

India as a Net Security Provider in Indo-Pacific and Implications for the Region

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Abstract

The US determination to preserve the status-quo and consolidate its global pre-eminence as the sole superpower and China's objective to enhance its share in the global power structures are creating US and China great power competitors in the world, specifically in the Asia-Pacific. The initial US Asia-Pacific strategy, which the Trump administration termed as Indo-Pacific strategy, aims to contain China by increasing military presence and making counter-weights in the region. In this 'containing China' strategy, India is an important ally and the US sees India's potential in the Indian Ocean and beyond as a multiplying factor that could work towards furthering its strategic interests in the region. Therefore, in the wake of US Indo-Pacific Strategy, India portrays itself as an assertive American ally to emerge as a 'net security provider' that could further promote the latter's vested interests in the region. Hence, the active western support to India contributes to New Delhi's pursuit of becoming a regional hegemon. This puts other countries, including Pakistan and China, in serious security dilemma where their legitimate security interests are threatened by the Indo-US attempts to dominate the region. These trends suggest that regional stability is likely to face severe setbacks, and the countries might find themselves in serious military confrontations with each other.

Keywords

Indo-Pacific, Net Security Provider, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Quad Group, Geopolitics

Introduction

The geopolitical environment is currently in a state of flux, whereby the international political order is witnessing a gradual power shift. The American supremacy that contributed towards the unequivocal Western dominance after the demise of the Soviet Union is gradually declining. It is often argued that the transatlantic alliance, serving as the basis of liberal global order, is steadily losing the capacity to influence

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international events in many parts of the world. President Trump's antagonistic relationship towards Europe and Brexit further adds to the alliance's fragility, termed as 'brain dead' by the French President Emmanuel Macron (Bergmann, 2020). The most primary reason behind the uncertainty of contemporary geopolitical environment is the ongoing tussle for power between US and China. While US is determined to preserve the status-quo and consolidate its global pre-eminence as the sole superpower, China, on the other hand, is an emerging great power that is seeking to enhance its share in the power structure. The current global crisis emerging because of COVID-19 seems to have catalyzed this competition with China trying to play a global leadership role in overcoming this pandemic.

According to the Thucydides Trap (which is named after the ancient Greek historian Thucydides), when one great power threatens to displace another, war is almost always the result (Allison, 2017). Therefore, as China challenges America's predominance, the actions and intentions of any even one of them can lead them into this deadly trap, which neither of them may want. Robert Kaplan, a well-known American scholar in the strategic field, believes that "the United States, the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, will try to prevent China from becoming the hegemon of much of the Eastern Hemisphere. This could be the signal drama of the age" (Kaplan, 2010, p. 41). Therefore, to stop China from taking over a global dominance and leadership role from US, the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in 2011, provided a framework for the US Government to refocus national power instruments towards the Asia-Pacific (Clinton, 2011). She wrote, "The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the centre of the action" (para. 1). On the importance of Asia-Pacific, she wrote,

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. It boasts almost half the world's population. It includes many of the key engines of the global economy, as well as the largest emitters of greenhouse gases. It is home to several of our key allies and important emerging powers like China, India, and Indonesia (Clinton, 2011, para. 2)

Therefore, an Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy was adopted with apparent objectives of preserving and enhancing a stable and diversified security order, including the peaceful resolution of disputes; an *open economic order* that promotes strong, sustainable, balanced, and inclusive growth through a level competitive playing field; and a *liberal political order* that promotes peace and human dignity, based on human rights and the rule of law. Since then, US has deepened its partnership with the regional powers such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea, in addition to India, and enhanced its defence posture in the region.

On November 4, 2019, the Trump administration released a document titled 'A Free and Open Indo-Pacific Advancing a Shared Vision'³ which outlined his administration's vision for the Indo-Pacific region. This document highlighted the US engagements with regional countries for preserving free and open regional order. The document also mentioned India as vital to the US Indo-Pacific vision and stated that US and India are working together to address the regional and global development

³ For details, see <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

challenges. From the Chinese perspective, this Indo-Pacific strategy is the continuation of 'Asia-Pacific Rebalancing', aiming to contain China (Zhu, 2019).

