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The transition from Asia-pacific to Indo-pacific: a significant geopolitical transformation in the 21st century

Abstract

In the post-Cold War era, international politics, especially the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific region, have undergone unprecedented changes. For several years after the fall of the Soviet Union, very naturally the US had established its dominance as the sole controlling power in the international world. However, since the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, several Fast-growing economy, including China, India have begun to challenge this dominance of the US by advocating multilateralism. However, China's expansionist foreign policy in Asia (e.g., its claim to sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, military conflicts with various neighboring countries along its borders, etc.) has become a cause for a headache for India., Japan, and ASEAN countries. In response to this growing hegemony of China, several countries including the India, US, and Japan have now given rise to a new geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific region instead of the Asia-Pacific concept. In this context, the Indo-Pacific region has now become a region of geopolitical tension, where countries such as the US, Japan, Australia, India, etc. have come together to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific to counter the growing influence of China. This paper highlights the political changes in the Asia-Pacific region and the construction and significance of the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, this paper has attempted to paint a clearer picture of the Indo-Pacific region by discussing the perspectives of different countries on the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: cold war, asia-pacific, indo-pacific, geopolitics, network-zone, maritime-security

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Introduction

It goes without saying that the Asia-Pacific region had no geopolitical significance before the end of the Cold War. The economic prosperity of this region has attracted the West for ages. Several European countries including UK and France have colonized many areas of this region. But with the evolution of time, this region has risen above the humiliation of subjugation. Karl Haushofer, the German geopolitical thinker, also shed light on the immense geopolitical significance of this continent. In the 1980s, several terrible wars (Vietnam War, Korean War etc.) took place in the Asia-Pacific region. Later, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the US controlled international politics for several years in the post-Cold War period, which gave rise to the US-dominated unipolar world order. However, since the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, significant changes have occurred in the US-dominated unipolar world order.

This change is more evident in the post-Covid pandemic period. Several Asian countries, including China, India, and Japan, are unwilling to accept the US world order. China is again rejecting the US world order and moving forward with its dream of establishing its own world order. Though India, Japan, Australia and several ASEAN member countries are also unwilling to accept China's desire to expand its dominance and are gradually trying to work as an alliance for this purpose. In this case, US wants to stand by them to prevent China's influence. Therefore, although Europe was the center of geopolitical tension during the Cold War, now the clouds of that tension are gathering in the Asian sky. In order to resist the initiative that China is currently working to strengthen its control over a vast area of the Indian Ocean, starting from the South China Sea, major powers like Japan, the US, Australia, and India have developed the term "Indo-Pacific" as an important geopolitical strategic area in the 21st century. They all want a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Research objectives

In the 21st century, China began to dream of establishing a world order that would challenge the unipolar US controlled world order and to realize this dream, they took significant steps, the most notable of which was China's BRI Project. In this context, the Asia-Pacific region began to gain increasing importance in international politics. Although India also does not support US dominance in the region, China's growing influence also comes as a challenge to its sovereignty, so India initially considers China to be a bigger challenge than the US. Not only that, in recent times, China's aggressive and expansionist foreign policy is emerging as a major threat not only to India but also to the sovereignty of several ASEAN countries and Japan. In this situation, India, Japan, several ASEAN countries, US, Australia and several European countries (France, Germany, Britain, etc.) and even organizations like the European Union are coming closer to each other strategically. As a result, a new geopolitical regional understanding or equation called Indo-Pacific is being created. In this context, India, one of the most transparent countries in international politics, one of the largest economic and military power in Asia, is gradually emerging as one of the determining forces and a trustworthy partner in the Indo-Pacific region and is going to play a significant role to maintain the balance of power in this region.

The important points in this article are-

First, to explain the profound changes that have occurred in the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific region since the end of the Cold War.

Second, to analyze the emergence and importance of the imaginary geopolitical sphere called the Indo-Pacific in countering Chinese hegemony.

Third, to present a map of this region by providing a comparative analysis of the thinking of different countries about the Indo-Pacific.

