

India's Successes and Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

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Summary

The last few years have seen a significant growth in India's role and influence in what is now being increasingly referred to as the Indo-Pacific region. A series of factors has led to New Delhi acquiring a greater profile in the region, but there also lie many challenges ahead for India.

Introduction

The United States (US), under President Donald Trump, has been following an 'America First' policy in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere. The 'Indo-Pacific' term reflects the increasing convergence of interests of nations in the region, which encompasses both the Indian and Pacific Oceans and has caught on in both academic and policy circles in the context of the rise of China and India. At the same time, Washington seems to be inclined to give increasing importance to India in the strategic realm, as seen in its decision to rename its oldest and largest military command, the US Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command. In a significant change from the past, the US has also now become one of the biggest sellers of defence weaponry to India.

A series of factors has led to a rise in India's role and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. First, as India's economy grows, its influence in the region is also seeing a commensurate rise. New Delhi is also increasing its naval presence in the region. Second, it has set up additional naval bases recently in its strategically-located Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which lie very close to the Straits of Malacca. It is worth mentioning here that New Delhi already has a tri-services command in these islands.

Third, New Delhi's strategic relations with countries like the US and Japan are improving rapidly and this has been a major factor in its growing influence in the region. India, Japan, and the US are part of the *Malabar* naval exercises. In addition, India, Japan, and the US have also been holding a strategic dialogue amongst themselves since December 2011. New Delhi and Tokyo now also have an annual naval exercise (known as the Japan-India Maritime Exercise), which was not the case earlier. In a first, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President Trump and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Argentina in 2018, which clearly indicates India's growing importance in the Indo-Pacific.

Fourth, concerns over Beijing's growing assertiveness in the region have brought together India, Japan, Australia and the US together in the 'Quad' or the 'Quadrilateral Alliance', which was resurrected at the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in the Philippines in November 2017. The 'Quad' had been tried earlier too, but it faded away in the light of protestations from Beijing.

Fifth, New Delhi's relations with regional groupings like the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are also improving. During India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2018, the heads of state of all the 10 ASEAN countries were present.

Challenges

However, it is not as if things are smooth sailing for New Delhi. There are still quite a few challenges for New Delhi to play a bigger role in the Indo-Pacific. First, the Pulwama terror attack on 14 February 2019 in the border state of Jammu and Kashmir has put the spotlight back on terrorism in South Asia. This may, once again, bog down New Delhi in the subcontinent, something which New Delhi, especially under the Modi government, has tried to avoid.

Second, although the 'Act-East' policy has enjoyed a fair measure of success, it is still a work in progress. There are still many connectivity initiatives, like the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway and the Indian-funded Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Corridor Project in Myanmar, which will provide connectivity between the eastern ports of India and Northeast India via Myanmar, besides providing the northeastern states of India with access to the sea. These initiatives are running behind schedule.

Third, India faces huge domestic challenges although it has become the "fastest growing major economy in the world". The economy has been facing significant headwinds of late. In addition, New Delhi runs a huge trade deficit with countries like China.

Fourth, New Delhi is a large importer of energy and, hence, its economy can be impacted by sudden fluctuations in supplies of energy resources.

Fifth, although its relations with countries like Japan and Vietnam have improved, these have not translated into big improvements on the trade front in spite of the favourable government-to-government relations. This will be a challenge for New Delhi in the years ahead.

Sixth, New Delhi will have to devote more time and attention to its immediate neighbourhood. Although Prime Minister Modi had started out on an emphatic note by inviting the heads of state of all the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation countries to his inauguration, things have petered out since then, especially with respect to countries like Pakistan and Nepal.

Conclusion

The road ahead will not be easy for India even as its influence increases in the region and beyond. India will have to carefully calibrate its foreign policy towards the countries in the Indo-Pacific region. New Delhi will also need to have a greater diversity of sources from where it imports its energy resources. The situation in Afghanistan also looks tenuous in the light of some reports of the US seeking a withdrawal from the region. All these mean that

New Delhi will have a very fluid external environment to contend with. While India will have to exercise caution in some areas, in other areas, it will have to walk the talk.

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