

第7章

India's Foray into the Indo-Pacific: Embracing Ambiguity through Strategic Autonomy

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Summary:

This paper examines India's approach to the 'Indo-Pacific' under the Modi administration vis-à-vis other nation states like the United States, Japan, and Australia. It employs the framework of critical geopolitics and myth-making to argue that there is an ambiguity about the application of this unified, coherent concept. The paper further examines the pillars of the 'Indo-Pacific': connectivity, maritime security, prospects of an '[liberal, international] international order' and regionalism to evaluate these nations' approaches to it. In the assessment of India's approach, this paper focuses on the concept of strategic autonomy and argues that under the Modi government in the debate on the Indo-Pacific region, the concept of strategic autonomy has a two-fold connotation. Firstly, in the concept of sovereignty and building alliances with the West; and secondly, in the concept of maintaining diversity, plurality, and Indian values intact. Furthermore, the first connotation has impacted India's approach to connectivity and maritime security; while the second connotation impacts the components of maintaining a 'liberal order' and the idea of regionalism within the Indo-Pacific. As the complementary or competitive nature of the debates of the Indo-Pacific region evolve, this could impact the foreign policy outlook of the nation, which the new government post the General Elections in May 2019 could determine whether the connotations of strategic autonomy be wedded to principles of outward engagement or inward attention.

Key-words:

Indo-Pacific, India, Australia, Japan, United States, Geopolitics, Connectivity, Maritime Security, Strategic Autonomy.

Introduction:

The 'Indo-Pacific' as a term has rapidly gained currency in the recent years with the economic rise of India and China, the power shift underway with the United States. This power shift has been underway for more than a decade, when China's economy surpassed Germany's in 2009, the financial crisis in 2007-08 gave momentum to the transition. It was in light of these circumstances that nations surrounding China while cementing economic cooperation were also wary of the nature of the challenges that its military rise portended. This narrative of cooperation and competition cooperation in the region along with the breaking down of once fixed sub-regional barriers in Asia (West, South, South-East, and Northeast-Asia) called for a new framework to visualize the region.

While the origins of the concept (in the Indian context) could be traced back to an Indian naval officer, Capt. (Dr) Gurpreet Khurana's article, who is credited for having illustrated the concept first in the context of Indo-Japanese cooperation in securing sea lines of communication.¹ It was followed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who visited the Indian Parliament in 2007 and made a speech about the "Confluence of Two Seas", the Indian and Pacific Oceans alluding to the formation of a "broader Asia".² In 2011 Hilary Clinton wrote an article in the Foreign Policy magazine about the significant connection between Indian and Pacific Oceans to announce the United States' pivot to the region and introduced the word 'Indo-Pacific'³; followed by Australia who adopted the term in 2013 Defense White Paper.⁴ The term gradually gained credence in policy and think-tank circles in Canberra, Tokyo, New Delhi, and Washington.

¹ Khurana discusses this in his interview with *The Diplomat*, where he states that he was involved in a discussion with Japanese analysts in the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA) in October 2006 after which he published the article titled, "Security of Sea-Lines: Prospects for India-Japan cooperation" in *Strategic Analysis*, in July 2007. See: Mercy A. Kuo, "The Origin of 'Indo-Pacific' as Geopolitical Construct, Insights from Gurpreet Khurana", URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-origin-of-indo-pacific-as-geopolitical-construct/> (Accessed on 2019 January 25).

² "Confluence of Two Seas" [2007] Speech by Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, See URL: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html> August [Accessed 2018 December 2]

³ Hilary Clinton [2011] "America's Pacific century", *Foreign Policy*, November, See URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> [Accessed 2018 December 2].

⁴ Australia Defense White Paper [2013], Government of Australia, See URL: http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2013/docs/WP_2013_web.pdf [Accessed 2018 December 2]

The basic components of the Indo-Pacific include: maritime security, i.e. securing sea lanes of communication, freedom of navigation, maintaining an open and transparent rules-based order, abiding by international law, open dialogue and discussions, and fostering regional development by engaging in infrastructure and connectivity projects. Many countries have adopted this concept in myriad of ways, and connotations, it is hard to gauge how much they have coordinated to accommodate a single vision, as a unified adaptation of this concept seems to be missing. This discourse on the 'Indo-Pacific' grew from a geopolitical construct, a mental map that was slowly incorporated into various nation's foreign policy interests, and security interests, albeit in ad hoc and limited manner. As nations gradually sought their place in this framework, demarcating the territories encompassed, it is now discussed as the 'Indo-Pacific region'; some nations like Japan and United States have now declared an 'Indo-pacific strategy' or a 'vision'. The framework is here to stay but it will continue to evolve depending on change in governments in power and international circumstances.

The focus of this paper is on India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific under the Modi government. This paper is divided broadly into four parts, the first part provides a framework linking critical geopolitics and myth-making which is employed to assess the concept of the "Indo-Pacific region", the second part examines the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' as it is adopted and defined by a few prominent nations like India, Japan, the United States, and Australia. The third part focuses on key components of the framework- connectivity, maritime security and regionalism to situate various nations' engagement with the concept. The fourth part assesses India's engagement with this framework from the perspective of strategic autonomy and the paper finally ends with a section on the conclusion.

1. Geopolitics and Myth-Making

Historically, there have been periods of dramatic economic and political change that impact the geographic conditions of nation states and vice-versa. The hunt for resources, need to secure fertile lands or access to deep water ports, led to the control of territories, demarcation of spheres of influence, and the prowess in statecraft and grand strategies. The Silk Roads of the 12th-13th century, the spice routes, the trade of porcelain and silk, of oil and food resources have in many ways determined or nudged the rise and fall of empires and nation states. Hence given this context, as nation states revive some of the

old routes and concepts in the present day with benign connotations like that of China's maritime and continental silk roads, or even setting up 'arcs of freedom and prosperity' (as Japanese PM Shinzo Abe stated in 2007 in the speech at the Indian Parliament), it would be useful to examine these constructs to assess how nation states deploy these "myths" or retell these stories to guide present day diplomacy.

