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Indo-Pacific Concept: Juggling for Clarity

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SYNOPSIS

There is no consensus on what the Indo-Pacific concept will cover. It is not clear what kind of structure is needed for such an Indo-Pacific construct. Nevertheless, the main protagonists behind the Indo-Pacific concept continue their diplomatic efforts to crystalise such a strategy. ASEAN remains non-committal even though it has reasserted ASEAN centrality.

COMMENTARY

INDIA, JAPAN and the United States held their first trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the recently concluded G20 Summit in Buenos Aires. Invariably deliberating on the Indo-Pacific, the leaders of the three countries agreed that a "free, open, inclusive and rules-based" order is essential for the Indo-Pacific's peace and prosperity.

They also stated the importance of meeting in a trilateral format at multilateral conferences. Coined as the JAI meeting, Prime Minister Narendra Modi explained the significance of the JAI (Japan, America, India) acronym, which translates to "success" in Hindi.

JAI Troika

The JAI grouping is shaping up to play a key role in Indian foreign policy. India has proposed the three countries synergise their infrastructure projects and other efforts in the region. Tokyo and New Delhi have already agreed to deepen naval and maritime-security cooperation and collaborate on infrastructure projects in third countries, including Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, to enhance strategic connectivity in the Indo-Pacific.

Assuring all countries of the inclusiveness and openness of the Indo-Pacific concept, PM Modi articulated five action points that would serve the common interest of promoting peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region — connectivity, sustainable development, maritime security, disaster relief and freedom of navigation.

Modi also underlined the importance of building consensus on an architecture in the Indo-Pacific region based on principles of mutual benefit and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Question of Implementation

While stakeholders have a broad agreement on the principles that the Indo-Pacific concept entails, what needs to be discussed next is the implementation of these principles of freedom of navigation, peaceful resolution of disputes, and a rules-based order.

Without addressing the question of implementation and lacking clarity on the specifics, countries in the region including ASEAN will continue to remain hesitant to embrace the Indo-Pacific concept.

According to Kavi Chongkittavorn, ASEAN member states showed different levels of scepticism to the Indo-Pacific concept. The Philippines and Cambodia were the most reluctant to discuss the initiative within the ASEAN framework fearing it might hurt ASEAN centrality, while Laos, Brunei and Myanmar were silent.

However, they became more receptive to discussions as more information became available. Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia seem to be supportive of the initiative although each of them would like to shape different aspects of the Indo-Pacific concept in pursuant of their respective strategic interests.

Changing Strategic Paradigm?

The strategic paradigm has changed in the Indian Ocean and the debate now is how to respond. Washington and New Delhi have time and again reiterated that ASEAN centrality is key to the Indo-Pacific concept as it embodies regional inclusivity and multilateral trade. ASEAN already has in place a set of inter-linking regional mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus, designed to engage big powers and neighbouring countries.

The Indo-Pacific framework should make use of these existing mechanisms to ensure that the Indian Ocean region has complementary rather than competing mechanisms. For instance, ASEAN can engage its ASEAN Maritime Forum to complement efforts by the Indian Ocean RIM Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

ASEAN can also engage BIMSTEC as an economic sub-grouping in the Bay of Bengal involving Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan, especially since two of the BIMSTEC members (Myanmar and Thailand) are also

member states of ASEAN. BIMSTEC's connectivity projects in the Bay of Bengal region will greatly benefit from ASEAN's involvement.

ASEAN's role in the Indo-Pacific Framework

To get ASEAN on board with the Indo-Pacific concept, it is essential the Southeast Asian grouping plays a role in defining the evolving regional security architecture which follows. Since Indonesia has been the most active among ASEAN member states in articulating its version of the Indo-Pacific, Jakarta has been tasked by ASEAN to finalise the ASEAN concept paper on the Indo-Pacific.

Although the concept paper is still being drawn up, ASEAN diplomats have alerted ASEAN dialogue partners that the ASEAN framework will not toe the line of the US-inspired strategy despite some overlap on key principles. Furthermore, it will be inclusive and not aimed at any particular power.

It will also come with practical measures and action plans. ASEAN aims to synergise elements of Washington, Tokyo and India's concepts with ASEAN-led projects concerning infrastructure development, governance and maritime cooperation.

ASEAN foreign ministers are scheduled for a retreat in Chiang Mai in January 2019 and will have the opportunity to further deliberate on ASEAN's vision for the Indo-Pacific.

Need to Continue Engagement

The Indian Ocean is a contested, complex and congested region. Each stakeholder has their own perception of what the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) means. For Washington, the Indo-Pacific stretches from the west coast of the United States to the west coast of India. For Tokyo and New Delhi, it lies from the west coast of the US to the east coast of Africa.

The US has emphasised the power dynamics underlying the FOIP while Japan has highlighted its economic potential. To Japan, the FOIP is open to all countries which observe the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and relevant standards of transparency and sustainable development.

While stressing that no one is excluded, the US aspires to a regional order of independent nations in the Indo-Pacific that defends its populations, respects human dignity, competes fairly in the market place, and is free from great-power domination. Thus, it may not be easy for China to be part of the FOIP even if Beijing wished to be included.

As different states have different understandings of the idea of Indo-Pacific, it is critical to ensure that the Indo-Pacific concept does not create misunderstandings. To this end, there is a need to continue engagement with ASEAN member states and stakeholders in the Indian Ocean so that all Indian Ocean actors are on the same page. More so now that Australia, India and Indonesia are heading into electoral campaigning in 2019.

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