Repositioning South Asia in the Indo-Pacific Region:
Changing Geo-politics and Geo-strategies

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Geo-political and geo-strategic constructs pertinent to geographical spaces are by no means static. They may evolve over time in line with the changes in geo-political strategies and calculations of relevant actors and also with the shifts in distribution of global and regional power. Hence, the validity and importance of a particular geo-political ‘space’ underlies certain power-political contours and their change would give birth to new geo-political formations. Since the geo-strategic concept of Indian Ocean took its present form in the 16th century, the centrality of South Asia remained a conspicuous feature. Architecturally speaking, the Indian Ocean is a huge bay, surrounded by the Afro-Asian landmass and islands on three sides. The South Asian peninsula penetrates into the Indian Ocean basin centrally, linking the western and the eastern planks of the water column. At present, the Indian Ocean as a geo-political concept is being overshadowed by the new construct of the Indo-Pacific region. In 2007, Gurpreet S. Khurana of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses of New Delhi employed the term Indo-Pacific Ocean to the academic discourse, combining the Indian Ocean region with the Western Pacific region to a single regional construct1. The US strategic thinking found strategic validity and promise of the new construct and the US became one of the main purveyors of the Indo-Pacific Ocean concept since then. Consequently, it gained an increasing currency in the geo-political and strategic discourse in the region and beyond. The US Pacific Command (PACOM) changed its name to the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in May 30th 2018. In this background, this paper examines geo-political and geo-strategic underpinnings behind the construction of Indo-Pacific Ocean/Region from the perspective of a small island state in South Asia. The paper first traces the evolution of geo-political concept of the Indian Ocean while placing South Asia in the changing strategic contours

over time. It will then proceed to examine evolving power politics pertaining to the shift of terms and repositioning South Asia strategically in the ‘Indo-Pacific Ocean’.

I

The Portuguese Thalassocracy and the Estado da India in the Indian Ocean

The water column that is identified today as the Indian Ocean played a crucial role in conditioning social, economic and political life of people in the bordering littoral area since the birth of ancient maritime civilizations. Prior to the arrival of the Portuguese into the Indian Ocean in 1498, the term ‘Indian Ocean’ referred only to the narrow water column around the South Asian subcontinent. A large section of the eastern part of the present Indian Ocean along the coast of Africa was identified as the Erythraean Sea. The present day Red Sea and adjacent waters, identified as Sinus Arabicus, and the Persian Gulf were considered as natural extensions of the Erythraean Sea. The eastern part of the Indian Ocean including the Bay of Bengal was called Sinus Gangeticus, the Gulf of Ganges. The southernmost part of the Indian Ocean, south to Sri Lanka was called the Green Sea, the Mare Prasodum.

In the long maritime history of the Indian Ocean, the Egyptians, Sumerians, Phoenicians, Persians, Greeks and Romans, Indians and the Arabs established their pre-

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4 Ancient Egyptians were the pioneers to sail into the Indian who entered the Indian Ocean waters by coming along the African coast in as far back as 1500 BCE. See, Gregory P. Gilbert, Ancient Egyptian Sea Power and the Origins of Maritime forces. Canberra ACT: Sea Power Centre, 2008.

5 The seafarers of the ancient Sumerian civilization got acclimatized with the Indian Ocean waters by sailing through the Persian Gulf. The seafaring activities of both the Egyptians and the Sumerians were limited only to the coastal belt.

6 The first seafarers who carried out excursions far beyond the shores were the Phoenician master mariners. They established their naval power in the western part of the Indian Ocean in the period 10th century to 7th century BCE.

7 The Achaemenid Empire of Persia built an empire stretching from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. Darius the Great of the paid keen interest in naval activities and endeavored to link India with Egypt through the Indian Ocean.
eminence in trade and naval activities from time to time in certain parts of the Indian Ocean; but no political power was able to take the entire Indian Ocean under its single control. No power in the region or outside even perceived the Indian Ocean as a single geo-strategic entity before the establishment of Portuguese *thalassocracy* in the Indian Ocean in the early 16th century.