Cynthia Weber (2009, 1-12) explains, "IR [international relations] myths are 'apparent truths' usually expressed in slogans that IR traditions rely upon to be true". Weber goes on to say "the myth-function in IR theory is making a 'fact' out of an interpretation...it is the transformation of what is particular, cultural, ideological...into what appears to be universal, natural, and purely empirical. It is naturalising meanings-making them into common sense- that are the products of cultural practices". These myths serve as building blocks or are used to attribute action and coordination between different international actors on different issues. In one way one can argue it is what led to the culmination of the discourse on the 'Indo-Pacific'.

This growing debate on the Indo-Pacific by various nations highlights three challenges: first, there is a conflation between old and new models of territorial threats, sovereignty claims that resurrect cold war structured 'rimland/heartland' stories ('us versus them' narratives) alongside economic diversity, trade flows, globalization; secondly, the joining of the Indian and Pacific oceans involves a connection between two diverse regions and sub-regions, where international challenges are so diverse (prominence of non-traditional versus traditional threats with environmental change influencing factors of conflict); and lastly, the search for joint responses to these challenges through new collaborative pathways encounter old rivalries under new conditions.

Gerard O' Tuathail a proponent of critical geopolitics, presents an overview of the new strands of geopolitics in a post-Cold War era (Tuathail 1999, 111), (i) formal geopolitics: the old school proponents like Halford Mackinder, Alfred Thayer Mahan in an imperial setting who popularized the 'heartland', 'rimland' debates; (ii) practical geopolitics: everyday practice of foreign policy reasoning by governments; (iii) popular geopolitics: the role of mass media and popular culture in constructing national identities and understanding geographic conditions; and (iv) structural geopolitics: "how globalization, informationalization, and risk society conditions transform geopolitical practices". Hence to cope with the power shift underway in Asia or the Indo-Pacific region, modern day strategies are seasoned with the simultaneous old and new problems

that make solutions tailored to new challenges imperative along with new realities and diverse actors.

Tuathail concludes with three observations about geopolitics in this post-Cold War context (Tuathail 1999, 119-123): firstly, that the idea of 'national security' in the contemporary era is now global (with regional and transnational threats of terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction); (ii) the "institutions of Western modernity [free market, welfare state, multiparty democracies, etc] are experiencing a 'victory crisis'" as "industrial society institutions cannot handle, manage and respond to the problems of risk society"; lastly (iii) the emergence of "Countermodernity": which is an "attempt to manage the chaos and upheaval caused by modernization. It does so by resorting to myth and violence, by inventing mythic traditions and communal fundamentalisms while drawing borders and organizing violence against those it designates as 'outsiders' to its naturalized community and 'chaotic' elements in its aesthetic visions of society." Thus, the expansion of 'resurgent nationalisms' etc. These assessments of the world almost two decades ago, still hold true in the current context of the so-called current backlash against globalization and the rise of populism.

As Asia re-emerges in this so-called Pacific century, the institutions that sealed the 20th century or the Atlantic century borne out of colonization and two World Wars- there appears to be new winds of change again. The myths of peace and stability that exist, which theories underpin models, and how much truth existed in them to gain support, ultimately determined the course of history. The newly emerged Indo-Pacific construct is situated in these narratives. It is no coincidence that these new geopolitical myths are inter-linked with the present uncertainty about structures of the 'liberal international order'. The direction that the present debates take have an impact on the structures of peace of the future.

Thus, this paper attempts to raise the following questions when un-packaging the components of the Indo-Pacific: is it a region or is it a strategy? How many countries adopted it in their foreign policies? What are the central components of such a framework? How is history being used in diplomacy to further political interests? How would local governments interact with these tectonic changes? As local governments seek investments what would be the national implications of such changes? What is the relation between sovereignty and connectivity projects? Will multiple economic models translate into multiple political models? These questions warrant answers and

explanations in times of such change. Changes in small parts of the world like Hambantota that have repercussions for the region. It is in this light that the Indo-Pacific construct would be examined.

2. Nations and the Indo-Pacific:

2-1. Modi Government and the Indo-Pacific:

Indian think tanks and government officials have repeatedly used the term the 'Indo-Pacific', the Indian government's official engagement with the term has been gradual and deliberate. This section would delve into the evolution of India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.

Geographically, a peninsular nation, India bound by mountains on its north and connected to the Arabian Sea (leads to West Asia) connected to Bab-al-Mandab and Hormuz Straits on the West, and Bay of Bengal in the East (with Andaman and Nicobar Islands, up to Indonesia) leading to the straits of Malacca. India's first Prime Minister Nehru once noted India was on the 'crossroads of Asia'. For a long time, three wars kept it continentally focused with more priority on continental policies than maritime interests. However, post the 1990s increasing energy dependence on West Asia, including immigration and remuneration from the region, as well as the gradual increase of trade with East Asia, led India to adopt a 'Look East' policy in the 1990s as it grew dependent on the Indian Ocean for its trade and prosperity. In 2011 Indian defence minister A.K. Anthony in a speech declared India accepts its role as a "net security provider to the island nations in the Indian Ocean".⁵

In 2014 the year Prime Minister Modi was elected into power, he decided to modify India's policy towards East Asia from "Look East" to "Act East" policy to deepen ties with ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific region. A few months later in 2015 January with U.S. President Obama, India signed the "Joint Strategic Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region" defined the geographical scope of their partnership from "Africa to East Asia to support sustainable inclusive development, regional connectivity...infrastructure development" and also made a reference to the UNCLOS

⁵ Indian Navy-Net Security Provider to Islands Nations in the Indian Ocean Region, Ministry of Defense, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, October 12 2011, URL: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=76590>. [Accessed 2019 January 11]

and peaceful settlement of the South China Sea dispute. India aligned interests in the Asia-Pacific region with the United States. To formalize its intentions in the region India launched its “Maritime Security Strategy” acknowledging “the sweeping change that the global and regional geo-strategic environment...the shift in worldview from a Euro-Atlantic to an Indo-Pacific focus”, additionally delineating its primary and secondary areas of maritime interest.⁶ By this time China had declared its intentions to set up the Belt and Road Initiative, then called Maritime Silk Road and Silk Route projects.⁷ In the September of 2015 India-U.S.-Japan held their first inaugural trilateral dialogue and Japan had become a permanent participant in the Malabar exercise. In December of the year, India and Japan signed a Joint Vision Statement for the first time expanded their partnership to the “Indo-Pacific region”.

