



## Original Article

## The Gambit of Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific: A Critical Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Geopolitics is essential in understanding global dynamics, economic and resource considerations, cultural interlinkages, global governance for common humanitarian causes, foreign policy, diplomacy and security. Today, geopolitics as a concept transcends temporality and ventures into technological innovations, interdependence, demographic shifts, transnational threats, and involvement of non-state actors. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct is accompanied by the nations' quest to establish themselves in prominent positions in the region. India, too, is not alien to this quest. India's geopolitical move from its neighbourhood to the Indo-Pacific hence becomes a critical point of analysis in the nation's aspiration to become the regional leader. The evolution of geopolitics from a nation-state-centric paradigm of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to a multi-pivotal approach in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflects the current highly interdependent global order. Nation-states shape their foreign policies based on internal and external factors, with the Indo-Pacific region assuming increasing significance, particularly concerning maritime interests, both developmental and strategic. Historically, India has played a prominent role in the Indian Ocean region, contributing significantly to global trade and cultural diffusion. Over time, the land borders assumed priority over the maritime space. However, the shared yet contesting interests in the region with various nation-states competing for their claims, the attention returned to the seas. These competing claims and claimants in the region highlight the vitality of India to have a stringent and proactive foreign and maritime security policy – for the region and in the region. This research delves into the evolving discourse of geopolitics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific construct, and its intersection with maritime security. By analysing India's strategic viewpoint, particularly its maritime strategy, through scholarly and official sources, this paper aims to elucidate the critical linkages between geopolitics and maritime security. Ultimately, it seeks to underscore India's role as a key agenda-setter in the region.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics; IndoPacific; Maritime Security; Security Dilemma

## INTRODUCTION

The orchestration of nation-states to bolster security and influence in the international system using geography is imperative to sustain. Geopolitics, defined as the study of the effects of geography on international politics and the relationships between nation-states, plays a pivotal role in determining the strategic interests and interactions of nation-states. It is the theory of political events integrated into their geographical setting. 'Geopolitik' intends to and should become the "geographic conscience of the state"<sup>1</sup>.

The concept of Geopolitics can be seen in action by nation-states to maximise national interest. Hence, invariably, geopolitics and security become intricately interlinked

aspects that are paramount in fostering strategic culture among nation-states, thereby shaping the global landscape. Security, as a central component of national interest, encompasses not just military capacity but also economic, political, and environmental dimensions. Security includes the measures taken by states to safeguard their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national interests against threats.

The emerging region of geopolitical significance, the Indo-Pacific, is of vital interest to the nation-states, especially China, India, Japan, Australia, and the United States of America (USA). The nation-states in the region work towards their 'shared interest' of creating a free, open, interconnected, prosperous, secure, stable, and resilient Indo-Pacific region and are yet to define a comprehensive



rule-based international order that can strengthen their role in the region. While doing so, each nation-state shapes the security landscape of the region and of all the parties involved in the region. It is in this background that India, too, makes its moves. Thus, it is imperative that the changing geopolitics and the subsequent change in maritime security scenarios are traced. India's outlook of the seas is a part of these changing scenarios.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Methods*

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the intricate dynamics of geopolitics and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. Specifically, we use textual and contextual analyses of relevant scholarship, official statements, and government reports to delve into the nuances of the concepts within their political, geographical and historical contexts.

### UNPACKING THE MEANING, DEFINITION, AND UNDERSTANDING OF GEOPOLITICS

The discourse surrounding geopolitics has persistently been a focal point since its conceptualisation within the realm of International Relations. The initiation of this discourse on geopolitics can be traced back to Carl Ritter's work, which involved the systematic examination of the interplay between human interactions, geographical positioning, and political system and practices<sup>1</sup>. In the following subsections, we will see the evolution of geopolitics during the wars – World War I, World War II, and the Cold War and in the post-Cold War world order.

