



Delhi Policy Group

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Challenges

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(Photographs top to bottom)

U.S. President Donald Trump signing the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) on December 31, 2018.

Source: White House/ Flickr

The Inaugural India-US Ministerial 2+2 Dialogue, New Delhi, September 6, 2018. Source: Twitter/ MEAIndia

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The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act 2018 (ARIA) of the US and India's Security Challenges

by

Hemant Krishan Singh and Arun Sahgal

Introduction

US President Donald Trump signed the bipartisan Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of the US Congress, or ARIA, into law on December 31, 2018. ARIA provides the force of law and \$ 1.5 billion in annual funding for US political, diplomatic, economic and military initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, complementing the US Administration's National Security Strategy (2017) and the Pentagon's National Defense Strategy (2018) and further signalling US resolve to remain a resident power in the Indo-Pacific rimland which has emerged as the world's economic powerhouse.

Examined more closely from India's perspective, the central purpose of ARIA appears limited to addressing the strategic challenge to US interests in East and South East Asia posed by China through its revisionist territorial assertions and coercive military posturing as well as the predatory-mercantilist-imperialist economics of the one-way Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The range of US concerns listed in ARIA also includes the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes. In other words, ARIA's focus is on the part of the Indo-Pacific that corresponds to the operational area of US INDO-PACOM, that is from the West coast of India to the West coast of the US, to the exclusion of almost the entire Indian Ocean, South Asia and India's western arc of security concerns.



U.S. President Donald Trump signing the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) on December 31, 2018. Source: White House/ Flickr

Elements of ARIA

ARIA aims to shape implementation of US national security policy in the Indo-Pacific through a combination of Congressional oversight and budgetary provisioning of US\$ 1.5 billion for each fiscal year from 2019-2023 to strengthen economic, diplomatic and strategic linkages with the region. The Act specifically recognises the vital importance to the security of the United States of US treaty allies (Japan, South Korea, Australia, Philippines and Thailand), strategic partners (India) and security partners (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam), while also reinforcing the US commitment to Taiwan.



*U.S. Warship sails through the Taiwan Strait, January 25, 2019.
Source: South China Morning Post*

ARIA signals a major change in US policy towards China, which is held as an 'adversary' rather than a 'competitor'. It underlines "grave concerns over Chinese actions that seek (a) to further constrain space for civil society and religion within China; and (b) undermine a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region."¹ It further goes on to list a series of measures to address the challenges emanating from China's "influence operations".

ARIA recognises that China's illegal construction and militarization in the South China Sea and its coercive economic practices constitute a security

¹Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018. See: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2736/text>

challenge to the “United States-backed international system”. It mandates that appropriations “shall be made available for United States Government efforts to counter the strategic influence of the People’s Republic of China...” Segments of ARIA aimed at China reflect a considered assessment that China is a growing economic, ideological and military threat to the United States.

In dealing with the challenges posed by China, ARIA seeks to enlist and buttress a broad spectrum of allies, partners, institutions and plurilateral mechanisms. The Act affirms US commitment to engage ASEAN as a part of the region’s “problem-solving regional architecture”. It recognises ASEAN centrality and commits the US to build a strong, stable, politically cohesive, economically integrated and socially responsible community of nations subscribing to common rules, standards and procedures. This is designed to wean ASEAN away from its emerging China-centric focus to one that is more consistent with international law and a rules-based order. On security mechanisms, ARIA recognises the role of the US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Security Partnership and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (US, Australia, India and Japan).

Overall, ARIA is a comprehensive policy instrument which encompasses engagement with all relevant nations of the Indo-Pacific to reassure US allies, deter US adversaries and re-secure America’s dominant position in the Indo-Pacific which is under relentless challenge from China.

US Re-focus on the Indo-Pacific

The US national security establishment recognises that China’s dominance over continental Asia and its power assertions in the maritime domain, including the militarization of the South China Sea and PLAN moves into the Indian Ocean, are giving rise to a China-centric security and economic order. ARIA is an attempt to re-focus US commitment in the Indo-Pacific and reverse the increasing regional perception of US decline.