Meanwhile India continued to engage with China and Russia in the BRICS forum as they focused on creating multipolar world order. Subsequently India became a new member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This steady deepening of ties between the Pacific actors gave the impression that India was playing a balancing role between continental interests (Russia and China) and its maritime interests (with Japan and the United States). The Indo-Pacific narrative around this period was separate from the continental Silk Road narrative, as India perceived its interests and goals different despite doubts over the potential clash between the two. Despite its complicated ties with China, in May 2017 the One Belt One Road Forum was launched and India was the only nation that boycotted the event. Indian Ministry of External Affairs released this statement, “connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, and rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities; balanced ecological and environmental protection and prevention standards, transparent assessment of project costs...that respects sovereignty and

⁶ The Indian Navy defined primary area of interest to be the Indian Ocean region (and its chokepoints and littoral regions) while secondary area of interest (sea routes to the Pacific Ocean and Southern Indian Ocean region and West Coast of Africa, etc.) Refer: Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy, Ministry of Defence (Navy) 2015, See URL: https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf [Accessed 2018 December 2]

⁷ In 2013 China had made its first speech about the Maritime Silk Road in Kazakhstan and Maritime Silk Route in Indonesia.

territorial integrity”.⁸ Despite India’s vocal concerns against the China Pakistan Economic Corridor that violated the territorial claims over disputed territory in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir’s Gilgit Baltistan. This further exacerbated tensions between the two as previously, China rejected India’s membership in the Nuclear Security Group, China putting off Indian requests for banning Jaish-e-Mohammad (a terror group)’s chief Maulana Masood Azhar under UN Resolution 1267. As Sino-Pakistan ties continued to deepen, with China additionally building the Gwadar port in Pakistan, and has invested in several port projects in the Indian Ocean Region surrounding India. Chinese behaviour and actions bring up questions of balance of power struggles and coalitions, as some claim it was an attempt to “balance and contain within South Asia”.⁹

This culminated in the Doklam crisis between July-August 2017, where Indian and Chinese troops had a faceoff in the trijunction of the Doklam Valley that bordered India, China and Bhutan. Both nations were credited for de-escalating the tensions through diplomatic channels peacefully. The leaders outlined the “Astana Consensus” on the side-lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit where it was agreed upon that “Both India and China should be an anchor of stability in regional and global situations... [despite existing] differences, the two countries should strive to ensure that these do not become disputes.”¹⁰ India went ahead and conducted two informal summits with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Putin in Wuhan and Sochi respectively. By this time, a new president Donald J. Trump was elected into office in the United States. India’s approach to its geopolitical interests in the region had transformed as Prime Minister Modi delivered the keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018 outlining “India’s vision for the Indo-Pacific” for the first time.¹¹

⁸ “Official Spokesperson’s response to a query on participation of India in OBOR/RBI/Forum”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, See URL: <https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/Official+Spokespersons+response+to+a+query+on+participation+of+India+in+OBORBRI+Forum> [Accessed 2019 February 25]

⁹ Rajesh Rajagopalan [2018] “As India’s power grows, China’s containment strategy will get frenetic”, Economic Times, URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/as-indias-power-grows-chinas-containment-strategy-will-get-frenetic/articleshow/52705951.cms> [Accessed 2019 February 27]

¹⁰ Answered by Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale to the Committee on External Affairs (2017-2018), “Sino-Indian Relations Including Doklam, Border Situation and Cooperation in International Organizations”, Sixteenth Lok Sabha, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, September 2018, p.3, URL: http://164.100.47.193/lssccommittee/External%20Affairs/16_External_Affairs_22.pdf

¹¹ Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue, 2018 URL: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/> [Accessed 2018 July 25]

The four key points of the Shangri-La speech are as follows : Firstly, the geographic expanse of the Indo-Pacific: PM Modi began the speech highlighting the diplomatic achievements with ASEAN, but what is less focused upon is, the same breath with which he mentioned India's growing connections and visions with Russia (especially since the Sochi-Summit, also re-iterating the BRICS goal of "creating a multipolar world order"), the United States (by omitting the phrase 'free and open Indo-Pacific strategy' and declared the shared interests to be "open, stable, secure, prosperous Indo-pacific region") as well as China (describing it as a nation with "many layers in the friendship" announcing that "Asia's future works better when India and China work together and trust in confidence"). Secondly, the speech emphasised "ASEAN centrality" in a strong manner, positing the regional institution as "the heart of the new Indo-Pacific" supporting its values of "inclusiveness and openness". Thirdly, the values imbibed or the ideology underlying India's vision could be discerned by the choice of words used, "free, open, inclusive, region that embraces all...includes all nations in this geography as well as others beyond who have a stake in it". By stressing on "inclusivity", one could argue that India was speaking to the previously nervous ASEAN leaders who were sceptical of this new regional concept that diluted their role or made them pawns in a great game between Asian middle powers once again. Additionally, it could also be a reference to actors like China and Russia, that (by this time U.S.-Chinese tensions were shoring up, U.S. President Trump's 'Make America Great Again' and abandonment of principles globalization was ushering in protectionist policies) India sought to re-build new ties, or seek new pathways to regional stability with. Since then there have been increasing arguments on India reviving principles of non-alignment and strategic autonomy as India conflated the earlier distinct continental and maritime alignments as it participated in the Russia-India-China trilateral ministerial which was in few days followed by the Japan-Australia-India trilateral dialogue. Both trilaterals focused on principles of "inclusivity" as the former dialogue even released a Communique on "freedom of navigation and over-flight rights based on international law" seeking an inclusive Asia-Pacific region".¹²

