening 'defence ties with [other] Indo-Pacific Nations'.

India's moves outside the Indian Ocean involve varied Indo-Pacific rhetoric. With regard to links with Southeast Asia, Sudhir Devare (2013) argues that converging India-ASEAN relations reflect 'the evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific'. Subhash Kapila (2013b), commenting on India-Vietnam strategic and defence links says that 'Vietnam would be expecting more assertive Indian policy formulations on the South China Sea disputes, which would in the coming decades impact security and stability in Indo-Pacific Asia, which includes India'; while Ankit Panda (2013) similarly argued that 'the relationship can only grow more important in determining geopolitical outcomes in the Indo-Pacific region' and that 'for India, Vietnam is a pivotal node in its attempt to blur the lines between its Indian Ocean and SCS interests'. India's interest in the South China

Sea, the intervening stretch of waters between the Eastern Indian Ocean and Western Pacific has been given Indo-Pacific underpinnings by Raman Puri and Arun Sahgal (2011, p. 445) who explain India's presence in South China Sea waters as 'the extension of Indian strategic space into the Indo-Pacific' (also see Kapila 2013a).

With regard to India–Japan links, within the government, Salman Khurshid (2013b) has run the emerging India–Japan partnership through an Indo-Pacific prism, as involving 'the confluence of the two seas which gave rise to the term "Indo-Pacific" that is commonly used by strategic thinkers today'. He went on to note that in the official India–Japan Strategic Dialogue mechanism, one of its central themes was 'how the Indo-Pacific concept can be developed' (Khurshid, 2013a). At the highest level, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2013) similarly talked of 'the Indo-Pacific region' as "'the confluence of the two seas"—the Pacific and the Indian Oceans—which has defined the new framework for our bilateral [India–Japan] relationship'. Quite correctly, Indian commentators considered Singh's comments to be 'treating the Indo-Pacific as a strategic geopolitical space' (Samanta, 2013b). Outside government, think tanks close to government have used the 'Indo-Pacific' as the area for India–Japan links (AII, 2011; IDSA, 2012a). Other commentators similarly linked Indo-Pacific as the appropriate geographic term encompassing the India–Japan partnership (Mishra, 2013b; Mohan, 2012b; Nalapat, 2013). Shinzo Abe's high profile visit to India in January 2014 brought a further rafter of 'Indo-Pacific' underpinnings by various Indian commentators (Chellaney, 2014; Kesavan, 2014; Mohan, 2014a).

Further afield, India and Australia have moved together in a partnership described by the two governments as common interest "in the maintenance of stability and security through the Indian-Pacific region" (India–Australia, 2012). The Track 1.5 India–Australia Roundtable deliberations in December 2012 were underpinned for its Chairmen Raja Mohan and Rory Medcalf (2012, 2013) by a common sense of 'convergent strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region'. Various Indian commentators specifically describe the relationship as 'Indo-Pacific' (Bagchi, 2012a; Gnanagurunathan, 2012b; Ved, 2013) in nature. The Australian 2013 *White Paper on Defence* was welcomed in India, in part for its 'projecting India as an emerging power in the Indo-Pacific region' (Jha, 2013, p. 3). Similarly, Balaji Chandramohan (2012, p. 1) viewed India–New Zealand cooperation as an 'Indo-Pacific strategic partnership'. Finally, Subha Singh (2013) argued that with 'the Indo-Pacific region gaining in strategic importance', Indian interest in the South Pacific, especially with regard to Fiji, 'is a logical extension of the "Look East" policy'.

India increasingly explains its partnership with the US in Indo-Pacific terms. Ambassador Rao (2011) emphasized to an American audience in December 2011 that 'we also have an increasing convergence of interests with the United States ... linked to the Indo-Pacific region', her first invocation of the term. A month later, in January 2012, she noted how 'in the broader Indo-Pacific region India is working with the US' (Rao, 2012a). She continued to pursue

'co-operation between India and the United States on what we call the Indo Pacific' (Rao, 2013c). Her predecessor as ambassador to the US, Ronen Sen (2012), argued similarly that 'India and the United States of America have many common challenges in the Asia-Pacific, or rather, Indo-Pacific region'. Her successor, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (2014), similarly reiterated to another American audience how 'geo-strategic convergence is still the core of our relationship ... in the Indo-Pacific region'. Indian commentators have picked up on this strategic linkage of 'Indo-Pacific' and US–India relations (Bagchi, 2013; Pant, 2013a; Shubha Singh, 2012; Singh and Pulipaka, 2013).

