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India's Interests, Stakes and Challenges  
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## *Indo-Pacific and the Practice of Strategic Autonomy*

Morish Tourangbam\*

*What makes the Indo-Pacific construct appealing to Indian policymakers and the strategic community is that it gives ample scope for the practice of India's strategic autonomy. It gives space for it to drive the emerging debates as a more direct stakeholder rather than being seen as a co-opted partner in America's rebalancing strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. While the term 'strategic autonomy' needs to be defined based on India's capabilities and aspirations, it will augur well for India's own interests to take into confidence other countries in the region (besides the major powers) regarding the viability of this new geopolitical and geo-economics construct. India's rising capabilities and a sober analysis of its strategic autonomy denotes India's ability to take foreign policy steps commensurate with its national interests. This includes striking partnerships and coalitions as and when it suits India's priorities of balancing uninterrupted internal development amidst a stable and secure external environment in the Indo-Pacific region.*

The contours of world politics, and the way countries engineer their foreign policies usually revolve around certain geopolitical and geo-economics constructs. The end of World War II brought forth the significance of the transatlantic alliance which cemented the importance of military institutions like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Bretton Woods economic institutions. Amidst the joint management of strategic issues by the USA and its European partners, Cold War competition with the Soviet Union led to both superpowers hopping across the world for alliance partners, leading to American engineered institutions like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) - although, over the years, ASEAN has morphed into a different entity, with the South East Asian countries taking the lead in the affairs of the region. Over the years, countries like India and the USA have taken due cognizance of the centrality of ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific construct through their 'Look East Policy' and the 'Rebalancing Strategy' respectively. However, in recent times, countries like the USA, Australia, Japan, and India are acknowledging and promoting the emergence of a new geopolitical construct in the form of the Indo-Pacific region.

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Thus, a pertinent question arises: how should India define its success in the Indo-Pacific region? Defining success becomes imperative for any strategic vision to be adequately assessed. Success can be defined only when India's goals and objectives are clearly defined. And, setting goals and objectives necessitates a clearer understanding of India's practice of strategic autonomy. The concept of strategic autonomy has largely been seen as the lens through which most of India's foreign policy decisions are to be taken. However, what does strategic autonomy really signify? And, how does it represent a graduation from Non-Alignment? As debates and deliberations emerge on India's perspective and role in the Indo-Pacific region - which are now being seen as more inclusive than the Asia-Pacific construct - notions about the practice of strategic autonomy need to be clearly spelled out.

One of the most significant differences which reveal strategic autonomy as a graduation from Non-Alignment is India's ability to engage with some Western countries, the most important being its emerging strategic partnership with the USA. This is quite unlike what accrued in the Cold War era. Even as carpers in India's strategic community continue to see eminent vulnerabilities and challenges to India's independent decision-making while building ties with the USA, this relationship has undoubtedly changed the trajectory of India's foreign policy. It has also led to new dynamics with other US allies like Japan and Australia - countries that are, and will be, instrumental in shaping the Indo-Pacific architecture. India's relationship with the USA has given a new dimension to India's understanding of its own rising capabilities and aspirations amidst the changing distribution of capabilities, both regionally and globally.

In essence, because of India's changing equations with the USA, the notion of strategic autonomy better reflects the realities of world politics, and comes minus the anti-Western edge often identified with Non-Alignment. This understanding of strategic autonomy will be germane in navigating India's policy priorities in the new and emerging Indo-Pacific construct. Spelling out the salience of strategic autonomy in India's foreign policy, the much debated document 'Non-Alignment 2.0' has pointed out that a strategic approach should strive

to give India maximum options in its relations with the outside world—that is, to enhance India's strategic space and capacity for independent agency—which in turn will give it maximum options for its own internal development.

