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Indo-Pacific Region: Evolution, Importance and Manifestation

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Abstract

Global power shifts are strategically and politically important. It tends to change or reorient existing international power order. The global strategic, political and financial structures have been governed by domination of USA and Europe. Asia remained dominated by European colonization for almost two centuries and there after dominated by the USA strategically for one more century. In association with Asia's economic progress has taken place the fast track military modernization & spread of Asian military strengths. These factors contributed to the emergence of Asia's major countries – China, India, Japan as global players. The global shift of power to Asia indicates that an 'Asia unbound' and aware of its comprehensive strengths would now want to have greater say in the strategic, political and economic future of the world. In this paper we will analysis evolution, development, significance and manifestation of Indo-Pacific term.

Key Words

Geopolitical, Strategic, Colonization, Indo-pacific, Geo-economics.

Introduction

'Ideas' are termed as moving force in the philosophical history of political science (as stated by George Welhelm Friedrich Hegel). Plato has also highlighted the importance of ideas by stating that 'reality is the shadow of ideas'. Thus it seems that an idea and the reality have a circular relation. Both follow each other and strengthen or weaken each other depending upon the level of harmony between the idea and reality.

The idea of 'Indo-Pacific' is about two decade old, but it continues to evolve and so it represents geo-strategic and geo-economic conditions of our time. The 'Indo-Pacific' region is a geographic oceanic area which comprises of tropical waters of Indian ocean, western and central Pacific ocean. Both the ocean i.e. Indian and pacific shares a number of common marine species and their habitats which are not found in any other ocean. The entire 'Indo-Pacific' region is subdivided into three sub regions: the western Indo-Pacific, which comprises of the western and central portion of the Indian ocean including east coast of Africa, Red sea, Gulf of Aden, Arabian sea, Bay of Bengal and Andaman sea; second sub division is the central Indo-Pacific that covers the seas and straits joining Indian and Pacific oceans including the seas around the Indonesian archipelago, south China sea, the Philippines sea, the northern coast of Australia and the seas surrounding islands nations like New Guinea, Fiji, Tango etc; and the third sub division i.e. Eastern Indo-Pacific, it covers the volcanic islands of

central Pacific ocean, extending from the Marshall islands passing through the central and south-eastern Polynesia to Hawaii island.

There are different opinions in scholarly world about geographical reach of Indo-Pacific region. On one hand some scholars like Bishoyi include larger area stretching from the east coast of Africa passing through the India Ocean and ending in western Pacific Ocean. On the other hand some scholars like Scott, Arun Prakash etc advocate inclusion of somewhat narrow swath of water i.e. where Indian and Pacific Ocean meets, in the definition of Indo-Pacific region.

Thus the Indo-Pacific is a bio-geographical area of ocean and landmass which extends from eastern coast of Africa to the Central Pacific Ocean. Indo-Pacific region includes those areas which lies between tropic of cancer and tropic of Capricorn and not the area that lies beyond tropics in both the hemisphere.