The political and strategic conditions in the Indian Ocean had undergone a profound transformation after the arrival of *Caravels* of the Portuguese at the turn of the 15th century. The establishment of Portuguese *thalassocracy* in the Indian Ocean heralded the colonial phase in the history of the region, which K.M. Panikkar termed ‘the Vasco Da Gama Era’. The controlling the sea-lanes of communication (SLC) in the Indian Ocean remained the Archimedean screw of European colonial domination in Asia.

From the very outset the Portuguese conceived the Indian Ocean as a single strategic unit. They did not limit their naval activities to one region. In the western Indian Ocean, the Portuguese captured Mozambique and Kilwa on the African coast and Socotra and Ormuz in the Arabian Sea. On the western coast of India, the Portuguese began with Cochin and moved to Goa, Daman and Diu. In the central and eastern parts, they approached the Kotte Kingdom in Sri Lanka, Masulipatnam and Nagapatam on the Coromandel Coast and Malacca in South East Asia. As Toussaint observed “it had taken the Portuguese about two centuries to discover the Cape route. It took less than 15 years for

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8 After Darius, Alexander the Great tried to revive his oceanic dream. Following the decline of the Greeks, the Romans emerged as the main naval power in the eastern part of the Indian Ocean.

9 Their eastward expansion of Tamils in South India gave birth to the Sri Vijaya Empire. It was a mainly a thalassocratic empire that flourished between the 7th and the 17th centuries. Its power was “based on its control of international sea trade. It established trade relations not only with the states in the Malay Archipelago but also with China and India.” “Srivijaya empire - Historical Kingdom, Indonesia”. Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com

10 The Arabs who were united by Islam emerged as the foremost political and trade power. Since then, they embarked on a project of their trade, religion and culture throughout the Indian Ocean region. However, they also did not develop an oceanic mechanism covering the Indian Ocean.

them to secure all the key positions in the Indian Ocean.” Alfonso d’Albuquerque, the second Portuguese Viceroy, was the architect of the Portuguese maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean. He perceived the Indian Ocean as a single strategic theatre and developed an Indian Ocean geo-strategic plan. It entailed establishing bases at the gateways to the Indian Ocean and building bases at strategic points. Taking into consideration the geo-strategic value of its location, the Portuguese established their center of the *Estado da India* at Goa in the Malabar Coast of the South Asian Subcontinent.

Being such a vibrant geostrategic theater in the last five hundred years, the geo-political and geo-strategic conditions of the Indian Ocean had continued to undergo a series of changes. At the beginning of the 17th century, other European powers also entered the colonial prey in the Indian Ocean. The decline of the Portuguese naval power paved the way for naval competition among other European powers in the Indian Ocean, mainly between the Dutch, French and the British. In the struggle for the mastery of the ‘Eastern waters’, the British emerged as the victorious naval and colonial power in the mid-18th century and the Indian Ocean became practically a British lake thereafter. As Toussaint noted, “Adopting d’Albuquerque’s ideas and even giving them a new twist, for d’Albuquerque had not foreseen industrial capitalism, the English were to set up in the Indian Ocean as the most absolute hegemony of all time, and were to impose upon Asia a yoke which was to be shaken only by Japanese cannon a century and a half later.”

**Pax Britannica and the Indian Ocean**

The naval strategic structure that the British developed in the Indian Ocean was an outcome of its response to the requirements of defending a colonial empire in Asia. As the British Empire expanded from the red sea to the Malay Peninsula, the isolated defense measures taken by the British to maintain the security of different parts of the empire in Asia finally evolved into a unified system of defence in the Indian Ocean. Throughout the period of the Second Empire, India was considered the Jewel of the British Empire. The unique strategic

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13 *Ibid*, p.188.
location of South Asia made India the natural centerpiece of the defence of the Indian Ocean. As Philip Darby pointed out, in the east-of-Suez naval defense strategy of the British, India had been the keystone of the arch of defense in the Indian Ocean.\textsuperscript{14}

