

Emerging Indo-Pacific Geopolitics: Challenges and Opportunities for India

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Introduction

India and China accounted for nearly half the Global GDP in the early 19th century.² The exploitation by imperial powers though, resulted in an economic decline that made them amongst the poorest by the end of WW II. Commencing the late 20th century however, history appears to be correcting itself, as the balance of world-power swings back to the East. With Indian and Chinese rise altering global geopolitics, the 21st century is aptly alluded to as the “Age of Asia”. The Asian revival can be attributed to the robust trade between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, just as it existed for many centuries prior Asian colonisation. The rising economies in the Indian and Pacific Oceans have thus been instrumental in the conceptualisation of a new construct - the Indo-Pacific.

The marriage between two of the largest oceans has however stretched geo-economic considerations to a point where today, the Indo-Pacific is increasingly being defined more in geostrategic terms. Strategic discourses worldwide have attributed this to the belligerent rise of China in the Indo-Pacific and agree that this will inevitably alter the regional balance of power. In fact, Mearsheimer’s theory on international politics suggests that the mightiest states attempt to establish hegemony in their region while making sure that no rival great power dominates another region and he identifies China’s Indo-Pacific rise as similar to American domination of the Western hemisphere.³ So far, Mearsheimer appears to be spot-on with his

¹ The views expressed are the author’s own and not necessarily those of the Indian Ministry of Defence.

² *The Guardian*, April 18, 2012.

³ John J. Mearsheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise,” *Current History*, April, 2006, p. 160.

prediction as, China has completely dominated the South China Sea (SCS), its Indian Ocean influence is increasing, and with the One Belt One Road (OBOR) it is on course to become the pre-dominant Indo-Pacific power displacing the US. A realist perspective of the emerging Indo-Pacific geo-politics thus sees an intense security competition with considerable potential for war.

This probably is a realisation that has prompted India, which for long shied away from overt responses, to visibly leverage its strategic geography. Delhi justifiably sees the growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean as a threat that necessitates response. It has altered its strategy to counter Chinese aspirations in the Indo-Pacific as India's commercial interests in the Pacific as part of its 'Act East policy' and its influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) could both be hampered by a hegemonic China. A change in the India political view suggesting a more active role in regional geopolitics has granted it increasing visibility in Indo-Pacific discourses.

India's reactions to the emerging regional dynamics have been fairly recent and are comprehensively highlighted in numerous papers that debate the emerging Indo-Pacific geopolitics. While most papers are unanimous in the view that China's rise does have a major impact on the Indo-Pacific balance of power, Indian writers have viewed the Chinese rise in excessively securitized terms. This paper thus seeks to examine the question – Does India need to be unduly concerned about the Changing Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific Region?

The paper consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 would analyse how China has altered the balance of power in the region by examining its activities in the SCS / IOR, the expanding operations of the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the recent OBOR initiative and how these challenge India. Chapter 2 looks at India's responses to the emerging Indo-Pacific challenges. Chapter 3 attempts to look at future policy options for India to evolve as a credible Indo-Pacific power. The paper concludes by making an assessment of whether the changing Indo-Pacific balance of power has tilted towards China or has India been able to nullify China's strategic gains.

Chapter 1-Indo-Pacific Balance of Power Shift and Challenges to India

China is a common denominator in any Indo-Pacific discourse. If one were to map China's strategic policy initiatives and its capability build-up / deployment patterns over the last two decades, it becomes apparent that Chinese efforts to exert its influence has been driven by a two-pronged strategy.⁴ Firstly, it seeks to deny access to the Yellow, East and SCS. It does this in an aggressive manner often displaying brute force as it cites non-negotiable historic sovereignty over these seas along with the islands in it. The second is a power projection strategy across the Indo-Pacific articulating trade security concerns. While trade security and territorial sovereignty issues are legitimate concerns, the manner in which China has sought to address them demonstrates its hegemonic aspirations.

The development of a maritime security strategy along the two-pronged drivers mentioned above and the associated capability build-up indicates that China seeks to alter the Indo-Pacific security balance. This chapter aims to establish this by examining three aspects (i) Chinese Indo-Pacific capacity building-SCS and IOR; (ii) Expanding People Liberation Army Navy(PLAN) operations in the Indo-Pacific; (iii) OBOR initiative.

(1) China's Indo-Pacific Capacity Building Activities

A. South China Sea

China views 1.5 million km^2 and more than 50 islands in the SCS/ECS as occupied by foreign nations that seize its resources.⁵ In

⁴ Robert C. O'Brien, "China's Two-Pronged Maritime Rise," *The Diplomat*, July 24, 2011. <https://thediplomat.com/2011/07/chinas-two-pronged-maritime-rise/>, accessed October 11 2017.

⁵ The National Institute for Defense Studies, *NIDS China Security Report 2016*, 2016, p.8

establishing its sovereignty claims tensions between China and other stakeholders have often spiralled to a point where conflict seemed imminent as it has been particularly assertive in defending its maritime claims.⁶ Some observers have characterised this as a calculated Chinese approach for asserting and defending its territorial claims. They have termed it the ‘Salami Slicing’ strategy that employs a series of incremental actions none of which by itself is *casus belli* (an act/event that provokes or is used to justify war) but gradually changes the status quo in China’s favour.⁷ A case in point has been the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012. Having forced a Philippine withdrawal, Chinese officials began speaking of a “Scarborough Model” for exerting regional influence and annexing disputed territories.⁸

The fact that geography now substantially favours China in a SCS conflict cannot be overemphasised especially due to the rapid militarisation of numerous islands. Since 2012, China has reclaimed numerous islands in the SCS, to develop them into facilities that can comprehensively support ships and aircraft. It has been building air bases and port facilities in Spratly Islands at Subi Reef, Mischief Reef and Fiery Cross, adding air strips, hangars, weapon storage facilities and fuel storage tanks. In effect it has at its disposal ‘unsinkable aircraft carriers’- a capability that no other regional power has. China intends to build monitoring stations on a number of islands, including in Scarborough Shoal area.⁹ Combined with its existing bases in Paracel and Spratly this would form a “strategic triangle” for monitoring and policing activities across the SCS¹⁰ giving it

⁶ Ronald O’Rourke, “China Naval Modernization: Implication for US Navy Capabilities-Background and Issues for Congress”, *Congressional Research Service Report*, June 17, 2016, p4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁸ Ely Ratner, “Learning the Lessons of Scarborough Reef,” *The National Interest*, November 21, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/learning-the-lessons-scarborough-reef-9442?page=s how>.

⁹ Caroline Mortimer, “China to Build on Disputed Shoal in SCS,” *Independent*, March 18, 2017.

