

The Indo-Pacific: An Examination of Regional Instruments for Improved Coordination

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Abstract—The Indo-Pacific has become the focal point of discussion among strategists in the 21st century, which is evident from the implementation of different instruments such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). The strategic posture entailed within the Indo-Pacific security architecture necessitates a military balance of power within the region, as the power rivalry in the Indian Ocean has evolved beyond military aspects into economic, ideological and technical dimensions. Therefore, this research examines how these international instruments could be better coordinated, in order to improve the balance of power in the region. Towards this end, this research has two objectives, firstly, to map out the different regional mechanisms that are in position to improve interaction; and secondly, to analyse what steps need to be taken to improve the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Qualitative in nature, the research utilises primary sources such as the strategy documents issued by governments and security groupings, speeches from world leaders, along with secondary sources. The research underscores that the oceans of the Indo-Pacific remains central to this evolving power struggle, as the economic centre of gravity shifts to the East, necessitating peaceful interaction to increase trust and improve the balance of power. FOIP assures a proactive contribution to peace based on the principle of international cooperation, encouraging likeminded navies in the region to increase collaboration and cooperation. In conclusion, it can be ascertained that the increased number of regional groupings has reduced the level of trust within the Indo-Pacific thus, calling for more synergies and understanding among international instruments.

Keywords: Coordination, Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Indo-Pacific, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region articulates a new geopolitical landscape expanding from the East coast of Africa across the Indian Ocean to the Western and Central Pacific Oceans. The rise of China with its strategic outreach in to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the decline of the alliances championed by the United States (US) and their attempts to resurge, make the Indo-Pacific strategically significant in the 21st century (Diplomat, 2020). Moreover, the Indo-Pacific is viewed as a new multipolar region owing to the appealing demographic attributes of the region. The presence of 38 countries sharing 65 percent of the world population, accounting for 62 percent of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 46 percent of the world's merchandised goods passing through the region are encouraging attributes of an emerging multipolar region (De, 2020). These elements make the rise of the Indo-Pacific significant, owing to its economic, political and strategic attributes. This contributes towards an emerging understanding that the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Oceans are interlinked strategic theatres which bring diverse issues to the forefront.

The Indo-Pacific region is home to vital sea routes that connect major economies in the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, Europe and America. Today, more than ever, the world economy is heavily dependent upon seaborne trade as a volume of more than 90 percent of traded goods are transported by sea. The Indo-Pacific is also home to nine out of the ten busiest seaports in the world. The amount of maritime trade transited only through Asia amounts to 60 percent of the world's transit cargo and one-third of the global shipping passes through the South China Sea (SCS) (Department of Defence, 2019). Thus, the Indo-Pacific is capable of influencing global trade to a greater extent, necessitating security of the

Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC), a significant component in the global maritime trade.

The security of the SLOCs, trade potential and maritime connectivity within the region make the Indo-Pacific strategically significant, as it connects two theatres giving a unified understanding about the strategic inter-connectedness, common responsibilities, common challenges and opportunities present within the region. Hence, according to Bishoyi (2016) the Indo-Pacific has also become a place for power in the 21st century owing to the strategic significance within the region. Therefore, the unhindered trade connectivity through the maritime space of the region is a major concern among both regional and global players in developing and executing their maritime strategies as a response to the growing security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific.

Consequently, the Indo-Pacific has become the focal point of discussion among strategists in the 21st century, which is evident from the implementation of different instruments such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). The strategic posture entailed within the Indo-Pacific security architecture necessitates a military balance of power within the region, as the power rivalry in the Indian Ocean has evolved beyond military aspects into economic, ideological and technical dimensions. Therefore, this research examines how these international instruments could be better coordinated, in order to improve the balance of power in the region. Towards this end, this research has two objectives, firstly, to map out the different regional mechanisms that are in position to improve interaction; and secondly, to analyse what steps need to be taken to improve the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Qualitative in nature, the research utilises primary sources such as the strategy documents issued by governments and security groupings, speeches from world leaders, along with secondary sources as methods for data collection.

In order to understand the security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, the following sections provide an understanding of the various international instruments available. This enables the first objective outlined in this paper to be achieved, i.e. to map out the different regional mechanisms that are in position to improve interaction in the Indo-Pacific.

A. International Instruments

The Indo-Pacific is a focal point of discussion due to major power rivalries within the region such as those between India-China and China-US. It is noteworthy of mention that these rivalries have become major causes of concern, especially among the Asian countries. Economic independence and regional instruments were traditionally regarded as mitigating tools for great power rivalry and inter-state conflicts in Asia (Jung, Lee and Lee, 2020). The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been in the forefront in ensuring peace and security within the Southeast Asian region. Accordingly, ASEAN has been working towards its mandate of developing an inclusive security architecture for the region based on the collective leadership in shaping the vision for closer cooperation within the Indo-Pacific (The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, 2020). Therefore, balance of power within the Indo-Pacific will largely depend upon the behaviour of the United States, China, Japan and India. Furthermore, responses of major Southeast Asian states, such as Indonesia and Vietnam, have also become important elements in determining balance of power within the Indo Pacific (Foreign Policy White Paper, 2017).