#### *The Wars and Geopolitics*

The inception of 'World Island' and within it a single great political authority, Heartland, a construct of Halford J. Mackinder in 1904, resulted in further growth of the discourse. His claims that the Columbian Epoch (1500-1900), which was characterised by leverage of navies, was transiting towards leveraging land, strongly arguing that it is the 'natural seat of power'<sup>1,2</sup>. The term 'geopolitics' was first introduced by Rudolf J Kjellen, emphasising the influence of geographical influence on politics and, subsequently, its influence on policies added to the chain of discourse on the term<sup>2</sup>. Where he defined geopolitics as "the study of the state as a geographical organism or a phenomenon in space", indicating that the nation-states of the time understood and looked at leveraging the "space by colonisation, amalgamation or conquest"<sup>1,2</sup>. In his scholarly exposition delineating the evolutionary trajectory of the term 'geopolitics,' Charles Hagan elucidates a crucial distinction between political geography and geopolitics. While Political Geography concerns itself with historical

and factual accounts of the changes surrounding the state, geopolitics observes and speculates on the influence of geography on the political events and political decisions of the state<sup>2</sup>.

Karl Haushofer contends that "geopolitics formulates the scientific foundation of the art of political transactions in the struggle for existence of political living forms on the living space of the earth." This assertion posits geopolitics as a scholarly framework that elucidates the principles governing the intricate interplay between political actors and their territories, thereby contributing substantively to the understanding of geopolitical dynamics and strategic decision-making in the pursuit of security and influence on the global ecosystem. The conversation of optimising geopolitics started after World War I as a means of restoration to of lost glory of Germany by harnessing its geography to become self-sufficient. Hagan contributes to the discourse, writing that any nation-state is looking at "an ultimate goal of world organisation based on domination and not on cooperation between equal states." Explicitly characterising geopolitics as a "contemporary rationalisation of power politics," Hagan contends that it offers solace to scholars advocating for democracy and the establishment of a peaceful world order. This perspective underscores the nuanced and strategic dimensions inherent in geopolitical discourse, aligning with broader debates on political ideologies and international relations.

The alternative debate that started at the same time as Rudolf Kjellen's leveraging of space, Alfred Thayer Mahan posited that achieving maritime supremacy is imperative for nation-states to secure a strategic advantage within the international system. Prior to World War I, with colonial nation-states holding power, the importance of the seas for economic gains was prominent. During this time, the Indo-Pacific, though the term was inexistence, contributed to the major trade portions. At the time of the World War I & II, the maritime space was exploited for security, concentrating on expansion of naval bases. It was during the Cold War 'Balance of Power'<sup>1</sup> game that the maritime space was utilised for naval exercises and show of strength, albeit, the Indo-Pacific was still dormant. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, for some scholars, meant the end of Geopolitics and saw the international system move towards development and economic growth, a step towards conceptualising Geoeconomics<sup>3</sup>.

#### *Post Wars*

As discussed above through the World War I, World War II and the Cold War, there has been an evolution in how

<sup>1</sup>In an international system, Balance of Power Theory states that to minimise the growth of one nation-state as the sole power, the other nation-states enhance their powers. Traditionally, it was military power, but in the present day, the understanding of power encompasses more than military capabilities



nation-states construct geopolitics, i.e., from nation-state centric to a more globalised outlook. The end of Cold War marked the beginning of globalisation. The nation-states prioritised making their foreign policies around issues like free trade, climate change, and terrorism, which were set priorities by the Western countries that claimed their domination after the Cold War, thus enabling them to set the global order and functioning of the global institutions<sup>4</sup>. As a result of shifting geopolitical construct in the Post-Cold War era, the budget cuts on military spending and foreign aid during President Bill Clinton's administration due to the absence of any 'serious geopolitical challenges' were a move to benefit from the global economic system<sup>3</sup>.