Research methodology

This article is written using the content analysis method where the writings of various important scholars, various government information and newspaper reports have been reviewed and the thoughts of various scholars have been analyzed.

From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

The term "Asia-Pacific" gained special significance in the context of global geopolitics and geoeconomics in the 1980s. During this time, the US, ASEAN, and NAM played important roles in the region. It may be mentioned that the Asia-Pacific region mainly includes various sub-regions of the Asian continent such as Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia, as well as countries such as Russia, Australia, and New Zealand. During the Cold War period, the world was deeply divided between two superpowers—the US and the USR—and the Asia-Pacific region was no exception to that division. Liberal democracies such as Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia were close allies of the US, while socialist states such as China, North Vietnam, and North Korea sided with the Soviet Union. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, the global situation changed radically—the bipolar world system suddenly became unipolar. Later, the rise of China had a profound impact on the security and strategic balance of international politics. Nowadays, the term "Asia-Pacific" is increasingly replaced by the term "Indo-Pacific". It is believed that this region will become one of the centers of international trade and economic functions in the future. Due to its extensive maritime communication system and huge economic potential, powerful states are showing increasing interest in this region to determine the future geopolitical balance (Scott, 2018, p. 30).[1]

Thus, in the late 1990s, it appears that the Asia-Pacific region flourished as a key strategic arena for global and regional geopolitics. The end of the Cold War in the Asia-Pacific region created a new balance of power between a rising China, a weakened Russia, a rebellious US, an optimistic Japan and South Korea, and a potentially emerging India. After the end of the Cold War, the center of world politics gradually shifted to Asia—especially East and South Asia—as a stage for new power competition. In this new balance of power game, China has gradually emerged as a global superpower and has taken the initiative to challenge the unipolar world order centered on the hegemony of the US. So in this context, the Asia-Pacific region has become an important strategic arena for China's economic and military activities. China's vast economic power and strategic ambitions in the region have firmly established it as the main rival of the US.[2]

Naturally, parity of power in the Asia-Pacific region has been changing drastically since the beginning of the 21st century. China has now reached a position where, regarding economic and defence capabilities, it is able to directly challenge the influence of the US, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, if not on the global stage. As a result, while the US criticizes China's role in the region, China wants to expand its own geopolitical plans and influence in the region, where, in its view, the presence of the US is like an intrusion of a foreign power. In addition to claiming Taiwan as an integral part of itself, China is claiming sovereignty over most of the South China Sea and is occasionally demonstrating military force to establish that claim. As a result of China's actions, not only Japan, but also Taiwan and various ASEAN states are increasingly concerned and an imbalance of power has arisen in the region. In addition, China is pursuing an expansionist policy on its land borders, which has created new challenges to the sovereignty of various neighboring countries, including India. In response to China's strategic ambitions, several states in the region have begun to make changes to their security and foreign policies. This is reflected in the emergence of a new geopolitical concept called the "Indo-Pacific". At the initiative of countries such as Japan, the US and India (who will never accept China's hegemonic role), the term "Indo-Pacific" is now rapidly gaining popularity instead of the term "Asia-Pacific". As a result, the concept of "Indo-Pacific" can be said to be a recent and significant addition to the international strategic vocabulary.[3]

According to many experts, the "Indo-Pacific" concept has emerged as a new geographical and strategic framework, the main purpose of which is to replace the previous "Asia-Pacific" concept—which was considered insufficient to counter China's growing influence. Therefore, in recent times, the "Indo-Pacific" has gained prominence in global diplomacy as a significant geopolitical arena. For example, the US introduced the notion of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", which aimed to strengthen regional stability and balance the growing assertiveness of China. The point is to include the Indian Ocean littoral states (especially India) in this initiative (to counter China's expansionism).

