

Indo-Pacific Region: Geopolitical Complexities and Significance for India's Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper elucidates the growing vitality of Indopacific region in the global politics. It also seeks to examine how the geopolitics of the region has its implications for shaping the ties of the major powers in the region generally and India particularly. This region not only has enormous resources potential but also has its strategic significance which has determinantal role in India's foreign policy in general and its relations with littoral states particularly. Moreover, the significance of the Indo pacific lies as many argues that the 21st century is the Asian century. The vitality of the geopolitics in the contemporary global politics is undenyng fact however the rising geopolitics has also created certain complexities in the relations of major power within the region besides India and littoral states. The growing power rivalry, China string of pearls, deployment of military bases, climate change and rising sea level due to melting of glacier etc. These complexities have far reached impact upon the region in generally and India particularly. India in order to strengthen its position in the region and tackling the complexities must perpetuate its proactive policy in the Indo pacific region.

KEYWORDS: Indo Pacific, Geopolitics, Climate change, Strategic.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of 21st century has witnessed numerous transformations in the international milieu. One such transformation is the rise of Indo Pacific region in the international politics and its role in shaping the foreign policy of India. It is said that, since the new government was formed in May 2014, Prime Minister Modi and his team of Ministers and officials have been actively engaged in the Asia-Pacific region. This includes visits to the region at the highest level, which were both bilateral, and attending other multilateral meetings (Padmaja, 2018). The increasing inclination of India towards the Indo Pacific can be traced from Mahanian logic as Alfred T. Mahan (2013) in a book entitled "The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1753 mentions the importance of the role of the sea as an aspect of the strength of a nation. He further mentions that whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia ... in the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided on these waters".

Following the Mahanian logic India's foreign policy makers paid huge attention towards the Indo-Pacific region and it can be explicit through India's proactive foreign policy in the Indo Pacific region. Indo Pacific the locus of global politics in the contemporary time is defined by a renowned Political analyst Joshi as '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,2013). Robert D Kaplan in his book Monsoon has defined the region as is a significant geostrategic node for economic, environmental and human resources (Kaplan,2011).



Source: Pinterest

This paper seeks to analyse what significance Indo Pacific region holds for India's foreign policy? It further seeks to analyse what complexities India could face in its foreign policy strategy in the region and what policy initiatives India has taken to strengthen its presence in the region.

INDO PACIFIC REGION AND ITS IMPERATIVES FOR INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Foreign policy of any state is determined by certain set of factors some of which are tangible and some are intangible in nature. The detrimental role of these factors on foreign policy is explicitly reflected as the continuity and change in the foreign policy of any state. Likely, India's foreign policy is not an exception to this as it has certain perpetual feature while some went transformation with time.

The 21st century witness certain transformation in the global politics in general and Indian foreign policy in particular. One such transformation can be viewed in India's foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region. This change in India's foreign policy is due to certain factors, the change in India's strategy of growth from import substitution to export driven that has substantially enhanced the value of the Indian Ocean in India's strategy of economic growth (Mann, 2018). The shift in international power from Euro Atlantic region towards Indo Pacific region (Abingdon & Wojczewski, 2020). Furthermore, the emergence of Globalisation, growing power rivalry and the centre of gravity in world politics is gradually shifting away from the United States and Europe to (re)emerging powers such as China, India, Russia and Brazil, which are growing in power, wealth and aspirations (Stuenkel, 2016). India not only makes transformation in its policy towards the region rather involved proactively in its policy stances in the Indo Pacific region. The proactiveness of India's policy in the Indo Pacific region lies due to the growing vitality of the region in the international politics.

Transport by water remains the cheapest form available, 95 percent of internet traffic at some stage carried under the sea by underwater cables, Maritime trade and energy supply critical to India's transformation (Menon, 2010). Paul while highlighting the significance of Indo Pacific region mentions that it is a confluence of the existing power, a rising power and a few secondary powers, and is also home to the world's fastest growing economies (Paul, 2020). It is also argued that the Indo-Pacific was a term whose time has come (Medclaff, 2012).