In China, the Indo-Pacific Strategy is viewed as a countermeasure to undermine and weaken China's growing influence. According to Le Yucheng, the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, "we are all open to initiatives that are conducive to regional development and cooperation, but we are firmly opposed to using the Indo-Pacific strategy as a tool to counter the 'Belt and Road' initiative and even contain China" (Yucheng, 2018, para. 34). Likewise, during an interview with the French media, China's Ambassador to France Lu Shaye expressed concerns regarding the Indo-Pacific Strategy because Washington's initiative was originally proposed to compete with Beijing (Shaye, 2019). The Chinese believe that the Trump administration's strategy of advancing free and open Indo-Pacific aims to create multiple big powers in Indo-Pacific to deal with the rising China under the American hegemony (Zhu, 2019).

Geo-Politics in Indo-Pacific Region

The term 'Indo-Pacific' as a regional construct has frequently been used by the US and its allies in recent years. In the modern lexicon of international relations, this term has gained salience and has widely been used in different aspects. Geographically, the term Indo-Pacific represents the physical connection between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. Indo-Pacific mainly refers to the vast sea area and its coastal shelves from the western Pacific to the western Indian Ocean, from the US, Indian, Japanese, and Australian perspectives. China, a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, is reluctant to register itself to the Indo-Pacific, and so far, no Chinese official document has used the term. However, in practice, China's economic and strategic interests have straddled across both the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, and it will remain a key player no matter how the geographical boundary is defined.

Nevertheless, despite these differences in describing the regional construct, the four nations — US, India, Australia, and Japan — have established a quadrilateral grouping to structure a future Asia-Pacific order and pursue mutually shared objectives in the region (Clarke, 2019). Despite the American claims that the Indo-Pacific regional construct is not an effort to contain China's influence, experts observe that this construct responds to China's rapidly growing presence and geopolitical influence in the region (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018).

The so-called Indo-Pacific has emerged as a global trade hub, and energy with two-third container trade passes through this region (IPSA, n.d.). The major sea-routes located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans are considered as highways for international trade, especially for the transportation of energy and other commodities. The rising great powers, such as China, are dependent on Indo-Pacific sea routes for their trade and energy supplies; therefore, the security of these sea routes is important as the two crucial maritime chokepoints, Bal al Mandeb and the Malacca Strait, are located on either side of the Indo-Pacific (Ibid). The US rebalanced China's assertive outreach with stirring of a resurgent Japan and Indian excitement to play a big brother to smaller states further add to strategic turbulence in the region (Kaushiva & Singh, 2014).

Therefore, the countries surrounding these two oceans have a crucial role in the region's emerging strategic and economic dynamics. The major US allies that are also the part of the quadrilateral arrangement — i.e., Australia, Japan, and India — are located in this region. From the Chinese perspective, the sole purpose of the US

emphasis on the Indo-Pacific concept and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy is to contain its rise and ensure US supremacy across the globe (He & Mingjiang, 2020).

US is also wary of the China's aspirations to maximize its power share in the global system. While the Chinese leadership has resolved to enhance engagement with the multilateral institutes, several of its officials also hint at aspirations to change global institutions' power structure. For instance, during the times when the negotiations for accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) were in the process, Chinese Ambassador reportedly proclaimed, "We know we have to play the game your way now, but in ten years we will set the rules" (Ford, 2015, p. 394).

Being concerned with these aspirations and ensuring American dominance in various multilateral bodies, US stresses greater economic interdependence among so-called democratic states to bolster the liberal capitalist free-market economy worldwide. Towards this end, it is imperative for US to ensure an uninterrupted trade flow among these states and exert influence or possibly disrupt the Chinese economic transactions with its like-minded states.

In the last few decades, the region's littoral states have witnessed enormous economic growth, converting the region into an attractive market for the extra-regional players. While China aims to reach these markets and secure the dominant position, US sees it as assertive and seeks to pull the regional countries in its own camp. Therefore, the mix of economic and strategic interests reshape the nature of engagement between the regional and extra-regional powers. The US perspective aims to connect the Indian and Pacific oceans under a single strategic system and convert it into an economic hub to support the capitalist liberal world order (Khan, 2017). Therefore, the Indo-Pacific region is the most significant aspect of the US Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy, currently termed as the Indo-Pacific Strategy that envisages establishing US pre-eminence in this region by diluting the growing Chinese influence. Hence, regional and global stability hugely depends on the nature of international trade, energy security, and potential military confrontations in this region (Michel & Passarelli, 2014).