For the same reason, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was the first to officially use the term "Indo-Pacific" in his historic "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech delivered in the Indian Parliament on August 22, 2007.[4] Subsequently, Australia, India and several ASEAN countries began to present their own distinct geopolitical interpretations of the "Indo-Pacific" concept.[5] Even European powers such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom recognized the significance of this concept and formulated their own Indo-Pacific strategies.[6] The effectiveness of this strategic vision has been reflected in the expansion of regional cooperation, the increase in military exercises, and the growing alliance formation among the leading countries in the region.[7]

Therefore, It may be argued that today this regional concept is no longer confined to the geographical boundaries of the region; rather, it has now acquired international importance and relevance. "Indo-Pacific" has now transformed into a distinct geo-geographical term in world politics. Although the interpretation of this geopolitical concept is varies from country to country in this region, the common idea among them is that it is basically a strategic region located at the junction of the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, where many countries express concern over China's growing influence, because the relevance of this region in terms of global trade is currently immense.

However, many countries in Asia, including India, do not want to see it as just a geographical reality; rather, they want to use the "Indo-Pacific" concept as an alternative framework to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In contrast, China has expressed reluctance to accept the "Indo-Pacific" concept—especially the "free and open Indo-Pacific" vision—and sees it as a strategic effort by the US that is not only against China's interests but also against the interests of the entire Asia. China believes that the US actually wants to maintain its strategic dominance in the region. Therefore, it can be clearly said that geopolitical competition and economic interests have combined to increase the importance of the "Indo-Pacific" region manifold.

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Definition of the Indo-Pacific

In the 1930s, German geopolitical thinker K. E. Haushofer realized the strategic potential of the region. He called it the "Indopacific Region" or "Greater Indo-Pacific", which is considered to be the initial form of the current "Indo-Pacific" concept.[8] After analyzing the history, anthropology, trade routes, infrastructure, economic structure, imperialist tendencies and maritime military power of the region, Haushofer predicted that India and China would emerge as the major influential powers in Asia in the near future and potentially compete with each other. He also called on German policymakers to develop strategic and geopolitical relations with the region, so as to challenge British and American naval dominance. Although in reality, the issue was largely overlooked in German policymaking. Recognizing the significance of the deeply rooted civilizations of India and East Asia, he described them as "the two greatest meeting places of cultures and civilizations seen in human history".[8] According to his prediction, the nations of this region were on the verge of awakening and expanding their influence on the world stage.

Thus, it is understood that two central factors are responsible for the rise of the strategic imaginary Indo-Pacific region – first, China's increasing influence in the entire region and second, the gradual decline of US influence in the world system. The US needs a new strategic partner in this region. A review of recent US policy suggests that it wants to give priority to India as a strategic partner in this region. In fact, since the 1990s, India has been seen as one of the most influential powers in the Asian continent. Besides, the strategic partnership between India and the US has also become increasingly strong. In this regard, several analysts have expressed the opinion that the new strategic map of the "Indo-Pacific" region is essentially a US initiative – a kind of ideological strategy, the purpose of which is to increase India's geopolitical importance and In parallel limit China's dominance in the region.[7]

Indian Foreign Minister S. According to Jaishankar, the perspectives of different powers on the "Indo-Pacific region" naturally differ from each other, but there is no doubt that this region has now become a priority for all.[3] There is no doubt that the term "Indo-Pacific" has now gained recognition as a new geographical term in the global regional concept. The region is seen as a strategic framework for a vast maritime expanse centered on Southeast Asia. Its conceptual origins lie in the economic and strategic rise of two Asian superpowers—China and India. Many analysts believe that this geopolitical concept was first introduced by Indian thinker Gurpreet S. Khurana in his article "Sea Lines of Communication: The Indian Perspective", where he used the notion of "Indo-Pacific" Within the framework of maritime security cooperation between Japan and India.[9]

The region is one of the most important centers of international trade. Therefore, various powerful states are wary of China's covert attempts and initiatives to establish its dominance in the region. Major countries in the region—such as the US, Japan, Australia, India, and most ASEAN member states—have expressed deep concern about China's growing military presence and activities in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans. In a recent speech at the White House, US President Donald Trump alleged that China is illegally claiming sovereignty over certain areas of the Pacific Ocean, which poses a significant threat to freedom of navigation and the normal flow of international trade.[10] Therefore, the 'Indo-Pacific' can be understood as a strategically constructed geopolitical concept designed to preserve the regional power balance.[6]

To fully understand the Indo-Pacific region, it is necessary to analyze the perspectives and interpretations of different countries—especially those that played a prime role in developing the concept—because each country's own strategic interests, geographical location, and political objectives have shaped their perception of the region differently.

