

# India's Democratic Strategies in the Security Architecture of the Indo-Pacific Region: An Overview

Sayantani Sen Mazumdar\*

Submitted: 21.01.2023.

Revised: 29.04.2023.

Accepted: 13.05.2023.

**Abstract:** *The perception, Indo-Pacific region, is in no way an attempt to devalue the pertinence of the Asian countries, on the contrary the rationale is to emphasize Asia in the maritime region. It is an admonition of the fact that the international sea lanes of communication of the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean are integral to the regional, economic and strategic aspects of the countries of the region, hence every country's interests are linked to it. The aspects of mutually beneficial advantages have made the countries to be politically and economically interdependent on each other. There is a necessity of evolving competent security cooperation architecture with an objective to bolstering mutual trust and compatibility. The Indo-Pacific region implies a multipolar region, a stretch too extensive and diverse to be dominated by any one power. Its resource riches are enticing for domineering imprints but cooperation among the countries perhaps is the most desirable policy to counter manifold security challenges, unilateralism or rivalry must be denounced in all possible means. This study aims to delineate the strategic realities of the Indo-Pacific region in terms of power equations of the regional players and to analyse India's role in this security architecture.*

**Keywords:** *Indo-Pacific Region, Mutual Advantages, Strategic Realities, Security Challenges, Regional Players.*

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\* Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Diamond Harbour Women's University.  
e-mail: senmazumdarkmimi@gmail.com

## **Introduction**

The Indo-Pacific region has been integrally related to our civilizational consciousness and the magnitude of economic and political interdependence bears immense implications on our strategic concerns. It is argued that the term 'Indo-Pacific', which is a recent entrant in the international discourse of geo-strategic dynamics underscores the shift of prominence from the West to the East and is primarily associated with the pursuits of maritime security and cooperation. India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific region is driven by the interplay of myriad factors like the strategies of expanding its outreach, developing extra regional ties with major players, balancing against China in its expansionist moves, promotion of maritime strategic vision and developing a multipolar regional system and a new Asian balance of power. India's Indo-Pacific dynamics call for the realisation of its Act East Policy in facilitating regional stability where each country can pursue its legitimate interests without jeopardising other's security thereby creating a more balanced Asia.

This study attempts at exploring crucial aspects like the analysis of the impending security threats in the Indo-Pacific region and India's role in addressing the traditional as well as the non-traditional security threats. It also aims to address a crucial question that how a strategic dialogue between the major actors in the region can be facilitated for the purpose of collective security, economic cooperation and trans-continental commercial and security connectivity ensuing peace and prosperity in the region in a win-win paradigm. In lieu of that it emphasizes how the recent developments in international scenario have impacted the contours of international relations thereby inducing changes in the concepts of partnerships, alliances and alignments. The pertinence of this study lies in its attempt to underscore the relevance of India's balancing role in the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region. In order to have a comprehensive knowledge on the afore mentioned aspects, both qualitative and quantitative data were used. Analytical studies of official documents, relevant books, magazines, journals, publications, articles published in journals, newspapers were conducted. Moreover, emphasis was paid to interviews with academicians, students, specialists in this field for acquiring and enrichment of information.

## **Background of the Study**

Indo-Pacific realm is considered to be of immense strategic significance as it is a zone of convergence of international sea-lanes and air-routes. The maturing of relationships between the regional players emphatically bears significant connotations on the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region and the precept of mutual advantages and self-interests is pivoting the geo-strategic concerns and the pace of regional integration among the major players in the region.

The strategic equations of the major players in the Indo-Pacific region are expounded by a number of factors like the prerogative of diplomatic interests of the countries, power projection potential of the countries for military advancement, prioritization of strategic questions, partnership and rivalry equations and predisposition to the essence of regionalism thereby reflecting changes in the regional networking of strategic and economic dynamics. It is imperative to mention that under the rubric of Indo-Pacific the parameters of connectivity and linkages between the countries as well as the inherent vulnerabilities and opportunities are eulogized. The challenge therefore is to devise the means to counter the emergence of any hegemonic or aggressive power that might be detriment to the interests of other countries in the region. The resource availability and the inherent opportunities have propelled the stakeholders to redefine their defence and diplomatic priorities in the Indo-Pacific context. Before undertaking any crucial developmental initiative, the countries need to take detailed account of the connections as well as the risks involved across the two Oceans.