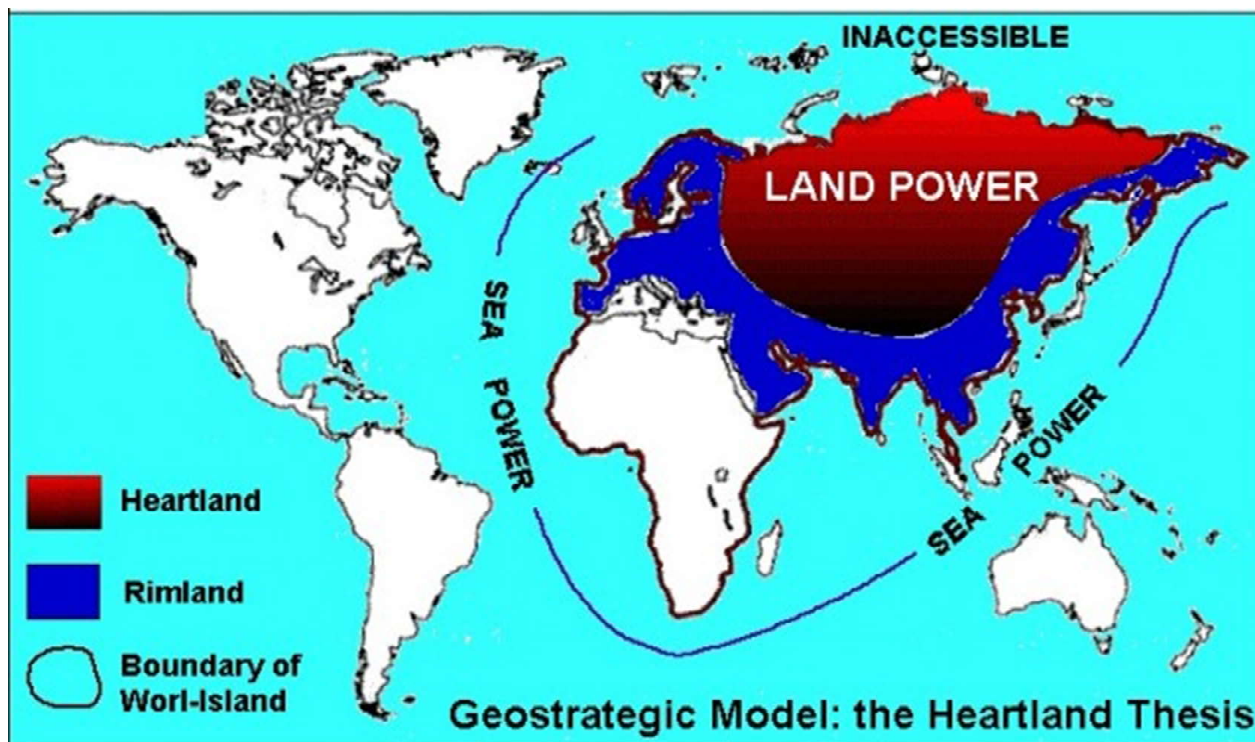


History of use of Geo-Political terms

The term 'Indo-Pacific' is combination of geographical and political connotation of this particular region i.e. it is a geopolitical term. Geopolitics is the science of the relationship between space and politics which attempts to put geographical knowledge at the service of political leaders.

The tradition of such use of combined knowledge of both disciplines has begun quite earlier. Like significance of sea or oceanic power to control world politics was first highlighted by Alfred Thayer Mahan who advocated Anglo-American alliance through Atlantic Ocean to counterbalance European land powers. Later on Halford J. Mackinder developed his spatial political model to explain the world political pattern in the light of the declining relative strength of the sea power. He has given 'Heartland theory'. According to him the geo-politics of world lies in the area which he called as 'the geographical pivot area of history'. His geographic pivot area was the vast area of Eurasia drained either to inland lakes or to frozen northern ocean and thus was inaccessible to ships

and to sea power. The Heartland of mackinder is the strongest fortress on the earth, commanding resources of a huge trans-continental area. Any power that could organize it effectively was in Mackinder's view bound to emerge as a great colossus in the world politics, head and shoulders above any other state. The Heartland therefore, held the key to world supremacy. Later on in the same tradition Nicholas K. Spykman reemphasized the importance of sea power. He has given of Rimland theory. Rimland is the area which surrounds the Heartland area of Mackinder.



These theories have affected relation among countries for a long time and even now they also have impact on engagements of various countries.

The world political arena has witnessed many phenomena. Like in the times of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Machiavelli, politics was mostly centered on regional issues. Later on concept of nation state become dominant and its further development in coming time has resulted into the phenomena of colonialism and imperialism. World has also witnessed two world wars. Before the First World War, world politics was defined by the syndrome of Pax-Britannica and after the end of Second World War term bi-polar world (which has two super powers) was most suitable for describing the world political scenario. But after the collapse of Soviet Union (in 1990s) the phrase used to define world order is Pax-Americana i.e. world politics is centered in United State of America. But in 21st century the focus of world politics has shifted to Asia pacific region or in more accurate term to Indo-Pacific region.

The idea of Indo-Pacific is of quite nascent in its origin. In the current century the term is used more frequently. The term was first used by Gurpreet Khurana in his article titled as 'Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation in 2007'. Later on in 2011 the then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe while addressing the Indian Parliament, invoked the image of 'Indo-Pacific' by the referring the 'confluence of two oceans as a region of freedom and prosperity'.¹ The term gradually got significance mainly after 2010 round the world. The former Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran articulated the concept and gave it official importance in his article 'Mapping the Indo-Pacific'.² Outside India Australia defense white paper published by Government in 2013, was first official document to talk about Indo-Pacific region.

This concept has gained momentum due to its suitability to evolving ground realities as well as the core interests of the important countries like Japan, USA, China and others. David Huang (Associate Research fellow at the Institute of European and American studies in Academia Sina Taipei) linked the substantial increase in the economic interdependence within the Asia-Pacific region since the 1940s to the enter-regional trade and

investment as well as the FTAs among the Asian countries or sub regional cross border arrangements such as ASEAN, APEC, RCEP & TPP. Significance of Asia-Pacific region can be assessed by increasing involvement of USA in regional security affairs, national defense white paper 2010 of China was also highlighted the profound change in the Asia-Pacific strategic landscape.