US perspective on the Indo-Pacific

According to American analyst Vikram Nehru, the Indo-Pacific region is a vast geographical area that brings together East Asia and South Asia in a logical connection of market dynamics and geographical realities. According to Nehru, this region has the potential to become one of the world's major economic centers. In his speech, he mentioned, "The peaceful rise of this region should be seen as one of the main goals of US foreign policy.[11] During the Obama administration, the US quickly adopted the notion of the 'Indo-Pacific' as a strategy for maintaining balance in Asia. According to them, although the center of global power dynamics have shifted from the trans-Atlantic region to the Indo-Pacific, the The U.S. leadership in the international system will continue. However, in this new context, America will have to develop relationships with new partners in the region. In the 20th century, especially during World War II and the Cold War, Britain was the closest ally of the US; but in the 21st century, India, Japan and Australia are emerging as important strategic partners in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. As such, the US considers India a natural ally in addressing regional challenges and maintaining stability.[12]

Later, in June 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry raised the concept of an "Indo-Pacific Corridor" During a joint strategic dialogue with India, which focused primarily on the role of South and Southeast Asia. Later, in April 2014, Nisha Desai Biswal, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs at the US State Department, defined the Indo-Pacific region as a large coastal strip stretching from South Africa to Australia. However, the US often uses both the terms "Asia-Pacific" and "Indo-Pacific"—primarily to refer to the geopolitical connection between the Pacific Oceans and the Indian Oceans. However, the Trump administration has given special Value to the Indo-Pacific concept, which is heavily influenced by the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" idea pioneered by Japan. In fact, President Donald Trump formally introduced the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept at the 2017 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Hanoi, expanding on former President Barack Obama's "Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor" (IPEC) initiative.[13]

In October 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson defined the Indo-Pacific as a broad geographic area encompassing the Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific, and their surrounding countries. He highlighted the importance of the roles of India and the US in the region, stating that these two countries are the "lighthouses of the East and the West" of the Indo-Pacific. Besides, the Trump administration officially announced that the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" (FOIP) would be the cornerstone of its new regional policy. The "National Security Strategy" released in December 2017 defined the Indo-Pacific as "a vast region stretching from the west coast of India to the west coast of the US." Therefore, it is clear that the US wants to focus more attention on the extent of its presence and influence in the region, and this vision is based primarily on military strategy. This objective became even clearer when the US renamed its "Pacific Command" (USPACOM) to "Indo-Pacific Command" (USINDOPACOM) in May 2018. Later, the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" report published in June 2019 stated that the Indo-Pacific region is "the single most important geopolitical region for America's future".[14]

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This is also undoubtedly a well-planned strategic move. Because, from the perspective of China's maritime trade routes, the map prepared by the Pentagon has identified the Indo-Pacific region as one of the most significant geopolitical regions. In fact, China is no longer limiting its influence to the Pacific Ocean; rather, it is gradually expanding its influence to the Indian Ocean region. Consequently, the security concept that was developed around the three island chains in the Pacific Ocean has now extended to the Indian Ocean, and the concept of a fourth and fifth island chain has been added to it. The fourth island chain stretches from the port of Gwadar in Pakistan to the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka and the US military base of Diego Garcia. Therefore, it can be said that this maritime trade route of China poses a serious challenge not only to the security of India, but also to the strategic and security interests of the US.[15]

As a result, by placing greater emphasis on the FOIP (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) policy, the Trump administration has asserted that the Indo-Pacific region will be the main axis of US foreign and economic policy in countering Chinese influence for the next few decades. Western countries, including the US, are gradually realizing that the purpose of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project is not just to establish infrastructural connections between different countries; there is a larger strategic and geopolitical plan behind it. In fact, China now wants to build a world order that can be an alternative to the current American-dominated world order. This raises the question - what is the current world order? History testifies that in different eras, some country or group of countries have taken control of the global system or tried to seize it.

