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The Indo-Pacific Concept And Its Africa Connect

By Forbes Africa

How should Africa respond to the increasing interest in the Indian Ocean?

By Ambassador Gurjit Singh

Since the advent of the Joe Biden Administration in the United States (US) in January, there has been speculation on how much the new government would remain committed to the Indo-Pacific.

It is useful to understand this concept whose usage is increasing. Geographically, the Indo-Pacific is an extension of the Asia-Pacific region, from the US to Myanmar. The expanded vision covers the Indian and Pacific Oceans together. Hence the shores of eastern Africa, besides the island countries, are included in the new conception. As the Indo-Pacific is now part of geo-strategic and geo-economic activity, its impact is widening.

Indo-Pacific strategies are enunciated by Japan, Australia, India and the US; in 2019, ASEAN and France and in 2020, Germany announced its policies too. The European Union (EU) and United Kingdom (UK) are engaging more. China has opposed the Indo-Pacific concept preferring the Asia-Pacific idea. It sees the Indo-Pacific as an effort to hedge China's role; most proponents of the Indo-Pacific seek a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) including the freedom of navigation, trade and the like in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the *Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS).

How does this impinge on Africa? Five African countries have a seaboard on the Indian Ocean, and they are South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya and Somalia. In the Red Sea, Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt and Djibouti are also part of the impact zone. The islands of Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros, Seychelles and the French Indian Ocean territories are important parts of this construct.

The Indo-Pacific concept brings focus on existing institutions in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Ocean Commission, since 1984, links Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles and Réunion (an overseas region of France).

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), since 1997, has 22 members and 10 dialogue partners. The five Indian Ocean littoral African countries and the four island countries make up

40% of the membership which extends up to Australia. It includes four ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia), four SAARC members (India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh) and four from West Asia (Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Iran). Among the 10 Dialogue Partners are China, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, the UK and US. Most of these are important players in the Indo-Pacific construct today. On February 4 2021, many participated in an IOR Defence Conclave organized by India. This shows the concern they all have with widening issues of maritime security in the region.

From 2012, when India assumed the IORA Chair, there has been a growing direction and determination to strengthen institutions and capacities within IORA. The Chairmanship came to South Africa in 2017 and now the UAE is the Chair. The first African country to chair IORA was Mauritius in 1997-98 and Mozambique in 1999-2000. Kenya and Tanzania have not chaired IORA at any time so far.

The Indo-Pacific Outlooks of Japan and France have sought to engage Africa conceptually. Promoting democratic values, protecting shipping, dealing with regional crises, and the presence of French forces in Djibouti, South Indian Ocean and the UAE are some of its many facets. Economic opportunities, the blue economy, development cooperation, S&T network, are part of a new approach to the Indian Ocean. Dealing with terrorism and radicalization are important goals. Japan, like the French, US and China, has a base in Djibouti. Djibouti is the focal point for much action around the Indo-Pacific policies. Djibouti acquired attention due to the piracy around the Gulf of Aden. The piracy was controlled but the interest of partner countries was enhanced.

Africa gains from the infrastructure development that partners develop. Djibouti perhaps epitomizes the coexistence of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with military engagement and securing projects with competitive financing for its development. Japan supports quality infrastructure in the Indian Ocean littoral. Projects in the Kenyan port of Mombasa and the Mozambique port of Nacala are strategic projects. China is involved in the railways in Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia. A Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report in June 2019 showed that China was investing in 46 ports in Africa with four on the Indian Ocean side in Durban in South Africa, Beira in Mozambique, Doraleh in Djibouti and Bagamoyo in Tanzania. These are mostly categorized as part of the BRI. Some of them are strategic in nature while others are infrastructure and trade facilitators.

China, through the BRI, has a strategic view and is grasping the opportunities. The countries which challenge its view are expanding their Indo-Pacific outlooks and engaging these with their existing Africa programs, like Japan with the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), India with the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS), France with its Africa policy and the EU with its Africa EU summit process. The US' Africa strategy under the Trump administration is anticipated to be now rejuvenated.

What these lack is cogent coordinated economic action. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) between India and Japan was a starting point and is now looking to coordinate trilateral projects in conjunction with African partners. Meanwhile, the security dimension has

transformed to engage nontraditional threats and to deal with Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), as India has done over the years in the region.

How should Africa respond to the increasing interest in the Indian Ocean? Africa gains from divergent interests and capabilities but needs to be cautious in ensuring a level playing field for all its partners. Africa can benefit by not becoming a target of competition. However, most countries are keen to secure their economic growth and are prepared to engage all partners. In the field of maritime security, this is easier said than done. Ultimately, the competitive edges which are there in the Indo-Pacific will certainly impinge on the African context too.

The challenges of the region are quite common for now and balanced by allowing all players. African countries on the Indian Ocean will do well to keep a strategic and economic balance among their partners.

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