

Virtual Dialogue

Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) and Myanmar Institute of Strategic &
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Challenges to Peace and Security in South Asia

Myanmar's Perspective on Indo-Pacific

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Indo Pacific Concept and Region

Asia is one of the world's most economically and politically dynamic regions. Despite territorial and historical tensions, regional power competition, nuclear crisis, and human security threats, the region has remained relatively peaceful and stable since 1945. However, great power rivalry and international politics imposed huge implications on its regional politics.

The rising China and the US's Asia Pivot policy overshadowed strategic environment of Asia. In recent decade, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), led by President Xi Jinping, and President Trump's American First policy brought about implications entirely on the region and regional states. Especially states with geostrategic importance have experienced huge impacts whenever power relations changed in international and regional relations.

Meanwhile the rivalry between the United States and China in the Pacific, and Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean shaped strategic calculations. The distinct rivalries and interactions between them seemed to reflect undeniably on geopolitics of the region.

After the retreat of Obama's "Asia-Pacific rebalancing" strategy, the Asia-Pacific power structure involved corresponding adjustments. Allies in the Asia-Pacific region had been

skeptical of President Trump's foreign policies. Against the backdrop of the relative weakening of the United States' dominant position and the increasing shift of geopolitical and economic gravity to the Indo-Pacific, the American aim is to reshape alliances and partnerships to respond to China's rise.

In 2017, the concept of the Indo-Pacific was unofficially framed by the US as the region's main discussion issue although some scholars and Asian leaders referred the idea occasionally in the past. The United States has put forward the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and objectives of President Trump on the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" are the expansion and revision of the "Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy" and to contain China's rise. In June 2018, the US renamed its Pacific Command as Indo Pacific Command that indicated its gesture of strategic approach.

Changes in the geopolitical environment in the Asia-Pacific region are the fundamental causes motivating the creation of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The concept of the Indo-Pacific has emerged from an evolving mental map of the increasingly contiguous Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the growing economic interdependence of states within the region. Indo-Pacific", originally a geographic concept that spans two regions of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The term geographically defines the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions as a single interconnected region, the Indo-Pacific.

Indo-Pacific concept is actually seen as divisive for various Asian countries. Japan, as an important ally of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, plays an important role in the conception and promotion of the India Pacific. India is one of the most important advocates of the concept of "Indo-Pacific Strategy". India can take this opportunity to promote the justification and rationalization of its interests in South Asia and Asia region, strengthen its political, economic and military cooperation with the United States and its allies. Quadrilateral alliance of the US, Japan, Australia and India is developing.

Responses of Southeast Asian countries to the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" are diverse. To link the "Indian Ocean" with "Pacific Ocean", Southeast Asia becomes a key area that cannot be bypassed. Indonesia and Singapore are also supporters of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" concept. Small countries, which geographically and economically link with China, are cautious regional order changes while maintaining relations with China.

ASEAN built on the geographical side to this approach, and expected to play a key place in the economic and political processes of the future concept. The “centrality of the region” is expressed while it has concerns for potential fragmentation of the region on the issue of Indo-Pacific.

As the Indo Pacific region navigates through uncharted waters in the US-China rivalry, strategic small states in the Rimland in Asia which border with both powerful states and have choke points in World commercial sea-lanes, are very crucial for hegemonic objectives of great powers. Both Myanmar and Pakistan are definitely in the position of geostrategic states in Indo Pacific region.

Myanmar’s Role in Indo Pacific Region

Myanmar is a very important country in terms of geostrategic and geographic factors in Asia. The country was strategic for hegemonic power in Asia in the past and still essential for the ambitions of great power in Asia and particularly Indo Pacific in contemporary regional politics. There are five factors why Myanmar plays a key role of Myanmar in Indo Pacific.

The first factor is its strategic location. Myanmar is located at the crossroads of East and West. Geographically, it is a gateway between East Asia and South Asia. It borders with India, China and ASEAN countries. Its access to the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean is crucial. It is necessary for the backdoor of southern states of China and development of seven states of South- west India. It is one of states in strategic center of Gravity in Indo-Pacific region.

The second factor is its natural resources. Myanmar is rich in water and mineral resources and fauna and flora. Additionally, its reserves of energy resources, emerging consumers, youthful labour force, and fertile land are valuable assets of prosperity. The country could provide raw materials and market for external economic partners.