¹⁰ Steve Mollman, “The “strategic triangle” that would allow Beijing to control the SCS,” *Quartz*, September 11, 2016, <https://qz.com/1099819/us-foreign-aid-in-the-time-of-trump-china-still-is-not-about-to-become-the-worlds-largest-donor/>, accessed October 8, 2017.

considerable strategic advantage. Its position of strength in the SCS is evident from an increasing willingness to challenge US actions — long the region’s pre-eminent military power.¹¹ Having achieved SCS dominance, it has with greater vigour sought to enforce the other critical aspect of its maritime strategy — the ability for power projection in the far seas — notably the Indian Ocean.

B. Indian Ocean

In contrast to its SCS behaviour, China has been measured in its IOR approach. Initially, Hu Jintao, sought expansion of PLAN deployments to the ‘far seas’ to overcome the “Malacca Dilemma”. More recently, Xi Jinping’s zeal in rebranding China as a maritime power, reformed the maritime military strategy to that of “Active Defence” resulting in a methodical increase in the number, complexity and geographic extent of the PLAN’s deployments across the Indo-Pacific. Since the turn of the century, China has been actively investing in Indian Ocean facilities termed String of Pearls which are commercial ports and communication facilities along its ‘strategic’ Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) originating from the resource-rich Africa and Middle East.

C. China’s Indo-Pacific Activities-Challenges to India

The premature ‘String of Pearls’ coinage’ in 2005 turned prophetic when, Chinese conventional and nuclear submarines docked at the Chinese run container terminal in Colombo (2014) and Karachi (2015). With Gwadar, Djibouti and Hambantota becoming available, PLAN can operate in the IOR overcoming geographic constraints. China appears keen to replicate the incremental SCS strategies in the IOR with plans to construct multiple logistical facilities¹² and operationalising 18 to 19 naval bases in the Indian Ocean¹³ to provide land-based support to

¹¹ Matthew Dunn, “China’s Strategy Protecting Own Territory, While Increasing Military Presence within Disputed Waters,” news. com. au, July 3, 2017, <http://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/inventions/chinas-strategy-protecting-own-territory-while-increasing-military-presence-within-disputed-waters/news-story/2f5e0995bd102ffe065f12f2a95854f0>, accessed October 12, 2017.

¹² Brahma Chellany, “China Reinvents ‘String of Pearls’ as Maritime Silk Road”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, May 1, 2015, <https://chellany.net/2015/05/01/china-reinvents-string-of-pearls-as-maritime-silk-road>.

¹³ Chan Kai Yee, “China to Build 18 Naval Bases in Indian Ocean,” *China Daily Mail*,

Chinese Carrier Battle Groups (CBGs). The availability of bases with readily deployable combat soldiers, has not only challenged India in what it considers its 'proprietary space' but such plans also clearly point to Chinese desire to assume Indo-Pacific dominance. The building of logistic facilities across the Indo-Pacific would drastically shrink India's geographic advantage. This is true even for Chinese bases in the SCS that may be perceived to have little relevance to India, but the availability of which would significantly reduce the unprotected transit requirements against Indian or US antisubmarine and maritime surveillance efforts.¹⁴

The 2017 Doklam standoff adds to the list of high-intensity confrontations between the two Asian giants. China's reluctance to engage in a 'caveat free' bilateral dialogue to resolve border issues indicates its intent to maintain it as a bone of contention. When compared to the Indian Army, PLA enjoys a greater advantage in terms of capability. A wholistic view of the subcontinent presents a rising China that not only strives to fortify capabilities across its land borders but also seeks to surmount the harsh terrains of the Himalayas via the Indian Ocean by opening another strategic front. When viewed in this context, China's projection of Naval power into the Indian Ocean translates into a serious security challenge for India.

Another critical concern has been the challenge to India's regional influence. India's realisation that its neighbourhood holds the key to its emergence as a regional and global power¹⁵ came much after China had significantly expanded its footprint in the region. Much of India's neighbourhood has been economically deprived and have also seen periods of politically instability that needed a benign view and it is here that China capitalised. To be fair to China, India has shown diplomatic lethargy in addressing the political and economic concerns of its neighbours and China has been swift and effective in ensuring that it moved into the vacuum that India refused to fill. It's this head start

November 22, 2014, <https://chinadailymail.com/2014/11/22/china-to-build-18-naval-bases-in-indian-ocean/>, accessed October 27, 2017.

¹⁴ John W. Garver, "Diverging Perceptions of China's Emergence as an Indian Ocean Power," *Asia Policy*, No. 22, July 2016, p. 59.

¹⁵ *Hindustan Times*, May 18, 2014.

that has allowed Chinese civilian analysts to argue that ‘China should not be shy about projecting its activities in the Eastern Indian Ocean and that India needs to be reminded that the areas around Gwadar, Chittagong, Hambantota and Sittwe have not been India’s sphere of influence.’¹⁶

(2) PLAN’s Expanding Indo-Pacific Maritime Operations

A. PLAN Taskings

The nature of PLAN taskings have evolved over the last decade in terms of duration, distance and complexity. From a Navy whose operations were restricted to coastal security, limited operations in the SCS and selective sea denial through submarine warfare, it has now identified breaking the US. stranglehold on the Indo-Pacific as the top goal of its Indo-Pacific strategy.¹⁷

China expects other countries to view the increased frequency of its surface combatant and submarine deployments to the IOR as the new normal of its maritime strategy.¹⁸ PLAN deployments have graduated from single ship to larger formations and are not only combat-gearred but also deployed for longer durations. Since 2008, the PLAN has deployed ships in the IOR for counterpiracy missions and since 2013 oddly included conventional and nuclear submarines in such missions. PLAN routinely dispatches warships to the IOR even for missions independent of antipiracy. In Aug 2017, Indian Ocean deployed PLAN ships for the first time carried out live firing drills¹⁹ ostensibly to deliver a strong message – its capability for aggressive military posturing in a region where the Indian navy (*IN*) thinks it is influential.

PLAN ships have also undertaken frequent passes through the Eastward-island chains in the Pacific and has often challenged Japan

¹⁶ Garver, “Diverging Perceptions of China’s Emergence as an Indian Ocean Power,” p. 59.

¹⁷ You Ji, “China’s Emerging Indo-Pacific Naval Strategy,” *Asia Policy*, No. 22, July 2016, p. 17.

¹⁸ Ministry of National Defense The People’s Republic of China, “Defense Ministry’s Regular Press Conference on Jan. 29, 2015,” January 29, 2015.