Since the Indo-Pacific region signifies the confluence of two Oceans it entails that the peace, prosperity and stability of both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean are intermittently connected. The abundance and availability of natural resources in the Indo-Pacific region, especially energy, are the pre requisites for economic development of nations in the world. This region represents a thriving market with half of the world's population and many countries depend on maritime economy such as China, Japan, and India. Though it has abundance of opportunities and possibilities still it has a number of challenges to encounter like terrible strategic competition between major powers, conflicts over possession of natural resources, sovereignty claims over territories, waters and islands and international terrorism. The increasing pace, frequency, scope and scale of these disputes might lead to the escalation of armed conflicts. But it is to be borne in mind that the non-traditional security threats, most particularly cyber war, migration, water and food security, energy security, environmental pollution, climate change, drought, salinisation and pandemic bear more disastrous implications on mankind and society than any armed conflict. It should be noted that no country can confront these challenges unilaterally. A sense of oblivion towards conforming to international law, fierce competition among the countries for dominance over territorial and marine resources and invocation of violent tactics for the solution of international disputes is an alarming trend for the entire generation, which is exerting adverse impact on regional security architecture in terms of freedom of navigation and over flight and maritime security and safety. Much to the dismay of regional integration process, these challenges potentially lead to a regional arms race, rise of mistrust and lack of confidence among the regional players ultimately thwarting the cooperation process in the region. Promotion of peace, security and sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific region is required. The countries should make joint efforts to accelerate

cooperation on the basis of international law, to bolster equality and mutual benefit, to protect stability, to prevent armed conflict and to avert a zero-sum game.

Unanimity of decisions should be facilitated through bilateral and multilateral alliances, mutual understandings and credence as well as by enriching regional security dialogues. Regional dialogue mechanism must be endorsed in order to safeguard the interests and concerns of the countries in the region as the member states will be encouraged to discuss issues related to sustenance of security environment, free of nuclear weapons, without resorting to threat or use of force in international relations and conformity to international law including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and to adopt effective measures jointly to address non-traditional issues such as terrorism, environmental pollution, security and safety of people working at sea and dispute over natural resources. It upholds the efficacy of confidence-building measures as the most convincing tool in addressing to the adversities of unresolved disputes and ambiguous security issues as these instigate the perils of uncertainties and misunderstandings. An imperative for all the stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region is to undertake collaborative endeavours to build a peaceful and stable environment that will lead to promotion of overall security and prosperity of the region.

### **Impending Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific Region**

The region possesses approximately a population of about 4 billion people, three out of the biggest economies in the world, the largest democracy in the world, nine of ten biggest ports in the world, seven out of ten largest standing armies in the world, five nuclear states in the world and a total GDP of tens of trillions of dollars in purchasing power parity terms. At the same time the region has to confront a horde of threats ranging from low-intensity conflict to nuclear race between the contending neighbours. The future security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region should delve into a competent and inclusive strategy to deter any military build-up or conflict at sea or on land leading to deadly consequences. The maritime region encompassing Africa, Asia and Australia encounters a series of varied conventional and non-conventional security challenges. The region has emerged as an epicentre of great power rivalries with the presence of the US navy at Diego Garcia, China's expanding investment in port facilities in littoral states like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan and India's booming blue water capabilities. The non-conventional security challenges such as piracy, trafficking of drugs, arms and human, failed states, environmental degradation and the protection of marine resources especially in the Horn of Africa, South East Asia remits a perpetual threat to the SLOC in East Asia, Persian Gulf and the Arab Sea. Moreover, the debate on the Indian Ocean security seems to centre on

the incongruities between the strategic relevance of the region on the international level and lack of concrete security efforts of the littoral states on the regional level.

Security architecture is “an overarching, coherent and comprehensive security structure for a geographically-defined area, which facilitates the resolution of that region’s policy concerns and achieves its security objectives”<sup>1</sup>. The security architecture may get featured by detrimental competition and confrontation in which the major powers will coerce the small countries to take their sides, leading to the peril of a ‘new type of Cold War’ in the region. For instance, China has already started using the aspect of economic interdependence as a ploy to garner the support of other countries. The ASEAN, as a regional organization has not been successful enough to sustain unanimity and solidarity amongst its members in dealing with regional related matters. Unilateral activities like stretching disputed arenas, executing wide-spread reclamation, exerting fishing bans, tormenting other countries’ fishermen, militarizing occupied islands and most alarmingly non-compliance to the international law has become a cause of international concern, which threatens freedom of navigation and over flight, regional security and development of the region. It is apparent that unipolar approach is not sufficient enough to encounter or combat the non-traditional challenges, which are intensely overlapping, spontaneous, impersonal, unpredictable and uncontrollable as well. But the unfolding of these tragedies or threats has disastrous consequences on entire humanity, encountering of which mandates coordinated efforts of all the countries of the Indo-Pacific region<sup>2</sup>. For example, greatly influenced by the great American naval thinker Alfred Thayer Mahan there has been considerable development in the understanding of naval strategies in both China and India and both the countries have been enthusiastic enough to undertake progressive naval expansion programmes<sup>3</sup>. In order to protect and promote regional peace and stability all countries should take up the responsibility of self-restraint steered to erode the risk of escalating tensions, should frame codes of conduct at sea while dealing with disputes and must devote all the synergies to foster confidence building measures and to settle disputes in conformity to the international law<sup>4</sup>.