The third factor is the hub of communication and transportation. Myanmar stands as a natural land bridge between transport and trade networks of China and ASEAN on one hand and those of South Asia on the other hand. The country is naturally likely to be transportation and logistics centre for the region. It has smooth access to neighbouring

countries with ASEAN Highways, Asian highways, BIMSTEC highways, Tripartite highways, Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport, bilateral highways from Laos, Thailand, China, India. Its dried ports are improving. Deep- seaports would be attractive for world commercial sea-lanes and maritime trade routes. Moreover, railways are trying to upgrade while new Muse-Kyaukphyu railways, Muse-Mandalay railways , Singapore-Kunming Rail Link (SKRL) and Southern Corridor Trans Asia Railways Networks are constructing. Trade routes from India to China go through Myanmar within one day while goods from the Middle East can reach Danang from Dawei seaport within hours. It has links with China- Indo-China peninsular corridor, GMS Economic Corridor, and East-west Economic corridor.

The fourth factor is its maritime strategic post .Myanmar links with the hinges of geopolitical destiny, India and Pacific Ocean. Its deep-sea ports could be potential spots of commercial and naval strategy. Its maritime territory is located in Bay of Bengal, near chock point of Indian Ocean sea-lanes and becomes a key area that cannot be bypassed by all great powers in Indo Pacific. Consequently, it is a key for ocean access of Southern China and Indian supremacy in the Indian Ocean.

The fifth factor is its participation in regional and sub-regional organizations in the region. It is the member of ASEAN and its affiliated institutions. The country is an observer of SAARC and could be a potential member in the future. It is actively participating in BIMSTEC, AMECES, LMC .

The above five factors proved that Myanmar is the strategic importance in Indo Pacific. Both the US and China considered that it is important in the regional geostrategic environment. The US seemed to consider the country as a member of the ASEAN grouping and as another avenue for reducing the influence and dominance enjoyed by China in the region. The US's Shared Vision a Free and Open Indo-Pacific report stated that Mekong region including Myanmar is strategically important in the mainland Southeast Asia.A series of diplomatic visits and engagements in 2012 marked normalization of their diplomatic relations and pragmatic engagement of the US.

China is a strategic partner of Myanmar while it has been the largest trading partner, major investor and donor. It is the diplomatically supporter in the international community. It is also a major facilitator for peace process in Myanmar. The policy of

non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries has been a critical factor in shaping the special relationship between China and Myanmar.

Myanmar has various challenges and issues while it is in the process of democratic transition. It could not risk its national interests by mingling in the crossfire of great power rivalry in the existing international relations.

Myanmar Policy for Balancing in Indo Pacific

Indo Pacific is a debatable idea but the US and its allies are responding along the Indo Pacific strategy. US-China rivalry is visible in the current regional politics. Whether like it or not , Myanmar as a pivotal country in the region , has no choice but engages with delicate balance .As a small power and sandwiched between China and India, it is important to balance itself with pragmatic engagement and diplomacy.

Such kind of policy is not new for Myanmar. Since independence in 1948 Myanmar adopted independent and non-aligned foreign policy. International politics were characterized with power struggle between West and East blocs. Myanmar was willing to avoid East-West tensions since both favoured the country for its valuable location. Hence, it practiced non-alignment policy since then. In 1954 , the country adhered Five principles of Peaceful Coexistence.

The current NLD government stated an independent, non-aligned and active foreign policy direction dealing closely with neighbours and nations of the world. The basic principles since 1948 are the same. Besides, the approach to international issues is based on sincerity, goodwill and genuine friendship.

Through the United States-China and India-China regional rivalry in the future, the Indo-Pacific region is likely to be characterized more by competition than cooperation. Myanmar needs to strictly keep its non-aligned policy towards both the US and China. It is essential to use wise diplomacy and balancing response for its own stability and interests.

Myanmar-US relations became improved in 2011 due to outcome of the changing American policy in the Asia-Pacific and domestic politics. Myanmar could reintegrate

international community and diverse diplomatic ties as democratic and independent state and reduced overreliance on China.

At the same time, Myanmar continues to maintain the *Pauk Phaw* (fraternal relationship) with China. As its strategic partner, giant neighbor, and major economic supporter, it is necessary to have cordial relations with China. At the same time, its approach steadily led to balancing diplomacy, which enabled Myanmar to opt for a balance in its external relations and sometimes, even mild hedging with China.

Conclusion

Myanmar seeks to manage insecurity and ambiguity, maintain relations with the major powers, and work toward balancing various “external influences.” The non-alignment policy actually serves as Myanmar’s long-held foreign policy, which calls for balancing internal factors while managing external relations independently.

Moreover, the country should engage actively and positively more with regional countries which are in the same position. Then these strategic countries with delicate position in Indo Pacific share experiences, learn each other and cooperate for regional peace and stability.

Both Myanmar and Pakistan can cooperate closely, share experiences and working together for peace in South Asia and Asia as a whole more than ever in the Indo Pacific.

Nevertheless, in the current regional politics of Indo Pacific, Myanmar is essential to practice its independent, non-aligned and active foreign policy firmly that would benefit from maintaining a delicate balance in its external relations.