The British firmly believed that the defense of British India must be secured from far, taking the entire Indian Ocean into strategic account. The British Indian Ocean defense strategy was based on two fundamental conceptions: first, that of not allowing any other great power to establish bases or fortified ports in the Indian Ocean; second, that Britain should always control the gateways to the region. Once the Oceanic regime based on British naval power was firmly established throughout the Indian Ocean, and the gateways to the Indian Ocean were firmly latched, security concerns of spokes of the defence system, rather than the hub (India) itself, assumed importance. The hegemonic stability based on British naval supremacy in the East-of-Suez and the ‘\textit{Pax-Britannica}’ in the Indian Ocean prevailed until the outbreak of the Second World War.

The Indian Ocean after 1945

The changes that took place in world politics after the World War II did not have immediate impact on the Indian Ocean. The British naval supremacy in the ‘East of Suez’ was more or less re-established with some modifications and the United States also pursued a policy of acting under the British naval umbrella in the Indian Ocean. The Soviet Union was not technically in a position to challenge the British naval power in the Indian Ocean. However, after the ‘transfer of power’ in her South Asian colonies, the British lost the South Asian hub in its Indian Ocean defence architecture. In the early Cold War phase, the strategic primacy of South Asia in the Indian Ocean naval strategic architecture was diminished. The US Collective Defence Alliances, SEATO and CENTO focused mainly the South-East Asia and the West Asia where the Soviet intrusions were predicted. The South Asian countries were also offered the membership of these Defence alliances. The Prime Minister Nehru of India forthrightly refused to join them, as he believed that it contravenes his avowed policy of ‘neutrality’. After a period of vacillation, the Sri Lankan Prime Minister John Kotelawela also followed the Indian line.

Pakistan was the only South Asian country to join the US-led Collective Defence Alliances networks by accepting the membership of CENTO.

With the onset of the Cold War, the main theatre of confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union was Europe and US naval strategy concentrated mainly on the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Pacific. The United States believed that as long as the Indian Ocean continued to remain a British lake, it had nothing to worry about. The US defence strategy in the early Cold War context was based on long-range bombers, carrying nuclear weapons (Strategic Air Command- SAC), supplemented by forces garrisoned at the most likely point of land concentration with the Soviet Union. The Indian Ocean was left with its key Cold War partner, the United Kingdom.

The Suez crisis in 1956 marked the turning point in the post-War British naval hegemony in the Indian Ocean. The political and strategic implications of the Suez crisis compelled the US to rethink their naval strategies in the Indian Ocean, which was reflected in two developments: first, the projection of US naval power directly into the Indian Ocean by sending Naval Task Groups with aircraft carriers to the Indian Ocean and second, the presentation of ‘Strategic Island Bases Concept’ (SIBC).

The British decision to withdraw from the Indian Ocean and the entry of Soviet naval forces into the Indian Ocean in 1968, the presentation of the Diego Garcia plan by the US Navy and the new emphasis on naval mobility in the Indian Ocean by the Nixon Administration in US in 1969 contributed to change the geo-strategic contours in the Indian Ocean. After the Yom Kippur War in the Middle East in 1973 and subsequent oil embargo against the United States and its allies changed the earlier strategic perceptions, the Middle East and the Persian Gulf received a priority in the US strategic thinking. The US naval strategists now viewed it as an “area with potential to influence a shift in the global power balance over the next decade”\(^\text{15}\). In the second half of the 1970s, the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa came increasingly under Super power competition. The primacy of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East in US geo-strategic thinking was further enhanced in light of political upheavals and ensuing volatility in the strategic

positions of the Super powers in the area from Ethiopia through Yemen and Iran to Afghanistan which US National Security Council Advisor, Zbigniev Brzezinski dubbed the *Arc of Crisis*. In this context, the western arc of the Indian Ocean, not South Asia, became the center of strategic gravity in the Indian Ocean.