### **Expanding Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific Region**

There is a need of stabilization of the Indo-Pacific region and it can be conducted through a harmony or concert of great powers. In this lieu a reference may be made of Robert Kaplan, who has highlighted a perception for a concert that calls for the expansion of security cooperation of the United States with China and strengthening of defence collaboration with that of India and Japan. He surmises that the motto of the US naval strategy in the Indo-Pacific should be to tacitly leverage the sea power of its closest allies like India in the Indian Ocean and Japan

in the Western Pacific to prevent the assertive overtures of China. Kaplan also asserted that it needs to utilize the possibility of incorporating China's navy into international alliances since a US-Chinese understanding at sea is a pre-requisite to the stabilisation of world politics in the twenty-first century. The objective of the United States should be to foster a global maritime system that can reduce the danger of inter-state conflict while diminishing the burden of policing for the US Navy<sup>5</sup>

It is to be accepted that the scarcity of natural resources has led to the emergence of competitive situation between China and India especially in their search for resource security<sup>6</sup>. Both the countries are proactively inclined towards the optimum utilization of energy and mineral resource supplies. They are also concerned regarding the policies of other powers, which could put pressure on their supplies. Too much dependence on imported natural resources has been increasingly perceived as a major strategic vulnerability in both China and India and the address of the instability is the priority in the national security dynamics of the two Asian neighbours. Both China and India have depended heavily on the import of primary sources from outside their borders for the sustenance of reasonable growth and maintenance of domestic peace and development. Renewed emphasis on the development of naval power and an ardent requirement of the security and protection of the sea lines of communication have become a major strategic concern in both the countries.

### **India's Relevance in the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture**

India's stake and concerns in the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region need to be sincerely pondered over and it is to be noted that in terms of economic and energy growth India's limitations loom large as it has a number of challenges to encounter. Japan has devised the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy which emphasise on three groups of activities to be implemented: a) counterterrorism, capacity building of law enforcement authorities and countermeasures against violent extremism, b) humanitarian assistance including assistance for refugees, stability of society, peace building measures, the removal of landmines and c) strengthening the rule of law through support for capacity building to ensure maritime security and the establishing of legal systems and reinforcing the capacity of both law enforcement authorities and their government officials. It was actually from the second half of the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, Indian academic circles started delving into the concept of the Indo-Pacific. The concept was formally introduced and explained in an academic paper for the first time, by Captain Gurpreet S. Khurana in January 2007.<sup>7</sup> The concept of the Indo-Pacific has started gaining credence in geopolitical and strategic discourse since 2011 among

Indian policy-makers, analysts and academics.<sup>8</sup>

From India's standpoint, security is an imperative for internal cohesion, economic development and consolidation. India's primary motive is to create an enabling external environment for the economic progress of the country. Unless there is regional security, economic development cannot be envisaged. India considers that the shift of global maritime focus from the Atlantic-Pacific to the Pacific-Indian signifies the fact that beyond the Indian Ocean the Western Pacific falls within the purview of India's security interests. India's inclination towards the region is being substantiated by its proactive Act East Policy, instituted by economic linkages with South East Asia and even expanding to strategic cooperation beyond South East Asia. Maritime security refers to economic development of not only littoral states but also of the region and of the entire world. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure freedom of navigation and over flight, maritime trade and a high level of compliance with the international law including the UNCLOS. At the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue, the then Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar had highlighted three key challenges to India's security: territorial disputes that might degenerate into military conflict, terrorism and protection of the maritime domain. Focusing on the third challenge, he stated that by the advantage of geographical location, the Indo-Pacific is the fulcrum of the world's maritime traffic. Over half of the world's commercial shipping transacts through these waterways. Any type of aggression would thwart the process of economic growth and development not only for India but for the broader region.<sup>9</sup>

A viable security cooperation mechanism in the Indo-Pacific region should emphasise on the aspects of solidarity, democracy, compliance with international law and benefits to people in the region<sup>10</sup>. India aims to rejuvenating traditional ties with the neighbouring countries, solidifying cooperation with the major powers, facilitating the intensity of international integration and effectively realising its international commitments. Substantive measures are being adopted by India to play a bigger role in the Indian and Pacific Oceans from a political, economic and security perspective.