The Indian Ocean region emerged as one of the most dynamic geopolitical flashpoints in the last two decades. The region is rich in energy resources and has been an important trade route between the East

and the west. Given the fact that it is a significant energy trade route, the region is at the cusp of geo-strategic and geo economic shifts (Attanayake & Atmakuri, 2021). Notwithstanding with all, the significance of the region for India is explicit in one of the prominent maritime strategist K. M Panikkar statement who held that ‘the ones who control the Indian ocean can rule India’ (Panikkar, 2019). It is further said that the Indian Ocean region has become more fluid with the rise of India and spectre of India China rivalry or even cooperation (Pan,2014). This geographical entity in contemporary scenario is an equatorial pendulum that also transports the majority of value added goods connecting the Occident to the Orient. Therefore, in the current era of increasing economic meshing, the effects of events in this oceanic body create ripples that have global connotations (Mishra, 2014). Nirupama Rao a powerful official Indian voice 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).

India due to its strategic location in the Indian Ocean region has certain leeway to shape its foreign policy credentials in the Indo Pacific region. However, considering the growing geopolitical rivalries, aggressive policy of China and certain natural threats in the region have also major role in shaping India’s foreign policy in the region.

CONSTRAINTS FOR INDIA’S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE INDO PACIFIC REGION

The Indo-Pacific region not only being the centre of global politics rather a place of rising geopolitical rivalries. Besides, the region faces certain challenges which has its ramifications for India’s foreign policy in region. The emerginggeopolitical 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’(Chaturvedi, 2012). The major lacuna in the region is the conundrum faced by the Asian powers in balancing and hedging between the USA and China (Lee, Lee & Jung, 2020).

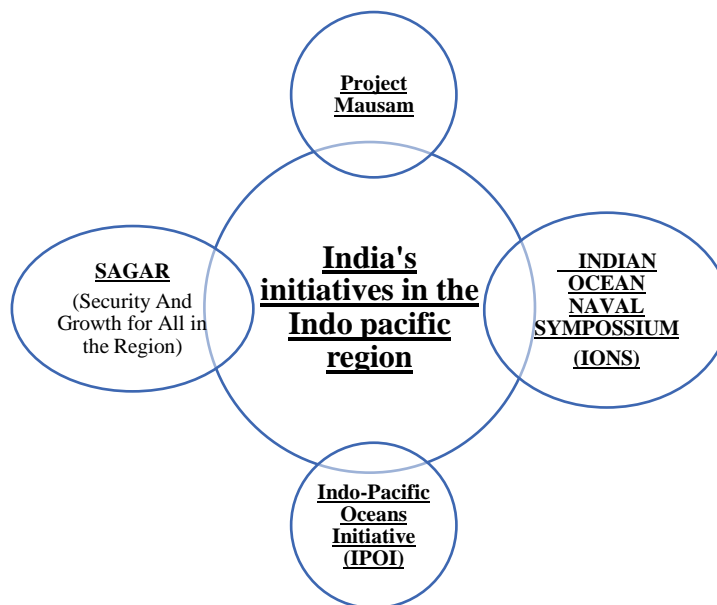
The Indo Pacific region is also considered to contains the seeds of growing instability or conflict marked by widespread poverty and unequal development, religious extremism, fountain of trans national terrorism, internal strife and future playground for USA China struggle for global pre-eminence (Mishra, 2014). The region also faced certain threats from non-state actors which include piracy action related to political struggle(insurgency) and acts of suicide attack. It is also said that the Malacca Strait and Andaman Sea are considered as the most vulnerable areas for piracy related issues (Singh, 2003). Moreover, the rise in sea level, associated with climate change is a major environmental concern for the planet and the most alarming concern for the Indo Pacific region (Aswani, 2020).