However, such claims have been countered through assertion that the perceived decline of the term 'geopolitics' is unwarranted<sup>5</sup>. There is a contention that the concept remains operational, as evidenced by its continued deployment by nation-states, emphasising its enduring relevance in shaping the dynamics of the Knowledge-Power Interplay<sup>5</sup>. As a result of globalisation there is a shift from conventional nation-state centric foreign policies to foreign policies that promote regional and international organisations participation. It is arguable that there was a shift in outlook of Foreign Policies, from geopolitics to geoeconomics. Notably, the debate on 'absence of geopolitics' is unwarranted due to its ever-present nature with one such manifestation that is seen in the territorial disputes of South China Sea, calling for the need to understand the leverage that geopolitics has on security<sup>6</sup>.

## GEOPOLITICS SHAPING SECURITY

Geopolitics can be understood as the assessment and utilisation of the geographic configurations of nation-states in international politics to play well using the 'balance of power game'. It encompasses the relationships between nation-states and plays a pivotal role in determining the strategic interests and policies of nation-states<sup>5</sup>. Colin Gray and Geoffrey Solan conceptualise that geopolitics can materialise in strategic conditioning of two kinds – defence and offence: the defence of locations that are vital for the strategic influence of the nation-state and utilisation of routes and locations that are in favour of attacking<sup>7</sup>.

Geopolitics is a term specifically referring to the geographical assumptions and understandings of world politics. Geopolitics can be considered the manifestation of a space-power interface, which competes to gain better influence in global affairs. The leveraging of the space power interface for the strategic interests of a nation-state demonstrates the relationship between geopolitics and security. The interaction between geopolitics and security is complex and dynamic. Their manifestations influence international relations, strategic decision-making, and the pursuit of national interests in the complex web of global politics. Geopolitics is about the crucial power to define danger

and about the ability to describe the world in ways that specify appropriate political behaviours in particular contexts to provide 'security' against those dangers. The power to construct a widespread understanding of the context is a crucial discursive task of geopolitics<sup>5</sup>. The rising Weaponisation<sup>2</sup> of Seas of in the Indo-Pacific is the manifestation of the interplay between geopolitics and security in the region.

In an international system with multiple regions acting as pivots<sup>3</sup>, India also needs to leverage its space holistically, including its maritime space. There is a burgeoning consensus that the Indian Ocean assumes paramount significance, with scholars such as Robert Kaplan, Saul B. Cohen, and Sanjay Chaturvedi asserting that it will persist as the primary theatre of world geopolitics in the twenty-first century<sup>2</sup>.

## INDO-PACIFIC: 'THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY'

The then Prime Minister Nehru in 1958 said, "...we cannot afford to be weak at sea..."; this shows that conventionally the Indian leadership has given prominence to bringing sea lane connectivity in Indian Ocean Region. The end of Cold war revamped India's outlook towards the seas and the region. This can be observed in the transition from India's Neighbourhood Policy of 1980's which looked at the nation-states in the east went through transition to 'Look East Policy' (1991) and now to 'Act East Policy' (2014)<sup>8-10</sup>.

Discussed below are subsections on India's position in Indian Ocean and its view point of the Indo-Pacific and the global actors in the region.

### *India's Position in the Indian Ocean*

"The Indian Ocean Region is at the top of our policy priorities."

- Narendra Modi, Honourable Prime Minister of India<sup>11</sup>

India is at the centre of the Indian Ocean. With its resources which are crucial for food security, energy security, and other needs of the littoral nation-states, and its prominence in global trade, the ocean today is more important than any other time in history. India, too, has refocused its view on the oceans with the changing contours of security in the region. With a coastline of about 7500 kilometres, the region is of supreme importance to India. India is involved in the region's trade, mineral resource extraction, traditional and non-traditional security and humanitarian assistance. The involvement of India accounts

<sup>2</sup>Weaponisation is a new trend of warfare where nation-states use culture and credit (finance), faith and famine, and fake news disinformation as new weapons. These wars are often unnoticed, undeclared, and unending. For example, nation-states weaponise humanitarian aid, medicines, and water, like the weaponisation of migrants in undeclared political conflicts. Galeotti, M. (2022). *The Weaponisation of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War*. United Kingdom: Yale University Press.