Development of Indo-Pacific Concept

The idea of Asia Pacific has gained significance as a framework for regional order in the late 20th century, and now has given way to another construct: the Indo-Pacific. The term Indo-Pacific, though new to geopolitics, is in some ways an evolution, rather than a refutation, of the late twentieth-century idea of the Asia-Pacific. The Asia-Pacific security construct with its focus on East Asia and a marginal focus on South East Asia was too narrow a concept to incorporate the Indian Ocean, and, Indo-Pacific is a strategic enlargement of Asia-Pacific phrase which has lasted for nearly half a century. The Indo-Pacific is not a new name for the Asia-Pacific nor it is a abruptly redefined regional concept that undermines the centrality of Asia. The Indo-Pacific, as an extension of Asia-Pacific region, is rather a strategic arc extending from India through South East Asia to Northeast Asia, including the sea lines of communication in nearby oceans.

Though the term, 'Indo-Pacific' was often used in the early and mid-20th century and has a long standing acceptance as a biogeographic region in marine science. A common link is the sea which binds the diverse subsystems within the Indo-Pacific, characterised by a multiplicity of cultures, ethnicities, religions, economic models and governance structures. The idea of an Asian maritime region, in general terms is in reality an old idea. On recent time, credit for coining of this concept goes to Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe when he referred this in his speech in Indian parliament on August 22, 2007, when he observed that...

*"A 'broader Asia' that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form..."*³

Even in December 2012, at ASEAN – India commemorative summit, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also described that "future of ASEAN and India is linked and a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for its own progress and prosperity."⁴ Besides Australia's 2013 defense white paper was first official Government document that highlighted the strategic importance of Indian & Pacific Ocean in terms of trade connectivity and source of energy flow. Thus on the one hand, if India, USA, Japan, Korea and Australia highlighted the importance of newly defined region of Indo-Pacific, then on the other hand China was major critique of such development, as latter considered such connotation is mainly made to undermine it in South China Sea area in particular and larger region of Indo-Pacific in general. Hence, Indo-Pacific region emerged as new contentious area among the emerging power centre in terms of its acquired geo-economic and geo-strategic space in the post cold war international political scene.

Global Power Structure

Different sets of great or major powers have existed throughout history; however the term 'great power' has only been used in scholarly or diplomatic world since the Congress of Vienna which was held in 1815. After the Congress of Vienna, the British Empire emerged as the pre-dominant power due to its navy and has acquired many new territories, which signaled the beginning of the Pax Britannica and of the Great Game between the UK and Russia. The balance of power became a major factor in the European politics. In Europe power rivalry ended with the Britain becoming dominant power and it remained a significant power in the international political arena till the first world war.

After the first world war, the Great power status of Great Britain ended and its place was taken by U.S.A. which emerged as a fine balancer in international political arena. USA was instrumental in creation of 'League of Nations' like institution. But USA was not much interested in acting as a balancer in international political field. But war definitely changed the very unique status of Great Britain. Post second world war political order is definitely defined as Pax Americana.

Since the end of cold war, America's military superiority has functioned as an entry restriction designed to prevent emerging power from challenging the United States where its interests are paramount. But in recent

time the era of Pax Americana is drawing closer to an end as the country's relative power declines along with its ability to actively manage global economic and security architecture of world.

In post 2010 period the USA seems to have acknowledged the global shift of power to Asia. As Harvard's Stephen Walt wrote that "the American Era is nearing its end, for now and for some time to come the United State will remain *primus inter pares* – the strongest of the major world powers."⁵ There are many factors which signify shift of global power. These are as:

First, there is China's rapid rise to great power stature, both militarily and economically. China has already overtaken the USA as the world's largest economy. China's purchasing power parity is also greater than that of USA.

Secondly, the shift in power politics is also officially acknowledged by major power such as USA viz. the Obama doctrine of 2012 directing a US strategic pivot of Asia pacific through the relocation of USA forces from Europe and Middle East to Indo-Pacific region.

Thirdly, it is significant that in the early twentieth century the military challenges to the existing international order was from Germany & Japan. Currently power challenges and power shifts in global politics are being generated basically by Asia's economic and financial strengths, all contributing to significant Asian political leverages over the established international order.

Fourthly, major Asian countries like India is deepening its security engagements with regional & global powers like Japan, Australia, USA, ASEAN etc.

Fifthly, strengthening of Asian regional institution like ASEAN, evolution of new engagements like transpacific partnerships, forum like Indian Ocean rim association, evolution of new financial arrangements like New Development Bank, Asian infrastructure investment Bank etc reflects the very shift in global power politics.

Sixthly, the idea of shifting importance to indo-pacific region also acknowledges the growing Chinese maritime presence in the Eastern Indian ocean, south China sea and western pacific.

Seventhly, world's security is closely tied to indo-pacific region as far as nuclear weapons are concerned. Other issues like rise in global warming, fear of submergence of small island states in pacific region and issue like sea-piracy and terrorism etc are belongs to pacific region are crucial for world's security.