¹⁹ *Hindustan Times*, August 25, 2017.

passing through the Miyako straits.²⁰ December 2016, saw the maiden deployment of the Liaoning carrier task group beyond the first island chain.²¹ Apart from cautioning US and its allies by way of political signalling, the evolving scope of such deployments clearly indicate that PLAN's consolidation of operational capabilities for the future. With Chinese maritime strategy moving beyond the traditional 'island chain', such deployments will assist future CBG's expeditionary missions, especially in the IOR.²²

*The Sino-Russia 'Joint Sea Exercise 2016' was noteworthy for its complexity and location- the SCS. The highlight of the eight-day exercise was an amphibious assault to seize an island. Particular media emphasis was given to the exercise which featured Chinese and Russian marines storming beaches with landing boats and ZDB-05 amphibious tanks, while helicopters carried air mobile marines to encircle the enemy's rear.*²³

B. PLAN's Expanding Indo-Pacific Maritime Operations -Challenge to India

While in the SCS, PLAN has evolved a sea-control strategy²⁴, its Indian Ocean strategy has been oriented towards selective sea denial. The changing nature of PLAN taskings, type of platforms being deployed in the Indian Ocean and the view of Chinese strategists that China needs two carrier strike groups each in the West Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean²⁵ is however indicative of a strategy shift to one that prioritizes sea control in the Indian Ocean. The nexus of China's Indo-Pacific strategy and carrier doctrine reflects the navy's changed

²⁰ *The Strait Times*, April 28, 2017.

²¹ Eli Huang, "China's Master PLAN: How Beijing Wants to Break Free of the 'Island Chains'," *The National Interest*, May 19, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/chinas-master-plan-how-beijing-wants-break-free-the-island-20746>.

²² Ji, "China's Emerging Indo-Pacific Naval Strategy," p. 17.

²³ Jeffrey Lin and P.W. Singer, "The Chinese-Russian SCS Naval Exercises: What Happened and Why Did It Matter?" *Popular Science*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.popsoci.com/chinese-russian-south-china-sea-naval-exercises-what-happened-and-why-did-it-matter>, accessed October 4, 2017.

²⁴ Ji, "China's Emerging Indo-Pacific Naval Strategy," p. 18.

²⁵ Mihir Sharma, "Why Beijing's more muscular naval force should worry India," *The Japan Times*, April 30, 2017.

mindset on sea power, capability improvement, and policy choices.²⁶

The thrust on amphibious exercises is worrisome as possibilities of seizing an island in the Andaman Islands to control the Malacca Straits chokepoint increases. This would fundamentally alter the Sino-Indian Naval balance in the Indian Ocean especially when paired with deployment of PLAN ships at Gwadar, Pakistan. ²⁷

The expanding scope of PLAN wherein, they are deploying multiple ships and submarine in the IOR will stretch India's efforts to maintain a continuous MDA. While the acquisition of the P8I have considerably augmented India's capability it would need to devise newer means such as information sharing agreements to monitor the entire IOR so as to retain its strategic advantage.

(3) OBOR Initiative

A. OBOR-China's Strategic Ploy

President Xi Jinping's OBOR initiative has two components-an oversea connectivity project called the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and an overland Silk Road economic belt connecting Europe and Asia. China never acknowledged the 'String of Pearls' dismissing it Western media's far-fetched imagination. However, it is more than evident that the 'String of Pearls' with its distinct military advantages has actually been subsumed into the OBOR and strategically rebranded at a much larger scale to be seen as a geo-economic initiative. Through OBOR, China would build political and economic relations with nearly sixty countries on four continents²⁸. reflecting China's desire to be viewed as an outward looking global power.

B. OBOR-Challenges to India

China marketed the OBOR initiative during the Belt and Road

²⁶ Ji, "China's Emerging Indo-Pacific Naval Strategy," p. 18.

²⁷ Garver, "Diverging Perceptions of China's Emergence as an Indian Ocean Power," p. 58.

²⁸ Fatima-Zohra Er-Rafia, "Er-Rafina on China's OBOR and the Global Balance of Power," *Foreign Policy Concepts*, August 4, 2017, <https://foreignpolicyconcepts.com/er-rafia-obor-global-balance-power/>.

Forum (BARF) as the new “shaper of global trends and norms” with the Chinese president Xi Jinping claiming that with OBOR- “what we hope to create is a big family of harmonious co-existence.”²⁹ Indian strategists are divided in their view of New Delhi’s disagreement with OBOR. From an economic cooperation perspective, OBOR fits well with the Modi administration’s ‘Make in India’ initiative and its ambition to expand international economic collaboration. However, from a geostrategic perspective, OBOR presents New Delhi a picture that warrants it to be cautious. The fact that all its neighbours (except Bhutan) have joined the OBOR initiative is another concern. If she continues to distance herself from economic cooperation projects involving China and South Asian countries, participants that are its neighbours will move further from India, which is not in its best interests.³⁰

At the core of India’s reservation to the OBOR is the ambitious \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project which is a pivotal link in the OBOR. The corridor comprising transportation (rail, road), energy and infrastructure projects violates India’s territorial integrity. This exposes China’s double standards on territorial sovereignty as on one hand it opposes international funding for projects in Arunachal Pradesh on grounds of being a disputed territory and on the other sees no objection in pursuing CPEC through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

Notwithstanding rhetorical claims, China is clearly unwilling to accommodate India in the project given its insensitivity to India’s concerns. China’s inability to share the operational plan on project execution furthers strategic mistrust and causing some Indian researchers to speculate if the project is just a game of deception.³¹ For

²⁹ Harsh V Pant, “Unless China Changes Tack, India Won’t Be the Only Country Opposing One Belt, One Road,” *Quartz*, June 23, 2017, <https://qz.com/1012929/unless-china-changes-tack-india-wont-be-the-only-country-opposing-one-belt-one-road/>, accessed October 17, 2017.

³⁰ Lin Minwang, “Belt and Road: India’s Dilemma,” *China-India Dialogue*, April 14, 2017, <http://chinaindiadialogue.com/belt-and-road-indias-dilemma>, accessed November 10, 2017.

³¹ Peter Cai, “Why India Is Wary of China’s Silk Road Initiative,” *HuffPost*, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-cai/india-china-silk-road-initiative_b_11894038.html, accessed November 4, 2017.

the moment, India views the OBOR as a project that actually aims to fulfil China's strategic ambitions in the region and provide legitimacy to the building of logistic bases in the region. While the timeline for the execution of the OBOR is yet to be formulated, it is a given that its completion on Chinese terms would be strategically very disadvantageous to India. India needs to expeditiously script an alternative narrative that will contest a possible Chinese hegemony.

(4) Overall Assessment of China's Influence in the Indo-Pacific

Xi Jinping's 'China Dream' envisions China becoming a maritime power.³²Wielding considerable superiority in the SCS, the Chinese road map to achieving regional superiority has gradually expanded into the IOR, both these sea spaces effectively forming the core of the Indo-Pacific construct. The formal acknowledgement in the 2015 Chinese defence paper that PLAN will shift its focus from 'Off Shore Waters Defence' to combination of "Off Shore Waters Defence with Open Seas protection" and build a combined, multi-functional and effective maritime force³³ indicate the change in China's strategic outlook that now seeks global influence.