India's Aspirations in the Indo Pacific Region

Indian maritime posture has been steadily shifting from defence to pre-eminence, intending to exert influence far from its shores (Ullah, 2019). With maritime component as its integral part, the Indian foreign policy objectives, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, include becoming a significant power in South Asia, continuing economic development, securing and protecting energy resources essential to its growth, and increasing its global influence (DeSilva-Ranasinghe, 2011). The Indo-Pacific region is central to achieving these foreign policy objectives as it contains energy resources necessary for its economic growth and the major states that can help India increase its global influence. Experts observe that one of the primary reasons behind replacing Asia-Pacific with Indo-Pacific construct by US is the hope for Indian cooperation in maintaining a desirable order at sea (Roy-Chaudhury & Sullivan de Estrada, 2018). US sees India as an important country for balancing rising China and creating a new power landscape in this region and reshaping regional security order under its hegemonic support (Zhu, 2019).

On the other hand, India's strategic alignment towards US under the quadrilateral grouping is, therefore, driven by the desire to acquire technological and political benefits that could facilitate New Delhi's pursuit of its political ambitions at global systemic level. It is only natural that the Indian leadership and academia

welcome the Indo-Pacific construct and vehemently use it in its maritime narrative. The use of this regional construct goes beyond the mere use of terminology and is manifested in the deployment of naval assets and conduct of bilateral or multilateral naval exercises by India as a matter of policy (Scot, 2012).

The first Indian usage of the term 'Indo-Pacific' was in 2007 by Gurpreet Khurana and was later adopted by Indian government officials (Scot, 2012). The study of India's Maritime Strategy document suggests that the Indian leadership has divided the Indo-Pacific region into areas of primary and secondary interests. The water bodies on India's coast, including the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, constitute the area of primary interest where the Indian Navy is preparing to exert greater influence in coming years. The extended regions, such as the South China Sea (SCS) in the Pacific Ocean, constitute the secondary area of interest. Therefore, the emergence of the term Indo-Pacific should also be considered in the context of the Indian aspirations. The Indian leadership sees this term as a tool to focus on the commonality of interests with the US and emphasize the perceived prestige that it sees in the potential role of defining regional order. Arun Prakash, the former Indian Naval Chief, noted that using the term Indo-Pacific "impinge on India's prestige and standing and that the term and region Asia-Pacific tends to marginalize India" (Scot, 2012, p. 166).

From the Indian perspective, the Indo-Pacific region concept aims to legitimise India's envisaged security role in the Indian Ocean and in the Pacific theatre. This term is also directly linked with the Indian willingness to serve as a key actor in the US containment strategy against China and its Act East policy that revolves around establishing more robust relations with the South East Asian Nations. Furthermore, this also enables India to magnify its stature from a meagre South Asian power to growing world power. The objectives of the Act East Policy are to preserve a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific by securing the Indian Ocean, integrating with Southeast Asia, and deepening strategic partnerships with other major powers such as US, Japan, Australia, France, and Russia (Jaishankar, 2019).

In the wake of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, India portrays itself as an assertive American ally to emerge as a 'net security provider' that could further promote the latter's vested interests in the region. Capitalizing on its democratic outlook, growing economy, attractive market because of huge population, and also the historic rivalry with China, India has managed to forge closer strategic ties with the West, particularly US; The active Western support to India helps it pursue the perceived objective of becoming a regional hegemon. US sees the India's potential in the Indian Ocean and beyond as a multiplying factor that could further its strategic interests in the region.

Net Security Provider — What Does It Take?

Though the term 'net security provider' is frequently used both in academic literature and official statements, the Indian and American leadership refrain from explaining what the term really means. The lack of any comprehensive or mutually agreed definition of the term keeps it open to different interpretations. Nevertheless, it refers to a nation that is not only capable enough to address the hindrances in its own security but also that of its neighboring countries and beyond (Mukherjee, 2014).

Therefore, this term, 'net security provider', implies that a country can pursue its own vested interests as well as provide security assistance to other states in the region. Considering the geopolitical environment in any given region, this role

creates an alliance among regional states or generates multilateral cooperation. However, this notion can be problematic once a few regional states hold differing strategic and political aspirations compared to the nation determined to play the role of a 'net security provider'. In this scenario, the difference in interests would only lead to mistrust and generate an environment of competition.