The ASEAN's Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) held in Bangkok 2019, adopted the *ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific* as a collaborative measure to further strengthen its founding principles of developing and shaping the regional architecture in Southeast Asia and beyond (Saha, 2020). The ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific is based on four principles; i.e. the Indo-Pacific is not a contiguous territorial space but a closely interconnected and an integrated region; an Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry; an Indo-Pacific region of development and prosperity for all; and lastly, the importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional architecture (Bhatt, 2019). This highlights the importance ASEAN places on cooperation, sharing of resources and a common security architecture, based on the ASEAN values.

Moreover, the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* provides additional emphasis to ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) and others such as the relevant ASEAN

Plus One Mechanisms (Indonesia Defense Strategy towards Indo-Pacific, 2020). ASEAN's outlook on Indo-Pacific showcases ASEAN's centrality within Indo-Pacific and its inclusive nature.

Interpretations given by various countries on the Indo-Pacific too has given rise to the coinage of numerous international instruments. This has led to a better understanding of the concept and given insight to its diversity. India perceives the Indo-Pacific as an inclusive space where common responsibilities and common interests are heightened, whereas the US emphasises a rules-based order in the region (Singh, 2020). This points towards the second instrument in the Indo-Pacific region, in which both Japan and US emphasise the Free and Open Indo Pacific concept (FOIP) that highlights the importance of the rules in the region. Thus, it can be observed that both Japan and United States promote a shared vision on a Indo-Pacific region that is accessible to all. The *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (2019) published by the US Department of Defence defines the "Indo-Pacific as the priority theatre with all nations, large and small, are secure in their sovereignty and able to pursue economic growth consistent with accepted international rules, norms, and principles of fair competition". The Department of Defence highlights China as a revisionist power and that the US would use all lethal powers to contain China in Indo-Pacific, should the need arise. Furthermore, the US attempts to promote their enduring commitments in the region through different lines of efforts such as preparedness, partnerships and an increasingly networked region.

FOIP promoted by the US identifies their rivalries; China as a revisionist power; Russia as a malign actor; and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea as a rogue state. Unfortunately, FOIP has not been fully subscribed to by many states as there is a principle deviation from the original concept of the Indo-Pacific and with that of FOIP.

The third international instrument that is in place at present is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogues, better known as the QUAD. QUAD is a grouping between Australia, India, Japan and the United States of America to cooperate and collaborate in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad got their momentum through several minilateral

dialogues and frequent meetings between the member states. Two members of the grouping, i.e. USA and India agreed to several military agreements in the recent past, namely Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2015 and the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in year 2016. Furthermore, Japan-India civil nuclear cooperation agreement was signed in 2017 and became a momentous occasion of the bilateral relations (Buchan and Rimland, 2020). The Malabar Naval Exercise between United States, India and Japan as well as the Australia-India bilateral naval exercise (AUSINDEX) have been able to strengthen the minilateral grouping and military-to-military capabilities between the QUAD nations.

Discussion and Analysis

This section deliberates on achieving the second objective outlined in this paper, i.e. to analyse what steps need to be taken to improve the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific has captured global attention as an emerging multipolar region as it combines the Indian and Pacific Oceans. History indicates the emergence of larger power blocks was witnessed through the amount of resource endowment including size and the scale of the economy (De, 2020). Many strategists believe that the Indo-Pacific is a region that is difficult to define in a political sense, as it is still developing (Biswaas, 2020). On the other hand, it is also viewed as an approach to contain China's strategic outreach into the Indian Ocean. However, USA and Australia view the Indo-Pacific as an extension to the former Asia-Pacific with the inclusion of India as an emerging superpower in the 21st century. Conversely, both India and Japan see the Indo-Pacific as a combination of two continents; i.e. Africa and Asia with the confluence of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans (He, 2020).

The Indo-Pacific is home to two of the world's most populous countries; China and India. Militarily, seven of the largest standing armies in the world are based in the Indo-Pacific. One-third of the global shipping passes through one of the most contested ocean spaces in the region, the South China Sea (Biswaas, 2020). The Indo-Pacific also homes more than 50 percent of the world's population including the world's largest Muslim population in Indonesia. The presence of major sea routes connecting choke points Bal al

Mandeb and the Malacca Strait on either side of the region adds more strategic value to the region (Biswaas, 2020). This illustrates the significance of the Indo-Pacific region and the importance of the individual countries falling under the region. The *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019)*, indicates the Indo-Pacific as a priority for the U.S., aimed to contain China's presence in the Indian Ocean. However, it is unclear as to whether China is included as a partner in the Indo-Pacific regional discourse, as there is currently no documented evidence to prove that. Yet China has been into the Indo-Pacific both in economic and strategic terms through its Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). The United States claims that the "Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for the America's future" (Bubnova, 2019). This is because of the strategic interests the United States has in the region vis-à-vis containing China as well as in accessing resources in the region.