2-2. America's Relations with the Indo-Pacific:

¹² Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury [2018] "India, Japan & Australia firm up partnership for free and open Indo-Pacific region", Economic Times, See URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-japan-australia-firm-up-partnership-for-free-and-open-indo-pacific-region/articleshow/62055943.cms> [Accessed 2019 February 25]

The United States has always been credited as the ‘resident’ power in the Asia-Pacific with its hub-and-spoke alliance system with significant military infrastructure in the region. The earlier mentioned article by Hilary Clinton in Foreign Policy as well as former U.S. President Obama’s ‘Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific’ also referred to as the ‘pivot’, was aimed at shifting the focus of U.S. strategy and security institutions from the West Asian crises to the ‘Asia-Pacific region’.¹³ There was an attempt made in the final years of the Obama administration when the “Second phase of the Rebalance” was being discussed, the idea of re-modelling the traditional ‘hub-and-spokes’ into an expansive, inter-connected, intra-connected “network of alliances and partners” as it was the period when security minilaterals, trilaterals were in their nascent stages.¹⁴

The election of President Trump ushered in this air of uncertainty and unpredictability of the future role of the United States in the region. The transactional nature of diplomacy (prioritizing ‘America first’) along with lack of interest in principles like multilateralism, raised doubts about alliance management in the Asia-Pacific region. It was noted how “questions that might lead to a debate over U.S. strategic priorities in Asia-such as how should Washington contend with the ever-rising influence of China, how U.S. influence can be leveraged in the service of regional peace and prosperity and how the U.S. can build collective responses to regional economic and military challenges-are not being asked in Washington.”¹⁵ This was a period when North Korea was the biggest strategic priority of the administration.

In October 2017, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, made a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies discussing the future of relations with India and in the same context for the first time mentioning the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” (which some scholars noted that it was originally proposed by Japan who was the “main mover” behind this concept¹⁶) and identified India as “a partner In the Indo-

¹³ The United States would interchangeably use terms like ‘Indo-Pacific’ or specify ‘Asia-Pacific region’ or ‘Indo-Asia-Pacific’ when talking about the region.

¹⁴ Remarks on “The Future of the Rebalance: Enabling Security in the Vital & Dynamic Asia-Pacific”, United States Department of Defense 2016, URL: <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/959937/remarks-on-the-future-of-the-rebalance-enabling-security-in-the-vital-dynamic-a/>, [Accessed 2019 February 27]

¹⁵ Sheila A Smith, “Whither Trump’s Asia Policy?” 2017 East Asia Forum, URL: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/04/whither-trumps-asia-policy/>, [Accessed 2019 February 4]

¹⁶ Takehori Horimoto, “The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy: India’s Wary Response”, 2018, URL: <https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00436/the-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy-india%E2%80%99s-wary-response.html> [Accessed 2018 October 11]

pacific”. Tillerson also declared “China’s “provocations in the South China Sea as directly challenging the international law and norms”, referred to its “predatory economics” (India had first alluded to the term in its statement on the Belt and Road Forum). American interests in the Indo-Pacific were defined as “goals of peace security, freedom of navigation, free and open architecture; trilateral engagement between the U.S., India, and Japan...with an interest in developing and expanding transparent, high-standard regional lending mechanisms.¹⁷ The Trump administration attributed its trade deficit with China as well as loss of jobs domestically to Chinese unfair and non-transparent trade practices and assertive behaviour. Tillerson speech's anti-Chinese intent could be underlined by the terms “free” meaning “free from coercion” (by Beijing) and “open” underlined by “abiding by rules, not forcing technology transfer...not stealing intellectual property”.¹⁸ As U.S.-China trade ties worsened, and tensions increased, this was translated into the following government documents like National Security Strategy (2017) and Defense White Paper (2017) where the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” was laden with a strong anti-China position. Furthermore, in May 2018 the U.S.-Pacific Command was renamed as the Indo-Pacific Command.

2-3. Japan’s Engagement with the Indo-Pacific

Japan was the earliest proponent of the Indo-Pacific construct. During PM Abe’s first stint in office in 2007 when he pronounced the ‘Confluence of Two Seas’ at the Indian Parliament. After being elected into government in 2012, the steady deepening of ties with India, led to the joint vision statement in December 2015 when both nations agreed to take “responsibility for the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region”. Both nations widened the scope and intent of the ‘special strategic partnership’ to include Africa in their mental map of the Indo-Pacific region, as they looked to establish an “Asia-Africa Growth Corridor”, with the intention of extending development and connectivity projects between the two regions. During the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in August 2016, PM Abe formally

¹⁷ “Defining our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, URL: https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/171018_An_Address_by_U.S._Secretary_of_State_Rex_Tillerson.pdf?O0nMCCRjXZiUa5V2cF8_NDiZ14LYRX3m, (Accessed 2017 October 20).

¹⁸ Brad Glosserman [2018] “The Indo-Pacific: A U.S. Perspective”, URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/indo-pacific-us-perspective-20692> (Accessed 2019 February 15).

announced the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” whose pillars include: (i) upholding principles of rule of law and freedom of navigation; (ii) the pursuit of economic prosperity through enhancing connectivity, including through Quality Infrastructure development by maintaining international standards; (iii) peace and stability through assistance of capacity building and maritime law enforcement¹⁹. In November when PM Abe and U.S. President Trump met, they exchanged views about this, and since the East Asia Summit of 2017 at Da Nang in Vietnam, the United States carried forth the Japanese proposal of this strategy. While India engages with the Indo-pacific concept as an extension of its “Act East” policy with Japan’s strategy. The strategy has been widely promoted by Japan in various fora, as a flagship strategy for cooperation in the region, between other U.S. allies like Australia. The rhetoric against China grew stronger as the Quadrilateral Initiative was revived briefly in 2017 during the East Asian summit (which will be elaborated upon in a later section). The ties had turned in 2018, when the thawing of ice occurred between Japan and China and Japanese PM made his first visit to Beijing in October.