The explosion of the Iranian Revolution in January 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 changed the strategic scenarios in the India Ocean drastically. In this context President Carter delivered his famous State of the Union address, known as the ‘Carter Doctrine’ on 23rd January 1980. He stated “An Attempt to buy outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf Region will be regarded as the assault on the vital interests of the United States and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force”. The Rapid Deployment of Joint Task Force (RDJTF) was established as a tool of implementing the Carter Doctrine in March 1980. The geo-strategic focus of RDJTF was the Persian Gulf-centered ‘Arc of Crisis’. The RDJTF was transformed into a permanent unified command in 1983 as CENTCOM. Pakistan who became a frontline state after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is the only South Asian Country that directly comes under the purview of CENTCOM.

II

Changing Geo-Strategic Contours in the Post-Cold War Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean has entered a new historic phase after the end of the Cold War. The regional strategic linkages that evolved in the context of the Cold War were eventually dismantled while new strategic relationships took shape. The United States has become the only external naval superpower with widespread naval wherewithal in the Indian Ocean, including the full-fledged Diego Garcia naval facility. The rapid economic growth witnessed by China and India and the acquisition of near blue-water naval capabilities along with other power projection competence by these powers has ushered a new politico-strategic environment in the Indian Ocean.


Consequent to the economic and politico-strategic resurgence of Asia along with other changes in international politics, the center of gravity in global politics in the new millennium is gradually moving towards Asia. It is now estimated that Asia will surpass North America and Europe combined in global power based on GDP, population size, military spending and technological investment by 2030. According to the World Bank, South Asia solidified its lead as the fastest growing region in the world in 2016. WTO rated China the second largest merchandise trader in the world in 2016. Accordingly, China has risen to the second largest economy in the world, surpassing Japan in the new century. Today, China lays claim to the second largest navy in the world.

The shifting of the center of gravity in global politics from the West to Asia has made the Indian Ocean a pivotal global geo-strategic space in global politics. The uninterrupted flow of hydrocarbon energy resource from the Persian Gulf is vital for the continued breathing of the global economy. The Indian Ocean has become the principal conveyor belt for the international coal trade where China and India are now the top two importers and South Africa, Indonesia, and Australia together account for more than half the world’s exports of thermal coal. The Indian Ocean ports handle about 30 percent of global trade. Nearly 40 percent of the world’s offshore petroleum is produced in the Indian Ocean and two-thirds of global seaborne oil trade transits the Indian Ocean, rounding South Asia. As a result, South Asia’s position in the global order has also changed. South Asian advances in the knowledge industry linked with the IT revolution are also very impressive today. The impact of the lead in ‘colonizing the cyberspace’ by South Asia is reverberated in the Silicon Valley too. South Asian brainpower is a critical factor in the Western corporate world.

The geo-strategic importance of South Asia is further enhanced by the ascendancy of India. With a population of over a billion and an impressive growth rate above the world average, India has become an aspiring global power. India is the third largest oil importer, after USA and China. In the last two decades, India has taken impressive strides in the area of knowledge industry and R&D. India is ranked fourth in the Global Fire Power (GFP) ranking, based on each nation’s potential for conventional war-making capabilities across land, sea and air18. Today, India’s military is the third largest and its air force the fourth largest with 1,080

combat aircrafts. The Indian Ocean is critically important to the economic and politico-strategic interests and calculations of the two emerging Asian giants: India and China.

The changing strategic contours in the post-Cold War Indian Ocean were mirrored in the new foreign policy approaches and perspectives of India. In this regard two developments are to be noted. The first is the ‘Look East’ policy. The Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao first announced it in 1991 and the subsequent governments of Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004) and Manmohan Singh (2004-2014) made it a key foreign policy direction. The focus of the Look East policy was to strengthen economic and strategic relations with the South East Asian Countries. In 1992, India became a ‘Sectoral Dialogue Partner’ of ASEAN. After protracted negotiations, the ASEAN–India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) came into effect in 2010. At the same time, India endeavored to develop its cooperation with Asian regional groupings, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). In order to promote Look East policy further, Prime Minister Narendra Modi changed it to ‘Act East’ policy. The ‘Look East Act East’ policy is a clear manifestation of India’s changed foreign policy priorities.

