



India Society in “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” Context: Vision and Policy

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Abstract- The “Indo-Pacific” concept was first initiated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007. By 2017, U.S President Donald Trump echoed this concept with implications for a new strategy towards the wider region as the “Indo-Pacific” rather than the “Asia-Pacific”. With its strong rise in recent years, India is expected to hold a prominent position in the new milieu. Through recent moves, India aims to develop an “independent, self-reliant” foreign policy as an important player in the strategic space of the “Indo-Pacific” region. This paper is to analyze India's vision and policy adjustments in the context of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, india, foreign policy, international relations.

I. INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented rise of China in economic power as well as military power in the first decade of the 21st century has truly impressed the whole world.¹In 2000, China was the sixth-largest economy. In 2002, Chinese government officially declared “China’s Peaceful Rise” Rhetoric (in Chinese: 和平崛起) [in 2004 changed to “China’s Peaceful Development” (in Chinese: 和平发)] to prepare a new development period. In 2010, China was the world’s second largest economy (behind the United States) with a GDP of \$5.930 billion after overtaking Japan, Germany, France and Britain. Since 2012, Xi Jinping has become the new leader of China, taking this country in a new foreign policy approach for a new China’s position in world politics. In 2013, “China Dream” (中国梦) was promoted image of the new superpower with aspirations and attitudes of a great power under Xi Jinping. It is clearly that China’s foreign policy strategy under the new leadership has pursued “Period of Strategic Opportunity” for taking selective actions to consolidate China’s sovereignty claims and its ambition in Indo-Pacific.

Unlike China, India’s rise has been welcomed by the world. India is also considered as a great power becoming “a maritime power” in the future with the coastal areas surrounded by India Ocean - one of the most important seas in the world. India approached and affirmed the importance of Indian Ocean Region in its development, thereby making India to be the most powerful influence in this area.² However, China’s Naval Expansion in the Indian Ocean has threatened India's strategic interests in this ocean.

II. METHODOLOGY

We mainly use qualitative analysis: synthesis, analytical, inductive methods combined with explanatory methods.

We also use historical and dialectical materialism methods.

III. MAIN RESULTS

New Security Challenges by the Expansion of Chinese Influence in Indo-Pacific Region

In Indo-Pacific region, the major security threat is China's rise. Especially, one of the China’s strategic interests is influence by territorial sovereignty disputes with neighboring countries in the “Emerging”. China's aggressive behaviors, territorial claims and geostrategic changes in the Chinese vision have increased tensions in the Indo-Pacific regions, which are the most important ocean for China’s rise. In the second decade of the 21st century, China took the strategic opportunities to gain influence in several

“strategic spaces” when the United States made “power vacuum” in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions due to the [relative] weakness of the United States after the Global Financial Crisis (2007-2008). In the Asia-Pacific region, China has begun to have aggressive behaviors with its neighbors by diplomacy and military threats. China unilaterally laid historical claim to sovereignty based on “weaving” of “historical memories”³ by legalizing evidences and maps with military activities, such as land reclamation and militarization in Spratly Islands [in Vietnamese: “Quần đảo Trường Sa”] in the South China Sea [in Vietnamese: “Biển Đông” – “East Sea”].⁴ Chinese armed fishing fleets are used as “soft forces” to assert territorial claims in the South China Sea. Besides, growing provocative action to expand China’s influence is one of the main causes of increasing tense atmosphere over the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands [with Japan] in the East China Sea.

In Indian Ocean, China also boosted its presence through the implementation of “String of Pearls” strategy by construction of harbors along the northern Indian Ocean coast such as Gwadar port (Pakistan), Hambantota port (Sri Lanka), Chittagong port (Bangladesh). Through the “One Belt, One Road Initiative” (BRI), China has invested in the construction of road, rail and sea infrastructure to expand its influence in Central Asia, South Asia. As can be seen that the various levels of participation of many countries in “One Belt, One Road Initiative” show an increasing influence of China in the region. This situation raises doubts and concerns in many other countries, especially countries with territorial disputes and strategic competition with China like India.⁵

Besides, China is also building a “Blue-Water Navy” [In Chinese: 远洋海军; In Vietnamese: “Hải quân viễn dương” hoặc “lực lượng hải quân vùng biển khơi”], a maritime force capable of operating globally aiming to protect shipping routes and become a dominant force in Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean.

According to the forecast, Indian Navy will become the world’s third-largest force (after United States and China) that is able to reduce China’s military expansion in Indo-Pacific – the space has China’s core interests (Andrew, 2018). In the Pacific, China has basically completed reef-island accretion over 7 entities, connecting artificial islands, developing infrastructure, building 3 runways with full-length of 3,300 meters. These runways can allow modern fighters to take off and land turning them into “military bases” to increase the long-term presence of Chinese military forces in the South China Sea.(Quan, 2018). China also reached an agreement with Cambodian government to build a deep-water port in Koh Kong province on a 99-year-lease.