Besides, the rising military maritime capability accretion in the Asia-Pacific of major resident players such as India, China, Japan, South Korea and Australia, besides the greater focus of quasi/extra-regional players such EU members as well as the US, have also been considered as a source of greater friction in the Indo Pacific region (Mishra, 2014). Furthermore, the emergence of China as a revisionist power in the region has threatened the regional order and warned that the Indo-Pacific increasingly is confronted with a more confident and assertive China that is willing to accept friction in the more expensive set of political, economic and security interests (Lee, Lee & Jung, 2020). In addition, China One Belt One Road initiative (OBOR) and ‘String of pearls policy’ strategic policy, in the region has serious

implications for India's maritime security and foreign policy in the Indo Pacific region. India proactively opposes both the initiative including China Pakistan economic corridor considering its security implications for India (Bagale& Singh, 2019). Shyam Saran has often raised the China issue with reference to the IndoPacific. 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, 2012)

UNDERSTANDING INDIA'S INITIATIVES IN THE INDO PACIFIC REGION

India's ambition to become a benign power in the Indo pacific region has constrained by numerous factors which are discussed in the previous section. India in order to tackle all the constraints has launched various initiatives in the Indo pacific region, which is clearly depicted in the diagram below.



India's maritime diplomacy in the Indo Pacific region in general and Indian Ocean in particular under the regime of Modi can be understood through "SAGAR", i.e., security and growth for all in the region. This policy was launched during Prime Minister Modi visit to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka during March 2015. The salient features of the policy SAGAR as summarised by Padmaja are, India will do everything to safeguard its sovereignty and to defend its interests. India will deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and island states, and assist in building their maritime security capabilities. India believes that collective action and cooperation will best advance peace and security in the maritime region. India will seek an integrated approach and cooperative future which will result in sustainable development for all in the region. Those who live in this region have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. Thus, the SAGAR policy of India is basically a non-assertive policy and has its coherence with the international law related to maritime security as well (Padmaja, 2015).

Moreover, the other grandiose policy initiative launched by India in the Indo-Pacific region is the Project Mausam. It was considered as India's response to One Belt One Road policy of China in the Indo Pacific region. Unlike string of pearls, under project Mausam India try to harness its cultural linkages with countries along the Monsoon routes for effective and fruitful foreign policy. In addition to this the Project Mausam aims for "Indian Ocean maritime routes" to attain transnational nomination under

world heritage, increasing scope for visibility, research, Sustainable development, heritage development and promoting other cultural conventions across the Indian Ocean region (Ranjan, 2017).

Furthermore, another significant initiative undertaken by India to strengthen its leverage in the Indian Ocean region in 2008 was Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. IONS was a voluntary initiative that seeks to increase maritime cooperation among navies of littoral states in the Indian Ocean region by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues (Sawan, 2020). IONS aims to promote a shared understanding of issues and concerns relevant to the IOR, which have a bearing on maritime security. To strengthen the capability of all nation-states of the IOR to address present and anticipated challenges to maritime security and stability. To establish and promote a variety of trans-national, maritime, consultative and cooperative mechanisms, designed to address and mitigate the maritime security concerns of the region. To develop interoperability in terms of doctrines, strategies, procedures, organisational and logistic systems, and operational processes, so as to promote the provision of speedy, responsive and effective Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster-Relief (HADR) throughout the IOR (Ghosh, 2012).

India's Prime Minister enunciated a new "Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative" (IPOI) at the 14th East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bangkok, on 4 November 2020. The IPOI has been conceptually positioned to be in consonance with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) — specifically (but not exclusively) with 'SDG 14': Life Below Water. The IPOI is designed to further the endeavour of countries of the Indo-Pacific, stretching from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of the Americas, "to create a safe, secure and stable maritime domain" within which collective and collaborative mechanisms could be created to "conserve and sustainably use" this domain and "safeguard the ocean" (Kumarasamy, Parmar & Chauhan, 2020).

Besides all these, India's proactiveness in the Indo Pacific region is apparent through its active participation in various bilateral and multilateral forums and exercises in the region. India's project like Sagarmala, Look east to look Act policy, etc has clearly reflected India's inclination towards the region and how the region has its role in India's pursuit of benign power in the region.

CONCLUSION

India's foreign policy in the recent past has shown its inclination towards the Indo-Pacific region considering the relative potential and significance of the region in the contemporary world order. Notwithstanding with this, the region is also significant for India's endeavour of preeminent power in the world generally and Indo Pacific region particularly. India in order to strengthen its leverages in the region has launched numerous policy initiatives perpetually. However, non-coherence among the initiatives and sluggishness in India's interaction with the littoral states besides the assertive policy of the China in the region requires India to make its policy more comprehensive and try to bring coherence among all the initiatives to leverage the advantage of its strategic location in the Indo Pacific region.

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