Earlier US initiatives like the “pivot”, later termed the “re-balance” strategy, were never backed by a clear-cut and bipartisan policy framework and essentially remained a set of policy pronouncements which envisioned objectives similar to ARIA but failed to provide credibility to US staying power in the Asia Pacific. Consequently, the US-led alliance system faced multiple constraints in leveraging politico-military and economic power in Asia, particularly in relation to the Korean peninsula, Taiwan and ASEAN.

Over the past two years, the Trump administration has unveiled a number of policies under the renamed rubric of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Taken together, these appear designed to confront strategic challenges to American power by

deploying the full spectrum of America's enormous leverages to regain geopolitical advantage. What is missing from these initiatives, however, is an overarching economic vision that can compete with China's BRI, or even ASEAN's RCEP.



The Chinese navy exercising in the South China Sea, April 2018. Source: Quartz

Despite these policy pronouncements, perceptions are slow to change and countries in the region remain deeply sceptical of US commitment and reliability as a provider of regional security and stability.

China's military assertions in the East and South China Seas continue unabated. Taiwan is now being intimidated by the threat of reunification by force. China's influence in the political and economic domains of Japan, Australia and ASEAN has grown. Meanwhile, the Russia-China nexus on regional and global issues continues to expand. The consolidation of China's coercive influence through the strategic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is creating inexorable pressures on countries to accommodate China's dominance.

In the midst of widespread concern about US intentions, and faced with geopolitical pressures from China, even traditional US allies are tending to pursue balancing strategies. Japan is following a dual policy of "balancing dialogue and deterrence", in terms of which it has begun to engage China economically and enhance its own military capabilities, even as it continues to depend on the US security alliance. This economic détente has also resulted in Japan and China agreeing to join infrastructure development in third countries under the

BRI. Australia endorses the US Indo-Pacific strategy but remains concerned about the fallout of US-China confrontation, given its substantial economic dependence upon China. Similar concerns are pervasive across the ASEAN nations, propelled by a steady erosion of US economic objectives in the Indo-Pacific following the US withdrawal from the TPP.

In this scenario, the underlying purpose of ARIA is to signal that the US will not cede further strategic space to China. Given policy uncertainties emanating from President Trump's transactional and "America First" impulses, ARIA consolidates a bi-partisan consensus in the US government regarding the need to balance and counter China in the Indo-Pacific.

ARIA and India's Security Challenges



The Inaugural India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, New Delhi, September 6, 2018.

Source: Twitter/ MEAIndia

While in general India might welcome a more robust US posture in the Indo-Pacific as signalled by ARIA, it cannot but be concerned about ARIA's limited focus on addressing the strategic challenges posed by China in East and South East Asia, to the exclusion of India's core security concerns in both continental and maritime domains.

The Pentagon's report on "China Military Power"² has flagged China's enhanced activities and deployments in the Indian Ocean, which include access to ports such as Gwadar and Hambantota and a full-scale military base in Djibouti, as threats to American interests. As per the US's own assessment, China will possibly be in a position to permanently deploy a naval task force in the Indian Ocean by 2020-2021.

ARIA significantly fails to address these acknowledged concerns related to China's inroads into the Indian Ocean, which are also a key security challenge faced by India.

While India is undoubtedly the major Indian Ocean rimland power, it faces a hostile continental and maritime environment underscored by legacy territorial disputes, inimical neighbours acting in collusion and state-sponsored terror. An asymmetrical balance of power with China and an intransigent Pakistan contribute further to India's security concerns. China's inroads along India's eastern and western borders in search of access to the waters of the Indian Ocean constrict India's strategic space and coerce its smaller neighbours into adopting balancing policies more favourably aligned towards China.

In the absence of any regional equities or cooperative security architecture in the Indian Ocean, India remains the sole deterrent to Chinese naval expansionism. It enjoys asymmetric geographic advantage but at the same time is hard-pressed by military capacity and capability constraints.