China's influence in the Indo-Pacific has been increasing in accordance with their well thought out military strategy. For long, it was fixated to a continental outlook. But the 21st century has seen it recalibrating its strategy to provide primacy to becoming a global maritime power. While harbouring global power aspirations cannot be faulted, it is the manner in which it has gone about in achieving it that has resulted in regional unanimity to counter it. India sees itself as having been tread over by China in its march to dominance. SCS stake holders have also seen their interests aggressively subverted by China. That notwithstanding, its hegemonic development of disputed islands has only evoked muted responses by regional powers with even ASEAN, the most vibrant regional grouping appearing helpless to influence Chinese actions in the SCS.

³² Michael McDevitt, "Becoming a great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream," *CNA*, June 2016, p. iv.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Promoting trade security concerns, China has skilfully utilized its commercial interests in the IOR to legitimize its disproportionately expanding military footprint in the region. With increased maritime expertise, they now blatantly pursue a more aggressive Indo-Pacific policy. The deployment of SSNs for antipiracy is one such example that raises questions on its IOR agenda.³⁴ The lack of transparency in the OBOR initiative indicates that it may not be restricted to economic well-being of the region. In fact, the OBOR has actually placed in perspective, China's geostrategic aspirations in the Indo-Pacific.

With China pursuing a vigorous Indo-Pacific policy, India already realises that it can ill-afford to assume the allegiance of the Indian Ocean states. India cannot match China's aggressive soft power initiatives and would need to exert considerable politico-diplomatic heft to counter Chinese influence. PLAN's increased Indo-Pacific footprint complicates India's security calculations necessitating it to re-examine its security assessments. So, while China's rise has altered the Indo-pacific balance of power, regional powers in general and India in particular would need to expeditiously address the challenges posed by the balance of power shift.

Chapter 2- India's responses to emerging Indo-Pacific

The rigid adoption of a 'Non-Alignment' stand saw India ceding regional influence for most of the 20th century and was viewed as nothing more than a fringe player in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. But with definitive actions over the last decade, India is now beginning to be viewed as a regional power that can counterbalance the Indo-Pacific power-shift. This chapter would highlight four specific responses by India to the emerging Indo-Pacific challenges: (i) Shift in Political Mindset (ii) Regional engagements in the Indo-Pacific (iii) Strategic engagement with Indo-Pacific powers (iv) Maritime Power Projection including Capability Development

³⁴ P K Ghosh, "Chinese Nuclear Subs in the Indian Ocean," *The Diplomat*, April 12, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/chinese-nuclear-subs-in-the-indian-ocean/>, accessed September 17, 2017.

(1) Shift in Political Mindset

With the Indo-Pacific evolving in a manner that would define the future trajectory of 21st century political interactions, Indian political leaders have for that past few years begun to express an Indo-Pacific vision. India's interests in Indo-Pacific geopolitics can be traced back to the early 1990s when the then Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao launched the 'Look East' policy³⁵ aimed to enhance economic engagement with countries to the East of India. The scale of execution of the Look East policy was so insignificant that it did not alter India's regional visibility. China's renewed strategic vigour during this period saw India's sphere of influence rapidly encroached upon thus losing its regional advantage.

India renewed its Indo-Pacific focus earlier this decade. In May 2013, PM Manmohan Singh during his visit to Japan spoke about the increasing "confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans" and also highlighted maritime security as "essential for regional peace and prosperity" cautioning that the region faced multiple challenges and unresolved issues on account of historical differences alluding to China's rise and its impact on the regional geopolitics.³⁶ The present Modi government has furthered India's Indo-Pacific engagement by dictating a new foreign policy narrative that modified the 'Look East' to an 'Act East' policy that seeks to counter any shift in the balance of power. The present decade has seen Indian political leadership finally willing to acknowledge that it was time for India to act as a regional power and agreed to a larger *IN* role in the Indo-Pacific. With political outlook gaining a maritime focus, the Navy reoriented its defensive 2007 Maritime Strategy to a more assertive 2015 strategy document.

(2) Regional Engagements in the Indo-Pacific

³⁵ David Brewster, ed. *Indo Pacific Maritime Security: Challenges and Cooperation, India and the India Pacific Balance*, National Security College Australian National University, 2006, p. 85.

³⁶ Harsh Pant and Yogesh Joshi, "The American Pivot and the Indian Navy," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 68, No. 1, Winter 2015, p. 52.

The ‘String of Pearls’ strategy brought out how India’s lack of focus on its immediate neighbourhood allowed China to fill in with reasonable ease. But much has changed in recent times. Sri Lanka turning down a Chinese submarine port call request in 2017³⁷ after having accorded such clearances in 2014 is one clear example. Indian diplomatic initiatives have also seen Myanmar weaning away from China³⁸ after having been a strong ally for many years.

Amongst India’s foremost responses to enhancing its Indo-Pacific image has been its increasing engagements to its East which is arguably a reaction to China’s expansion to the West. Measuring up to China’s Indian Ocean interests, India’s SCS interests has grown in the recent past. While India and Singapore have been bi-lateral military partners since 1994, it has enhanced engagements with Vietnam, Indonesia and Philippines. India has publicly supported Vietnam and Philippines in their disputes with China.³⁹ Indian Naval ships have visited Vietnam and India offers considerable military training to Vietnam.⁴⁰ In June 2016, New Delhi was reportedly set to sign an agreement to sell Brahmos supersonic cruise missile to Vietnam.⁴¹ Recently, India agreed to impart submarine training to Indonesia.⁴² An Indian state-owned shipyard has reportedly been awarded a contract to build two warships for the Philippines.⁴³

India has also become diplomatically active in the Northern Indian Ocean and Africa where China has sought to expand rapidly. In Mar 2015, PM Modi in a single trip, visited Seychelles, Mauritius and Srilanka thus signifying a dramatic reorientation of Indian strategic thinking and reassuring the IOR states of India’s capability to be a net security provider in this oceanic space. Later in 2015, India hosted the

³⁷ *South China Morning Post*, May 12, 2017.

³⁸ Dhruva Jaishankar, “Myanmar Is Pivoting Away from China,” *Foreign Policy*, June 15, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/15/myanmar-burma-is-pivoting-away-from-china-aung-san-su-kyi-xi-jinping-india/>, accessed November 14, 2017.

³⁹ Harsh V. Pant. “A New Maritime Balance in the Indo Pacific Region,” *The Japan Times*, May 4, 2016.

⁴⁰ *The Times of India*, December 6, 2016.

⁴¹ *The Times of India*, June 4, 2016.

⁴² *The Hindu*, February 9, 2017.

⁴³ *The Hindu*, May 19, 2016.

largest-ever India-Africa summit which saw the participation of 54 African nations.

