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The Indo-Pacific Scene: An Update

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ABOUT US

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In keeping with India's increasing global profile as a leading power and the accompanying dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the Delhi Policy Group has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role; India's initiatives to strengthen its strategic periphery; India's political, security and connectivity challenges and policies across the Indo-Pacific; and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise. To support these goals, the DPG undertakes research, publishes policy reports and organises conferences on strategic and geo-political, geo-economic, and defence and security issues.

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US President Donald Trump delivers his Press Statement on February 25, 2020 during his State Visit to India. Source: MEA

India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting on side-lines of the UNGA Summit on September 26, 2019. Source: MEA

India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar Delivers the Keynote Address at the Indian Ocean Conference, Maldives, September 03, 2019. Source MEA

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The Indo-Pacific Scene: An Update

by

Lalit Kapur & Hemant Krishan Singh

As the world order undergoes a disruptive transition, the international community is facing the challenge of reshaping some globalist purpose in the midst of great power rivalry. The Covid-19 pandemic ravaging the world has embittered US-China relations even further; fault-lines are growing between the world's democracies and authoritarian states. In Asia, competition between proponents of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" on the one hand and the "Community of Shared Future in the New Era" on the other remains ongoing.

What is clear is that the locus of global geopolitical competition has decisively shifted to what is being described as the Indo-Pacific. In response, the US has enlarged its erstwhile Asia-Pacific outlook to include India. A month ago, in the midst of an emerging pandemic crisis and relentless demands of domestic politics, US President Donald Trump flew half way across the globe for a stand-alone state visit to India. Does the Modi-Trump Joint Statement¹ of February 25, 2020, presage the recognition that the preservation of their increasingly converging interests in the Indo-Pacific and prospects for the meaningful operationalisation of the Quad will be impossible without their newly upgraded comprehensive global strategic partnership?



US President Donald Trump delivers his Press Statement on February 25, 2020 during his State Visit to India. Source: MEA

¹ <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32421/Joint+Statement+Vision+and+Principles+for+IndiaUS+Comprehensive+Global+Strategic+Partnership>

Asia is experiencing a new form of empire building by stealth, one in which states are subjected to a range of pressures that suppress national sovereignties and independence into coerced alignment with the strategic interests of the Middle Kingdom. This is something which the US does not accept and India resists.

Understanding what the Indo-Pacific really represents remains the subject of much discussion and analysis, particularly amongst longstanding US allies in the region like Australia. A series of articles spurred by strategist Rory Medcalf's book "Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future" and authored by Wilson Center and Australian National University (ANU) academics earlier this month project some perceptions that to our mind confuse this debate. The first² questions the strategy that expands the Asia Pacific to India, when the regional security focus (for the US and Australia) remains on China, North Korea and Taiwan. The second³ suggests that the Indo-Pacific concept that now lies at the heart of Australia's foreign policy is founded on the belief that "as America's position in Asia fades, India will step forward to help balance and contain China's power and prevent it from dominating countries like Australia". It goes on to conclude that "rather than India leading a grand Indo-Pacific coalition against China, it is more likely to cut a deal with China to divide the wider Indo-Pacific region up between them". The third⁴ suggests that "For now, the Indo-Pacific idea is based on implausible assumptions about India's political posture, amateurish calculations of India's projected economic power and unrealistic expectations of American commitment". Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who has described the Indo-Pacific concept as a "headline grabbing idea, like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean, which may get some attention but will soon dissipate"⁵, would certainly be pleased with such assumptions.