<sup>3</sup>Pivots are centres in the international arena which are significant for their geographical leverage, economic and political strength, and natural resources.



for its national interest driven by the geopolitics of the region but also accounts for the 'shared interest' of other nation-states in the region – the role of Vishwaguru<sup>12,13</sup>. Bolstering India's strength is its naval power; India currently has around 65,000 active personnel, a fleet strength of 295, 2 aircrafts carriers, 18 submarines, 2 of which are ballistic missile capable nuclear subs, more than 50 destroyers, frigates and corvettes, helicopter squadrons capable of anti-sub warfare, and 13 ports and terminals<sup>14</sup>.

The Asia Pacific Construct (APC) garnered significant global attention, notably exemplified by the United States's adoption of the 'Rebalancing Strategy,' commonly referred to as the 'Pivot to Asia Strategy,' and India's articulation of its 'Look East policy.' The intensity of focus heightened, notably with the advocacy and promotion of the Indo-Pacific Construct by nations such as Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. This geopolitical narrative has garnered recognition, given its richness in resources, from an expanded cohort of actors, including countries such as France and entities like the European Union. The collective acknowledgement of this emergent geopolitical construct underscores its growing prominence as a focal point within the international discourse and geopolitical considerations<sup>15,16</sup>.

Henry Kissinger can better explain the significance of the Indo-Pacific and Power shift to the region. He argues in his work that "...the centre of gravity of world affairs has left the Atlantic and moved to the Pacific and Indian Oceans"<sup>17</sup>. This pivotal shift marks the conclusion of Western predominance and signals the ascendancy of non-Western nations, thereby fundamentally altering the global order. Notably, emerging powers such as India and China assume central roles as primary agents shaping this transformative paradigm<sup>17,18</sup>. These rising powers will change the Indo-Pacific Region's landscape, giving birth to a new geopolitical construct – 'Indo-Pacific'. This construct, as underscored by Kissinger, not only serves as a testament to the changing nature of the world order but also encapsulates the heightened influence wielded by these rising powers in shaping regional dynamics.

### ***India's Point of View of Indio-Pacific***

The Indo-Pacific emerges as a strategic focal point for India, synergistically reinforcing its 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies. The heightened regional activity accompanying this geopolitical transition emphasises the substantive impact of the Indo-Pacific construct on India's strategic and diplomatic engagements in the Asian continent<sup>19</sup>. The conceptual transition from 'Asia Pacific' to 'Indo-Pacific' signifies a paradigmatic shift aimed at comprehensively encapsulating diverse sub-regions, encompassing the Eastern coast of Africa, the Indian Ocean Region, South East Asia, East Asia, Oceania, and the Western coast of the United States of America. The emergence of the geographical construct

indicates the power shift towards Asia "acknowledges the growing interconnectedness between developments in the Indian Ocean (IO) and the Pacific Ocean"<sup>18</sup>.

Underscoring India's geopolitical construct of the region is its vision of a 'Free, Open and Inclusive' Indo-Pacific. In weaving together India's Indo-Pacific fabric, the thread of South-East Asia fits at the centre of the two oceans. As highlighted by the Prime Minister in his 2018 Shangri-La address, "...Inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality and unity [therefore] lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific. India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members..." is thus at the crux of India's Indo-Pacific vision<sup>20</sup>. The other organisations and groupings that are involved in bringing 'holistic stability'<sup>4</sup> to the region are the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), East Asia Summit (EAS).

