



Webinar Report

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

December 12, 2024 | Thursday

CUTS International Global Affairs hosted an in-depth virtual discussion on “India’s Indo-Pacific Strategy.” on December 12, 2024. This webinar aimed to critically examine the urgent necessity for India to establish a formalised Indo-Pacific strategy. Simultaneously, the event explored India’s existing policy outlook and its transformative potential in shaping the region’s future. Distinguished experts and former military officials, both domestic and international, participated in this dialogue, contributing their multifaceted perspectives and deep insights. The discussions provided a holistic understanding of India’s role and aspirations within the Indo-Pacific framework.



Moderator

Purushendra Singh, Assistant Director at CUTS International

Panellists

Admiral Sunil Lanba, 23rd Chief of Indian Naval Staff

Capt. Sarabjeet S. Parmar (Retd.), Distinguished Fellow at the United Service Institution of India

R. Admiral (Retd.) Katsuya Yamamoto, Programme Director and Senior Research Fellow at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan

Dr Pooja Bhatt, Associate Professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs

Dr Monish Tourangbam, Director at the Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies

Background and Context

India's Indo-Pacific strategy, though not formally codified, has emerged as a pivotal element of its foreign policy, influencing regional stability, trade, and security across a vast area stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the Western Pacific. This strategy is anchored in initiatives such as the Act East Policy, Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).

India's Indo-Pacific strategy aims to reinforce its role as a regional security provider, build strategic partnerships, and address evolving geopolitical challenges, particularly in response to China's growing influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. By enhancing connectivity, upholding a rules-based international order, and fostering economic cooperation with ASEAN, the U.S., Japan, and other Indo-Pacific nations, India seeks to achieve its broader goals of stability and prosperity.

However, challenges persist, including the lack of a unified Indo-Pacific strategy, limited economic integration with ASEAN, operational inefficiencies in key initiatives, and the need to maintain strategic autonomy.

KEY DISCUSSION POINTS:

The session began with the statement, “From the Pacific Ocean to our shores in the Indian Ocean and the East Coast of Africa, India seeks to anchor its strategy around three key pillars — peace, prosperity, and partnership.” Purushendra Singh, Assistant Director of CUTS International and the session's moderator underscored the necessity for a robust and comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy.

He highlighted that this century is poised to be Asia's and emphasised that India's approach should embody the vision of Viksit Bharat — a developed India that contributes to both regional and global growth. This statement set the stage for further discussions.

India's Perspective on the Indo-Pacific

Admiral Sunil Lanba, 23rd Chief of Indian Naval Staff, offered an expansive analytical perspective on India's vision for the Indo-Pacific. He traced the origins of this vision to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's articulation at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018. This vision underscores India's unwavering commitment to a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific. Admiral Lanba highlighted the geostrategic and geo-economic significance of the region, stating:

“The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the epicentre of global geopolitics and economics, playing a pivotal role in shaping the 21st-century world order. With nearly 60 percent of the world’s population residing in this area, its demographic and economic weight is unmatched.”

He elaborated on the critical importance of the Indo-Pacific’s SLOCs, which serve as vital conduits for global trade and economic integration. Additionally, Lanba highlighted the region’s role as a focal point in India’s economic and technological planning. With global priorities undergoing constant shifting, he argued that partnerships with like-minded nations are essential to upholding a rules-based maritime order, ensuring regional stability, and fostering inclusive development. Lanba’s remarks provided clarity on India’s strategic imperatives and its pivotal position in the Indo-Pacific.

US-Indo-Pacific Strategy under Trump 2.0

Capt. Sarabjeet S. Parmar (Retd.), a Distinguished Fellow at the United Service Institution, presented an analysis of the United States Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly in the context of a potential Trump 2.0 administration. He contextualised the Trump administration’s earlier stance as outlined in the 2017 National Security Strategy, which characterised China as a “revisionist power” threatening a free and open world order. While the Biden administration later redefined China as a “competitor,” Capt. Parmar noted that the overarching objective of countering China’s rise has remained consistent.

Capt. Parmar emphasised the doctrine of “peace through strength,” which defined Trump-era policies. This approach prioritised the deployment of combat-ready forces to maintain deterrence and stability across the region. He posited that under a Trump 2.0 administration, India would likely face heightened expectations to assume a leadership role in regional

“Until new strategy documents emerge under a Trump 2.0 administration, the precise contours of U.S.-India cooperation in the Indo-Pacific remain speculative. However, trends point to heightened defence collaboration, expanded technology-sharing, and India’s pivotal role as a stabilising force.”

initiatives and act as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Capt. Parmar concluded with this assessment:

India’s Indo-Pacific Narrative

Dr Pooja Bhatt, Associate Professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs provided a thorough exploration of India’s evolving Indo-Pacific narrative. She explained how China’s meteoric rise, coupled with initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has catalysed regional collaboration. However, she observed that while China’s ascent has united Indo-Pacific nations in some respects, each country’s unique economic and political relationships

with China have shaped divergent approaches to cooperation. This diversity, she argued, underscores the nuanced and multifaceted nature of regional partnerships.

