

# The Nation

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## **The Indo-Pacific Project**

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U.S. President Donald Trump strongly characterized the “Indo-Pacific” in his recent tour of five Asia-Pacific countries that was concluded on 14 November. For the United States, “Indo-Pacific” is its new engagement in the “post-pivot era. After the United States, Japan is most active player for “Indo-Pacific” project. It is developing special ties with India in the framework of strategic relationship. The “Indo-Pacific”, however, lacks an economic component like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) but entails a significant strategic component. The “Indo-Pacific” looks synonymous with the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity”, a value-oriented diplomacy as claimed by Taro Aso, Japan’s Foreign Minister, in 2007. The move was against non-democratic values and norms and to promote freedom of human rights in across Asia.

The idea was dropped, fearing the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” war-tone philosophy of Japan during World War II but now it has regained weight under the

“Indo-Pacific”. The “Indo-Pacific might move toward a political alliance between the United States, Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, Singapore, and some other countries. Some countries might be disinclined toward “China bashing” in the Asia-Pacific, fearing down-grading of strong trading relations with China and commitments in the BRI.

The earlier coined term “Af-Pak” became irrelevant in 2009. The Obama administration raised the “Indo-Pacific” concept, which emphasised India as the “pillar” of its policy. The purpose is not the full amalgamation of the Indian Ocean into the Pacific Ocean but just the inclusion of India into the Pacific Ocean, giving a larger geographical access to India to increase its weight especially in the South China Sea bringing it at par with China, Australia, Japan, and the United States as well as the rest of the Pacific countries but these countries are physically there.

Americans, Japanese, Australians, and Indians policy-makers are expressing opinion on “Indo-Pacific”. Chinese, however, are disinclined toward “Indo-Pacific”. This also means that Americans, Japanese, Australians, and Indians share concerns about the rise of China. They might be upset of Chinese handling of disputes in the South China Sea. The Philippines example is there. They may push Vietnam, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei not to follow the China-Philippines suit and further dispute with China. The “Indo-Pacific” could play such a role.

As a result, India’s oceanic weight will increase by making it a Two-Ocean power as China has been rising as a Two-Ocean power in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. This would bring a fresh round of conflict between the rise of China and Indian designs to dominate. Instead of creating new geographical connotation or reality, Indo-Pacific looks as political emergence in the changing geo-strategic considerations.

In Chronicles (22 November), Srdja Trifkovic made an outstanding observation: “In Seoul he [Trump] said that “our alliance is more important than ever to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and across the Indo-Pacific region.” When he arrived in Hanoi he said he was honoured to be in the “heart of the Indo-Pacific.” At the Forum in Da Nang he said he’d had “the honour of sharing our vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.” At the end of the tour, in Manila, he said, “we have been friends, partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific for a long, long time.” Shortly before Trump embarked on his tour, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson used the term “Indo-Pacific” no fewer than 15 times when he spoke about the US-India relationship on October 18. Describing the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a “single strategic arena,” he described India and the United States as “bookends” within that region.”

Many thought that Trump was visiting the “Asia-Pacific” but actually he visited “Indo-Pacific”, becoming the first U.S. President to have visited such a newly carved geographical area.

The “Indo-Pacific” is giving birth to a new geo-political geography from the United States to India by overshadowing China. Trade cooperation has already been excluded by Trump, which was there in the form of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). The growing challenges in the Asia-Pacific and particularly security and terrorism would gain more strength if the U.S. focus turns around the Indo-Pacific. One has to see after the “Asia Pivot”, how the new concept of “Indo-Pacific” would become popular and gets its place. The success is, however, unlikely too.

By exclusively focusing on the “Indo-Pacific” or “new China containment” by bringing India in the limelight of dominance in worsening security and terrorism situation across all Asia-Pacific countries, especially from Japan to Australia and India, the area might get out of control under the on-going counter-terrorism efforts. State and non-State terrorist actors across the wider Asia-Pacific region could get more propitious space to handle their anti-State agenda. The Trump Administration and its close allies like Japan and Australia as well as India need to reassess the “Indo-Pacific” and to put maximum efforts in combating terrorism and ensure security and peace across the Asia-Pacific rather than building an exclusive club of the “Indo-Pacific” countries, which would sharply divide common efforts against terrorism.

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