These are indeed early days when one considers the use of Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct. Nevertheless, India has to reassess its foreign

policy manoeuvres in the context of its core policy parameters. India's own intent to expand its zone of influence towards its east is largely commensurate with the emerging importance given to the Indo-Pacific region. The economic vitality of the trade routes in the region is giving extra importance to the need for stability and continued economic growth of the countries in the region. The increasing importance to the term being given by the USA in its strategic vision indicates its belief that the sustainability of America's primacy could be largely determined by how it manages its relations with allies and new partners in the region. Relations with an economic giant like China are instrumental for all countries in the region. However, many countries are also wary about the increasing influence of China and its wider implications and, as such, want to count on the rules of the international community and the freedom of navigation as espoused by countries like India and the USA.

Through a proactive role in the emerging debates on the Indo-Pacific, India can carve out a strategy which will streamline its domestic growth commensurate with its foreign policy orientations, and thus help take forward its aspirations to be a global power of some reckoning. In this pursuit, its capabilities and willingness to contribute to the distribution of global public goods, and the maintenance of the global commons, will come under scrutiny. Surely, in a globalised and an interdependent world, the promotion of India's national interest necessitates greater engagement with a wider pool of countries-*à la*beit in strategic but flexible interactions, and not in strict alliance set-ups. One thing is clear: the adoption and recognition of the term 'Indo-Pacific' as an emerging geopolitical entity does not guarantee the meeting of minds or any consonance in strategy among countries. This has been seen in the kind of ambiguous reception that America's rebalancing strategy has had in India, even as the USA has called its defence cooperation with India a 'lynchpin' of the strategy<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, the increasing importance given to the term in strategic communities and government circles in many countries, like the USA, Australia or Japan, needs to be accompanied with a clear enunciation and recognition of the differences. India's own expanding geographic interests seems to be aligned with the attention given to the Indo-Pacific region. There is no gainsaying that India's increasing capabilities have made possible increasing leverages in the region, and in the global arena. However, this change requires India to step up its search for resources in the widest space possible. The sustenance of India's domestic growth and the exemplar of its democratic polity and social inclusiveness are instrumental for both the material and ideational success of India in the global firmament. This

necessitates that India steps up its role in securing and safeguarding the trade routes crossing the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. With its size both in terms of geography and demography, its enduring democratic political system, and increasing power capabilities, India could be what some call the 'bridge state' in the changing global order. As India straddles the divide between the developing and the developed world, its diverse identity and multiplicity of interests could put it in an opportune position to negotiate the emerging transitions in world politics.

In such a context, there is need for internal consensus regarding India's external engagements within the country as well. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic system is seen as a recognition of the recent growth in interconnectivity over energy security, economic vitality, and security concerns among countries in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. Moreover, India is being largely seen as a potential net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. Also, India's role in the Indo-Pacific can be seen as a geographic expansion of the importance being accorded to India in the Asia-Pacific. As India's former Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran, wrote while reflecting on the Indo-Pacific<sup>2</sup>,

...it is also a reflection of the concept of the Asia-Pacific, which hitherto excluded India, expanding westwards to encompass the subcontinent as its integral part. As India's regional and global profile increases, it will inevitably gravitate towards the centre of this expanded geopolitical and geo-economic space.

The waters in the Indian and Pacific Ocean are becoming the centre of global commerce and trade. As India's former National Security Adviser, Shivshankar Menon has said, '...The new equilibrium in Asia is likely to be as much a result of production chains and regional and global market integration as of purely security driven alliances or structures.'<sup>3</sup> The dynamism of Asian markets is leading to the creation of various multilateral and bilateral forums towards the economic structuring of the region. And, the unmistakable rise of China as an economic behemoth has been central to these webs of economic linkages and interdependencies developing in the region and beyond. Hence, as regional and extra-regional countries manoeuvre the complex geo-economics of the Indo-Pacific, the invariable centrality of the China factor in forums, the inclusion as well as the exclusion of China will become paramount. In a globalised world determined by increasing levels of complex interdependence, coalitions and partnerships will be fluid rather than ones based on structured and cemented alliances. India needs to start taking a more active role in bilateral and multilateral forums to ensure that the world

economic order remains open—albeit in a fashion that takes cognizance of its own priorities and needs.