The next month as nations gathered together for the East Asia Summit in 2018 in Singapore, Japan conducted separated bilateral meetings with ASEAN nations, there was a noted softening in the tone of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” which now is known as the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision”. This change of semantics has a weighted impact given the context as in 2018 during the Shangri La Dialogue, India in the keynote address presented its “Vision for the Indo-Pacific region”, again after interacting with Chinese and Russian leaders. Whether Japan consulted India about this semantics is unknown, however articles observe how in a bilateral news conference with Malaysia during the side-lines of the East Asia Summit, Japan first used the term ‘vision’.²⁰ The same article quoted a Japanese Foreign Ministry official who apparently said, “Some ASEAN members didn’t like the idea of having to make a choice between an Indo-Pacific strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative. We decided it wasn’t in our best interests to stick with the glaring image associated with ‘strategy’”; another source further revealed, “We’ll have to use ‘strategy’ with the U.S. and vision with ASEAN”.

¹⁹ The Diplomatic Bluebook of Japan, 2018 URL: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2018/html/chapter1/c0102.html#sf01> [Accessed 2019 February 20]

²⁰ Yukio Tajima, “Abe softens tone on Indo-Pacific to coax China’s ASEAN friends”, Asia-Nikkei, 2018, URL: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Abe-softens-tone-on-Indo-Pacific-to-coax-China-s-ASEAN-friends>

Whether this change is a permanent one, and what impact would it have on Japan's foreign relations remains to be ambiguous as it finds itself in a place to maintain the credibility of its security alliance with the United States.

2-4. Australia's Engagement with the Indo-Pacific

Australia was one of the early proponents of the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' as it saw itself straddling between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, between the economic rise of China and simultaneous deepening of security ties with the United States. The changing dynamics of the region, with growing economic independence with China as well as India, drew its attention to the region as a "strategic system that is complex and multi-layered" extending it beyond Southeast Asia to also include India and the Indian Ocean region (Medcalf 2012, 5). It adopted the Indo-Pacific construct in its Defense White Paper in 2011, and later on revised it in 2016. It followed up with the release of its Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017. While the 2011 White Paper presents the Indo-Pacific as 'a region' in which Australia sees itself part of, the 2016 White Paper defines its security interests within the region, stating that Australia's "security and prosperity depends on a stable Indo-pacific region and a rules-based global order".²¹ Australia's concerns lie in the ongoing power shift between the U.S and China, the need to maintain the freedom of navigation, manage its growing ties with China (which has penetrated Australian domestic politics), engaging in balancing minilateral coalitions of trilaterals while increasing ties with ASEAN (with the Australia-ASEAN Summit being held in Australia for the first time in 2018).

Along with this, India and Australia have deepened their security ties since 2014, and in 2017 PM Turnbull visited India and in the Joint Statement declared each other as "partners in the Indo-Pacific", with a "commitment to democratic values, rule of law, international peace and security, and shared prosperity."²² Australia also released a report on an economic strategy to invest in India, based on pillars of "economics, geopolitical convergence [as Indo-pacific partners], people to people ties", identifying ten sectors to invest in with the "goal to lift India into its top three export markets, to make it the third largest destination in Asia for Australian outward investment and to

²¹ Defense White Paper, Government of Australia, URL: <http://www.defence.gov.au/WhitePaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf>

²² India-Australia Joint Statement during the State visit of Prime Minister of Australia to India [2017], Ministry of External Affairs, See URL: <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28367/> [Accessed 2019 February 25]

bring it into the inner circle of Australia's strategic partnerships and with people to people ties as close as any in Asia by 2035".²³

3. The key components of the Indo-Pacific:

3-1. The [liberal, international?] Indo-Pacific Order

The 'Indo-Pacific' a term in vogue is gradually becoming embedded in nation's foreign policies and diplomatic records, however there still remains ambiguity of the ideological underpinnings of the principles shared between the members. As mentioned earlier, this comes at a time when questions of the 'liberal international order' are in question or 'collapse' as some argue because of the backlash from globalization. Joseph Nye (2019: 63-80) elucidates on the four basic pillars of the 'liberal international order' (which Nye argues as being never fully liberal neither international): (i) economic strand underpinned by Bretton Woods Institution; (ii) security strand- formalized by institutions like the United Nations and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) created in 1949; (iii) strand of 'American order emphasized human rights, liberal political values incorporated in the United Nations Charter; and lastly (iv) protection of global commons: a legacy of Britain's role in relation to freedom of seas.

Some elements of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" (touted by Japan and the United States) are directly connected to these four aspects. PM Abe has been a pioneer of this strategy, which dovetails into its foreign policy objective of "proactive contribution to peace". Some analysts have called for Japan to readjust the United States' strategic myopia under the Trump administration²⁴. The focus on democratic values as well as securing global commons in the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" ties in to the QUAD's interests as well, however the zero-sum nature of this narrative is what keeps countries like India or Australia on the fence. China's economic interdependence with all nations, the diverse risks it poses to these countries, makes hedging a useful

²³ An India Economic Strategy to 2035, URL: <https://dfat.gov.au/geo/india/ies/introduction.html> [Accessed 2019 February 25]

²⁴ Yoichi Funabashi, Its time to protect the liberal international order, The Japan Times, 2017, URL: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/07/09/commentary/japan-commentary/time-protect-liberal-international-order/#.XH-a7YgzZPY> and Jeffrey W. Hornung, The Fate of the World Order Rests on Tokyo's Shoulders, Foreign Policy, 2018, URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/30/the-fate-of-the-world-order-rests-on-tokyos-shoulders/> [Accessed 2019 March 6]

foreign policy tool to employ by Asian ‘middle powers’ like India, Japan, Australia, Indonesia. ASEAN nations along with countries like India wouldn’t want their flexibility and policy choices to be determined yet again by a renewed Cold War tussle between the Belt and Road Initiative and Indo-Pacific ‘strategy’. India’s speech at the Shangri-La dialogue highlighted this aspect as it pushed for the principle of “inclusivity and openness” more than “free and open”, as it simultaneously values its ties with the BRICS nations and seeks to keep China engaged in the region because of the importance of the Eurasian dimension of their partnership. However, the implications of India merging the two geostrategic landscapes together in its vision of the Indo-Pacific is yet to fully play-out. As one sees the larger picture of this debate, there still remains ambiguity over whether these are competing or complementary models and how China seeks to engage with global governance in the future.