However, since the international system is essentially anarchic in nature, the dominance of a single power often plays a helpful role in maintaining peace and stability in the world. But whenever an alternative or rival power emerges within this structure, that stability is challenged. The US held de facto global leadership for nearly two decades following the end of the Cold War. But in the second decade of the twenty-first century, this situation changed profoundly. As a consequence, the current global system can no longer be said to be exclusively American-controlled. As a result, competition between the US-led international order and emerging powers, especially China, is becoming increasingly intense in the geopolitical context.[16]

China is now directly challenging US influence not only militarily but also economically. According to various statistics, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project has an investment plan of about $1 trillion, under which China has taken responsibility for implementing a total of more than 2,200 projects in about 80 countries—about 20 of which are in the Western world. As a result of this initiative, China has emerged as a Leading geopolitical and economic power in Asia. Beijing has also pledged to finance various infrastructure and development projects under the BRI. Notably, the size of this massive project is about 11 times larger than the US Marshall Plan after World War II. China aims to establish a total trade relationship of $2.5 trillion with BRI-linked countries by 2025.[17]

While this Chinese initiative may seem laudable on the surface, it has deep strategic interests at its core. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not a grant-based aid program; Rather, it could be called—"Develop with your own money, borrow from China if necessary." Economist Prabir Dey rightly comments, "BRI is essentially a debt trap, not a free lunch".[18] Most of the countries associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are not that financially capable. Implementing these huge infrastructure projects requires huge amounts of money, which many countries cannot afford to invest independently. As a result, their only option is to rely on loans—and this is where China comes in. For example, Sri Lanka borrowed about US$7.3 billion from China between 2008 and 2017. Similarly, in 2016, China offered Bangladesh about US$24 billion in loans to build a railway trac, a deep-sea port, and a power plant.[19]

China wants these countries to borrow from it—which many analysts see as a neocolonial strategy, previously used by the US and some European powers. For this reason, India has repeatedly criticized China's policy. In India's view, China's debt policy is essentially "debt trap diplomacy," because India knows very well that most of these countries are not able to repay such a large amount of debt quickly. Many of India's neighboring countries—such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar—are already caught in this debt-dependence trap. For example, Pakistan has handed over a large part of occupied Kashmir to China, and Sri Lanka and Myanmar have been forced to hand over several of their ports to China. Therefore, it can be regarded as merely a modern form of imperialist mentality. As a result of China's expansionist policy, its foreign policy has become increasingly aggressive towards its neighboring countries. In response, major global powers, including the US, Japan, Australia, and India, have recognized the need to counter China's growing regional influence and dominance through diplomatic, economic, and military measures.[7]

The US has been actively taking steps to counter China's growing influence. In reality, however, China has not yet directly interfered with US territorial sovereignty, nor has it posed any immediate threat that would jeopardize America's core national interests.[16] If the US were to confront China without broad international support, the strategic basis for its efforts would remain weak. Historically, the Soviet Union never directly intervened on American soil during the Cold War; rather, its geopolitical rivalry was focused on exerting influence over powerful European states. Consequently, the US gradually emerged as the Soviet Union's main global rival.[20] The main goal of US policy over the past few decades has been to prevent the emergence of any rival power that could challenge its dominant position in global politics and economics.[21]

The end of the Cold War brought about the fall of the Soviet Union, and with it the tendency for Washington to see RUSia as a major geopolitical threat significantly diminished. Even the possibility of RUSia's re-admission to the G7 was later discussed. However, the US now faces a new challenge. And this new challenger is China. Beijing is now actively trying to reshape the existing international order and gradually consolidate its position as a major power in Asia.[7] To counter China's growing influence, the US has undertaken measures to strengthen relations with Asian countries concerned about Beijing's expansionist policies. In order to maintain strategic balance, Washington is trying to build a regional alliance that will help limit China's influence.[6]