### ***Global Actors: Claimants in the Indo-Pacific***

Indo-Pacific is a theatre of actions and opportunities. Its primary claimants are Australia, China, India, Japan, Pacific Island Countries (PIC), and the United States of America. The claimants beyond the region are nation-states of the European Union. Australia with its strategic interests looks at the region as a 'Goeconomic' construct. Similarly, China, India, Japan, and the United States of America also emphasise on this 'Goeconomic' construct and claim to establish a 'rule-based order' in the region. Though geographically smaller in size, the Pacific Island Countries are equal claimants in the region<sup>21</sup>.

### **GEOPOLITICS & INDO-PACIFIC: RAMIFICATIONS ON SECURITY**

The impact of geopolitics on security is due to various determinants from economic networks and resources richness in the region to dilemma associated with territorial conquests. These are discussed below.

### ***The Economics Behind Influence and Challenges Associated***

The Indo-Pacific accounts for 60% of the world's population and 60% of the world's GDP<sup>22,23</sup>. Taking account of natural resources, the Indian Ocean constitutes 40% of the world's offshore oil production; fishing in the Indian Ocean alone adds to 15% of the world's total. The region also accounts for a large stock of minerals and rare earth metals<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>4</sup>The holistic stability encompasses promoting security, peace, harmony, collaboration and cooperation.



Recognising the importance of this region, a Minilateral grouping, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) was formed between 14 partner countries (Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, the United States of America, and Vietnam) in May 2022. This framework aims to enhance inclusivity, sustainability, resilience, growth and development, cooperation, and peace in the region and amongst the partner countries. The partnership, at its launch, began negotiations on four pillars: Trade, Supply chains, Clean energy, decarbonisation and infrastructure, and Tax and anti-corruption<sup>24,25</sup>.

The stakes involved in the region also bring along a lot of challenges, which are, securing the free passage of trade and energy, ensuring the sustainable and equitable exploitation of natural and mineral resources, terrorism, piracy and organised crimes, and managing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations<sup>12</sup>.

### ***Revanchism in the South China Sea***

The South China Sea and ASEAN regions are in the middle of the Indo-Pacific<sup>20</sup>, “the confluence of two seas”<sup>26</sup>. The issues in the South China Sea region majorly deal with territorial claims. China’s claim with respect to the nine-dash line<sup>5</sup> has put itself in loggerheads with the ASEAN nation-states. Creation of new artificial islands, extending and militarising the existing islands have impacted the security portfolio of the region. These tensions in the region and China’s disregard for international arbitration, coupled with climate-related food security issues, marine ecosystem damage, and the increasing threat of water-level rise, have made the region volatile<sup>6,27,28</sup>.

### ***Sino-Indian Rapprochement: A Possibility or Impossibility***

Indo-Pacific is the theatre of action and opportunities for both India and China. In rising as great powers, these two nation-states have been crossing paths in various instances. The repercussion of the same is spilt over in the waters of the Indo-Pacific. The ‘great game’ can be observed in traditional military spheres, the diplomatic sphere, as well as in the economic sphere. While the ‘great game’ manifests in various spheres, the geopolitical perception of the region shapes their actions and interactions in the region<sup>29</sup>.

The recent scholarship on the region have found that relations between India and China are volatile and vulnerable. With their ever-expanding economies and widening geopolitical horizons, the bilateral relationship between the two rising Asian giants could be characterised more by competition than cooperation. These contesting interests

have perennially made rapprochement difficult to achieve<sup>30</sup>.

With the might of resources involved in the region and nation states’ race to claim and utilise these resources for advancement of their national interests, there is an explicit contestation in the region which have manifested in the form of territorial disputes and growing weaponisation in the region. This hint at an economic bearing to acts of security or insecurity in the region.

The perspectives discussed in the above sections focus on actors in this theatre of actions and opportunities. While the following sections will concentrate on their claims in the region.

## **ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION**

As discussed in the sections above, the shift in geopolitics provides us with a perspective of a shift from territorial space to maritime space. Arguably, such the shift is witnessed with a shift from nation-state centric to a global systems approach. As a matter of fact, the compounding factors are not necessarily within the nation-states but also in the international ecosystem.