India has been expanding its assistance to smaller Indian Ocean island states—including sale of a high-end patrol vessel to Mauritius in February 2014, fast attack crafts to Seychelles, OPVs to Sri Lanka and a fast attack craft and two advanced light helicopters to Maldives. Indian coastal surveillance radars have been set up in Sri Lanka (6), Mauritius (8) and Seychelles (1) as well as in Maldives in order to augment Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Agreements to develop sea and air infrastructure on the Agaléga Islands, controlled by Mauritius, and on Assumption Island, controlled by Seychelles, are major steps in ensuring an Indian presence in key chokepoints and SLOCs in the IOR. India has also signed a White Shipping agreement with France (Reunion Islands) to enable information sharing on maritime traffic and maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).⁴⁴ The most recent additions to India's IOR capacity building have been Chabahar port in Iran and Port Duqum in Oman.⁴⁵ India's lease of the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport co-located with the Chinese controlled Hambantota port in Sri Lanka can be seen as another strategic move that aims to defeat China's potential use of the port for Naval activities.

India has also stepped up attempts to strengthen the Indian Ocean's multilateral structures and enhance interconnectedness by giving organizations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium greater prominence. Modi has also envisioned the idea of an Indian Ocean "blue economy" as part of a broader vision for the region that would link with the Sagar Mala project which connects India's coast with its interior. Furthermore, the government has launched 'Mausam', a program designed to reinforce regional cultural and historical links. India has also stepped up its ties with ASEAN. It views Indo-ASEAN ties as an integral part of India's vision of a stable, secure and prosperous Asia and the surrounding Indian Ocean and Pacific regions, as remarked by former PM

⁴⁴ *The Economic Times*, January 24, 2017.

⁴⁵ *The Indian Express*, February 13, 2018.

Manmohan Singh during the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in 2012. India scaled up its ASEAN ties in 2015, by establishing a dedicated mission.⁴⁶

(3) Strategic Engagements in the Indo-Pacific

A. Indo-Japan Relations

India and Japan have significantly enhanced bilateral ties with cross visits being undertaken by the either heads of state reaffirming the commitment of close ties. Both countries have a congruence in their views on regional security issues such as the SCS. China views the growing Indo-Japanese relations with unease especially as it has territorial disputes with either country. Military ties between India and Japan have seen a noteworthy shift with Japan's addition to the Indo-US Naval exercise 'Malabar' in 2015. For long, India had desisted from enhancing the scope of Malabar accommodating Chinese concerns. With the addition of Japan, it has now indicated to China that it is willing to break the status-quo in order to maintain the regional balance of power. Considering India's graduated response to the evolving geopolitics, the possibility of other regional powers like Australia joining such an alliance remains open.

B. Indo-US Relations

India did not enjoy a proximate relation with US for most of the 20th century. The 21st century has seen both countries seeking greater engagement, a policy shift necessitated on account of strategic compulsions on both sides. Their congruence in views on certain regional issues have further aided the association. A case in point has been the joint statements by both India and US declaring their support for freedom of navigation in the SCS. India has thus indicated that it not reluctant to highlight its convergence with Washington on regional issues. After initial years of lukewarm responses, India and US are increasingly cementing a strategic relation based on greater trust. The signing of Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and US designating India as a "Major Defence partner"⁴⁷ are key

⁴⁶ *The Economic Times*, April 23, 2015.

⁴⁷ Ankit Panda, "India-US sign Logistics Exchange Agreement: What You Need To Know,"

milestones that emphasise this growing partnership. India has also sought military technology with the Indo-US joint-workforce on carrier technology being described as among the most successful military dialogues between the two countries.⁴⁸

(4) Maritime Power Projection

The Indian Navy has since independence sought to expand the country's maritime vision. It made early investments in achieving self-reliance by developing domestic capabilities; even setting its own design bureau. As on date, all new inductions are being constructed in Indian yards. These include platforms that range from aircraft carrier to nuclear submarines. Shedding earlier inhibitions, even the political establishment is aligning itself to *IN's* maritime vision approving its ambitious force expansion programme. A larger force will allow a `naval forward strategy` extending Eastward into the SCS and the Pacific Rim⁴⁹ which falls under the Navy's `Area of Interest` with respect to its operational philosophy.⁵⁰

The changing Indo-Pacific geopolitics has altered India's maritime outlook within a span of two decades, the Navy has seen a capability growth of 30 percent, emerging as the third largest Navy in Asia-after China and Japan.⁵¹ India's Naval budget surpasses the Naval spending by all other Indian Ocean States.⁵² In due course, the Indian Navy would become a three-carrier navy capable of operating at least two CBGs. Supporting the offensive would also be indigenously constructed conventional and nuclear submarines apart from numerous surface combatants. India's maritime build-up is in line with its renewed strategic outlook to be a more influential player in the region. Recent Naval strategy documents are increasingly seeing India dictating its

The Diplomat, August 30, 2016, <http://the-diplomat.com/2016/08/India-US-sign-Logistics-Exchange-Agreement-What-You-Need-To-Know/>.

⁴⁸ U. S. Embassy in India, "Growing U.S./India Defense Cooperation, Remarks of U. S. Ambassador Richard Verma, Defence Services Staff College Wellington, August 24, 2015, <http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/sr082415.html>.

⁴⁹ James R. Hilmes, Andrew C. Winer and Toshi Yoshihara, *Indian Naval Strategy in the 21st century*, Routledge, 2009, p. 61.

⁵⁰ As noted in India's new Maritime Security Strategy Document 2015.

⁵¹ Pant and Joshi, "The American Pivot and the Indian Navy," p. 56.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

aspirations for projecting power deeper into and across the IOR. Strategic thinking that was limited to `defensive coastal sea denial' operations gave way to maritime power being considered as an influential instrument when the need to counter increasing extra regional presence in IOR was addressed in the Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004) that envisaged raising the `costs of intervention' for extra-regional powers encroaching into its sphere of influence.⁵³

New Delhi has also increased India's Indo-Pacific naval footprint. In February 2016, the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya, visited Sri Lanka and Maldives⁵⁴ its maiden overseas tour after joining the *IN*, signalling India's commitment towards regional security to its maritime neighbours. New Delhi also briefly deployed two P-8I maritime reconnaissance aircraft in the Andaman Islands and another in Seychelles following reports of Chinese naval activity. Apart from frequent deployments to Mauritius, Seychelles to augment EEZ surveillance efforts, it also regularly deploys to the Pacific with port calls at Japan and Australia for bilateral exercises and has also been a part of RIMPAC. The Indian Navy also frequently assists IOR countries in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) asserting its role as a regional benefactor and consolidating its image as a credible Indo-Pacific power. This is in line with India's latest Maritime Strategy document that outlines its desire to be seen as a regional power that could be relied on to cater to all possible threats in the Indo-Pacific region.