The second is the new strategic partnership with the United States. The close strategic relationship with the Soviet Union was a key pillar of the Indian foreign policy since 1971. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, India changed its strategic gear that paved the way for growing strategic convergence between India and the United States. Heralding a new era in U.S.-India relations, the ‘Agreed Minutes on Defence Relations Between the United States and India’ was signed in 1995. Since then, the U.S.-India strategic partnership has strengthened significantly. In 2015, ‘Agreed Minutes on Defence Relations’ was renewed and upgraded as ‘Framework for the U.S.-India Defence Relationship’ to achieve greater interaction and cooperation between the armed forces. A further step in that direction was taken in 2018 by signing the COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) to facilitate interoperability between the two militaries and sale of high-end technology. It paved the way for the establishment of the U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial dialogue in September 2018. Accordingly, the security relationship with the United States gained real substance under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
In the changing geo-politics and geo-strategic conditions in Asia and in the Indian Ocean, the United States also placed unprecedented weight on Asia in its foreign policy in the new millennium. It is reflected in ‘Pivot Asia’ strategy, which President Barack Obama first outlined in his address to the Australian Parliament on 17 November 2011. In the light of growing prosperity in Asia, the ‘Pivot Asia’ strategy aimed to (i), strengthen US bilateral security alliances in Asia, (ii), intensify working relationships with regional states and the US, and (iii) boost regional trade and investment. Walter C Lodwig III employed the term ‘Neo-Nixon Doctrine’ to analyze this foreign policy demarche which was aimed at calibrating U.S. interests and regional commitment by counting on major democratic powers in the Indian Ocean in the context of the relative decline of US power in the emerging multi-polar world19. In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked,

“The Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics. Stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas, the region spans two oceans — the Pacific and the Indian — that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy…. Harnessing Asia’s growth and dynamism is central to American economic and strategic interests and a key priority for President Obama. Open markets in Asia provide the United States with unprecedented opportunities for investment, trade, and access to cutting-edge technology. Our economic recovery at home will depend on exports and the ability of American firms to tap into the vast and growing consumer base of Asia.”20

The term ‘Indo-Pacific Region’ gained rapid strategic currency first in US strategic thinking and subsequently, in strategic discourse in Japan, Australia and India this context.

From the Indian Ocean to the Indo-Pacific Region

The change of terminology from the ‘Indian Ocean’ to the ‘Indo-Pacific Region’ underlies evolving defence and strategic praxis on the part of some key actors of the region. Traditionally, the Pacific and Indian Oceans were seen as largely separate strategic spheres. For the Indo-Pacific construct, the Indian and the Pacific Oceans constitute a single and interdependent strategic and economic space. Before ‘Indo-Pacific’ entered the geo-political

20 Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century”, Foreign Policy, October 11, 2011
and geostrategic discourse, the term ‘Asia Pacific’ has been used since the late 1980s to identify a zone of emerging markets that have been experiencing rapid economic growth. Though the two terms sound similar, they are somewhat different. The term Asia Pacific gained currency especially after the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989. As India is not considered a part of the region of Asia-Pacific, India is not included in APEC. The ‘Asia-Pacific’ is more of an economic conception, rather than a security related notion.

In contrast, the Indo-Pacific combines broadly the Indian and the Pacific Oceans and the landmass that surround them into a single integrated theatre. As it is still an evolving concept, its exact parameters are not yet precisely defined. It encompasses both economic as well as geo-political and geo-strategic domains. The Indo-Pacific is primarily a maritime space and its focus was mainly on maritime security and cooperation. The new urge for maritime security and cooperation in Indo-Pacific relates to evolving geo-politics and geo-strategies. In short, the construct of Indo-Pacific manifests the shift in global power and influence from the West to the East.