In this section we analyse the claims of the global claimants for the region which are leading the equation shift to Indo-Pacific and India’s Foreign Policy in the context of having the region as the centre of gravity in line with its maritime strategies.

## **GLOBAL OUTLOOK ON ‘INDO-PACIFIC’: THE COMPETING CLAIMS & CLAIMANTS IN THE INDOPACIFIC**

Indo-Pacific is a field where multiple players with diverse ambitions are involved in the power game. The Australian outlook on Indo-Pacific is a zone of strategic interest ‘connecting the Indian and Pacific Ocean through South East Asia’. Australia looks at a pronounced strategic interest in the safeguarding of maritime trade routes, with a particular emphasis on the importation of crucial energy resources, especially petroleum and natural gas. This emphasises the centrality of secure and uninterrupted maritime trade flows in sustaining the economic vitality of the nation. Their strategic orientation aligns with the pursuit of economic opportunities for Australia in the southern Indo-Pacific region. They are looking at an intricate interplay between maritime security, trade dynamics, and economic opportunities in the context of the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific region<sup>31</sup>.

Similarly, Japan aims to play a leadership role in the Indo-Pacific through, Regional economic integration; Infrastructure cooperation- keeping the Chinese in check and being wary of their ‘debt trap’. Developing the Blue Dot Network (BDN), a certification platform to promote quality infrastructure; Energy Security - energy mix strategy that includes diversifying energy sources; Strengthening security

<sup>5</sup>The nine-dash line, also known as the eleven-dash line, is a visual representation of China’s disputed claims in the South China Sea.



cooperation for regional stability<sup>32</sup>.

The PIC collectively express apprehension regarding a paradigm shift in geostrategic dynamics within the region, manifested through a framework encapsulated within the overarching concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' where they see extreme competition and cooperation<sup>33</sup>.

The nation-states beyond the Indo-Pacific region are actively claiming to have stakes in the region, the European Union is one such. The Union is looking at a region that can uphold the rule-based international order while cooperating towards 'shared interest'<sup>34</sup>. The nation-states that have an interest in the region aim to bolster maritime security, capacity building, joint exercises, and human resource exchanges.

While there is specific interest among nation-states of the region for geopolitical gains, it is also to be noted that the nation-states beyond the region equally have 'shared interest' for the region, making geopolitics have a global outlook.

### DID THE EQUATION SHIFT TO INDO-PACIFIC?

Yes, it did shift to the Indo-Pacific. The Age of Anxiety and Anger that started as a reaction to globalisation is 'for real' and is here. People and nation-states are insecure about access to resources, both natural and mineral. The fear of resource shortage among Western nation-states is quite evident, and the Indo-Pacific region, unexplored and untouched, is the region under the radar. Another reason behind the shifting equations in global power is due to a significant contribution to the global economy and population by Asian giants, especially China and India.

For a long period of time, the Indo-Pacific was quiet and absent of any activity, which surely gave room for China to increase its sphere of influence through active infrastructure build-up and a substantial rise in island assets in the region. This paced progression is a threat that has added to the insecurity of the nation-states, small and big, in the Indo-Pacific. Hegemony in the region is unwarranted and unwelcomed, and it has, beyond doubt, made other historically influential and sovereign nation-states pay heed to the activity in the Indo-Pacific. The historically peaceful and stable region is not peaceful anymore due to the increased 'shared interests' by nation-states taking the trajectory of competition. It can be positively said that the region is comparatively more peaceful than the Central and West Asian regions, which is expected to be more beneficial and reduce the cost of military expenditure for the nation-states that have a stake in the Indo-Pacific region<sup>35,36</sup>.