India's simultaneous strengthening of bilateral links with Japan and with the US, coupled with strengthening Japan–US relations, has led to an India–Japan–US trilateral formation. Indian commentators (Karnad, 2013; Panneerselvam, 2013) specifically identify this trilateral formation as 'Indo-Pacific' in nature and operation. Its logic is that all three trilateral members faced growing assertiveness on the part of China during 2010–2011 in the East China Sea, South China Sea, Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. Consequently, Track-1 trilateral dialogue meetings were initiated in December 2011, representing 'an Indo-Pacific triangle of consequence' for Indian commentators' (Singh and Inderfurth, 2011). Initially, the Track-2 trilateral India–Japan–US meetings in 2011 and 2012 used Asia-Pacific terminology. However, by the 2013 Track-2 trilateral meeting, which included figures from the Aspen Institute India (AII) and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the 'Asia-Pacific' had been dropped as a common point of reference. Instead, it was talk of 'the Indo-Pacific concept' (AII, 2013).

Other Indo-Pacific trilateral mechanisms involve India. The Track-1 India–Indonesia–Australia troika, announced in 2012, was seen as a 'new grouping in the Indo-Pacific' by Bagchi (2012b) with their Track-2 trilateral meeting in Delhi considered by Ashok Malik (2013) as being between 'Indo-Pacific powers'. Elsewhere, Rupakjyoti Borah (2011, p. 1) argued in May 2011 that 'given the emerging security scenario in the Indo-Pacific region ... it is timely to explore the merits of a trilateral regional security architecture consisting of India, Australia and the United States'. In such a vein, Rajeswari Rajagopalan from the ORF participated with counterparts from Australia (Lowy Foundation) and the US (Heritage Foundation) in drawing up their report, *Shared Goals, Converging Interests: A Plan for US-Australia-India Co-operation in the Indo-Pacific*, in November 2011.

Maritime Naval Undertones

Given that the term 'Indo-Pacific' refers to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, it is not surprising that it emphasizes a maritime setting in which, as Ashok Behuria notes, as 'the contours of geopolitics change ... in the maritime domain, there has been a dramatic shift in focus from the Atlantic-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. We hear the

term Indo-Pacific more and more in recent months and years' (Behuria, 2012). From his close proximity to government circles, Shyam Saran (2013) felt that 'the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a single maritime theatre is a major insight' in recent Indian discussions. The term gives India a different potential organizing focus away from land concentration in South Asia (Team SAISA, 2013). Rohan Venkataramakrishnan (2013) argues that in India's strategic debates, 'names can have a powerful impact on our perspective ... switching to the Indo-Pacific label might force an embrace not just of the East but also of the growing importance of India's maritime role in the two great oceans'. Such a theatre involves consideration of what sort of maritime presence India has—in other words, maritime power. This was reflected in Arun Prakash's (2012a, p. 1) comments 'India's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region ... in which maritime power finds its rightful place', and Vijay Sakhuj's (2011, p. 284) comment that sense that 'the maritime interoperability with the Indo-Pacific region will be India's enduring and visible leverage of power'.

A maritime-naval underpinning has been pushed by the NMF. Its annual maritime power conferences in 2012, 2013 and 2014 highlighted the arrival of the 'Indo-Pacific' in Indian strategic discourse. At the 2012 Conference, the Indian Defence Minister, A.K. Antony (2012), noted the current 'relevance of the Indian Ocean-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific' in great power relationships that India was involved in. The former Chief of Naval Staff and current NMF Chairman, Sureesh Mehta (2012), argued there that 'we shall see further bolstering of the 'Indo-Pacific', which is as wide an extension of the strategic space as we ... may want it to be'. He went on to tell the politicians that given the 'particularly strong maritime connectivities between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans ... consequently, the term Indo-Pacific would find more relevance' (Mehta, 2012) for analysts and policy makers. At its 2013 Maritime Power Conference, with the official theme, *Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: The Next Two Decades*, Mehta (2013) considered that for Indian strategists and planners, there was an 'integrated Indo-Pacific as one singular maritime theatre'. His inaugural address at the 2014 conference similarly noted that 'the geographic limits of maritime security interests, as defined by the Maritime Doctrine of 2009, coincide with the contours of the Indo-Pacific' (Mehta, 2014, p. 4).