The United States, India, Australia, and Japan are in the forefront in promoting the concept of Indo-Pacific region. The initiative of ‘strategic rebalancing’ to the Asia-Pacific by the Obama administration reflected the shift. Its declared objective was to promote rules-based political, economic and security regimes for Asia. The United States joined the regional East Asia Summit (EAS) grouping, concluded agreements with Australia and the Philippines to allow U.S. troop rotations, and pledged to shift U.S. naval posture to give greater weight to the Asia-Pacific. In 2016, the Obama administration initiated the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which the Trump administration abandoned later. Instead, President Donald Trump called for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Vietnam in November 2017. Though the free and open Indo-Pacific concept echoes many elements of previous administrations' policies, it still remains amorphous. Nevertheless, the term Indo-Pacific becomes the buzzword in US policy in Asia.

According to the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, published by the US Department of Defence in June 2019,

“The Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for America’s future. Spanning a vast stretch of the globe from the West coast of the United States to the Western shores of India. The region is home to the world’s most populous state, most populous democracy, and largest Muslim majority state, and includes over half of earth’s population. Among the ten largest standing armies in the world, 7 resides in the Indo-Pacific; and 6 countries in the region possess nuclear weapons”\(^\text{22}\).

The Report further stated, “The United States is a Pacific nation. Our ties to the Indo-Pacific are forged by history, and our future is inextricably linked.... The past, present, and future of the United States are interwoven with the Indo-Pacific”\(^\text{23}\). Australia has been pushing the Indo-Pacific concept since the Australian Prime Minister aired it in New Delhi in 2008. The concept of Indo-Pacific is the frame of both the 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper of Australia. In August 2016, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’ at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development held in Kenya. It has now become the official policy of Japan. In June 2019, Japan outlined three pillars of Japan’s effort to realize free and open Indo-Pacific: promotion and establishment of the Rule of Law, freedom of trade, freedom of navigation etc.; pursuit of economic prosperity; and commitment for peace and stability\(^\text{24}\). During its annual Summit, ASEAN released a joint statement in June 2019 called ‘Asian Outlook on Indo-Pacific’, defining Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions as a single interconnected region. As Nazia Hussain observed, “the Asian Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is an initial step towards formally incorporating ASEAN Centrality in the evolving Indo-Pacific concept. The AOIP has been much anticipated as different powers assert their conceptions of the Indo-Pacific region in which ASEAN claims a key role”\(^\text{25}\).


\(^{23}\) Ibid.


Why does the US pursue vigorously the concept of Indo-Pacific? It is an attempt to calibrate its geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic interests in the changing global context. First of all, America wanted to be an integral part of ‘the arc of prosperity’. When the Indian and the Pacific Oceans are integrated into a single strategic theatre, the United States will become an in-side power. Before that, the United States is considered an extra-regional power in the Indian Ocean. To cite an example, in the Indian Ocean Peace Zone deliberations at the UN IOPZ Ad Hoc Committee in the 1970s, the US was considered an extra-regional state. In Indo-Pacific, the United States is inside the region that would bestow an added rationale for it to maintain bases in the Indian Ocean region. More importantly, US view the concept as a geo-strategic advice that can be used to checkmate and balance China by mobilizing ‘democracies’- India, Australia and Japan- in a critical geo-political theatre.

India also found promise in the new construct of Indo-Pacific to further its economic and strategic interests. Hence, the Indian political leaders and the strategic community have been pushing the construct of Indo-Pacific assiduously since 2010. The Indo-pacific concept offers an ideological rationale for India’s ‘Look East Act East’ policy. The concept Indo-Pacific region offers India with a wider area of strategic maneuverability beyond the Indian Ocean as an emerging global power. The Indian policy makers and strategic community are happy with the term Indo-Pacific as it inadequately serves India’s changing geo-strategic interests. They view “Indo-Pacific” construct as a space for closer partnership with the East Asian market economies. While maintaining trade links with China, India seeks to develop a credible strategic deterrence against China through strategic partnership with democracies in the Indo-pacific. The emerging strategic alliances between India, US, Australia and Japan in the Indo-Pacific enhance India’s political and strategic standing, regionally and globally.

