

New Delhi's Indo-Pacific 'Great Game'



By **MANOJ KUMAR MISHRA**

The global strategic and economic center of gravity is gradually shifting toward the Indo-Pacific region. It is rich in natural resources, especially hydrocarbons, which fuel the industrial engines of the world's economies and not only encourage competition among the established powers but push the emerging powers to scramble for scarce resources.

Apart from this, this region is emerging as a center of international trade and investment by providing a market comprising nearly half of the world's population. The economic growth of these states will also fuel their energy demands and there will be stiff competition among them.

While China depends on the South China Sea for 80% of its crude-oil imports and asserts its sovereignty in the energy-rich region to satisfy the energy requirements of its fast-growing economy, over the years, India's trade and economic linkages in the Pacific have become stronger and deeper. Countries in Northeast and Southeast Asian countries on the Pacific are considered vital facilitators of India's economic development and energy security and the drivers of its "Act East" policy.

Major powers such as the US, France, Britain, Japan and Australia are not only the traditional players in the region, they are, in fact, accentuating their role in the geo-strategically vital area. The administration of US President Donald Trump prefers the term "Indo-Pacific" to "Asia-Pacific," underlying the importance of India and the Indian Ocean in the shifting geo-strategic dynamics. As China's footprint in the South Asian and the Indian Ocean region expanded under the rubric of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's threat perceptions from a muscular China surged for such reasons as lack of trust between them historically and Beijing's long-term assistance to Pakistan, which bolstered the latter's conventional military as well as nuclear capabilities.

India's concerns appeared genuine and legitimate given that roads, railways, bridges and ports constructed under the BRI can be used for dual purposes – civil as well as military. India's concerns primarily stem from ulterior military objectives underlying China's connectivity mega-project and not from Beijing's official declarations that stress only commercial and development activities.

Some developments in the Indian Ocean and South Asian region did not go unnoticed in New Delhi – for instance, China's acquisition of a naval base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa in 2017, Chinese warships and nuclear submarines making port calls in Colombo, Beijing's alleged dwarfing of Indian influence in Maldives. As well, while China and Pakistan are developing the latter's Gwadar Port as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a purely commercial venture, and there have been news reports suggesting that China plans to deploy nuclear submarines at the port.

While it declined to participate in the New Delhi-proposed first-ever joint military exercise within the framework of BIMSTEC, Nepal said it was willing to participate in the 12-day [Sagarmatha Friendship-2](#) joint military exercise. In Sri Lanka, the government of President Maithripala Sirasena, which was perceived as pro-India, leased out Hambantota Port to Beijing for 99 years under Chinese debt pressure, indicating China's rising prominence, as well as enhanced Indian threat perceptions in the Indian Ocean and South Asian region.

Even while India and China attempted to reset their relations after the [Doklam standoff](#) – at the Wuhan meeting in April 2018, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and at the BRICS summit in July 2018 – and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi distanced New Delhi from any group or policy primarily aimed at containing China in the Indian Ocean at the Shangri-La Dialogue forum in Singapore in June 2018, New Delhi appeared poised to beef up its defense preparedness in view of growing Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean and along the Himalayan borders.

New Delhi's perceived role

While India has not explicitly endorsed any anti-Chinese strategy, the defense pact signed between New Delhi and Washington known as the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in September 2018, during the 2+2 dialogue it indicated there was enhanced strategic cooperation between Indian and the US. More crucially, it made it clear that both countries intend to keep Chinese moves in the Indian Ocean and Himalayan region under close surveillance.

Significant Indian moves in the face of China's rapidly expanding influence include: New Delhi's launching of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (in partnership with Japan) in 2017, the signing of a 20-year pact with Seychelles to build an airstrip and a jetty for its navy on Assumption Island, the signing of a deal with Singapore to expand its access to Changi naval base in November 2017, emphasizing the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' role in ensuring stability in the Indo-Pacific region, forging a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Vietnam in 2016, and the conclusion of a summit with Japan paving the way for a military logistics pact.

However, strategic competition between India and China in the region has facilitated greater intervention from external powers in the Indian Ocean, giving rise to varied power configurations and alliances, and an enhanced risk of military confrontations. In this larger context, India could either participate in balance of power politics, which could possibly enhance the militarization of the region, or it could choose the historical path of non-alignment.

The Indo-Pacific region is militarizing rapidly. China is pursuing its grand economic designs in the shape of the BRI, which allegedly involved greater naval presence, strategies and assertion of sovereignty. In addition, members of the [Quad](#) (US, Japan, Australia and India) are preparing to roll back Chinese economic and strategic influence by enhancing their own.

While on the one hand, the US and its allies are stepping up their ASW (anti-submarine warfare) capacities in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, the PLA (People's Liberation Army) Navy is likely to persuade Beijing to acquire the new generation of strategic submarines known as the Type 096. Also, the Chinese navy successfully flight-tested the JL-3 missile in the Yellow Sea in November last year.

The US sees India as a suitable partner to contain and roll back Chinese influence. The last day of 2018 witnessed Trump signing the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) recognizing the vitality of an Indo-American strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific region. The act sought to reinforce the Indo-American strategic partnership by reaffirming and endorsing existing bilateral instruments, such as the "New Framework for the United States-India Defense Relationship" of 2005 and the designation of India as a major defense partner under a 2017 law. It also "calls for the strengthening and broadening of diplomatic, economic and security ties between the United States and India."

Any submarine warfare in the Indo-Pacific region could have severe and broad repercussions. The US navy is reportedly equipped with 18 Ohio-class nuclear-powered submarines, with 14 capable of carrying up to 24 powerful Trident I missiles. It is also developing next-generation Columbia-class submarines, which will carry 16 of its most advanced Trident II missiles. It is anticipated that the US could also deploy more ASW to counter China's growing fleet, besides sending more nuclear attack submarines to the region.

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An over-reliance on a militaristic perspective would unnecessarily push India to view and approach the world from a realist perspective based on the assumption that strategic planning is possibly the only way to realize

India's national interests and fails to recognize the importance of diplomatic and peaceful efforts toward addressing security issues.

For India, a country with fewer military and economic resources to invest globally and which has relied more on soft power for global clout, a perspective based on peace, development and integration must take priority over a military security perspective to meet the challenges emanating from conventional as well as non-conventional threats like terrorism, climate change, pollution and underdevelopment.

Being a developing country, India's economic needs, its stance on climate issues and the sovereignty-human rights debate place it on a different platform from that of the US. While the Trump administration chose to walk away from the Paris climate agreement, India under Modi's leadership sought to play a key role along with other developing countries to make it a success.

For a long time, India has sought reforms at global financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which have been largely under the sway of developed countries, in order to make them more democratic. While on the one hand, India has been voicing its trade-related concerns at the World Trade Organization, it has been advocating reforms of the United Nations Security Council to make it more representative and democratic. Therefore, India must zealously endeavor to safeguard its prized strategic autonomy in its long-term interests.

As a nuclear power with geographical contiguity with the Indian Ocean region, and assured conventional military capability and naval presence, India must not allow itself to be panicked by its Chinese threat perceptions when dealing with its neighbors and external powers. Instead, it must encourage them to look for alternatives to military and nuclear endgames.

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