In turn, maritime stress brings emphasis on naval power as a state arm, in which Srinivasan (2011) considered that 'India, as an Indo-Pacific power, has the right and the obligation to project itself as a powerful naval force'. Ambassador Rao (2013a) put it more diplomatically: 'India has contributed its naval capabilities to help safeguard the vital sea lanes of the Indo-Pacific' (also see Raja Mohan, 2013b). Chandramohan (2012) argued that 'as part of India's power projection efforts in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi has decided to strengthen its Eastern Fleet in Vishakhapatnam and the tri-command service in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands'. The transfer of the tri-command ANC (Andaman & Nicobar Command) to the navy in November 2013 reflected the way the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, as acknowledged by India's President, were a 'springboard to Southeast Asia and

the Pacific Ocean' (Mukherjee, 2014). Deployments by the Indian Navy into the South China Sea, a recurring feature since 2000 and in the Western Pacific since 2007, are described as 'distant area operations in the Indo-Pacific' (Shukla, 2013), showing India's 'capacity to project power in the Indo-Pacific' (Pai, 2011; also see *The Hindu*, 2013).

Given the envisaged role of the Navy in wider foreign policy diplomacy, Abhijit Singh (2012) talked of how 'the Indian Navy works proactively with like-minded partners to establish a new peace-keeping architecture in the Indo-Pacific' (2012). One tangible manifestation of this naval architecture has been the MILAN exercises, 'institutionalised as a biennial event that draws in a large number of countries in the Indo-Pacific littoral' (Mohan, 2012a, p. 10). By 2014, the MILAN framework was involving navies from both the wings of the Indo-Pacific—in the shape of Mauritius, the Seychelles, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Brunei, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. Elsewhere, India's bilateral SIMBEX exercises with Singapore have been alternating since 2005 between the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. India's own deployments in the South China Sea have been a feature since 2000. Bilateral India-US MALABAR naval exercises have similarly alternated between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific since 2007. Similarly, bilateral India-Japan JIMEX naval exercises have taken place in the Western Pacific (2011) and Eastern Indian Ocean (2013). With regard to India-Japan strategic convergence, Chellaney (2011) says that 'interoperability between their formidable naval forces ... can undergird peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region', and is becoming a natural partnership for 'safeguarding vital sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific region' (Chellaney, 2014). The MALABAR-1 exercises in 2007 involved the Indian Navy carrying out exercises in the Bay of Bengal with naval units from the US, Singapore and Japan, while the MALABAR-2 exercises involved the Indian Navy carrying out exercises with naval units from the US and Japan in the Western Pacific, a format repeated in 2009 and 2014. The INDRA exercises with Russia take place in the Indian Ocean and also in the Western Pacific.

The maritime-naval undertones of the Indo-Pacific concept overlaps with the strategic undertones already noted. A battery of Indo-Pacific maritime-naval points of reference is used by Raja Mohan. With regard to India-Indonesia links, he argued that a 'maritime partnership between Delhi and Jakarta will erase the artificial separation of the two oceans and herald a new era of the Indo-Pacific' (Mohan, 2011a). Similarly, he sees India-Australia strategic convergence reflecting an 'Indo-Pacific naval partnership' (Mohan, 2011b) between 'maritime partners in the Indo-Pacific' (Mohan, 2011c). In this vein of strategic maritime cooperation, Mohan (2012c) also argues that 'the United States is now seeking a strong security partnership with India in the Indo-Pacific'; and that 'as the American and Indian navies ... work together in the waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the traditional differentiation between these two theatres is likely to rapidly disappear'.

China Undercurrents

With regard to China, we can start with Ambassador Rao's (2013a) circumspect words: 'the rise of China, changes the security calculus of the Indo-Pacific world' (also see Prakash, 2013b, p. 278) for India and for other countries. In the official sphere, Shyam Saran has often raised the China issue with reference to the Indo-Pacific. At a general level, he argues that in 'the interconnected Indo-Pacific region' in which India operates, a recurring challenge is how to 'manage China' (Saran, 2012c). The challenge is frequently seen as competitive, with 'Sino-Indian maritime competition in the expanded theatre of the Indo-Pacific' (Saran, 2013). From there he argued that China's 'more assertive posture of the past couple of years had triggered a rapid and continuing build up of countervailing coalitions in the strategic Indo-Pacific theatre' (Saran, 2011b, 2012a, b) that include India.

Outside government, clear China-centric Indo-Pacific linkages have been made around how 'the PRC's military rise is going to constitute one of the most significant challenges facing the Indo-Pacific region in the next few decades' (Khurana, 2008, 2011, p. 50; Prakash, 2013b, p. 278). Raja Mohan's book *Samudra Manthan* was perhaps the most widely noticed analysis of this genre, with its subtitle being *Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Mohan, 2012d). This affects the associations of terminology, with one Indian commentator arguing that 'fear of an increasingly aggressive China provides an opportunity for India to develop the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific'' (Shukla, 2011), although it should be noted that the concept is not in itself inherently derived or aimed at China-containment. Maritime friction overlaps with naval assets, in which Indian commentators argue that 'the only regional force that can challenge the Chinese navy's quest to dominate the Indo-Pacific waters is the Indian navy' (Pai, 2013).