Realizing India's importance in this geopolitical strategy, the US has realized that any initiative to deter China will not be effective without India's active participation. In the context of border disputes and long-standing economic and diplomatic tensions with China, India has emerged as an indispensable and influential partner in this regional power equation.[12] However, since India has traditionally not been included in the Asia-Pacific region, the US introduced the notion of the "Indo-Pacific". Its aim was to ensure India's active involvement in this strategic framework by linking the Indian Ocean to the Asia-Pacific geopolitical space.[13]

Therefore, considering China's role in the Pacific, Indian Ocean regions and especially in the South China Sea, the US has repeatedly accused China of violating the global order based on international law

and rules. Originally, the idea of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' was intended to build fair and healthy economic relations between the US and China, including the entire region, as the US has never explicitly stated that China is outside this initiative. This is why President Donald Trump has repeatedly emphasized fair and reciprocal commercial relations, which will depend on the principles of intellectual property rights, protection of private property, free competition, a transparent market system and open trade. Trump compared this to 'playing by the rules' — where the US will take action against those who break the rules, be it China or any other country. However, there is no doubt that in reality, China was the main target at the center of Trump's economic policy.[22]

However, in the context of China's recent expansionist policies and its increasing military aggression against neighboring countries in Asia, the character of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' policy has gradually changed. Now it is not limited to economic cooperation; rather, this policy also includes issues such as protecting the sovereignty of regional states, peaceful resolution of disputes, compliance with international law, and ensuring free movement of water and airspace. The word 'free' here basically symbolizes political and economic independence—that is, that each country in the region should be able to enjoy its own sovereignty without influence from others. Meanwhile, it also implies freedom of navigation in international waters, open market policies, and fair mutual trade. The US alleges that China is challenging this policy of openness by building artificial islands in the South China Sea and establishing military bases there. These actions have not only increased regional tensions, but have also made clearer the need for a united stance among Indo-Pacific countries against China's growing influence.[12]

In this context, the US aims to maintain its influence and leadership in the Indo-Pacific region through its '3P policy'—Preparedness, Partnership, and Promoting Networked Regional Framework.[7] First, 'preparedness' means keeping the US military always militarily ready by modernizing it. That is, being able to respond immediately if an adversary takes any aggressive action. In recent years, the US has deployed several carrier battleships to the South China Sea and significantly increased its military presence in the region—which is part of the 'preparedness' policy. Second, the 'partnership' policy aims to strengthen relations with countries with which the US already has military cooperation or bilateral alliances. For example, the US recently conducted joint military exercises with Japan, Australia, Taiwan, and several other littoral countries in the South China Sea. On his visit to India in 2019, President Trump called on India to actively participate in the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' initiative. Third, the aim of promoting the 'Network Zone' is to build a security network based on mutual cooperation between each state in the region. Initially, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative aimed to strengthen bilateral relations between the US and the littoral countries in the Indo-Pacific region. However, ASEAN countries did not agree with this approach; rather, they favored a multilateral cooperative framework, which would be implemented through the third 'P'—that is, 'promoting a Network Zone'. In 2009, the US launched the 'Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI)' or 'integrated sub-regional cooperation' with the four Lower Mekong states, including Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar. Later, the US also included this initiative in its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy.