India has paid particular attention to strengthening its Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) near the Western end of the Malacca Strait.⁵⁵ It commissioned a new airbase on Great Nicobar Island at the southern tip of the island chain in 2012. In May 2016, an Indian guided-missile frigate, the INS Karmuk, was repositioned to the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) Islands—the first time a top-line

⁵³ Pant and Joshi, "The American Pivot and the Indian Navy," p. 55.

⁵⁴ *The Economic Times*, February 14, 2016.

⁵⁵ "Strengthening the Andaman Nicobar Command," *Indian Defense News*, May 25, 2015, <http://www.indiandefensenews.in/2015/05/strengthening-andaman-nicobar-command.html>.

combat-worthy warship has been based there.⁵⁶

To cater for PLAN's increasing IOR presence in late 2017 the *IN* launched the new 'Mission-Based Deployment' concept to ensure greater presence and visibility in IOR. This would see 12 to 15 destroyers, frigates, corvettes and large patrol vessels permanently positioned in the IOR, supported by naval satellite Rukmani and daily sorties by P-8I patrol aircraft.⁵⁷

Chapter 3- Future Outlook for India's Indo-Pacific Role

India's ascendancy has altered its security perceptions and it is increasingly viewing the Indo-Pacific as a space that could challenge its destiny. With increased pressure for it to emerge as a net security provider, this chapter looks at four specific future policy imperatives for India to consolidate its Indo-Pacific position-(i) Articulating strategic intent (ii) Greater investments in strategic and regional ties, (iii) Bridging the capability gap between China and India, (iv) Countering OBOR.

(1) Articulation of Strategic Intent

Despite claims emphasising India's strategic intent, India lacks a clearly articulated strategy for dealing with Indo-Pacific developments. Two possible proposals are:

A. Develop a Strategy Document

A strategic vision document dramatically changes the way the world views a country. Existing Strategy and Vision documents have been published by individual services of the Indian Armed forces. Without the necessary political backing there is only so much that they can achieve in terms of political signalling. For far too long, India has kept itself away from the centre stage by choosing to skirt articulating its strategic views. A formal strategy document / Defence white paper

⁵⁶ *The Straits Times*, April 10, 2016.

⁵⁷ Abhijit Singh, "India's 'Mission Ready' Naval Posture Must Extend beyond the Indian Ocean," *Observer Research Foundation*, November 1, 2017, <http://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-mission-ready-naval-posture-must-extend-beyond-the-indian-ocean/>.

would provide much weightage to its role as a credible regional player.

B. Develop a Counter Balancing Indo-Pacific Strategy

With China and Pakistan claiming their alliance as ‘all-weather’, it would be reasonable to expect that a conflict across India’s land borders with either country would require India to be prepared for a two-front war.⁵⁸ This would be a colossal challenge for India’s land and Air Forces, notwithstanding their credible capabilities. On the maritime front however, India will have an advantage over China, given China’s reliance on SLOCs in the IOR. Thus, in order to deter a Chinese adventure across our land borders, there is a need to develop an Indo-Pacific counter-balancing strategy that should envisage operations by the *IN* not just in the Indian Ocean but also the SCS as it can aid in applying countervailing pressure by going through China’s own backyard.⁵⁹

(2) Building Strategic Ties

Despite its ‘Non -Aligned orientation’, in order to ensure that the tide of regional balance of power does not turn against it, India has recognised the need to moderate its position to build strategic ties with those that share political and security concerns.

A. Indo-Japan Relations

Japan was the only country to publicly support India’s stand during the Doklam stand-off reinforcing it as India’s only natural ally in Asia. For years, India’s fixation to its immediate neighbourhood and Japan’s self-imposed constitutional restrictions hampered the progress of Indo-Japanese ties. But the emerging Indo-Pacific dynamics that sees China’s rise and a perceived drop in America’s regional commitment, has led to both Japan and India seek greater partnership. Today, Indo-Japan ties appear to be growing stronger by the day and key to this emerging bond has been the political resolve at the highest

⁵⁸ “Doklam Standoff: Army Chief Says India Must Be Prepared for Two-Front War,” *Livemint*, September 6, 2017,

<http://www.livemint.com/Politics/k5KLT816ETjFdMX8ynP8II/Pointing-to-China-Army-chief-Bipin-Rawat-says-India-must-be.html>, accessed November 14 2017.

⁵⁹ David Scott, “India-China Competition Across the Indo-Pacific,” *Centre for International Maritime Security*, April 26, 2016, p. 5.

levels.

Japan has offered India assistance in installing a sound surveillance system in the Bay of Bengal close to the Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) Islands as a deterrent against PLA submarine movement in the littoral. When completed this could be integrated with the existing U.S.-Japan “Fish Hook” SOSUS network meant specifically to monitor People’s Liberation Army-Navy(PLAN) submarine activity in the SCS and the Indian Ocean Rim.⁶⁰ India’s plans to procure 12 Japanese US 2i amphibious aircraft (its first military hardware sale since WWII), regrettably wedged in bureaucratic tangles, is another strategically relevant project.

Future Indo-Japan ties would require either country to walk the talk for these ties to mature into a strategic partnership of any worth. While the upswing in Indo-Japanese relations holds much promise in shaping the regional security architecture, Modi and Abe would perhaps need to step up the game to demonstrate that they can overcome bureaucratic inertia that could limit the possibilities between India and Japan.

B. Indo-US Relations

India has accrued various benefits from its ties with the US such as the nuclear deal and the NSG waiver.⁶¹ From a military perspective, Washington recognizes India’s role as a net security provider in the IOR.⁶² India’s commitment towards a greater strategic partnership with the US however, remains uncertain. It took over a year to operationalise LEMOA⁶³ and two other ‘foundational agreements’- Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement

⁶⁰ Abhijit Singh, “India’s “Undersea Wall” in the Eastern Indian Ocean,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 15, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/indias-undersea-wall-eastern-indian-ocean/>, accessed November 15, 2017.

⁶¹ Rajesh Rajagopalan, “India’s Strategic Choices: China and the Balance of Power in Asia,” *Carnegie India*, September 14, 2017, <http://carnegieindia.org/2017/09/14/india-s-strategic-choices-china-and-balance-of-power-in-asia-pub-73108>, accessed November 18, 2017.

⁶² Pant and Joshi, “The American Pivot and the Indian Navy,” p. 51.

⁶³ *Financial Express*, November 11, 2017.

(BECA) are pending.⁶⁴ The Helicopter Operations on Ships Other than Aircraft Carriers (HOSTAC) agreement, allowing helicopter operations between *IN* and *USN* ships is under deliberation.⁶⁵ These agreements will together add up to a level of inter-operability in defence that presupposes a very high level of trust and strategic alignment.⁶⁶ Political reluctance in going ahead with CISMOA and BECA, notwithstanding the obvious critical technology gains, indicate India's inherent fear that its interests may be compromised in the long run. That notwithstanding, as India's Act East and US pivot to Asia find convergence in countering China, aligning with the US appears prudent.