China's growing naval presence is seen as a common Indo-Pacific challenge. Arun Prakash (2012c) warned that 'a much more expansive role for the PLAN in Indo-Pacific waters ... should provide considerable food for thought to its immediate maritime neighbours in the Asia-Pacific as well as to us in the Indian Ocean'. Consequently, Indian commentators have also been blunt in talking about the 'Indo-Pacific' specifically and directly in connection with balancing arrangements by India with other China-concerned states (Bali, 2013; Chandramohan, 2012, p. 5; Chaudhuri, 2013; Gnanagurunathan, 2012b; Kaneja, 2012; Kasturi, 2013; Malik, 2013; Rai, 2012; Singh, 2013, p. 19; Srinivasan, 2011). These China-related understandings constitute 'the Indo-Pacific Great Game' discussed by Kamal Davar (2014), India's first head of the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA).

Particular bilateral relations have China-centric Indo-Pacific underpinnings for various Indian commentators. Manmohan Singh's invocation of the Indo-Pacific in his 2013 visit to Japan was considered by Pranab Samanta (2013a) as a 'signal to China' about the 'Indo-Pacific strategic confluence' between India and Japan. Similarly, the ORF Track-2 dialogue with Japanese think tank counterparts was run on the basis of the 'China rise [being] a trigger for Indo-Japanese ... strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific Region' (ORF, 2014). Further, Shinzo Abe's high

profile visit to India in January 2014 brought a raft of China-centric Indo-Pacific underpinnings by various Indian commentators; typified by the former Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal (2014), arguing that India and Japan ‘have a shared interest in countervailing China’s hegemonic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region’ and Jacob’s (2014) argument that ‘China in mind, India, Japan expand footprint in Indo-Pacific’. This is similar to Chandramohan’s (2012) comment on India similarly ‘aiding the United States’ increased forward presence in the Indo-Pacific region—which has curtailing China’s increased assertiveness as a subtext’. Not only do both bilateral relations have China-centric undertones, but the wider India–Japan–US trilateral mechanism has as well. The India–Japan–US Track-II trilateral, represented from India by the Aspen Institute, delicately but pointedly explained how ‘the expansion of China’s influence and national power both politically and economically is the most important development in the Indo-Pacific security environment in recent years’ (AII, 2013; IWN, 2013), to which the trilateral members were responding through closer cooperation among themselves. Similarly, the deployment in January 2014 of Chinese naval vessels from the West Pacific into the Eastern Indian Ocean was seen by some Indian commentators as ‘Beijing’s increasingly bold maritime posture in the Indo-Pacific’ (Mohan and Medcalf, 2014), which showed the desirability of strengthening ‘maritime security co-operation in the Indo-Pacific’ (Mohan, 2014b) between India, Indonesia and Australia.

Indian Critics

Although the adoption of the term Indo-Pacific has become noticeable in Indian strategic discourse over the last few years, some Indian figures object to this embrace of Indo-Pacific geopolitical terminology. One importantly placed critic was the National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon. While he conceded that ‘security is indeed linked across the seas and oceans that encircle the Asian landmass’, he nevertheless felt that ‘the Indo-Pacific is not one geopolitical unit’; for ‘in geopolitical terms, and in terms of the naval capabilities of the different navies other than the US that operate between Suez and Hawaii’, the so-called Indo-Pacific stretch ‘still consists of three distinct areas: the Indian Ocean, the western Pacific, and the seas near China (namely, the South China Sea, the East Sea and the Sea of Japan)’ (Menon, 2013). Menon then argued that ‘the reason I cavil about calling the Indo-Pacific one space is because if we do, there is a danger of prescribing one medicine for the different security ailments that afflict the Indian Ocean, the seas near China, and the western Pacific’ (Menon, 2013). However, one can argue that these are sub-regional distinctions within a region, and that from India’s point of view, its deployments into all these sub-regions, and its pin-pointing of them as areas of strategic interest give the ‘Indo-Pacific’ term geopolitical coherence as a region, even if conditions and thus remedies vary within its sub-regions.