² J Stapleton Roy, "Whither the United States in the Indo-Pacific", March 15, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/03/15/whither-the-united-states-in-the-indo-pacific/>

³ Hugh White, "Why India isn't Going to Save Australia from China's Power", March 15, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/03/15/why-india-isnt-going-to-save-australia-from-chinas-power/>

⁴ ANU Editorial Board, "The Indo-Pacific Linus Blanket", March 15, 2020. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/03/16/the-indo-pacific-linus-blanket/>

⁵ <https://jamestown.org/program/the-prcs-cautious-stance-on-the-u-s-indo-pacific-strategy/>



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Press Conference on March 8, 2018, where he described the Indo-Pacific Concept as a "headline grabbing idea". Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China

Slowly but surely, the US has turned to enhancing relations with India, drawing it towards the Pacific but also bringing Indian Ocean security into play. Developing a coherent strategy to respond to major geopolitical developments, securing agreement among like-minded powers and forging a lasting mandate for that strategy is a complex, time-consuming process, particularly in democratic nations. Formulation of the US strategy towards its last great power competitor, the Soviet Union, started with the Truman Doctrine⁶ in March 1947, transitioned through National Security Council Paper NSC 68⁷ in April 1950 and then through Project Solarium leading to NSC 162/2⁸, which formalised the strategy of containment in October 1953.

The situation today is far more complex, particularly due to China's deep economic linkages not just with the US, but also with its allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific. These allies now face the conflicting pulls of ideological values, economic considerations and security interests, unlike in the past when all three were closely aligned with the US.

⁶ <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>

⁷ <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/NSC68>

⁸ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d101>

Expansion of the Asia Pacific to include India perhaps rests on the realisation that only India possesses the strategic potential, political will and autonomous deterrent capability to provide a meaningful counterweight to China. Given the apparent bipartisan determination in Washington D.C. to counter China's ambitions to dominate Asia and undermine America's influence, there is some reason to believe that a coherent, close partnership-driven US strategy towards India is being developed and will become increasingly apparent in due course. The US supports India's rise and regional prominence; whether this will eventually lead to deeper mutual commitments, or even institutionalised frameworks that aggregate deterrent power, still remains a matter of conjecture. Much will depend on China's actions.



India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting on side-lines of the UNGA Summit on September 26, 2019. Source: MEA

Let us now turn to the Quad, which has been revived as a security dialogue and coordination mechanism. Whether India will act with the Quad to balance China or not depends on India's perceptions of where its interests lie, the nature of reciprocal commitments from Quad partners, as well as its own growing capability and political resolve. As stated by India's Foreign Minister

Dr. S. Jaishankar⁹, “India’s vision is consultative, democratic and equitable but must find clearer expressions through its own narratives and concepts”. These narratives see the Indo-Pacific as the re-emergence of a centuries old strategic reality that was disrupted when global leadership passed from the UK to the US¹⁰. The shape of the Indo-Pacific of the future, in the minister’s words, will be determined by “the ambitions of China, the interests of India, the re-emergence of Japan, the confidence of Australia and the awareness of ASEAN, among others¹¹”. And as he goes on to conclude, “Where India can really make a difference is in the Indian Ocean itself. That is not just a natural arena for its influence but of overriding security consequence”. That India takes these words seriously is clear from its first comprehensive Indian Ocean vision (SAGAR); the 24x7 mission-based deployments of the Indian Navy across the choke points and SLOCS of the Indian Ocean; and its assumption of the first responder responsibility for provision of HA/DR in the region.



India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar Delivers the Keynote Address at the Indian Ocean Conference, Maldives, September 03, 2019. Source MEA

⁹ https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31915/Keynote_Speech_by_External_Affairs_Minister_at_Indian_Ocean_Conference_in_Maldives_September_03_2019

¹⁰ The convergence of narratives expressed by Dr. Jaishankar in his keynote speech at the Indian Ocean Conference in the Maldives cited above and those expressed by Dr. Medcalf, in his book “Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won’t Map the Future” is striking.