It is worth exploring how a country may claim to provide security to neighbouring states. The following four elements need to be considered to assess a state's ability to offer assistance in the security field to other states:

- a. **Capacity building:** This refers to a state's ability to impart assistance in training other friendly states' security forces.
- b. **Military diplomacy:** Military diplomacy involves establishing cooperative military-to-military relations between states. A state claiming to be a net security provider should, therefore, have the ability to offer armed assistance to other states towards pursuing common objectives. Military diplomacy can be pursued by exchanging military officials' visits, holding joint military exercises, or making ports calls whereby a ship of a navy visits port of a friendly navy.
- c. **Military assistance:** This requires military hardware assistance to equip the friendly state with required military technologies to deal with the commonly perceived challenges, like counter-terrorism and anti-privacy, and against the enemies.
- d. **Direct deployment:** This is the most demanding aspect of the role of net security providing nation whereby it is required to have the political will and military capability to physically deploy its forces in any given area of conflict to influence the outcome of the crisis. Readiness to deploy forces abroad needs to be backed by its foreign policy and its strategic priorities in the immediate and extended neighbourhood (Mukherjee, 2014).

India as a Net Security Provider: Ambitions and Policy Approach

India's buzz of being a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific region has been growing louder in official and academic discourse for the past decade and a half. In 2013, the then Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, stated, "We have added [...] Army's firepower [...]. We have enhanced the full spectrum of capabilities of our Air Force [...]. We have placed special emphasis on strengthening the capabilities of our Navy". He further added that all this had made India "conscious of our strategic opportunities [...] to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond" (The Hindu, 2013, para. 2). Likewise, while speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2009, the US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, argued, "we look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond" (Mukherjee, 2014, p. 1). The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review also argued,

India's military capabilities are rapidly improving through increased defence acquisitions, and they now include long-range maritime surveillance, maritime interdiction and patrolling, air interdiction, and strategic airlift. India has already established its worldwide military influence through counter-piracy, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts. As its military capabilities grow,

India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond (Quadrennial Defence Review Report, 2010, p. 60)

This thinking aligns with the Trump Administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims to contain China by building alliances and raising balancers in the region. The Department of State (2019), on Indo-Pacific, mentioned that the US vision and approach in the Indo-Pacific region aligns closely with the India's Look East Policy. Therefore, the Indian government has paid colossal attention to fostering closer relations with US. The ongoing Sino-US great power rivalry offered India the best opportunity to portray itself as a potential ally that could carry the American weight of arresting China's rapid rise at the regional level. This geopolitical competition has brought India closer to US and has let the former earn the title of 'net security provider'.

India has also been improving its credentials to show the world that it can be a net security provider. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, It aspires to adopt a global outlook in its foreign policy. Rahul Roy-Chaudhury has observed that the Indian foreign policy, which initially focused more at strengthening economic relations in the region, now also includes the political and strategic dimensions (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018) India has lately portrayed itself as one of the rapidly developing countries of the world. Capitalizing on its fast-expanding economic power, India attracts the international community by offering an attractive investment market. At the political level, India emphasizes its democratic character that complements the international liberal order and resonates with the West's global political aspirations.

India has been focusing on increasing its economic growth, but the recent assessment does not look good for India's economy. Asian Development Bank has projected India's growth to slow down to 4 per cent in the year 2020-2021 because of the weak global demand amid COVID-19 crisis (The Economic Times, 2020). However, this growth is likely to go up once the full economic activities resume throughout the world.

At the diplomatic level, Indian foreign policy appears to be more assertive than ever. The Modi government's assertive diplomatic approach is also evident from several of his visits during the last few years. He became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel, signifying the country's focus on strengthening strategic partnership with one of the world's leading arms suppliers. Despite the overt rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Modi chose to pay back-to-back visits to these two countries and underlined the Indian aspirations to have stronger ties with both the states. He also hosted leaders from the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on India's Republic day, giving a clear message of India's resolve to enhance relations with these states. Being proactive in his foreign policy and diplomatic approach, Modi asserts that India can meaningfully engage with the outer world. Likewise, this engagement also reflects that India is keen to maximize its influence over these countries. In the year 2019, Modi visited US and received a grand reception, and likewise, President Trump visited India in 2020 and was received with the same fanfare.

In the military domain, India has been hugely investing in acquiring modern weapons systems. Along with the indigenous production, India's strategic relations with the West also help it get access to most sophisticated dual-useable technologies. India and US have signed several military deals and military exchange related agreements such as: the 'Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement' that will allow both countries to use each other's military facilities; 'Communications

Compatibility and Security Agreement' which will facilitate India to obtain critical defence technologies from US and access critical communication network to ensure interoperability between the US and Indian armed forces; and 'Industrial Security Annex' that will facilitate collaboration between the defence industries by supporting the secure transfer of key information and technology.