In order to examine the political and strategic implications of India’s strategic flying eastward for South Asia in the emerging geo-political framework of Indo-Pacific Region, first of all, it is necessary to define South Asia. What is really meant by ‘South Asia’? The term South Asia bags different notions, depending on the context of its use and the underlying stake of its construction. The term has been presented as a civilizational entity, a geographical description and also as a political idea. The geo-political construct of South Asia is basically a political idea. Geo-politically what is South Asia? Is it the region as a unit or the countries in the region or both? It should be noted that South Asia is one of the least integrated regions in the world. The
intra-regional trade in South Asia accounts for only 5% of its total trade, manifesting a low degree of regional economic bonding\textsuperscript{26}. As a geopolitical construct, South Asia is something more than India. But, the conspicuous feature of South Asia is the central and asymmetrical presence of India in South Asia. India’s centrality in South Asia is geo-political. None of the South Asian countries interact with another without touching or crossing Indian land, sea or air space. India’s preponderance over all others in South Asia based on its size, power, resources and development is also an undeniable reality.

With the identification of India in Indo-Pacific space along with new strategic partnerships, its position in the global constellation of power has gone up. India’s place in the global diplomatic high table is well secured. It is pertinent to quote what Rex Tillerson said at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC in October 2017 about India after assuming the post of US Secretary of State:

“The United States and India are increasingly global partners, with growing strategic convergence. Indians and Americans don’t just share an affinity for democracy: we share a vision of the future. …In this period of uncertainty and somewhat angst, India needs a reliable partner on the world stage. I want to make clear, with our shared values and vision for global stability, peace and prosperity, the United States is that that partner”\textsuperscript{27}.

Raising of the international standing of India does not mean that South Asia’s position is also equally enhanced. South Asia has been one of the most conflict-ridden regions in the world. India and Pakistan was born in an environment of conflict and continue to remain so even after 70 years, getting locked into multiple levels of conflict and rival foreign policy approaches. The relationship between India and its other neighbors constantly fluctuates in an environment of mutual fear and suspicion. One of the key questions that arises in the context is whether India can move forward in the Indo-Pacific framework by leaving out the South Asian geo-strategic


\textsuperscript{27} “Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson”, CISIS Headquarters, Washington, D.C., October 18, 2017. (www.superiortranscriptions.com)
baggage. It will take some time for India to bring hegemonic stability to the South Asian region with its enhanced power posture. Barry Buzan captures this situation lucidly:

“There is no change in the general pattern of amity and enmity. The two biggest powers in the region, India and Pakistan, remain at each other’s throat. The law level war between Indian and Pakistani intelligence services continues, expressed in accusations, and probable realities, of mutual interference of each other’s domestic politics, including sponsoring insurgency and terrorism. The nuclear rivalry between India and Pakistan is ongoing, as is the cycle of apparently warning diplomacy and return to confrontation that produce no basic change.”

What would be the strategic reverberations of the emergence of Indo-Pacific construct as far as other smaller states in South Asia including Sri Lanka are concerned? When South Asia is repositioned in the new strategic map of Indo-Pacific, it is no longer the center as in the case of the Indian Ocean. In the Indo-Pacific strategic construct, Southeast Asia becomes the center of the strategic theatre as South Asia is drifted westward on the map. It appears at a glance that the strategic significance of small states in South Asia is somewhat scaled down in the larger Indo-Pacific region. However, it must be emphasized that the conjuring up of the construct of Indo-Pacific by no means reduced the geo-political and geo-strategic significance of the Indian Ocean. It is expected that small States in the South Asia would benefit from growth dynamics of Southeast Asia and East Asia through Indo-Pacific construct. However, it also depends on how these countries leverage their linkages in the new strategic space to induce the growth centers in Indo-Pacific to transfer cutting-edge technology through investment and expand their market opportunities in Indo Pacific. The success of this drive is also conditional on a number of political and economic variables and it could have been achieved in the Indian Ocean framework also.