Adding to the challenges of developing a more plural, open, and inclusive security architecture in the Indo-Pacific are the persistent strategic rivalries and protracted territorial and maritime disputes in the region, including the one between India and China. Even as trade and commerce signify the salience of cooperation in the region, there is simultaneous increase in military spending among Asian countries, accentuating the security dilemma inherent in the region. Moreover, the continued dominance of the US Navy, and the increasing ambitions of the Indian Navy and Chinese Navy, coupled with real time threats from non-state actors, necessitate a more robust and integrative maritime governance, aimed both protecting and fostering the common interests of the region.

Asia is also a theatre for the complex interplay of Sino-US competition and cooperation. Moreover, the love-hate relationship between a reigning power and its competitor complicates matters for other countries in the region, including India. Certainly, India and the USA share a larger strategic vision that looks at the security and stability in the Asian region, and attempts to preclude any destabilising role that China's rise could play. However, history does not disappear soon, and lingering concerns and a persisting mistrust between the two countries—reminiscent of the Cold War period—still remain. This lack of trust between the two countries often spills over, and impedes both sides from going ahead full-steam on issues spreading across the political, economic, security, and strategic realms. Moreover, there seems to be a strategic concern in India that China's relatively increasing power vis-à-vis the USA could, perhaps, lead to the USA accommodating China. This could be detrimental to India's interests in the Asia-Pacific, thus raising the importance of India's own strategic development, and its attempts to narrow its capability gap vis-à-vis China.

Therefore, even as India and its prospective partners in the region talk about shared strategic interests, in the end, every country's strategic visions are dictated by its own interests. Thus, striking unison among them is easier said than done. Even as the China factor remains prominent in regional constructs like the Asia-Pacific or the emerging Indo-Pacific, the success of any strategic arc would depend on how pertinent issues of common concern are brought forward and discussed, rather than base the construct and the resultant multilateral institutions—on a single causal factor like the rise of China. Only issue based debates and deliberations would guarantee the sustainability and inclusivity of a strategic arc like the Indo-Pacific that is still finding its

feet in the lexicon and practice of world politics. As debates and deliberations on the relative decline of the USA abound, in the near term, neither is the USA declining so fast, nor is China rising so fast as to topple the supremacy of the former.

In this complex uncertainty prevailing in the global system, where does India stand? What are its strategic choices? And, how will be able to achieve most of its goals without necessarily budging from its practice of strategic autonomy?

What makes the Indo-Pacific construct appealing to Indian policymakers and the strategic community is that it gives ample scope for the practice of India's strategic autonomy. It gives space for it to drive the emerging debates as a more direct stakeholder rather than being seen as a co-opted partner in America's rebalancing strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. While the term 'strategic autonomy' needs to be defined based on India's capabilities and aspirations, it will augur well for India's own interests to take into confidence other countries in the region (besides the major powers) regarding the viability of this new geopolitical and geo-economics construct. India's rising capabilities and a sober analysis of its strategic autonomy denotes India's ability to take foreign policy steps commensurate with its national interests. This includes striking partnerships and coalitions as and when it suits India's priorities of balancing uninterrupted internal development amidst a stable and secure external environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta, 6 June 2012, at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116636>
- <sup>2</sup> Mapping the Indo-Pacific, Shyam Saran, <http://www.cprindia.org/blog/borders/3574-mapping-indo-pacific>
- <sup>3</sup> Closing Remarks at the 13th Asian Security Conference, 18 February, 2011 - Shivshankar Menon, [http://rdsa.in/key speeches/AmbShivshankarMenon\\_13ASC](http://rdsa.in/key speeches/AmbShivshankarMenon_13ASC)

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