3-2. Connectivity in the Indo-Pacific Region

Connectivity and infrastructure development in this region ushers in the possibilities of collaboration between different nations, cross-sectional and transnational ties across sub-regions and multinational corporations. India’s Shangri-La speech in June 2018 and the speech by Indian foreign secretary at a “Regional Connectivity Conference”, titled “South Asia in the Indo-Pacific context” in November 2018, it was re-iterated how India was looking to work with multiple players without isolating either including new financial sources like World Bank, AIIB, ADB, BRICS New Development Bank along with U.S. private sector ensuring that best practices ensue.²⁵ At the same conference it was highlighted how “India views the Indo-Pacific as a positive construct of development and connectivity in which India can play a unique role because of its geographical location”.

India’s vision towards its foreign policy for the Indian Ocean Region was captured within the acronym ‘SAGAR’ that stands for Security and Growth for All (SAGAR). Its main pillars were advocated in PM Modi in March 2015 and it includes” safeguarding land and maritime territories; economic and security interests in the littoral states; promoting collective action to deal with non-traditional security threats; and work

²⁵ Address by Foreign Secretary at the Regional Connectivity Conference: South Asia in the Indo-Pacific Context, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018, URL: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30556/> [Accessed 2019 January 23]

towards promoting maritime rules and norms.²⁶ The Indian government also launched ‘Sagarmala’ an initiative which aims at linking coastal shipping development with international port projects to take strategic advantage of India’s geographical location. Some of the projects India seeks to pursue in the Indian Ocean Region are channelled through new multilateral groupings like BBIN (Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal), BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), Ganga-Mekong Initiative. The examples of some projects are: India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral Highway; Sittwe Port in Myanmar, Kaladan in Myanmar, developing the Trinacomalee port and Colombo port in Sri Lanka, and development of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. By attempting to link ‘SAGAR’ (an externally driven policy) along with ‘Sagarmala’ (an internal policy) the development of India is gradually getting linked with the stability of the Indo-Pacific region.

Meanwhile the United States passed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act which provides a detailed policy and diplomatic strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region. It has also passed the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act in 2018 as it aims to direct its finances through a new developmental agency for economic investments in middle and low income countries. This would have implications for coordinating connectivity initiatives with various nations in the Indo-pacific region. Japan too in its own measure has launched the high-Quality Investment program for the Indo-Pacific region. It has launched the “Tokyo Strategy 2018” for cooperation with the Mekong region in Southeast Asia, pledging assistance to Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. There has already been movement in Indo-Japanese joint collaboration in connectivity projects in the highway projects in Southeast Asia as well as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. At the Indo-Pacific Business Forum hosted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce- the United States, Japan and Australia formed a trilateral partnership for infrastructure and development in the region. The investment in projects would be underlined by principles of “to foster a free, open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific” adhering to goals of “transparency, open competition, sustainability, adhering to robust global standards, employing local workforce, avoiding unsustainable

²⁶ Sushma Swaraj, India’s Vision for the Indian Ocean Region, URL: <http://www.indiafoundation.in/sagar-indias-vision-for-the-indian-ocean-region/>, 2017, [Accessed 2019 March 6]

debt burdens” (reference to China’s BRI)²⁷. The future challenges that could arise from these development initiatives is the implementation of these high standards; the ability to cope with implications of so-called ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ of China, whereby local governance structures become intertwined with security risks with the chances of potential Chinese ownership of the civilian projects. This dichotomy between furthering connectivity and maintaining sovereignty will only increase in the future.

3-3. Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific

A long-time dictum in international politics has been ‘the flag follows trade’. The changing geopolitical nature of the region has brought with it other geoeconomic and geostrategic changes, as maritime security becomes a key concern for all nations in the Indo-Pacific Region. Singh (2018:6-7) argues, “China’s shifting strategic profile in Africa—where Beijing moved away from its traditional role as a resource extractor and investor with primarily commercial interests, towards a more security-centric presence—is a model Beijing would likely employ in South Asia. As China embeds itself into the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean, Indian observers worry Chinese dual-use commercial-military facilities (a string of pearls) in maritime-South Asian might begin to hurt Indian interests.”²⁸ India’s primary interests in the Indian Ocean is to monitor Chinese activity in the region, as there have been more reports of Chinese submarines docking in Sri Lanka, and the frequent movement of Chinese naval ships to its military base in Djibouti. Additionally a new complex challenge holds in this ‘great game’ for ports and bases, as China has set up special economic zones next to India’s port projects- for example, there were rumours of Pakistan offering a military base to the Chinese in a place called Jiwani which is barely 30 kms from Chahbahar which is port jointly development between India, Iran and Afghanistan); as well as Chinese aims to build an industrial city in Duqm in Oman, the same port to which India has gained access for military use.²⁹

²⁷ “The U.S., Australia and Japan Announce Trilateral Partnership on Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific, 2018, See URL: <https://au.usembassy.gov/the-u-s-australia-and-japan-announce-trilateral-partnership-on-infrastructure-investment-in-the-indopacific/>, Accessed [2019 February 26]