Nevertheless, this China subtext surrounding much, though not all, of the Indo-Pacific rhetoric has attracted criticism from some Indian circles. Gnanagurunathan (2012a) cautioned against this 'idea of the "Indo-Pacific"' since 'a geopolitical categorization might send a wrong, if not false, signal to other countries about India's intentions and actions ... China is a major stakeholder in the region, who may have reservations about the term and its obvious connotations'. Pinaki Bhattacharya (2013) argues that the term and policies based on it over-extended India while simultaneously antagonizing China while Rukmani Gupta (2011) argues that 'the adoption of this [Indo-Pacific] terminology by India' leaves India 'identifying too closely with American interests' in containing China. For Chaturvedi (2012, p. 2) and others, 'the dominant narrative based on an Indo-Pacific Region security construction tends to be propagated by conservative practitioners and commentators concerned principally with the use of collective traditional security and hard power directed ... more particularly, towards China'. Conversely, 'while there are subservient interpretations of the Indo-Pacific concept that are, on the contrary, very much inclusive of China ... this more inclusive map is not the dominant geopolitical construction currently being solicited and espoused' (Chaturvedi, 2012, p. 3). Instead, they called for a 'new Indo-Pacific' concept—that is, a view of the region as including China (Chaturvedi, 2012, p. 1).

Two comments can be made on this. First, official government rhetoric from Manmohan Singh and Nirupama Rao does include some inclusive cooperative economics-based emphases. Secondly, while it is true that most Indo-Pacific usage tends to involve hard power/military power projection by India and related strategic geometry which has a China-centric underpinning; it can be argued that such a dominant China-centric Indo-Pacific security narrative in India reflects a geopolitical issue that cuts across the old geographic division between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

On reflection, this China-centric balancing undertone in most, but not all, of Indian usage of the term Indo-Pacific is likely for three related reasons. First India, Australia, Japan and the United States are liberal democracies, which contrast with the non-liberal democracy status of China. Secondly, they are all countries, together with Indonesia, that do have overlapping concerns about China's growing presence. Thirdly they all are connected with water stretches, so that their deliberations tend to have maritime nuances that in turn point to military naval associations. Put all of these together, and while the term 'Indo-Pacific' does not inherently have China-related undertones, the actual Indo-Pacific settings of India (and also Australia, Indonesia and the US) give a tendency for the term to often have such undertones.

A further concern has been Chaturvedi's (2012, p. 13) argument that 'the emerging geopolitical discourse of the "Indo-Pacific", and its underlying geopolitical visions, are likely to provoke reactions from India's neighbours sooner rather than later', which 'might accentuate the geopolitical anxieties, bordering on fear, in some quarters over India's intentions to dominate'. However, smaller countries (Singapore), medium (Vietnam, Philippines), and bigger (Indonesia,

Australia, Japan, South Korea) seem more than happy to develop maritime security links with India and to welcome India's easterly outreach from the Indian Ocean into the South China Sea and Western Pacific. The parallel evocations of the Indo-Pacific by American, Australian and Indonesian figures match a noticeable degree of strategic convergence and cooperation between the governments of India, Australia, Indonesia and the US.

Conclusion

If we stand back from the flurry of 'Indo-Pacific' evocations that have been noticeable in India during the 2011–2014 period, how objective or subjective a term is it? The conclusion is simple. There is a geographic expanse able to be labelled the Indo-Pacific, which fruitfully combines India's Look South and Look East policies. This is a maritime zone spanning both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, or perhaps more coherently (Nirupama Rao's 'core'), the eastern Indian Ocean through the South China Sea into the Western Pacific. Such a maritime zone is one that India is located in, and plays a significant role in, with the greatest concentration and impact witnessed in the Indian Ocean, but with India increasingly playing a role in the South China Sea and Western Pacific.

Admittedly, the role of China, and response to China by India, in the Indo-Pacific remains an open question; but then, we come back to the general feature that a noticeable degree of China-centric soft balancing in the Indo-Pacific region has come from India and some other countries, even as they try to also engage within an overall strategic hedging. Such elements of soft balancing remain a question of policies adopted by governments rather than inherent aspects of the Indo-Pacific concept. Certainly, given the common challenges that India and China also face in the Indo-Pacific in the shape of SLOC security, trade security, and combating transnational threats from piracy and jihadist destabilization, the term Indo-Pacific could become associated with different more cooperative concerns. President Xi Jinping's evocation of a new 'maritime Silk Road' (*haishang sichou zhi lu*) during 2013 may give an Indo-Pacific opening for China to cooperate with India. However, cooperation (as indeed competition and confrontation) does not stem from the term Indo-Pacific, but rather from the actual policies and interactions of the actors in that Indo-Pacific region. What is clear is that, either way, the role of the Indo-Pacific as a meaningful security concept has become important for India. It is an area of growing strategic importance and maritime involvement for India, both in terms of traditional geopolitics and critical geopolitics and geo-economics.

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