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India's Indo-Pacific Embrace

By Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy

Synopsis:

India's perspective on peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific was outlined by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his recent visits to New Delhi's maritime neighbours – Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

Commentary

THE INDO-PACIFIC was the focus of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to three nations in Southeast Asia; it not only reiterated the reality of increasing acceptance of a shared oceanic space but has also generated a lot of interest among academic and policy communities. During his recent tour of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, Modi articulated India's perspective on peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.

Though the use of the term "Indo-Pacific" is recent in strategic thought and international affairs, its origin in the Indian discourse goes back to 1941. Founder Secretary of Greater India Society Professor Kalidas Nag wrote about "This momentous drama of the migration of the earliest races of the world was staged on the vast expanse of water extending from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific". Nag further underlined that 'India played a very important role in this drama of ethnic and cultural diffusion in the Indo-Pacific domain'.

Congruence of Strategic and Economic Interests

The narrative of the Indo-Pacific manifests India's willingness to step up its engagement and interactions in the maritime domain and shows Delhi's eagerness to participate actively and constructively in the changing strategic and geopolitical

landscape. The Southeast Asian nations and other major powers in the region too are keen to bring India into the region more effectively to create a better balance with China's presence.

So, there is a congruence of strategic and economic interests between India and Southeast Asian nations as well as other major powers in the Indo-Pacific region. India's expanding Indo-Pacific narrative should also be understood as a dynamic approach to the evolving regional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. What are the drivers of this Indo-Pacific embrace?

Drivers of India's Indo-Pacific Embrace

Several developments and factors have influenced and will continue to shape India's embrace to the Indo-Pacific region. At least four key factors shape a shift in India's approach.

First, the current geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific region has become much harder than it was before. A significant power asymmetry vis-à-vis its neighbours has translated into a "much more active and interventionist Chinese role" in India's maritime neighbourhood. Further, China has also started taking political interests and sides in domestic politics in India's neighbourhood.

Recent developments in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan in relations with China has generated a fear of losing ground to China. Therefore, the Indian government needed to change her approach and narrative.

Second, due to the unaccommodating and often confrontational positions of some of the powers in the region, deepening India's economic and security engagement with the Indo-Pacific region is being seen as a factor of stability by many countries. Also, India's economic growth and huge potential has generated significant interests in India.

Third, the relative success of regionalism in Southeast Asia and progress towards economic integration in the wake of globalisation are positive stories in the Indo-Pacific region. The regional trade agreements and their impact on India are very important and it is natural for India to step-up her engagements.

Finally, the dynamics of internal growth and developmental agenda of the Modi government needs active external cooperation. Therefore, it wanted development partnerships with the countries in the Indo-Pacific region and to make them a partner in India's growth story.

India's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

Modi envisioned the Indo-Pacific as a “natural region” and home to immense global opportunities and challenges. He proposed India’s approach to the Indo-Pacific in both geographical and civilisational sense – a free, open and inclusive club, open to all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity. Cherishing India’s central position in the Indo-Pacific, Modi outlined various elements of India’s Indo-Pacific philosophy, which can be enumerated as follows:

First, freedom of navigation and overflights: India has a strong interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region and Modi has reiterated the importance of free and open maritime space very clearly. India also underlines respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity as an essential element of such order, and equality of all nations irrespective of their size and strength.

Second, peaceful resolution of disputes: India favours peaceful resolution of dispute through dialogue, and opposes the use or the threat of use of force to resolve competing claims. India emphasises that maintaining peace and stability in the region is indispensable.

Third, respect for international laws: India insists on peaceful resolution of disputes, in accordance with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It underlines the need for a common code of conduct to have equal access as a right under international law to use of common spaces on sea and in the air.

Fourth, open and stable international trade regime: India supports rule-based, open, balanced and stable trade environment in the Indo-Pacific region. It underlines the need of a balanced approach among trade, investment and services, which will facilitate a level playing field for everyone.

Fifth, sustainable development of marine resources: India wants to be a pioneer in promoting blue economy as a key source of inclusive economic growth in the Indo-Pacific through sustainable tapping of oceanic resources. Modi emphasised the need to strengthen marine research, development of eco-friendly, marine industrial and technology base, and fisheries in the Indo-Pacific region.

Sixth, maritime safety and security: India seeks to strengthen the existing security architectures in the Indo-Pacific, anchored by ASEAN-led mechanisms and underlines the need to enhance strategic technical cooperation on maritime security in creating better and expanded maritime awareness.

Finally, fostering connectivity: to promote regional economic growth and prosperity, India emphasises the necessity of greater physical, digital, technical and people-to-people connectivity.

Foundation for Maritime Cooperation

Thus, India's Indo-Pacific outlook laid the foundation for maritime cooperation with key littoral states that connect the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, reiterated geographical imperatives and pivotal role of ASEAN, and inevitability of inclusive nature of the Indo-Pacific for peace and prosperity of the region.

Modi outlined evolution of rules and norms through dialogue and consent and underlined that "when nations make international commitments, they must uphold them". The elements of principled commitment to multilateralism and regionalism could be a major driver to the evolving architecture for the Indo-pacific.

A comprehensive framework for India's maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific includes deepening security cooperation with India's maritime neighbours; building cooperative maritime security mechanisms; focusing on sustainable economic development for all through expanding cooperation on the blue economy; inclusive nature and cooperating with regional and extra-regional powers; and defending India's maritime interests.

Given India's rise and its expanding economic and military capabilities, there is a growing regional interest in India's larger contribution to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, India's Indo-Pacific vision also seeks to create a connected Asia that must be governed by commonly agreed international norms, rules and practices.

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