The security dynamics of both West Asia and South East Asia are equally critical for India's security and efforts to maintain a favourable balance of power.

The existing regional imbalance in South East Asia impacts India's interests both in terms of the Act East policy (trade and connectivity) as well as China's military deployments in the Indian Ocean, access to which is through the four major straits of the Indonesian archipelago. China's entrenched footprint in the South China Sea poses a direct challenge to India's maritime security as well as SLOCs.

To India's west, Af-Pak and West Asia are increasingly coming under Chinese influence. China has emerged as a regional "peace broker" and is attempting to create a broad zone of influence extending from the Arabian Sea to Central

² Defense Intelligence Agency Report, "China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win" (2019). See : http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf

Asia, Iran to the Middle East. Meanwhile, growing China-Russia strategic convergence is providing further heft to these endeavours even as the US withdraws its presence in the region and is losing ground to Russia and Turkey.

There is no escaping the fact that in its drive for Asian dominance, China is reluctant to accept India as an emerging power centre. India's gravitation towards the US as part of their respective Act East and Indo-Pacific policies is seen by China as a major challenge. China will thus continue to make tactical gestures to dilute the India-US strategic partnership through trade and economic inducements, while maintaining its posture of territorial coercion of which the lingering boundary dispute is the central component. Furthermore, to counter the slow but incremental build-up of India's military-strategic capability that can change the security dynamics between the two countries from mild dissuasion to full deterrence, there is no question that China will continue building further military capacity both in Tibet and in the Indian Ocean.

ARIA: No Reassurance for India

The policy initiatives backed by ARIA address American interests in East Asia/Pacific and South East Asia, but not in the Indian Ocean/South Asia which are of more immediate concern to India. ARIA largely maintains the traditional Asia Pacific orientation of past US initiatives which have limited complementarity between Indian and US security perspectives.



Naval/Military Chiefs of the Quad + France at the 4th Raisina Dialogue held in New Delhi on January 9, 2019. Source: YouTube/ ORF

In our paper "Strategic Balance in the Indo-Pacific: A Role for Maritime Democracies"³, we had highlighted the need to create greater India-US equities that can play a balancing role across the interconnected Indo-Pacific region. If the India-US strategic partnership is to become an effective instrument of regional peace and stability, the two countries should invest further in aligning their thinking, developing credible strategies and accelerating the enhancement of India's defence capability.

Conclusion

ARIA is unlikely to put to rest regional concerns regarding America's intention to remain a countervailing power in the Indo-Pacific, and the noticeable tendency among regional states to adopt hedging or accommodating strategies towards China will continue to be manifested. This implies that the US resolve signalled by ARIA will increasingly need to be demonstrated by policy actions on the ground and not merely by statements of intent. It remains a matter of concern to US allies and partners that its military capacity building support continues to lag considerably behind in the region as compared to West Asia and Europe; the economic component of ARIA (and US policies) is negligible; and current appropriations under ARIA are limited. As matters stand, unpredictability about US foreign and security policies under President Trump has deepened. It remains to be seen if his "America First" impulses and long held fixations will predominate over the next two years, or the professional national security establishment will be enabled to pursue coherent strategies which have been postulated for the Indo-Pacific. US friends and adversaries alike in the region will be watching.

In terms of high-level policy pronouncements, the interests of India and the US are broadly aligned in support of a rules-based regional order that upholds national sovereignty and allows all regional actors to make decisions based on national interests, without coercive external influence. What is still lacking is a broader framework for their expanded defence and maritime security cooperation, particularly in the western theatre of the Indo-Pacific. Domestic political preoccupations over the coming year may well impact the trajectory of bilateral relations, but both countries can ill-afford to lose sight of the shared security challenges that are driving the India-US strategic partnership forward.

³ "Strategic Balance in the Indo-Pacific: A Role for Maritime Democracies" by Brig. Arun Sahgal and Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh, DPG Policy Paper, Vol. III, Issue 18, December 3, 2018 http://delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/strategic-balance-in-the-indo-pacific-a-role-for-maritime-democracies-1121.pdf







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