C. Indo-Australia Relations

India and Australia have been unable to build a relationship that could benefit from the tremendous potential such a relation could offer. However, there is increasing mutual consensus for India and Australia to engage more meaningfully.⁶⁷ The 2016 Australian Defence White paper lays considerable emphasis on the Indo-Pacific and Australia recognises India to be a regional power that it can ally with closely in contributing to a regional "rules-based order" Acknowledging India's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific, Australia has often indicated on various international forums its desire to scale-up its partnership with India.⁶⁸ Closer ties with Australia could help India accrue major gains from the "close security relationships Australia has with the Southeast Asian Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) partners who have together built an excellent maritime domain awareness system covering the entire eastern half of the Indian Ocean". As an emerging Indo-Pacific maritime power, that Australia seeks to engage

⁶⁴ *The Citizen*, August 21, 2017.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Shyam Saran, "A Lopsided Strategic Partnership," *Business Standard*, April 14, 2016, http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/shyam-saran-a-lopsided-strategic-partnership-116041400917_1.html, accessed November 7, 2017.

⁶⁷ Prakash Gopal, "Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Role of the US and Its Allies," *Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, Vol. 13, No. 1, May 2017.

⁶⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Joint Statement Seventh Japan-Australia 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations," April 20, 2017, http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_0/ocn/au/page3e_000692.html.

more with India than with China is credible proof that the two countries share the notion that Chinese maritime rise would upset regional “rules-based order”.

D. Is Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD) an alternative?

PM Shinzo Abe was the architect of QUAD when in 2006 he called for a QUAD between Japan, India, Australia and US.⁶⁹ In 2007, he spoke about the ‘Confluence of the two seas’ in the Indian Parliament referring to the Indian and Pacific oceans and the IN-USN bi-lateral annual Malabar exercise that followed, saw the addition Australia, Singapore and Japan for the first time. Beijing termed it as the first step towards the formation of an “Asian NATO”. To pacify Beijing, Australia in a joint statement in 2008, announced that they were no longer interested in the QUAD.⁷⁰ PM Abe not keen to let go of this key security initiative, sought to resuscitate it post his return to power in 2012. He suggested that China’s actions needed to be challenged and put forward the need to form ‘Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond’, by developing “a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the US (Hawaii) form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the IOR to the Western Pacific”.⁷¹

New Delhi conscious of the manner in which the last QUAD initiative capitulated proposed two alternative trilateral arrangements, one with US and Japan, and the other with Japan and Australia. While the arrangement between India, US and Japan matured into Japan permanently becoming part of the Malabar exercise, the same concession was not offered to Australia despite its repeated requests to be included in the exercise. This was possibly on account of New Delhi’s doubts with regard to Australian commitment, as its conciliatory approach to China has in the past caused it to walk out from the four-way exercise.⁷²

⁶⁹ C. Raja Mohan, “What the Return of Quadrilateral Says about India and Emerging Asian Geopolitics,” *Carnegie India*, October 30, 2017, <http://carnegieindia.org/2017/10/30/what-return-of-quadrilateral-says-about-india-and-emerging-asian-geopolitics-pub-73580>, accessed November 23, 2017.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bhaswar Kumar, “Beyond bullet train: Will India gift Japan's Abe the diamond of his dream?” *Business Standard*, September 27, 2017.

⁷² Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “It’s Not China, It’s You, India Seems to Tell Spurned

What then is the way forward for India? A major factor in determining whether a security diamond will take shape in the future is China and its behaviour. As India-China tensions grow, the future may well find New Delhi keen to join such a framework. While political ratification is pending, the QUAD seems to be on course to be realised as officials from the four countries met for the first time in Nov 2017.⁷³

(3) Building Regional Ties

China's maritime strategy evolved since the late 20th century with a distinct Mahanian tint seeking bases in the IOR in their quest to becoming a maritime power. India lost out to China's 'string of pearls' as it bitterly learnt that it could ill afford to take regional ties for granted. India must recognise that the economic destinies of numerous IOR states are enmeshed in its rise and must thus accommodate the developmental aspirations of its neighbours. Deft diplomatic measures over the last few years has generated the momentum to set right what it lost to China. Sri Lanka's turnaround in indicating to China that their friendship can no longer be at the cost of Indian interests is a classic example of the manner in which India's ties with others in the region should evolve. The level of engagement that will facilitate an expanding IOR footprint will come at a cost and the lack of economic muscle to match China in such endeavours can be made good by forging ties with developed countries like Japan.⁷⁴

With regard to security issues in the Indo-pacific, most regional institutions and frameworks have nothing more than a perfunctory role often allowing China to impose itself on such institutions. India's Indo-Pacific rise must aim to strengthen regional institutions like ASEAN amongst others. ASEAN as the core of India's Act East policy is a key element of India's Indo-Pacific vision. Regional countries like Philippines have not only welcomed the increased interest but also expects India to be more active in policing the SCS, with others such as

Aussies," *Foreign Policy*, June 5, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/05/its-not-china-its-you-india-seems-to-tell-spurned-aussies-malabar-australia-navy/>, accessed November 5, 2017.

⁷³ *South China Morning Post*, November 13 2017.

⁷⁴ *The Hindu*, September 21, 2017.

Singapore and Vietnam also sharing such sentiments.⁷⁵ India must therefore ‘up the ante’ in engaging with ASEAN so that it is seen as a viable alternative when compared to China.

(4) Addressing the Capability Gap

India’s recent foreign policy has garnered considerable diplomatic gains in the larger Indo-Pacific region. While diplomatic and strategic partnerships are important peace time activities, it is the presence of a credible armed force that provides the necessary backing for such measures to work in the first place. While the present government has altered India’s strategic thinking to acquire a maritime flavour, one of the biggest challenges to India from China is the widening capability gap between its forces. While this is not yet a source of grave concern, the rapid pace at which China adds to its maritime fleet as opposed to India’s tardy and time-consuming acquisition process, the widening capability gap could manifest into a critical issue in future. While India may be able to temporarily offset such shortfalls by suitable alliances, a growing power of its stature that aspires for regional pre-eminence cannot be restricted by being capability-disadvantaged. Discussed below are two key aspects India needs to consider in managing the capability gap.

A. Force Imbalance

PLAN surface fleet is almost four times the *IN*. While the current PLAN force structure is preoccupied in securing the S/ECS on account of territorial disputes with regional countries as well as the US Freedom of Navigation operations. The PLAN’s two ocean strategy however envisages a Blue-water navy with two CBGs each in the Pacific and Indian oceans. While this may not happen overnight, the recent launch of their second aircraft carrier and the powerful Type 55 Destroyers indicate that they will get there soon.