The traditional 'balance of power theory' established by the 'power-political question' of territory, military power, and sphere of influence is back in the region. And lest we forget, the win-win game<sup>6</sup> employed by nations is slowly transitioning to a zero-sum game<sup>7</sup>. The claims that Walter

Russel Mead made in 2014 that geopolitics has returned with the 'revenge of revisionist powers'<sup>8</sup> are standing true<sup>36</sup>.

All of these factors cumulatively suggest that in the last one decade, there is an emergence of India as a prominent regional leader in the Indo-Pacific, especially its active role through G20 leadership, vaccine diplomacy and many such initiatives. There are claims that the substantive shift in India's Foreign Policy towards Indo-Pacific is a result of western interest and China's rise. However, India has been aware of its maritime potential since its independence and even before<sup>37</sup>. Hence there are more compelling reasons why India is looking at maritime space and also a global outlook for the region.

In the subsequent section, we analyse the reasons for India's explicit interests in maritime space.

### INDIA'S VIEW OF THE SHIFTING EQUATION OF ITS MARITIME STRATEGY

Indian and Pacific Oceans demand attention by the competing claims and claimants as discussed in the above sections. This highlights the vitality of India to have a stringent and proactive foreign and maritime security policy – for the region and in the region.

#### *Transitioning from the Fringes to the Core*

India looks at the Indo-Pacific as a region of positive cooperation and collaboration. To build such an ecosystem in the region, a comprehensive Indo-Pacific Action Plan is imperative. The region, with its well-known geopolitical challenges, needs the nation-states to work collectively to build maritime capacity, infrastructure and personnel. India, with the aim of building a 'Free, Open and Inclusive' region, needs to assume a role in strengthening and unifying the nation-states in the region. This involves building strategic partnerships with major nation-states like the USA, Japan, and Australia, as well as small island nations and groupings such as ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific. India can become the 'main player' by promoting the idea of inclusivity and ensuring that nation-states, irrespective of their power, are heard in the forums or organisations in the region. Domains like space, cyber security, maritime security, health, climate change and disaster management need to take the forefront in these forums, and India can play a role in doing so. India can also act as the bridge in unifying all the organisations, institutions, and groupings that are presently stressing the faultlines in the region. With the declaration of the role of regional leader, India has assumed the responsibility of regional stabiliser: transitioning from fringes to core.

The idea for the above figure is from the Minister of External Affairs, S Jaishankar's book *The India Way*. The figure discusses the maritime security strategy for India

<sup>6</sup>A situation where all the nation-states involved are benefitted.

<sup>7</sup>A situation where one nation-state gains while the other loses.

<sup>8</sup>Revisionist states/powers seek to undermine established order to increase their power and prestige in the international system.



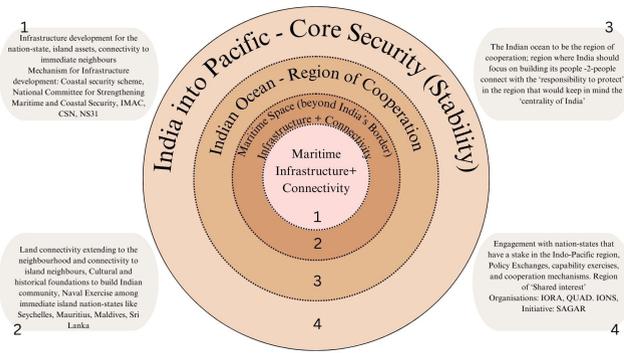


Fig. 1: Author's Illustration

in the Indo-Pacific Region. To achieve a larger goal of maritime security of not just in the region but also globally, the interplay of the concentric circles (1,2,3,4) become imperative. The figure brings out the necessity to secure hinterland infrastructure, to build effective sea lanes of communication and collaborations and cooperations in the region<sup>37</sup>.