The spectacular rise of China offers both economic opportunities as well as vulnerabilities to the countries in the Indian Ocean littoral, including South Asia. China should be sensitive to these vulnerabilities aired in political discourses in South Asian countries. In the context of new strategic competition, if not rivalry, between the United States and China, these

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concerns are utilized by US to wean South Asian countries off from China. The ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Report’ of 2018, published by US Department of Defence addresses this concern:

“While investment often brings benefits for recipient countries, including the United States, some of the China’s investments result in negative economic effects or costs to host country sovereignty. Chinese investment and project financing that bypass regular market mechanisms results in lower standards and reduced opportunities for local companies and workers, and can result in significant debt accumulation. One-sided and opaque deals are inconsistent with the principles of a free and open Indo-Pacific, and are causing concern in the region”

The defining factor of the geo-strategic conditions of the Indo-pacific region would be complex relations between India and China. The rapid pace of the rise of China and its more proactive foreign policy created a ‘security dilemma’ for both India and the United States. Hence, there is a strategic convergence between India and US in checkmating China. The United States finds India’s enhanced position useful to marginalize China in global politics and in the strategy of checkmating China in critically important Indo-Pacific with strategic alliance with Japan and Australia. It should not be forgotten that, as has been illustrated in many occasions, India always wants to keep its options open even though it strategically walks with the United States and its allies. India does not want to jeopardize its growing trade and other economic relations with China by playing overtly in the hands of the anti-Chinese forces. Even in the context of close Indo-Soviet strategic alliance in the 1970s, India’s did not endorse the Asian Collective Security Plan proposed by the Soviet Union, despite the earnest call made by Leonid Brezhnev in his speech before the Indian Parliament in November 1973. In 2018, India concluded a deal with Russia to purchase S-400 Air Defense System, ignoring US warning. Further, India’s readiness to ink the ‘Agreement on Reciprocal Logistical Support (ARLS) with the Russia in September 2019 reveals India’s eagerness to keep its options wide open.

Open and free Indo-Pacific region, if it is presented without covert geo-political ‘baggage’, would benefit all the stakeholders. It could be the point of convergence for a common action plan. In this context, as Robert D. Kaplan emphasized, the United States, as the

established blue-water global power in the Indian and Pacific oceans, needs to redefine its role to suit the changed geo-strategic conditions, counting more on its soft power potential, rather than on the military power, to maintain its preponderance. According to Kaplan,

“For the first time since the Portuguese onslaught in the region in the early 16th century, West’s power there is in decline, however subtly and relatively. The Indians and the Chinese will enter into a dynamic great-power rivalry in these waters, with their shared economic interests as major trading partners locking them in an uncomfortable embrace. The United States, meanwhile, will serve as a stabilizing power in this newly complex area. Indispensability, rather than dominance, must be its goal”31.

When the Indo-Pacific construct is perceived from an economic perspective, it is not an exclusive concept. By making an Indo-Pacific power, rather than remain as an Asia-Pacific power, the Indo-Pacific concept would provide China with a logistical rationale to pursue its geopolitical strategy linked with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the main foreign policy endeavor of China at present. However, China bears some reservations on the concept because of the way in which the concept has been projected. The fact that China is a critical geo-political and geo-strategic player in the Indo-Pacific region should not be forgotten. The integration of China and synergizing its economic strength with the rest of the economies in the Indo-Pacific to ensure and sustain ‘Asian prosperity’ in the new millennium is critically important for regional and global peace and stability. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific construct can be viewed as a step towards the new phase of globalization propelled by the 4th industrial revolution. As far as interests of the small states in South Asia are concerned, the Indo-pacific Region should not be a theatre of a ‘New Cold War’ between China and the United States.

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