Australian perspective on the Indo-Pacific

In October 2012, Australia was perhaps the first country to formally use the term 'Indo-Pacific' in its Strategic Policy Paper. The document presented a clear picture of the continuous strategic interconnections that exist between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean.[7] The concept envisions a vast Indo-Pacific region stretching from India through Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia, with particular reference to the strategic importance of maritime communications for global trade and security.[23] Despite Australia's strong commercial ties with China, the country has Deeply involved in the strategic concept of the Indo-Pacific and has been critical of China's aggressive diplomatic policies in the region. This participation is seen as a significant strategic turning point, reflecting Australia's conscious recognition of the economic and security linkages between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, as well as the region's growing geopolitical importance.[13]

Japan's perspective on the Indo-Pacific

Japan was one of the first countries to start thinking about the Indo-Pacific concept. In this concept, Japan mainly considers South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and the island states of the Pacific Ocean to be included.[24] In a speech given to the Indian Parliament in 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed his view on this concept. In his speech titled "The Union of Two Seas", he mentioned that the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are gradually connecting with each other and emerging as a common area of freedom and prosperity. He said that the outlines of a Greater Asia are now becoming clear, transcending traditional geographical boundaries. Japan and India have the joint responsibility and capacity to further expand this vision, so as to create an open and transparent maritime environment. According to Abe, through cooperation between Japan and India, this "Greater Asia" could quickly become a vast regional network that would also bring together important partners such as the US and Australia.[4]

Although at the time this idea had not been translated into practical action and remained at the discussion stage, the situation began to change after a few years. In particular, Amid China's increasingly assertive rise in this region, Japan moved to take effective action. In Tokyo's view, the region should be governed by a rules-based international order—which has long existed under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Japan expressed concern that China could ignore this rules-based framework and expand its influence there. In April 2017, Japan placed special emphasis on the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" (FOIP) in its Diplomatic Bluebook, which brought the notion of Indo-Pacific to a central policy position. Later, Japan broadened the concept to include ASEAN countries and New Zealand.[13]

ASEAN's perspective on the Indo-Pacific

There are differences of opinion among ASEAN countries regarding the Indo-Pacific region. As an illustration, Indonesia believes that the Western Indian Ocean and the Eastern Pacific Ocean should not be included in the region. They even refer to the region as "PACINDO". However, for Indonesia, the notion of the Indo-Pacific is not entirely new; it is seen as a continuation of existing regional thinking, which does not reject old ideas but rather reconstructs them. By adopting this concept, Indonesia and other ASEAN member states aim to further strengthen traditional regional structures and ensure that ASEAN maintains a central role in this changing geopolitical reality.[25] The vital sea routes are used for inward and outward maritime trade of ASEAN countries. During the COVID-19, the supply chain was vehemently interrupted.[26]

India's perspective on the Indo-Pacific

From India's perspective, the Asia-Pacific concept is essentially a legacy of colonial thinking. Because India had close cultural,

commercial and historical ties with East and Southeast Asia long before colonial expansion. But after the European colonial powers occupied various regions of Asia, that natural connection was severed. In order to distinguish the regions under their control, these colonial powers artificially divided Asia, resulting in the name "Asia-Pacific". This region was once under the control of various imperialist powers, but over time, the world order has changed. The colonial and expansionist era came to an end at the end of the twentieth century. Now connectivity and global commons have become particularly important. In this new reality, the concept of Asia-Pacific has become increasingly irrelevant, and the 21st century has emerged as the era of the Indo-Pacific, as the Indo-Pacific is a symbol of a larger, interconnected global sphere.[27]

India's geopolitical position in the Indo-Pacific region and its desire to play the role of 'net security provider' and 'first responder' have increased both India's responsibilities and coastal engagement. India sees the Indo-Pacific region as a natural extension of the Indian Ocean. In the words of Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, "For India, it is the next logical step in the Act East policy, symbolizing a broader connectivity beyond the borders of South Asia".[3]

India's Maritime Security Strategy document, published in October 2015, included the Indo-Pacific as one of the six maritime zones surrounding India. The Indo-Pacific is described as "the region extending from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, connected by the South and East China Seas and the Philippine Sea." Through this, India seeks to deepen its relations and cooperation with countries in the region under its Act East policy. In June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented a clear geo-geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific at the Shangri-La Dialogue. In his speech, "The Indo-Pacific is a natural and unified geographical region—where the world's opportunities and challenges lie. India does not see the region as a strategic alliance, a closed club or a tool for establishing hegemony. Rather, we see it as an inclusive area, not one of opposition to any country, but of mutual cooperation".[28]

The geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific region given by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is very significant in determining India's overall strategy in the region. There are several fundamental reasons behind adopting such a broad and inclusive vision - first, India wants to present itself not as a state limited to the western edge of the Indo-Pacific, but as a central power or a junction of this entire region. Second, just as India's strategic relationship with the US is currently strong, India also has historical and strategic relations with Russia. But Russia often supports China's position in the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, India does not want to be seen as a direct rival of China or to be tied to any defense pact with the US and its allies. This is why India is trying to build strong and balanced bilateral relations with each state in the region. Because to counter China's influence, it is very important to increase India's influence and acceptance in the region. Without the support and trust of these countries, even with the help of the US, India's efforts to counter China's expansionist policies will not be effective enough.[13] This strategic flexibility helps India maintain its independent foreign policy and gradually paves the way for its influence in the Indo-Pacific region. India along with the QUAD members, especially USA are actively taking new strategies to tackle Chinese aggression.[29]

Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State, noted in his book "World Order" that maintaining peace always requires a delicate balance between restraint, power, and legitimacy. Stability in Asia must also create partnerships and balances of power—because relying solely on military power will increase conflict, while building partnerships solely on pressure and coercion will create fears of dominance among other countries. If this balance cannot be established, a major catastrophe is likely to occur sooner or later.[30] India is taking steps to build friendly relations with various island states, including Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Simultaneously, India has recently taken a significant step — the closeness of China-Russia relations has now become a cause for concern. This move by India reflects its desire to deepen economic cooperation with Russia and also signals a strengthening of its long-term strategic position in the Indo-Pacific region.[31] By investing in the Russian Far East, India wants to diversify its partnerships and strengthen its position as a regional power. Concurrently, India is interested in maintaining a balance in relations with both the US and Russia in the changing Indo-Pacific system.[6]

China's perspective on the Indo-Pacific

China does not recognize or accept the Indo-Pacific concept.[32] China fears that the Indo-Pacific concept is essentially a strategy of the US to hinder its development efforts in the international arena. China is the pre- dominant power in the ASEAN region.[33] They believe that the US is following a kind of "Monroe Doctrine" in the Asia-Pacific region. China is no longer ready to accept US dominance in the South China Sea. According to them, the US is trying to upset the balance of power in Asia. In particular, the US policy on Taiwan is very confusing to China — because, on the one hand, the US officially accepts the 'one China policy', while on the other hand, in reality, it is providing military aid and weapons to Taiwan. Therefore, the accusation of US conspiracy is not entirely unfounded for China. China no longer wants to live under the US-led global system. However, in addition, China's policy towards its bordering countries has become more aggressive than friendly, which is further strengthening US influence and presence in the region. As a result, China's policy has made America a natural ally of India, Japan, Australia, and several other countries in the region.[34]

Conclusion

Therefore, it can be said that the 21st century is going to be the century of Asia. Napoleon once commented about Asia "Let her sleep; when she wakes up, the whole world will shake." The post-Cold War US-led world order has undergone profound changes. Whereas Europe was the center of international politics during the Cold War era, today that center is gradually shifting towards Asia. Today, Asia is the world's most densely populated continent, with nearly two-thirds of the world's megacities located here. Nearly half of global economic growth comes from Asia; 6 of the world's 10 largest banks, 8 of the 10 largest military powers, and the main centers of technological innovation are also located here. These data clearly indicate that Asia is rapidly becoming the new center of the world. The Indo-Pacific region has now emerged as a completely new, yet highly important and discUSed geopolitical arena in international politics. Previously, the Asia-Pacific concept was dominant in the region, but in recent years, China's increasingly aggressive activities in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific have emerged as a serious threat to emerging powers such as the US, India, Japan, and Australia. However, the recent US tariff war has created instability not only in Asia but also in the entire global politics and economy, which has begun to have a significant impact on the strategic relations in the region.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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