²⁸ Abhijit Singh, “Implication of the Maritime Area of the Indo-Pacific and its Future: An Indian Perspective”, 2018 URL: https://www.japan-india.com/files/view/articles_files_pdf_public/src/acc18ed1f894c42621cbceddc591698a.pdf

²⁹ Bill Geertz, Inside the Ring: China Building military base in Pakistan, 2018 URL: <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/jan/3/china-plans-pakistan-military-base-at-jiwani/> and Wade Shepherd, Why is China Building A New City Out in the Desert of Oman, 2017, URL:

A significant development in maritime security initiatives was the resurrection of QUAD after a decade since 2007 on the side-lines of the 12th East Asia Summit in Manila on November 2017 where the member nations held informal consultations. However, in separate joint statements, India released a toned-down version of the agreed matters mentioning the focus on a “free, open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-pacific region”.³⁰ India has separately signed security pacts with United States: Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) which gives access to specific military facilities in some areas and Communications Compatibility, Security Agreement (COMCASA) to allow for high-end, secure communication between the two militaries. India has additionally signed base use arrangement with France, Singapore, and Oman. This increase in India’s focus on maritime security which has deepened under the Modi government, there still appears to be a preference for bilateral security arrangements over quadrilateral ones (a trend that continues from previous governments in India) as was explained by India’s former National Security Advisor, “We [India] seem to use multilateralism for our values and bilateralism for our interests...There is an acute awareness on our part, but not others, of the extent and limits of India’s power and its potential uses, and a clear prioritisation between our interests and between our goals.”³¹ While Quadrilateral maritime ties have yet to gain full momentum, one can observe a criss-crossing in the intra-QUAD nations and other regional players, thus leaving room for more configurations in this domain. Scholars argue that there could be positive linkages between QUAD nations and ASEAN as there is a “need for multilateral exercises to be conducted along the ports of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road as well as coordinate with China deepen relations in non-traditional areas of security, HADR and etc (Shimodaira 2018). Other authors also call for QUAD to be an “inclusive mechanism” to be able to “reconcile with the wisdom of ASEAN-centered regionalism” as an “Adaptable framework would promote recognition of the Quad as an

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/09/08/why-china-is-building-a-new-city-out-in-the-desert-of-oman/#5fcec7b36b2f> [Accessed March 6 2019]

³⁰ India-Australia-Japan-U.S. Consultations on Indo-Pacific 2017, URL: https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29110/IndiaAustraliaJapanUS_Consultations_on_IndoPacific_November_12_2017, [Accessed 2019 February 26]

³¹ Shiv Shankar Menon, Address on “Strategic Culture and IR Studies in India” at the 3rd International Studies Convention held at JNU Convention Centre, New Delhi, Dec. 11, 2013, URL: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/22632/>),

anchor or idea incubator for issues-led functional cooperation for peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific”.³²

3-4. Regionalism and the Indo-Pacific

All nations proposing the Indo-Pacific concept have agreed on “ASEAN centrality” while the United States still refers to an “Indo-Pacific architecture” in its National Defense Strategy, the region being so diverse, that a binding thread of regionalism is yet to be defined. Meanwhile under the Modi government India has increased its cultural diplomacy, outlined its intention to develop an “Indian ocean identity” with the regular meetings held at the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and Indian Ocean Rim Association, through which cooperation with the littoral navies of the region is conducted along with gradual building of ties. The geographic expanse of the Indo-Pacific is so broad, that a single nation’s perspective would not capture the plurality of the region. Hence India’s focus on developing its ‘sphere of influence’ which it sees as the Indian Ocean region, as ASEAN nations seek to keep their region open and free for dialogue and discussion to take place. A positive-sum, whole vision for the region would have to gradually match the pace of connections between the nations within.

4. Strategic Autonomy, the Modi Government and the Indo-Pacific:

This last section of the paper argues that India’s engagement with the four pillars of the Indo-pacific concept is underpinned by the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’. The foundational principles of Indian foreign policy are this belief in of flexibility in policy-making. Shyam Saran (2017, 2) defines strategic autonomy as “the ability to take relatively independent decisions on matters of vital interest. Expanding the scope for such autonomy is the hallmark of a successful foreign policy”. It is often yoked with the concept of non-alignment, which was India’s response to the bipolar order during the Cold War. India then, recently liberated from the British, viewed alliances as a threat to territorial sovereignty as it then chose to disengage from the balance of power games then. The desire to maintain this decisional autonomy through the policy of non-

³² Akiko Fukushima [2018] “The Quad As A Caucus for Cooperation”, Real Clear Defense, See URL: https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/11/30/the_quad_as_a_caucus_for_cooperation_113992.html [Accessed 2019 February 27]

alignment was then linked to economic autarky. There was a moralistic tinge to this approach as Khilnani (2005) shares in an interview with *The Globalist*, “India’s primary mode of exercising autonomy in the international domain has been negative; and has often refused to participate in alignments, treaties and markets which it viewed in favour or the more powerful”. Khilnani traces the roots of it to its colonial experience, which “led to a rejectionist-and relativist-position, to mark its weakness, it was resolved that India did not need to engage with the world, but could simply withdraw-and revel in its profound spiritual superiority”.

In a post-Cold War environment, the concept of non-alignment began to wear off, as the world moved from a bipolar to a unipolar order and India began to perceive its security within a multipolar world. The opening of its economy, and breaking up of ideological barriers, led India to gradually pursue independent foreign policy interests. As the environment shifted, India had more interests abroad, had to engage with multiple players to gain access to the high-table to define the rules of the international order. The Modi government continued to follow the same principle, except that the external environment has given more to change, more players, increasing unpredictability and uncertainty, with more interests at stake, as India pushes for external security and economic engagements which makes his foreign policy approach feel more strong or dynamic or theatrical (as the media would often portray it). As one Indian scholar puts it, “Even in the age of Modi...the pursuit of strategic autonomy, however persists, [and] has become the reason for a diverse foreign policy that enables India to deal with the world’s major issues without being tied down to a single great power or set of powers”. (Pande 2017, 95-96). Indian scholars have labelled this as a new period of “multi-alignment” (see Raja Mohan, ‘Modi’s World: Expanding India’s Sphere of Influence’) or multi-directional engagement. While this might be true, this paper argues that ‘strategic autonomy’ still remains a core objective of Indian foreign policy, especially in the evolution of the debates on the Indo-Pacific.