Initially, Indo-Pacific discussions were heavily focused on military and defence cooperation. However, over time, the scope has expanded to encompass broader aspects of regional security

“India’s future Indo-Pacific strategy is likely to be driven less by the ups and downs of the U.S. involvement and more by its own vision and understanding of the region’s dynamics.”

and development, including economic growth, clean energy, and sustainable initiatives.

Dr Bhatt elaborated on India’s Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative, describing it as the cornerstone of India’s Indo-Pacific engagement. Despite its significance, she noted that India’s historical hesitancy to commit substantial resources and the complexities of aligning with multiple stakeholders have hindered the adoption of a formalised strategy. She argued that India must prioritise partnerships with smaller nations, while also addressing emerging security challenges, such as climate change, clean energy, and sustainable development. Dr Bhatt’s insights added depth to the understanding of India’s strategic dilemmas and its potential pathways forward.

Balancing Regional Aspirations and Capabilities

Dr Monish Tourangbam, Director at the Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies delivered a nuanced analysis of the Indo-Pacific narrative, describing it as being at a critical inflection point. He noted that since 2014, India has introduced various policies aimed at strengthening regional connectivity. However, he identified a persistent gap between aspirations and capabilities, particularly in addressing the challenges posed by India’s immediate neighbourhood.

Dr Tourangbam highlighted the strategic importance of India’s North Eastern region as a gateway for fostering economic and strategic integration with Southeast Asia. He cited initiatives, such as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) as evidence of India’s engagement in the region. However, he noted that these initiatives often lag behind more dynamic frameworks spearheaded by China. He advocated for the revitalisation of existing mechanisms and the pursuit of concrete outcomes. Dr Tourangbam’s analysis underscored the importance

“The Indo-Pacific’s cooperative architecture, while ambitious, often faces challenges from competing power dynamics, including U.S.-China rivalries. India’s role must evolve by fostering collaboration, revitalising neighbourhood policies, and addressing crises impacting its immediate surroundings.”

of aligning India’s ambitions with its practical capacities and concluded with this quote:

Regional Security Challenges through Multilateral Cooperation

R. Admiral (Retd.) Katsuya Yamamoto, Programme Director and Senior Research Fellow at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan provided an extensive overview of regional security challenges, with a particular focus on the role of multilateral cooperation. He emphasised the foundational importance of shared values, respect for diversity, and mutual trust in maintaining a stable and equitable international order. Admiral Yamamoto criticised coercive practices, such as China's use of fishing militias and civilian vessels for military purposes, as violations of international norms requiring a coordinated response.

Admiral Yamamoto also examined the potential recalibration of U.S. foreign policy, predicting a shift in focus from Europe to the Indo-Pacific. He highlighted the critical roles of India and Japan in promoting regional stability and fostering collaboration to counterbalance China's assertive policies. He argued that deeper cooperation between like-minded nations would be instrumental in upholding a free and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

The Indian Navy's indispensable role in ensuring maritime security emerged as a central theme of the discussion. With approximately 100,000 ships transiting the Indian Ocean annually, India's geographic position and strategic deployments make it a key player in securing vital waterways. India's active participation in over 40 bilateral and multilateral military exercises, including the QUAD-led Malabar Exercise, underscores its strategic significance and growing interoperability with allied forces.

India's expanding role in the Indo-Pacific is further evident in its defence collaborations and capability-building initiatives. Agreements such as ship repair pacts with the U.S. signal a deeper level of trust and cooperation. Expanding such agreements to include partners like Japan, South Korea, and Australia could further solidify India's position as a logistics hub in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, the discussion highlighted the strategic importance of the southern Indian Ocean and Oceania, particularly the role of vulnerable island nations in bridging the confluence of the two seas.

Conclusion

The webinar concluded with a collective call for a strategic framework that prioritises cooperation over rivalry. The guiding principles of peace, prosperity, and partnership were emphasised as central to India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific. The speakers unanimously underscored that India's vision reflects its aspiration to shape the region's economic and security dynamics. By fostering robust partnerships, ensuring maritime security, and leveraging its geographic advantages, India is poised to establish itself as an indispensable stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific.