The maritime security strategy for India is one that stems from the ambition of being the “Indo-Pacific Net Security Provider”<sup>38</sup>. Such a target involves building capacities and capabilities at different levels for various purposes. The attempt, however, starts at home. Building of maritime infrastructure and connectivity. This essentially involves enhancing hinterland connectivity, coastal infrastructure, connectivity to immediate neighbours and island assets. Coastal infrastructure can be viewed in two categories: development and security. The revitalisation of the Coastal Security Scheme (CSS) to involve the Navy, Cost Guard and the Marine Police, Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC), and National Command Control Communications and Intelligence Network (NC3I) are examples of security infrastructure enhancement. Development infrastructure accounts for the development of ports, for example, Sagarmala and Project Unnati<sup>39</sup> where the major ports of India are being rebuilt<sup>13</sup>.

To take this one step ahead, infrastructure and connectivity are to be developed in the region beyond the immediate neighbourhood; this is done through the development of multimodal infrastructure<sup>37</sup>. Examples of these are the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) multilateral multimodal project, The Kaladaan Multimodal project, the Sittwe Port and Hinterland connectivity project, and the Trilateral Highway Project between India, Myanmar, and Thailand. The desire to be the net security provider involves the influence in the larger circle, beyond neighbours of neighbours.

The oneness of the Indian Ocean Community is central to the ambition but also aligned with the shared goal of regional cooperation. This cooperation is driven by efforts of quick humanitarian assistance and disaster relief for freedom

of navigation and commerce, strategic partnerships, and naval capabilities to secure the maritime commons<sup>13,37</sup>. India's oneness strategy has Project Mausam at its centre concentrating on “understanding how the knowledge and manipulation of the monsoon winds has shaped interactions across the Indian Ocean and led to the spread of shared knowledge systems, traditions, technologies and ideas along maritime routes”<sup>40</sup>.

Finally, the larger cooperation in the region is required for the peace and development in the region. This involves capability engagement parties to the region, which is far from India's borders<sup>37</sup>. For example, engagements with Australia, the United States of America, Japan, etc. A few initiatives that can be discussed here are the Theatre Level Readiness and Operational Exercise (TROPEX), the Malabar Exercise, the Security and Growth for All in Region (SAGAR) initiative, etc.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct is no doubt achieved a prominent position as a result of compelling and compounding factors amongst the nation-states across the globe in general and India's neighbourhood, in particular. In this paper, the shift from nation state centric to global systems approach in understanding the geopolitics in the Indo-pacific region has been critically analysed.

The analysis illustrates the significance of maritime strategies from India's vantage point in bolstering its geopolitical capacity and capability in the region especially the shift in the dynamics between China and USA. It is in this context, it is interesting to note that such shifts claim to be a derivative of the western interests and China's rising power as described in literature in the domain of international relations and security studies. As a matter of fact, India's attention toward the region and its bolstering maritime capabilities are not primarily because of China's rising power but also due to the factor of enhancing access to rich resources. However, there is limited analysis or exposition regarding India's construct of geopolitical significance of the Indo-Pacific in the recent times, especially in advancing its maritime strategies. This study can be an effective case to understand the changing orientation of geopolitics, i.e., from land to sea and from a single pivot to multiple pivots.

In this line, the analysis further illustrates that India has witnessed a transition from the fringes to the core in terms of taking actions in the region. Arguably, the perspective of leadership on the region and leveraging of maritime space evolved through time but the region and the maritime space themselves retained prominence. The influence on Foreign Policies decisions of the nation-states on the region accounted not just the domestic politics and the national interest but also the external factors such as the action and



interest of other nation-states in the region. However, this analysis is an outcome of literature from secondary data sources and could provide better insights of New Delhi's evolving vantage points and shifting gravities by gaining access through primary data sources at the helm of Foreign Policy making.

Since, at the centre of Delhi's changing worldview lies its retreat to the oceans, there is a need for comprehensive maritime strategy depicting India's larger strategic culture. This is reflective of the 'Net Security Provider' that India aims to be through 'protection of global supply chains, avoiding deeper regional tensions and exploitation of blue economy' which involves holistic security approach.

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