India encompassed by the ocean on three sides has a coastline of 7500km, 1200 islands and 2.4 million square km of EEZ. Today 90 percent of India's trade by volume and 90 percent of our oil imports are carried through maritime connectivity. From the geo-strategic point of view, India is in a primary position of the strategic trade routes passing through the Indian Ocean linking West with East Asia as the core of a region spreading from the Eastern shores of Africa in the West, Bab-al-Mandab and the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea to Australia and the Western Pacific in the East. The Bay of Bengal forms the largest bay in the world with seven countries located on its rim. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands occupy a central position in



the Bay of Bengal region. As a part of the Island Development Plan and the measures of the AEP it is steered to expand the port and tourism infrastructure in the Islands. This would serve to develop maritime connectivity between the ports in the Islands and the ASEAN and promote cruise tourism. The Government has embarked upon the ambitious Sagarmala project which is a port led development initiative based on four facets- port modernisation, connectivity, port led industrialisation and coastal community development. The Development of Port infrastructure on the East coast of India and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands would expand seaborne connectivity and create coastal shipping routes between India and our littoral neighbours in the East including the ASEAN. The increasing relevance of the Indian Ocean to the global economy has rendered added momentum to the Indian Ocean Rim Association of which India is a founder member and an ardent supporter. The IORA has played a vital role in determining the opportunities for reinforcing regional connectivity, economic cooperation and to enrich mutual interests.

The growing upsurge in trade and investment between countries in the Indo-Pacific region mandates for greater connectivity facilities as well as the rejuvenation and modernisation of historical trade routes. Proper connectivity and networking among the navies and maritime partnerships between the countries of the region needs to be strengthened to safeguard peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region<sup>11</sup>. India has showed considerable enthusiasm in rebuilding the mutually beneficial historic linkages that existed around the Indian Ocean. Project Mausam, whose name is derived from the wind systems in the Indian Ocean, is a notable endeavour in this direction. Initiatives like “Spice Route”, “Cotton Route” aim to prosper the economic growth of the Indo-Pacific region through the creation of new connectivity and economic corridors built on historical bonding and sustained by enduring economic factors. Digital connectivity has to a large extent revamped India's connectivity with the region. India is connected to the Gulf, Africa and the West by undersea cables from Mumbai and Cochin. Today over 30 percent of Indian trade is conducted via the South China Sea and 30 percent of Indian air traffic moves towards the East. In order to fully implement SAGAR, which underlines security and growth for all in the region, it is needed to construct a comprehensive roadmap for maritime security and cooperation for the region. Through the vision of SAGAR India is venturing to expand the maritime logistics in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles and its littoral neighbours, to promote the Blue Economy and to develop infrastructure in order to bolster onward connectivity from India.<sup>12</sup> This would enable India's AEP to promote maritime cooperation and mobilize the Blue Economy, which would expedite the essence of partnership for prosperity in the maritime domain.



## Conclusion

The ongoing maritime operations, particularly naval, military and defence pursuits may weaken the confidence level of the countries and accelerate the danger of arms race in the region thereby spurring military violence, tensions and conflicts. The implications of the security challenges in the region are far-fetched and therefore mandate an international coordinated effort. The enhancing geostrategic significance of the Indo-Pacific region has propelled the US to accord credence to the conception of rebalance to the East. The US emphasize on the 'Pivot', which is a comprehensive strategy aiming to safeguard and promote American economic, geostrategic and military interests in the region by bolstering diplomatic and military alliances with its traditional allies and emerging partners. China is quite skeptical with the American pivot to the East as it considers it as a strategic pursuit of the US to contain China. Most regional allies and partners are in favour of the US pivot since it would render in balancing China's assertive ventures in the region. For instance, there has been a marked expansion in scope and dynamism in the Malabar exercise with the inclusion of Japan in 2016 and there have been spurring of bilateral naval exercises between India and Australia. Japan has been a proactive player in the region and is also a key driver in cultivating relations with the countries like the US, Australia and India. Substantive initiatives like the US-Japan-Australia constellation, US-Japan-India constellation, Japan-India-Australia dialogue and the emergence of the concept of Quad have taken place under the stewardship of Japan. It is imperative to have an in depth understanding on the characteristics, geography and history, stakeholders and their concerns, security objectives and threats, existing and potential challenges and most importantly the way forward. The waters of the Indo-Pacific have emerged as global economic highways and the concerns of the countries in the region are intermittently connected to the unfettered passage of oil and trade transactions. Safety, security and stability on the waters of the Indo-Pacific are of intense significance and it is the collective responsibility of the navies to safeguard the security of the global commons. India has the credibility of being a security provider, facilitator or balancer depending on the vision and competence of its policy maker.

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