In the debate on the Indo-Pacific region, the concept of strategic autonomy has a two-fold connotation: firstly, in the concept of sovereignty and alliances with the West³³; and secondly, in the concept of maintaining diversity, plurality, and Indian values intact.

³³ In the context of strategic autonomy used and the West, how it is being used by Europe and India under the Modi Government see Raja Mohan (2019), Two discourses on strategic autonomy, 2018, URL: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/indian-foreign-policy-us-european-union-narendra-modi-govt-donald-trump-5361329/>, Accessed [2019 March 5]

When applied to the four pillars of the Indo-Pacific region, the first connotation of strategic autonomy directly impacts the pillar on (i) connectivity and (ii) maritime security. As India gradually seeks to engage with many countries and projects, the prospect of zero-sum games or geopolitical rivalries dominating the affairs of the region, has already sprung regional groupings like QUAD. And the Modi government, in line with previous governments has kept open, India's stance by engaging in security partnerships, used/pushed more alignments; also playing a hedging game between its various interests in the region. With respect to the pillars on a prospective (iii) liberal international order and (iv) regionalism, the connotation of strategic autonomy is underpinned by values of pluralism, diversity, secularism, and democracy rooted in the Indian experience. Some intellectuals define India's "core interest is to seek an external environment that supports the transformation of India", also linking domestic values equally important in international values.³⁴ PM Modi's speech at the United Nations with the phrase 'Vasudeva Kutambam' also highlights this. Hence as the debate on a 'liberal international order' gets more ideologically polarized, this strand of strategic autonomy will gain more focus especially in an attempt to get other nations of Asia and IOR nation states aboard. Other scholars also note how, "The Modi government has redefined strategic autonomy as an objective that is attainable through strengthened partnerships rather than avoidance of partnerships...strategic autonomy and non-alignment are not necessarily a package deal, (QUAD enhances strategic autonomy vis-à-vis much as an RIC trilateral enhances strategic autonomy vis-à-vis Trump and protectionist views of global economic order)"³⁵.

Conclusion: The Sum of All Components = Not a Whole Indo-Pacific

In the examination of the myth of a "unified 'Indo-pacific' concept" it was revealed how the 'Indo-Pacific' region has been accepted as mental map by countries like India, Australia, United States and Japan. However, the geographical contours of the region varies as India and Japan visualize Africa and West Asia to be part of the Indo-pacific, meanwhile Australia and the U.S. perceive the region from "Pacific Ocean until India".

³⁴ ShivShankar Menon [2017], India's 70-Year Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy, URL: <https://www.icsin.org/uploads/2017/10/07/363d3426fcb3b7d34500accd9cc4289b.pdf>

³⁵ Harsh V, Pant, The Modi Factor in Indian Foreign Policy, 2019, URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/the-modi-factor-in-indian-foreign-policy/> Accessed [2019 March 6]

Secondly, while India mentions the region in its naval strategy as a maritime area of interest alone; the remaining three nations have incorporated it into their respective foreign policy white paper documents and Defense Strategy papers. In other words, India is yet to operationalize the term in its conduct of strategy, while other nations too, the employment of the concept in practice is yet to be seen. Thirdly, in between India and Japan there appears to be a softening of the approach to the region, to make it more inclusive. However for Japan it appears to be an ad-hoc approach as of now.

The various pillars of the Indo-Pacific concept unpackaged here, in terms of setting up an “Indo-pacific regional order” while each country agrees for a need of a framework and sees its role in the concept but how far and how willing is it to cooperate with each other is yet to be determined. Secondly, in connectivity projects there appears to be a positive sum approach on the surface, however underpinned by ideological questions of the political models being furthered through investments projects is yet to be fully examined. Also, whether third parties would be compelled to opt for either of these models resurrecting an either/or, binary approach to cooperation, is yet to be determined. Thirdly, the lack of a binding regionalism remains, while India is making attempts at creating one in its neighbourhood, the Indian Ocean region. Fourthly, maritime security cooperation is where the balance of power approach appears most prominent, as threat perceptions call for stronger balancing coalitions. However how connectivity initiatives intertwine with the maritime security approaches of governments could complicate relations in the future.

Lastly, tying up with the critical geopolitics and myth function of the ‘Indo-Pacific region’. The United States has remodelled some of the old classical geopolitical theories in new forms, bringing back the strand of “formal geopolitics” argued by Tuathail, thus there appears to be a lack of thinking about the future, new, open, inclusive pathways to dialogue. Meanwhile for China, how transparent its political model would be, its infrastructure projects that fulfil the demand within the region, however what would the implications for the region on a micro and macro level is yet to be fully grasped.

In the assessment of India’s approach to the “Indo-pacific region”, the debate appears to be deeper than ‘alignment versus autonomy’. ‘Strategic autonomy’ as a principle continues to underpin the Modi government’s policies in the region, however this time not linked with concepts of non-alignment or economic autarky. The narrative of an “anarchic Indo-Pacific region” has dominated Indian voices to deepen alignment with

external powers, however the pluralistic, open, diverse narrative of the Indo-pacific and the promise of prosperity, brings fold another connotation of strategic autonomy to pursue Indian values abroad, albeit more cautiously. Since the 21st century international environment well-being of the society is not just a welfare based one isolated from foreign policy, the Indian government under the Modi government has attempted to engage all sections of society, all tools of foreign policy, more plugged in the discourses around. This might mean that with the General Elections due in May 2019 along with shifting of international forces, the coming Indian government might revisit these principles of foreign policy that are presently outward oriented, and might decide to alter the direction of its sails, changing the contours of the debate on the Indo-Pacific region.

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