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Japan: Real Driver Behind the Indo-Pacific

By Harry H Sa

Synopsis

The Indo-Pacific has become the consensus term for the Trump administration to address the region widely known as the Asia-Pacific. However, the United States is not the principal driver behind this recently popularised concept. Instead, look to Japan, India, and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor to understand the Indo-Pacific.

Commentary

PRESIDENT DONALD Trump wrapped up his first year of presidency with the all-important tour of the Asia-Pacific. Despite the novelty and unorthodox nature that have become so characteristic of his presidency, it was, by and large, an unexceptional visit by a sitting American president. He visited alliance partners, spoke out against North Korea, bolstered relations with China, and attended the 31st ASEAN summit in Manila. The itinerary could have been a carbon copy of any past presidential visit over the past two and half decades.

Amidst the banality, there was one conspicuous change. The familiar words Asia-Pacific were hardly, if ever, mentioned. Instead, the region was greeted with a new term: the Indo-Pacific. It was a clear signal that the United States wanted to not only demonstrate commitment to the region, but also expand its interests to the Indian Ocean. As of now, this is purely a cosmetic change with little import, especially in its current state. For any real understanding of the Indo-Pacific concept, we must look, not to the US, but to Japan to find anything of substance.

The "Indo-Pacific" and its Quadrilateral Roots

The idea of the Indo-Pacific has always been debated within the more esoteric circles of academics, think tankers, and policy-planners. Its roots can be traced back to the

year 2002 with the creation of the Trilateral Security Dialogue, a series of high level meetings between old friends: the US, Japan, and Australia.

Five years later, in 2007, the group officially invited India, widening the geographic scope to the Indian Ocean. Unimaginatively dubbed the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, it was an attempt to create an arc of democracies to ensure peace and stability across the two ocean regions.

The quadrilateral effort never really took off. China perceived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue to be a Cold War-style containment strategy aimed at stemming Chinese growth. Beijing angrily lodged official diplomatic protests against the four countries, especially pressuring Australia. Canberra, then under the leadership of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, quietly relented and pulled out of the security arrangement.

In 2010, Prime Minister Julia Gillard breathed new life into the idea by agreeing to host a modest number of US Marines in Darwin. However, this was under the auspices of former President Barack Obama's pivot to Asia policy and tilted towards Southeast Asia more so than the Indian Ocean.

This constant toggling between progress and stagnation has become the recurring theme of the Indo-Pacific. Nothing substantial or concrete would ever materialise, that is, until Donald Trump's late-2017 trip to Asia.

Indo Pacific in Trump's National Security Strategy

A month after returning from Asia, the Trump administration published its National Security Strategy (NSS) and again, the Asia-Pacific was nowhere to be found. In its place, to further underscore the intent to prioritise this geographic concept, the Indo-Pacific featured prominently as the first of the region-specific strategies in this document. The Indo-Pacific took precedence over other important regions where the US maintains deep and important commitments, like the Middle East and Europe.

Even for an ambiguous document meant only to describe the general strategic direction of the US, the relevance of the Indian Ocean is exceedingly vague. Aside from a few token references to India as a rising power and a promise to expand cooperation with the subcontinent, the NSS struggled to find relevance in the Indian Ocean.

Instead, it only highlighted issues that would nominally be grouped solely within the Asia-Pacific: China's geopolitical ambitions, the tensions in the South China Sea, cross-Straits relations, the Korean peninsula nuclear crisis, relationships with alliance partners, and ASEAN. None of these issues warrant a discussion of the Indo-Pacific, and yet, the Trump administration saw fit to change the name in a foreign policy document that is symbolic, if not important. Aside from a cameo in the NSS, it is devoid of any real strategy. The reason for this is simple: the Indo-Pacific is not an American strategy. It is a Japanese one.

Indo-Pacific: Japan's Road to Africa

In 2007, at Japanese Prime Minister Abe's insistence, the Trilateral Security Dialogue was expanded to include India. That same year, PM Abe first publicly unveiled his vision in an address to the Indian Parliament titled "Confluence of the Two Seas".

Almost a decade later, at the 2016 Tokyo International Conference on African Development, PM Abe introduced the Indo-Pacific as the centerpiece to a developmental strategy towards Africa. Finally, the strategy evolved into the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, officially launched at the African Development Bank meeting in March 2017.

Concerned with cooperation, development, and maritime security in the regions of Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Africa, it is quite apparent that the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor is Tokyo's alternative to the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative, now known as the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). Japan is throwing down the gauntlet at China's feet, and thus far, it is really Japan alone.

Far more concerned with North Korean nuclear weapons and unfair Chinese trade practices, the US seems content to merely follow Japan's lead and support it from the rear. During the Japanese leg of Trump's Asia tour, the two nations signed a number of agreements that promised Indo-Pacific states better regulated and higher quality infrastructure development than the BRI.

Beyond that, however, the US is largely missing. What this means is that, much to the chagrin of Asian states, the US approach to the Asia-Pacific remains ad-hoc, piecemeal, and still to be a comprehensive regional strategy. Unless the US is once again ready to lead, it is Japan that the region will look to for further progress.

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