Recently, India and US also signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) to help India get real-time access to American geospatial intelligence and enhance the accuracy of automated systems and weapons like missiles and armed drones (Roy, 2020). India is currently the second-largest arms importer globally, with a 9.2 per cent share of the total global arms import (SIPRI, 2020), reflecting the ambitious military plans of the Indian leadership. India also possesses one of the largest militaries in terms of numbers. In recent years, it is backing its quantitative edge with qualitative enhancements. It has increased its procurements and indigenous program to prepare for its so-called two-front war. The Indian military has also contemplated limited war doctrines, such as the Cold Start Doctrine, that aim to engage Pakistan in a limited conflict under the nuclear overhang. India has increased its armoured forces and mobile artillery in its preparation to carry out such limited attacks.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) has also been modernizing its fleet to complement such doctrines and engage in joint military operations. To enhance its airpower capability, IAF is reportedly buying high tech fighters' jets from countries like France and Russia. IAF currently maintains 35 fighter squadrons in active service. IAF reportedly believes that it would need about 60 combat squadrons to deal with the so-called 'two-front' threat from China and Pakistan. IAF fighter squadrons nominally consist of eighteen aircraft each (sixteen fighters plus two combat-capable trainers —with three additional airframes in storage as maintenance, attrition, or war wastage reserves), implying that a 60-squadron force would muster 1,080 frontline fighters.

In the naval domain, India has been undergoing a comprehensive naval modernization program. According to Maritime Capability Perspective Plan 2007-22, India has planned to acquire 160 plus ships, 40 major combatants, and almost 400 aircraft of various kinds (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2010). This includes the development of a fleet of twenty-eight submarines, both conventional and nuclear. India already possesses one nuclear-powered submarine (SSN), *INS Chakra*, leased from Russia. India's Cabinet Committee on Security has sanctioned a joint Defence Research and Development Organization-Bhabha Atomic Research Centre navy project to build 6 SSNs indigenously. The estimated cost of this project is \$12 billion, making it the country's single largest defence project. The Indian Navy also plans to operate a fleet of five to six nuclear ballistic missile submarines to bolster its sea-based nuclear deterrence, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). At the multilateral level, the Indian Navy also regularly conducts exercises, such as MILAN and Malabar, with other states.

India is already working on enhancing engagement with states around the South China Sea. Joint military exercises with Singapore and friendly port calls to countries like Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and, above all, Vietnam also brings the Indian Navy into these disputed waters. Furthermore, in July 2012, India's establishment of deep-water maritime facilities in Campbell Bay (INS Baaz), the most southerly point of the Andaman Islands, enables India to conduct surveillance operations over SCS.

Historically, India resisted the calls to upgrade the Quadrilateral (US, India, Australia, and Japan) consultation's level because of the Chinese factor, but the Quad countries met at the ministerial level in September 2019, which shows a change in the Indian attitude. India has started 2+2 dialogues with US, Japan, and Australia, which involve dialogues between Foreign and Defence Ministers of the respective countries. It has conducted joint military exercises with ASEAN Plus nations. India has established an expanded maritime security cooperation framework with various island countries in the Indian Ocean, namely Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles (Ministry of Defence, 2014). Military equipment has also been given to several countries in the past, including helicopters, landing craft, and survey vessels. India also has robust defence cooperation with many countries in the region which involves training exchange, joint exercises, surveillance and hydrography, and anti-piracy operations and exercises (Ibid).

According to the annual report of the Indian Ministry of Defence (2018-19), India held joint military and naval exercises named 'AUSTRALIND' and 'KAKADU' with Australia. With Indonesia, 7th Army-to-Army Staff Talks were held in Bali, and the Prime Minister of India visited Indonesia during which an Agreement concerning cooperation in the field of defence was signed. Also, joint Army Exercise 'GARUDA SHAKTI' was held in Indonesia on March 7-18, 2018. With Japan, 2+2 Dialogue was held on June 19, 2018, and India-Japan Joint Army Exercise 'FTX JAPAN' was held in India from November 1 to November 14, 2018. With Malaysia, Joint Army Exercise 'HARIMAU SHAKTI' was held in Malaysia from April 30–May 13 the same year. Similarly, with other regional countries such as Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, joint military exercises were held, apart from many military-level talks and visits. India is also a part of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM)–Plus, held annually (Ministry of Defence, 2019).