¹¹ https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31915/Keynote_Speech_by_External_Affairs_Minister_at_Indian_Ocean_Conference_in_Maldives_September_03_2019

As for reciprocity and capability, India is the only nation among the Quad countries that shares a 3,488 km. long disputed land border with China and another disputed section of 850 km. with Pakistan. India does not seek mutual defence commitments from the Quad should China, or its proxy Pakistan, pursue aggression or grey zone coercion on the continental front. What it does require to accumulate further is hard-power, as well as ISR and MDA technologies, that help address the marked asymmetry between Chinese and Indian military capability, partly in the continental domain but particularly in the Indian Ocean. The US has begun to take proactive steps in that direction, which will hopefully accelerate over the coming year. Can Australia and Japan bring themselves to also play a meaningful part in the partnership, or are they going to be content with their focus on homeland and peripheral defence, largely under US protection?

India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is very different from the India of yore, when hesitation and timidity projected as “strategic restraint” was used to justify inaction in the face of even grave provocations, such as the Pakistan ISI/Lashkar-e-Taiba planned and executed Mumbai terrorist attack of 2008 or the earlier attack on India’s parliament in 2001. A new resolve to defend India’s national security interests, including through use of military force, is visible, as was evident from the standoff with China at Doklam and swift retaliation for Pakistani terror attacks at Uri and Pulwama. The assessment of these vital interests is guided by realist Indian perceptions of the challenges posed by Communist China and Islamist Pakistan.

The argument that India and China are more likely to strike a deal to divide up the Indo-Pacific between themselves betrays an acute lack of understanding of India’s emerging posture based on its bitter experience and belied hopes of the last seven decades. It also rests on highly questionable assumptions, including the belief that China would be content with indulging India with such a deal, when it is single-mindedly pursuing a strategy of containing India within South Asia. Keeping open the options of engagement and accommodation are permanent fixtures for any nation’s diplomacy, but India will have to go for the choices it has, not what it might wish for.

The government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison has committed unequivocally to “restoring trust following the Rudd Government’s policy to disconnect from the Quad”¹². This may well just be the present choice of a

¹² <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2019-lowy-lecture-prime-minister-scott-morrison>

centre-right government, as portrayed by Kevin Rudd¹³. However, the impression of an absence of political consensus within Australia generated by the second and third articles referred to earlier, as well as a fourth¹⁴ justifying Australia's deep trade dependency on China, only results in generating serious doubt about the continuity of Australian policy and the depth of its commitment to developing security relations with India, not least should a government with different views come to power. This will inevitably play a part in the geopolitical calculations of the other Quad countries as well, buttressing the impression that Australia might remain the proverbial weak link.



Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison delivering the Annual 2019 Lowy Lecture on October 3, 2019. Source: Lowy Institute

There is also now a new, unforeseen factor coming into play: the impact of COVID-19 on global geopolitics, and even on President Trump's hopes for a second term. Will the current bipartisan consensus in the US on progressing strategic partnership with India in the Indo-Pacific survive under a different President? Will the US's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy itself survive? On the other hand, having overcome the pandemic, China has rapidly returned to

¹³ Kevin Rudd, "The convenient Rewriting of the History of the Quad", March 26, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/The-Convenient-Rewriting-of-the-History-of-the-Quad>

¹⁴ Shiro Armstrong, "Is Australia Trading Too Much With China", March 16, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/03/16/is-australia-trading-too-much-with-china/>

the aggressive pursuit of influence and geopolitical objectives in Europe and Asia. A sustained period of great power competition looms on the horizon, both in the Indo-Pacific and globally. Australia and India will be called upon to decide where their greater interests lie.

Finally, it is important to remember that the common principles of the rules based order shared by the QUAD countries, including respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-use of force to resolve disputes, freedom of navigation and overflight, viability and transparency of infrastructure financing, remain directly relevant to the prevailing situation in the Indo-Pacific. Can the great maritime democracies of the Quad put aside their inevitable differences of perception and come together to uphold a balanced, open, rules based regional order? The jury is out, and China is waiting for this worthwhile but remote prospect to dissolve, like sea foam.



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