



Geopolitical Instruments of U.S.-India Stances in the Indo-Pacific

This Policy Note outlines thirteen geopolitical instruments that are shaping United States.-India engagements in context of the Indo-Pacific region. Considering the respective national interests, their diplomacy and popular media representations tend to weigh these instruments distinctly. However, both the U.S. and India must co-create more convergences to develop a predictable and rule-based regional architecture.

Introduction

Few, but powerful keywords *viz.* S-400, Iranian oil, 2+2, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) are redefining the bilateral engagements between the U.S. and India. Their connotations are shaping the discourse in diplomacy and popular media. However, within the purview of the Indo-Pacific region, and given the geopolitical manoeuvring and complexities therein, the two countries remain more cautious than ever.

They solicit mutual support in reinventing the direction, and indeed the depth, of their bilateral engagement in the Indo-Pacific. They have different national interests and their state behaviour manifests them. Therefore, their understanding of the geopolitically vibrant Indo-Pacific region is distinct – but not without convergences.

U.S. Understanding of the Indo-Pacific

The U.S. is a strong proponent of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)”. The term has gained prominence as an ideation of a politico-economic narrative, but does not exclude references to the American spirit of freedom and peace.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) of the U.S. published in December 2017 sums up the broader American understanding in the following words:

“The United States must tailor our approaches to different regions of the world to protect U.S. national interests... A geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region... Our vision for the Indo-Pacific excludes no nation”.

In fact, the U.S. understanding of the FOIP focuses on the geo-strategic significance of securing the maritime free commons. It calls for freedom of navigation, free access to seaways, peaceful resolution of maritime disputes, and transparency in infrastructure financing in the sea.

These issues largely have reference to the geopolitical volatility in the South China Sea. The United States has accused China for using predatory economics, while China alleges that the United States aims to contain its political and economic rise. The severity of the ongoing U.S.-China trade brouhaha narrates it all.

However, the security dimension of FOIP is the strongest among equals of its political, economic or cultural dimensions. This is clearly evident in both the NSS 2017 and National Defense Strategy (NDS) 2018 documents that asserts on strengthening security architecture with the U.S. enjoying the position of strength.

The U.S. has considerable expectations from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the informal consultative mechanism that it shares with Australia, Japan, and India. This mechanism seemingly opposes China’s ambitions in the South and East China Seas.

The U.S. also sees India as an indispensable security partner in the Indo-Pacific because of the following reasons in their decreasing order of importance:

- A growing market for American defense sales,
- A strong stakeholder in the South China Sea,
- A dominant power in Indian Ocean geopolitics

The U.S. understanding of the FOIP also incorporates the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a strategic aspect, though the approach is milder than that of India’s. Moreover, it strongly calls for irreversible

denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. It does not exclude the vulnerable small islands of the South Pacific either, and supports their effort to sustain.

One of these islands, the Papua New Guinea has recently conducted the Asia-Pacific Economic Leaders' week on 12-18 November 2018, during which China also organised a China-Pacific Island leaders meeting.

India's Understanding of the Indo-Pacific

India defines the geographical coordinates of the Indo-Pacific region as being spreading from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas. During his Keynote Address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for a "Free, Open, Inclusive Indo-Pacific (FOIIP)".

The word "inclusive" clearly signifies that there is no intention to dominate, and that it includes all nations in the region and also those who have a stake in it. Broadly, the Indian understanding of the FOIIP is rule-based and all-encompassing, though the focus has been more toward strategic and security considerations. Thus, the U.S. continues to be a dominant player.

Prior to COMCASA, the two countries signed Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016. Whereas LEMOA provides for using each other's military base for resupplying and repair, COMCASA, signed during the 2+2 dialogue, allows for exchange of information on equipment during joint training exercises. A third agreement with the United States i.e. Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) is also proposed, which will help in exchanging classified geo-spatial and topographical data.

Another key aspect is the ASEAN Centrality, which was also evident during the 10th Delhi Dialogue held in July 2018. This is crucial because of the following reasons:

- ASEAN countries are emerging as markets for India's defense sales,
- Focus on Southeast Asia will help leverage the benefits of Act East Policy, and,
- ASEAN countries can provide a cushion to negotiate India's strategic interests in the Eastern Indian Ocean and South China Sea

India's understanding of the Indo-Pacific has another crucial element – the China factor. This includes strategic advances of China through the Belt and Road Initiative and in South China Sea. India opposes China's competing claims in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone. Few months ago, India conducted a naval drill there.

However, unlike the FOIP strategy of the United States, Quad – which opposes China's role in the South China Sea – interestingly weighs softer on India's geo-strategic agenda. This is because India, in no uncertain term, looks forward to a skirmish-free relationship with China, despite political friction from time to time.

FOIP vs. FOIIP

Based on discussion of the two perspectives, the issue-based convergences and divergences in respective stances can be deciphered. Table 1 enlists 13 relevant geopolitical instruments, which are to be considered in this context.

Based on analysis of the policy aspects and their popular representations, it attempts to assign a perceptual weightage to these instruments as high, medium and low. It provides a general understanding about the issues on which the U.S. and India converge and diverge while shaping their role in the Indo-Pacific.

Table 1: Weightage of Geopolitical Instruments: FOIP vs. FOIIP

Geopolitical Instruments	FOIP (U.S.)	FOIIP (India)
Common rules-based order	High	High
ASEAN Centrality	Medium	High
Role of Quad	High	Low
Containing China's rise	High	Low
EEZ issues and China's claims	High	High
Sovereignty and territorial integrity	High	High
Securing maritime free commons	High	High
Regional Connectivity	Medium	High
Deterring Protectionism	Low	Medium
Focus on India Ocean Islands	Low	High
Focus on Pacific Islands	High	Medium
Information Security	High	High
Interoperability	High	High

Source: Author

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The U.S. provides utmost clarity in its role in the Indo-Pacific through its NDS 2018. The NDS summary document categorically points out that the U.S. is extending hands to its competitors and adversaries. In doing so, it however maintains its position of strength.

For India and the U.S., Indo-Pacific region provides immense opportunities to cooperate, co-exist and grow. They converge and diverge because of their distinct national interests. But, they need to co-create more convergences diplomatically while respecting divergences as geopolitical obligations.

This Policy Note has been written by Faisal Ahmed, Trade and Geopolitical Expert on Indo-Pacific, and an Associate Professor at FORE School of Management, New Delhi for CUTS-WDC.