India has negotiated agreements with several states in the littoral IOR to obtain military access to their bases. Such agreements, including access to Indonesia's strategically-located deep-sea Sabang port (Chaudhuri, 2018) and Oman's Duqm port (Panda 2018), will enhance India's geographical outreach. Other than with US, India has also signed a logistic agreement with France, giving India access to the French base on Reunion Island (Times of India, 2018).

Given these indicators, India believes that its rising capabilities that would bolster its comprehensive national power would prove useful in playing the aspired role of a net security provider's. However, with the US backing, these Indian moves will make the growing geopolitical contest in the Indo-Pacific more complex, leading major regional states, such as China, to take countermeasure for safeguarding its interest.

Regional Implications

Owing to its aspirations to portray itself as an emerging liberal economic and strategic power, India emphasizes the potential role it could play in imparting so-called 'rules-based' regional order and asserts the significant contribution to the US efforts to contain China. The term 'net security provider' reflects such aspirations whereby India attempts to bring the regional states into its fold and draw them away from Chinese cooperation by establishing closer ties. The term 'net security provider' also implies that India aims to establish itself as a self-proclaimed regional policeman who can watch maritime connecting routes and strategic choke points in the Indian Ocean

and beyond. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as a new regional construct is a step in this regard.

Being a 'net security provider' in a region requires a state's Navy to ensure sea command. In the contemporary geo-economic dynamics of the region, this command is essential to ensure energy security. India aims to establish its command in key maritime pathways and strategic choke points, including the Straits of Hormuz and Bab-al-Mandab. From India's perspective, the ability to influence trade passing through the Strait of Hormuz is crucial because it connects the regional states with the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Estimates suggest that the Strait of Hormuz once hosted 40 per cent of the total global oil trade (Corbett, 1918).

Therefore, under the guise of ensuring freedom of navigation, India portrays its determination to protect the regional states' economic stakes. India's resolve to collaborate with Iran to construct the Chabahar port in the Persian Gulf is one attempt to enhance the Indian Navy's presence in these crucial waters. This development is also seen as a countermeasure to dilute Gwadar port's significance, jointly built by Pakistan and China. Indian strategic thinkers believe that the Gwadar port may be used for commercial ventures and used to conduct strategic/military operations. However, contrary to this claim, such a command on a maritime trade route enables the state to dominate the maritime activities in a particular area. Likewise, India is also enhancing its engagement in SCS. Strait of Malabar hosts around 55 per cent of India's seaborne trade coming from that region.

Furthermore, US also aims to diminish the Chinese influence in the key passage. Therefore, the combined Indo-US interest in this area is creating challenges for China. These developments hint at India's increasing footprints in SCS that are problematic for China and demonstrate the Indian leadership's willingness to extend its military's presence from the immediate neighbourhood. India's willingness to play a net security provider has serious implications for the regional countries.

From China's perspective, India's greater willingness to serve as a US proxy directly implicates its regional security interests and may cause geopolitical conflicts and structural confrontations. The US Indo-Pacific strategy, involving India as a net security provider, may expose China to the strategic pressure and impact China's promotion of economic integration; thus, posing a threat to China's economic security. The Chinese vested interests in the region manifest alternative interpretation of the geopolitical environment and contest the Indo-US common understanding of a 'rules-based' regional order. A closer look at the Chinese foreign policy aspiration and its engagement with regional states reflect that the country seems to have the following possible vital interests in the region (Wang & Zhu, 2016);

- To prevent or refrain the adversarial navies from dominating key sea-lines of communication.
- To contest the Indian claim of considering the Indian Ocean as an Indian Lake and establish its own hegemony.
- To operate a credible sea-based nuclear deterrent to augment country's nuclear triad.
- To prevent US from establishing closer defence and economic ties with the states that may play against the Chinese interests.
- To expand the allied states' network and promote the Chinese regional integration vision.