Koh Kong port is a few hundred kilometers from East Sea [another name: South China Sea]. According to experts, this port, which can take ships up to 10.000 tons, will support China’s Blue Water Navy in controlling East Sea and reaching India Ocean.

In order to create influence in two important strategic spaces, Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean, China has also conducted relations with strategic allies in these two regions. In South Asia, China has boosted military ties with Pakistan to put directly pressure on the neighboring country - India, including nuclear and missile proliferation.

In addition, China has strengthened its relations with other major Indo-Pacific countries by aid, trade and defense agreements in the process of implementing the “Belt and Road”. China’s purpose is turning these countries into “natural Chinese allies”. In Southeast Asia, China is promoting relations with ASEAN countries that has supported and participated in China’s “Belt and Road” Initiative. In South Asia, China has concerned about development relations with island nations or countries near the border with India such as Maldives, Sri Lanka, Seychelles and Mauritius. Other countries in Indo-Pacific has continued participating in “Belt and the Road” Initiative. In May 2016, Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation opened in Beijing (China) with about 30 heads of state and heads, along with delegations from more 100 countries. It can be said that China has transformed into “an economic superpower” by its continuous appearance (Lane and Zhu, 2017). In the future, is looking for a political superpower position as one of China’s goals in the “China’s dream”. In the short period, China will attempt to assert its absolute power in Indo-Pacific.

This China’s ambition is seriously threatening interest of many regional powers such as India, Japan and the United States - the country also claims national interests in this region.

Hence, China’s ambitious rise is most significant threat for India’s security as well as other countries in Indo-Pacific region.

IV. DISCUSSION

“Free and Open Indo-Pacific” in India’s Vision and Policy under Narendra Modi

India has approached the concept of “Indo - Pacific” through “Look East Policy” since 1990s changing to “East Action Policy” later.⁶ It can be said that India has become a “responsible” power in Indo-Pacific

region. Indian leaders usually have used “Indo-Pacific” term because this concept is suitable for its “peaceful” traditional foreign policy. However, this term is still used in a cautious way by India. According to Shivshankar Menon, National Security Advisor under Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, due to problem of definition of “Indo-Pacific” term in a variety of ways, there is a risk of providing a solution to the various security issues in Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Moreover, Menon rejected competition for naval dominance between China and India.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India avoided using not only term “Indo – Pacific” but also this as a security-related strategy. Until 2017, Narendra Modi has usually used this term. In a President Donald Trump- Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Washington (June 2017), the two sides made a joint statement about a United States-India partnership in the Indo-Pacific context. “As responsible stewards in the Indo-Pacific region, President Trump and Prime Minister Modi agreed that a close partnership between the United States and India is central to peace and stability in the region”.⁷ However, in India’s view, on the one side, “Indo-Pacific” is an idea for development in India-United States relation as well as an opportunity for India’s global influence. On the other side, India has concerned United States’ behaviors to persuade India participate an alliance in order to controlling the expansion of Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region. India has not wanted to have any tension with China in this region during India’s rising.

Overall, India supports “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”. This is clearly defined in a meeting between Indian Prime Minister Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Abe meeting in Gujarat (September-2017). “The two Prime Ministers affirmed strong commitment to their values-based partnership in achieving a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international law are respected, and differences are resolved through dialogue, and where all countries, large or small, enjoy freedom of navigation and overflight, sustainable development, and a free, fair, and open trade and investment system. The two Prime Ministers underlined that India and Japan could play a central role in safeguarding and strengthening such a rules-based order. To this end, they pledged to reinforce their efforts to align Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy with India’s Act East Policy, including through enhancing maritime security cooperation, improving connectivity in the wider Indo-Pacific region, strengthening cooperation with ASEAN, and promoting discussions between strategists and experts of the two countries.”⁸ In India’s awareness, ASEAN plays an important role in maintaining regional stability and “Indo – Pacific” region. Prime Minister Modi has affirmed ASEAN’s solidarity is a key factor in maintain a stable future in Indo-Pacific region. “The organization [ASEAN] has laid the foundation for the Indo-Pacific region through two important initiatives including the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Agreement (RCEP)”

V. CONCLUSION

During a visit to Asia at the end of 2017, US President Donald Trump used the term “Indo- Pacific” as a way for the world to know the first view of the new geopolitical strategy of the United States. Since then, the term has been “politicized”, thereby altering the awareness map that has dominated since the end of the Cold War. The term “Indo – Pacific” comes from the economic and security developments in the region covering the entire all oceans in Asia, extending from the East African coast to East Asia, mainly from the rise of China and India in the early 21st century. India Ocean and Pacific Ocean are considered two representatives of the two great oceans of the world. However, many argue that the formation of the term “Indo-Pacific” is primarily a way to gather forces to against an ambition China. Besides, India is considered as one of the important actors in Indo-Pacific region. India wants to be a party to regulate the game in the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” context. Basically, India still focuses on building a strong force, focusing on economic and military development, in which naval forces as a strategic force in protecting India’s interests.

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