Economically, the Indo-Pacific has become the world's economic centre of gravity due to the presence of three major economic giants in the world; the US, China and Japan. The availability of hydrocarbons has created competition among both established and emerging powers. Trade wars between two major players, USA and China may negatively impact the economies of the Indo-Pacific states. Moreover, the inclusion of several flash points and choke points could also be possible sources for military conflicts in the region. The unresolved maritime disputes prevailing in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea could likewise be viewed as triggering points for clashes among the USA and China as these are disputed maritime spaces. Thus, the Indo-Pacific is viewed as a possible maritime space for US-China rivalry in the coming decades as it goes beyond the military in to economic, ideological and technical aspects, necessitating increased opportunities for cooperation and competition amongst established and rising powers within the region (Bishoyi, 2016).

Even though the Indo-Pacific has the aforementioned regional instruments, there is a significant lacuna in terms of providing membership to all the countries in the region through these mechanisms. In other words, the instruments for regional cooperation lack collaboration and an approach to collective security. As the second objective outlined in this paper is to analyse what steps need to be taken to

improve the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, the first possible solution is to be more inclusive in the regional mechanism in order to decrease the trust deficit among nation-states. Thus, inclusivity in regional instruments is paramount which calls for the anti-Chinese rhetoric to be abandoned and to instead, include China in the various groups such as QUAD and FOIP to ensure that they are able to participate enjoying equal access. Inclusivity of this nature then enables all parties to be equally responsible for their activities and to likewise promote a rules-based culture.

Secondly, the research underscores that the oceans of the Indo-Pacific remains central to this evolving power struggle, as the economic centre of gravity shifts to the East, necessitating peaceful interaction to increase trust and improve the balance of power. From ancient times, relations based on commerce and trade have remained the cornerstone of international relations. This was because it was necessary to sail across the oceans to exchange and sell goods and merchandise. Therefore, as this feature increases manifold, it calls for more peaceful interaction between countries to facilitate trade and commerce as well as to increase avenues for supply chains to ensure an uninterrupted flow of material. Peaceful relations between states further create a conducive atmosphere for economic interactions as states and their people increase their purchasing power capabilities. At the time of writing, China and India are having border skirmishes in the Galvan Valley, reducing the trust between two countries and likewise affecting their bilateral trade. Therefore, including both these players into FOIP would enable that other states too are able to assist them bridge their trust deficit. Furthermore, collaboration on common grounds and groupings enable more transparency which can propel economic growth. Hence, economic cooperation among states which ensure they thrive, is a mandatory requirement to warrant that states respect and collaborate with one another.

Thirdly, FOIP assures a proactive contribution to peace based on the principle of international cooperation, encouraging likeminded navies in the region to increase collaboration and cooperation. This understanding stems from the previous point of discussion of inclusivity. The current regional mechanisms in place do not include many of the regional partners, therefore,

an inclusive QUAD or FOIP would enable the navies of these countries to also interact better with one another. In this context, not only will trust between navies increase, but it will also ensure that navies can collaborate in addressing traditional and non-traditional threats to states.

Conclusion

The research initially specified the various regional instruments available in the Indo-Pacific region that can be utilised to expand relations in the region. In doing so, the first empirical finding of this research was identifying that these regional mechanisms have not been utilised to their maximum potential. Accordingly, the research achieved its first research objective of mapping the different regional mechanisms that are in position to improve interaction.

In achieving the second research objective, the research analysed what steps needed to be taken to improve the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the second empirical finding of this research was identifying that there was a significant lacuna in providing membership to all the countries in the region via these organisations. The research underscores that this is a hindrance in achieving regional growth and prosperity as well as in increasing unity. Therefore, there is a need to improve the membership of these organisations.

Improving the inclusivity of the regional organisations was the third finding of this research. Therefore, the paper emphasises that it is important for all relevant stakeholders to be involved, thereby reducing the animosity in the region and improving geopolitical connections. Furthermore, inclusivity enables the parties to better harness their geographical resources and work harmoniously.

In conclusion, it can be ascertained that the increased number of regional groupings has reduced the level of trust within the Indo-Pacific, thus, calling for more synergies and understanding among international instruments. This can be identified from the number of regional instruments in the Indo-Pacific region their membership or constitution. Therefore, in addressing the research problem, this paper calls for inclusivity of members to increase the trust between the states, as the lack of transparency has fuelled suspicion between the actors. Stemming from this, the paper calls for increased

interconnectedness between navies by sharing knowledge and know-how in order to increase collaboration between the states. These activities, therefore, increase attempts by regional instruments to circumvent threats by non-traditional security as well. Furthermore, the paper underscores the importance of economic interconnectedness to ensure the regional instruments are effective in collaborating with one another.

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