To pursue these interests, China has been working upon a strategy, famously known as the 'String of Pearls'. According to this strategy, the country has planned to build a network of ports in the IOR. These include container ship facility in Bangladesh, Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Deep-water port in Myanmar, Intelligence collecting facility in the Bay of Bengal, and Building of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, to pursue the idea of regional integration, China has launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), of which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an integral part. BRI aims at infrastructure development and economic integration of countries along the historic Silk Road and promotes the connectivity of Asian-European-African continents and their adjacent seas. However, the full materialization of BRI is constrained by the regional geopolitical complexities. India believes that joining the initiative will put China in an advantageous position against it in the South Asian region. The Indian strategy to deal with the rising China seems to focus on selective cooperation and competition. While it supports and cooperates with China at forums like Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and New Development Bank established by the BRICS States, it vigorously opposes BRI. In this opposition to the Chinese initiative, India is working on several other projects to enhance its connectivity with the regional States. For instance, India supports Russian International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project that aims to connect Russia with the Arabian Sea, notionally cutting Mumbai-St. Petersburg transport time from forty to twenty days.

Though the Indian involvement in the SCS does not directly implicate Pakistan (particularly in the military field), its recent engagement greatly concerns Pakistan's political interests. From Pakistan's perspective, the notion of net security provider is used 'only' to justify New Delhi's ambitious and hegemonic designs in the region. Pakistan refuses to accept this notion and asserts that India cannot be a net security provider in the South Asian region when it has conflictual relationships with all its neighbours and is pursuing a policy of destabilizing Pakistan from the East and the West (Hashim, 2017). India's expanding influence in the region puts it at a hegemonic position in the region that comes at the cost of Pakistan's security and political interests. Pakistan considers itself an important player in the IOR, and given its legitimate vested interests, Pakistan's maritime approach focuses on protecting its coast and pursuing economic interests in the region. Pakistan's economy considerably depends on the secure Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) as its 95 per cent of trade is seaborne (Clarke, 2019). Any possible Indian influence on these SLOCs may allow New Delhi to disrupt seaborne trade at critical times; thus, leading to Islamabad's economic strangulation. In such a scenario, a hostile environment could rapidly be transformed into a military conflict with the dangerous potential of escalation to the nuclear level.

Though Pakistan currently does not possess any hegemonic or revisionist ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region, it holds a concrete vision towards this region that urges states not to confront and accommodate each other's competing interests. In this regard, Pakistan views the Indo-Pacific region causing instability. Though the Indian and US leaderships emphasize this new construct's economic outlook, it signifies growing and strengthening the alliance of countries against the rising China. This would, in return, directly undermine the security of other regional states, like Pakistan. With the active US help to India to elevate its status as a net security provider, India will significantly enhance its military prowess. This trend hints at the possibility of unfolding arms competition in the maritime domain. Therefore, from Pakistan's perspective, the concept of new regional construct — the Indo-Pacific — is

neither all-inclusive nor represents all States' interests, primarily those of China and Pakistan.

With an increasing demand for energy resources and expected inflow of seaborne trade, Pakistan has been exploring new means of infrastructural development. One manifestation of this trend is the CPEC and the development of Gwadar port. Figures suggest that 85 per cent of the crude oil imported by Pakistan passes through the Strait of Hormuz. Since the materialization of CPEC would lead to enhanced seaborne trade flow, Pakistan's dependence on the critical sea-lines of communication would grow. In addition to this, Pakistan's relatively small coastline of 990 kilometres would make it vulnerable to any potential blockade in the event of a crisis.

Besides, the Indian ongoing naval nuclearization has been another factor directly impeding the policy choices of Pakistan. India chooses to shift the nuclear rivalry into the Indian Ocean, seeking to develop the triad of nuclear forces. India's nuclear submarine program is seen as a mean to ensure deterrence against China, but it has serious implications for deterrence stability between India and Pakistan and has forced Pakistan to take countermeasures. The competition at sea will be a challenge for the regional security and a potential cause of the increasingly frequent interactions between the Indian and Pakistani naval platforms.

Concluding Remarks

The term net security provider reflects India's aspirations to maximize its share of power among nations' comity. With an active US support, India has been gradually enhancing its military capabilities and developing diplomatic and economic engagements with the regional states. India and US have constructed 'Indo-Pacific' as a new term to signify their expanding interests in the two oceans. This strategic collaboration between the two states aims to counter China and help India emerge as a great power. This puts other countries, including Pakistan and China, in serious security dilemma where their legitimate security interests are threatened by the Indo-US attempts to dominate the region. These trends suggest that regional stability is likely to face severe setbacks, and the countries might find themselves in serious military confrontations.

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