India’s defence minister recently acknowledged the critical

⁷⁵ Darshana M. Baruah, “Is India Ready To Be a Power in the Pacific?,” *Foreign Policy*, December 18 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/18/is-india-ready-to-be-a-power-in-the-pacific/>, accessed 13 November, 2017.

capability shortfalls that the *IN* is facing in ship-borne multi-role helicopters, conventional submarines and mine counter measure vessels.⁷⁶ Procurement processes involving prolonged decision-making processes, a modest 15% share of the defence budget and bureaucratic apathy delays the induction of major capabilities. It also dilutes the Navy's operational credibility constraining it to develop 'less than ideal' solutions to obviate capability gaps.

B. Capability Build-up in A&N / Lakshadweep Islands

India's outlying island territories significantly complement its strategic position. The strategic location of these islands not only allow it to monitor all East-bound traffic from the Persian Gulf but also dominate the Western approaches to the Malacca Straits. The A&N islands allow India a natural staging base in order to project power into the Malacca Strait and beyond into the SCS. Although with the setting up of the ANC, India took a step in the right direction to develop military capabilities in the islands, its capabilities in intelligence, surveillance & reconnaissance (ISR) remain limited. In this regard, China's rapid developments in SCS to achieve complete superiority is worthy of emulation. India needs to upgrade its facilities in the A&N and Lakshadweep islands into larger military hubs. Shore based missile batteries, air bases that can support fighter ops and ports that can sustain naval ships and submarines are some of the 'must haves' so that the geographic advantage of the islands can be utilised to its full potential. There must also be a permanent reallocation of credible assets in terms of ships and aircraft to these islands so that India's external flanks are suitably fortified.

(5) Creation of an OBOR Alternative

China's OBOR initiative has been a regional concern with global ramifications as there is increasing evidence that behind the façade of regional development, China actually seeks to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to its advantage by coercing neighbouring countries.⁷⁷ Perhaps a

⁷⁶ *The New Indian Express*, October 27, 2017.

⁷⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Defense Budget Overview*, February 2018, p. 2-2, <http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/>

shadow of things is evident in the recent Chinese demand for Pakistan to use the Yuan in the 'Gwadar Free Zone' (under CPEC) as part of its policy to internationalise the Renminbi.⁷⁸ India must however see an opportunity in the fact that China has been unable to convert the initial OBOR euphoria into concrete support.⁷⁹ With India viewing the OBOR as purely a repackaged 'String of Pearls' it can take the lead in creating a viable alternative in the region,

In Sep 17, the foreign ministers of Japan, US and India agreed to work together to develop strategically important ports and other infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region.⁸⁰ During President Trump's Nov 2017 Japan visit, PM Abe proposed an OBOR counter involving partnership by India, Australia, US and Japan⁸¹. By enhancing the scope of the Indo Japan Africa-Asia connectivity project⁸² to align with the other multi-party proposals discussed above, China's Indo-Pacific aspirations by way of OBOR will be impossible to realise.

Is it Advantage India in the Indo-Pacific Balance of Power equation?

India's efforts to step-up its Indo-Pacific influence has visibly increased in recent years and is manifest in its support to numerous capacity building initiatives in the IOR. It has displayed increasing willingness to shoulder the responsibility of a security guarantor that numerous IOR littorals expect of it. Having been awakened from its indifference to regional security issues, India is now no longer content in being restricted to the IOR but is increasingly willing to be seen as a dominant player in setting right the changing balance of power in other

fy2019/FY2019_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.

⁷⁸ *The Indian Express*, November 22, 2017.

⁷⁹ *South China Morning Post*, February 1, 2018.

⁸⁰ *The Japan Times*, September 19, 2017.

⁸¹ Shannon Tiezzi, "In Japan, Trump and Abe Offer Alternative to China's 'Belt and Road,'" *The Diplomat*, November 8, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/in-japan-trump-and-abe-offer-alternative-to-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

⁸² The Indo-Japan Asia-Africa connectivity project is a project where the two countries will work together on multiple infrastructure projects across Africa, Iran, Sri Lanka and South-East Asia to bring the IOR and the African continent closer.

Indo –Pacific theatres as well. A driver to such a role reversal has been its ‘Act East’ policy that stepped-up engagement with countries to its East, notably ASEAN. The importance it pays to Indo-ASEAN relations is evident from the fact that the ASEAN heads of state were the Chief guests at India’s recent 69th Republic day parade in Jan 2018. Such overtures are also backed up with numerous bilateral engagements that span economic and military dimensions, a case in point being the recent agreement that allows *IN* ships logistical support, including refuelling, at Singapore’s Changi naval base.

India is now conceiving a new and more ambitious role for itself in the Indo-Pacific. While China by its ‘String of Pearls’ sought to enhance its leverage in the IOR, India has virtually nullified this by securing facilities in various IOR countries which along with India’s overwhelming geographic advantage and significant Naval build-up would considerably undermine China’s desires to achieve IOR superiority. Moreover, relaxing its rigid non-aligned stand, it is open to developing strategic relations with regional powers like Japan, Australia and the US thus allowing a suitable security architecture in the form of the QUAD to start taking shape as in the Indo-Pacific. Although not a direct stakeholder in the SCS territorial disputes, *IN* ships routinely deploy to SCS as part of the Act East policy. It is increasingly pushing the envelope as it engages in SCS security discussions with countries like US, Japan and Vietnam. India has in the recent past scored numerous strategic gains as it clearly indicates to China that its efforts at destabilising the regional balance of power will be responded to firmly.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific balance of power has been altered by China’s rise over the last two decades. While this shift has been most obvious in the SCS, China aspires to extend that advantage across the Indo-Pacific. India, a regional power that was content with a role limited to the Indian subcontinent found Chinese Indo-Pacific ambitions overlapping into parts of the IOR where its influence was long unchallenged. Being

a rising power itself, it soon realised the need to counter China to further its own regional standing. While it initially attempted such responses accommodating Chinese sensitivities, over the last five years it has mustered enough political will and resolve to aggressively respond to Chinese strategic ambitions. This new-found character of India has attracted, much to China's dislike, favourable responses not only from other Indo-Pacific powers such as the US, Japan and Australia but also regional players like Vietnam and Philippines.

Being rising powers, both India and China are conscious of the implications of confronting each other. For the moment, it appears that both countries have been able to successfully match the other in a manner that status-quo prevails without major provocations. Although a late starter, India has to its credit reasonably overcome the early geopolitical gains that China made. There is increasing global acknowledgement that India has evolved as a regional power around which the future of Indo-Pacific balance of power could pivot. Thus, the Changing Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific need not unduly concern India, as it has, at least for the near and medium term, ticked all the right boxes to present itself as an effective counter to China in the Indo-Pacific.