Eighthly, the shift is also seen as a strategic response to the growing assertiveness of China in the region. The mixture of strategies which aims to balance China with constructive engagement with the other rising powers in the region can aptly be characterised the new shift in strategic discourse of international relations.

Ninthly, the recent financial crisis had made United State less interested in crisis such as Middle East and made her more worry about her own interest. Now its seems that USA is more interested in countries of east Asia & south east Asia rather than countries of Central Asia.

Tenthly, Asia is the largest continent with highest population of the globe. Population of Asian countries is quite young as compared to other continent's countries. This young population if given proper education and skill then it will be most promising asset which is unique to Asia. It serves the purpose of the industry in both ways i.e. as labour to industry and as a market to finish products.

Eleventhly, keeping in view the wavering economy of the USA, Asia's progressive growth has now become crucial to American interests especially in economic and strategic arena. Hillary Clinton then US Secretary of state rightly said that 'the future of politics will be decided in Asia not in Afghanistan or Iraq and the United State will be right at the centre of the action'.⁶ Leon Panetla then US Secretary for defense also amplified the 'Pivoting to Asia' doctrine by announcing an American plan to move 60 percent of her naval assets to the pacific area by 2020.⁷

Twelfthly, current global political arena is witnessing new theatre of competition among various nations. Countries like India and China are competing in building more and more infrastructural projects in countries of southeast Asia and north Asia. Japan has also shown its intention to build a alternate route to China's one belt one road initiative. USA has also planned to move almost 60 percent of naval asset to Indo-pacific region.

Thirteenthly, now it is quite evident that world politics is becoming more and more realistic. Henry Kissinger the modern realistic scholar said that “America must have better relations with all other major power than they have between themselves”.⁸

Thus Indo-Pacific region has acquired unique significance in world's geo-political landscape. Out of important straits of globe, three Asian straits are worthy to mention these are as – Malacca strait, Sunda strait and the strait of Lombok. World most of trade from east to west or vice-versa passes through Strait of Malacca. This unique combination of geographical location, demographic dividend and economic resurgence will definitely make this century as Asian century.

Manifestation of Global Power Shifts are as

Manifestation of global shift of power to Indo-Pacific region from Euro-Atlantic region is quite visible both at the regional as well as at the global level. Such manifestations are seen in mutual cooperation as well as confrontation among different nations. This 21st century is witnessing new alignments and counter-alignments among various stakeholders in the region. These manifestations are as:

- Due to changing equation in relation of various nations, new agreements are signed. Example of such agreement is signing of free trade-pact between Japan and European Union. This ambitious trade pact has created the world's largest open economic area and it has emerged in the context of rise in protectionist policy of United States of America and amid the fear of demise of free trade economic order due to imposition and counter-imposition of tariffs by USA and China on each other.
- Newly acquired significance of Indo-Pacific region can be analysed by newly launched policies and upgraded policies of various nations. Like India has upgraded its policy of 'look east' to 'act east'. Previous administration of United State has came up with the policy of 'Pivot to the Asia' policy. Russian has its own initiative viz. 'Pivot to the east'. China has broader vision which is evident in her initiative like 'string of pearls', 'one belt one road' etc.
- Significance of Indo-Pacific region is seen in growing activism of European Union in the region. Recently EU had signed free trade pact with Japan. European Union has summit with China in Beijing. This summit has seen convergence between EU and China on rule based world order and both side agreed on free trade and multilateralism. This shift in EU's policy suggests that it does not want to remain behind the USA in its engagement with Indo-Pacific region and it is looking alternative to USA because current USA president has termed EU as might be America's most important adversary.
- Shift of global focus is being analysed by the growing importance of ASEAN Grouping. It is predicted that ASEAN will replace EU in terms of institutional and organizational strength. Because integration process of showing fault lines as evident with the imminent Brexit, whereas more and more countries are showing willingness to have dialogue with ASEAN countries.
- Indo-Pacific region is witnessing new form of multilateralism like formation 'Ovad'. This region of world is increasing being militarized in recent time. Conduction of military exercises among various nation of the region is now widely noticed.

Conclusion

Thus, there is significant debate on the feasibility of adopting the concept; and specific concerns are also there in terms of its meaning and purpose. Apart from Australia, India Indonesia, Japan and the USA, there are other Asian middle powers who are also increasingly using and acknowledging the Indo-Pacific terminology. Thus the concept of Indo-Pacific is increasingly being overtaken by reality. It is widely accepted an Indo-Pacific region has acquired a unique status of global power centre in recent time. Its significance has increased vis-à-vis Euro-Atlantic region due to its geographical location, its economic clout and also due to its political identity. Importance of this region is quite visible in manifestation of different policies of various nations. Although international politics is in a state of flux, so nothing can be of permanent nature here. Power equations of world politics are always of shifting nature and now it is acknowledged that focal point of world power lies in Indo-Pacific region.

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