India and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)

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The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) has developed some institutional and geopolitical legs since the US redesignated its Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command and as the original Quad has been reinvigorated. None of the putative members of FOIP or the Quad has been terribly explicit strategically on what FOIP really means. India, as much as any of the four Quad members, has been evasive. Prime Minister Modi's speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018 was an opportunity to learn more about the Indian view. The speech turned out to be bland and lukewarm in its endorsement of FOIP.

India's Strategic Interest in FOIP

First, India needs to be clearer on why the Indo-Pacific idea is important. Is it for symbolic reasons – the Indo in Indo-Pacific signifying both the Indian Ocean as well as India? Is it a legitimator of India's role in the Pacific by hyphenating the two words/oceans? Is it a measure of India's strategic-military relationship with the US, which apart from China, is really the only player in both oceans? Is it a signal that India is going to divide or share security responsibilities in the area from the Malacca Strait/Sunda Strait to the Arabian Sea and from Sri Lanka to South Africa? Is it intended to show the Chinese that their presence in the Indian Ocean will be contested by a coalition of "free" states who make up FOIP? Is it a sign to the Chinese that India is a strategic competitor on the oceans and that it has friends – is it, in other words, intended to increase New Delhi's bargaining room with Beijing? Is it the precursor to a military coalition or a more diplomatic-economic coalition in the face of the

Chinese Belt and Route Initiative? Is it soft balancing against China, or is it hard balancing eventually for the day when China is the biggest economy in the world and could be rampant diplomatically as well? As things stand, there is no great clarity in India's strategic reasoning, though we can fairly sure that China is the most important factor.

Second, New Delhi needs to weigh up carefully who is serious about the FOIP. Are the Australians, Japanese, and US really invested? Or is it a momentary coming together and as evanescent as the original Quad of 2004? In Indian eyes, Australia is regarded as a weak link. New Delhi points the finger at Canberra on pulling the plug on the original Quad in 2004 and is worried that it will do it again given its tortured position between China and the US. Japan was the originator of the idea going back to Foreign Minister Taro Aso and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speeches in 2006 and 2006, respectively. While Japan has stood behind the concept, it has more recently softened its approach to China after Beijing reached out to it. In the case of the US, it is striking that despite the renaming of the US Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command, President Donald Trump has scarcely mentioned the Indo-Pacific idea, leaving it to Secretary of State Pompeo and Secretary of Defence Mattis to carry the flag.

Given the uncertainties surrounding the degree of support for FOIP, how much is India likely to invest in FOIP? Modi's speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018 seems to indicate that India does not want to invest a great deal. In essence, Modi said a free and open Indo-Pacific is open to everyone – by implication including China – and is not a means of containing anyone (read China). Indian ambivalence may appear puzzling. Modi's China strategy going back to 2014 was to build a coalition of militarily powerful states in East Asia as a balance against China – not so much as an alliance but rather as a demonstration to Beijing that New

Delhi had strategic friends. This coalition consisted of Australia, Japan, the US, and Vietnam. Over the past decade, India has increasingly built a defence relationship with the US and in particularly the US navy, exercising with it in the Bay of Bengal in the Malabar Exercise, and hoping to work more closely with it in the Indian Ocan. In addition, it has regularly shown the flag in the South China Sea (though it has refused to do joint patrols with the US). In short, it has tried to project an "Indo-Pacific" image.

India's ambivalence over the past few months are probably related to several developments. The first is the thaw with China since the Modi-Xi summit in Wuhan in May 2018. The summit in turn is related to the Doklam confrontation. India seemingly faced down China at the time, but in the wake of the crisis Chinese forces have been bolstered in the area and road and other infrastructural construction continues. The military situation there and elsewhere along the border is a challenge for India. New Delhi has understood that it cannot afford to have relations with China deteriorate beyond a point. It is important to note that at the time of Doklam scarcely any country came out in support of India, including the US. A second concerns is that India is due for general elections in March-May 2019. Despite his personal popularity, Modi has a fight on his hands domestically. Given this, New Delhi cannot afford to rock the boat with Beijing. Most importantly, though, are Modi's difficulties with Trump and the US. While Trump publicly advertises his friendship and regard for Modi, in fact the US president has not shied away from showing his disdain (as is the case with many US allies). The meeting between the two leaders at the East Asia Summit in Manila was not a happy one for India and led to a reassessment of ties given Trump's unpredictability and transactionalism. Recent remarks by Trump mocking India's role in Afghanistan have only reinforced the view that the US relationship is going to be a rocky one. Trump's calling India out tariffs and India's relations with Iran and Russia and US unhelpfulness on H1B visas

have further complicated relations. While military ties have deepened with the logistics agreement and favoured status for arms purchases, and while various other forms of cooperation are proceeding (including naval and intelligence ties), even here there are questions on the Indian side, especially over the slow transfer of key technologies.

Third, India needs to get a clearer sense of where the cost-benefit assessment on FOIP comes out. Clearly, China will continue to oppose anything serious and material in FOIP. Here it depends on what the word "oppose" means. Will Beijing target the weakest links in the chain (Australia? India?)? Will FOIP cause China to use charm or coercion? If coercion in various forms, will this not become a self-fulfilling prophecy – a containment structure that turns the rival, China, into an even more determined and formidable foe? The opposition to FOIP is not just Chinese. ASEAN too looks on with fairly jaundiced eyes including Singapore, on the argument that FOIP represents three difficulties: one, it dilutes ASEAN centrality; two, it threatens to polarize the region even more (and given the economic relationship with China, this is problematic); and three, it threatens to either turn the focus away from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean or to complicate the Pacific by adding in the rivalries of the Indian Ocean area. FOIP therefore may end up alienating potential allies and neutrals in Southeast Asia, and this may only open the region to greater Chinese influence. One view in New Delhi is that bilateral India-US cooperation, especially naval cooperation, is the real prize in FOIP, and to the extent FOIP facilitates this, the concept is useful. The advantages of FOIP will then exceed the potential costs. If bilateral naval cooperation does not depend on FOIP, then FOIP will be largely dispensable.

India's Role in the Indo-Pacific and FOIP?

If FOIP does develop legs, and New Delhi works through its strategic calculus, what role could India have in the grouping? Much will depend on the seriousness of FOIP, but India potentially has an economic, political, diplomatic, and military role even if this will be rather modest given its capabilities.

On its economic role, by 2030, it should have the third largest GDP in the world, at about $ 6-7 trillion. In the meantime, China's economy will be $26 trillion. The gap between the two economies today is $12 trillion. By 2030, in absolute terms, it will be $19 trillion. The gap is therefore growing not reducing.

Politically, India will try to stand for pluralism, rule of law, and democracy in domestic politics as against more authoritarian, command politics. However, it is quite likely that India's own governance will slide increasingly into right-wing populist politics. The present government has already taken India a long way down this road.

Diplomatically, India will back regionalism/multilateralism, rule of international law (on the high seas, for instance), and Westphalian norms of hard sovereignty and non-interference. At the same time, it will continue to reserve the right to decide things in its own backyard with South Asian neighbours.

Finally, India will tout its naval role in the Indo-Pacific as a constabulary role for small states and against terrorists and pirates, as a relief provider when disasters happen, and as a balancer against China in particular. In fact, the development plans and competence of its navy are open to question. The navy is still the third arm of the Indian armed forces and not terribly well funded. Its indigenous production is growing but very slowly (compared to China). It

has about 137 ships of all kinds. China has 300. By 2030, India may have 200, but by then China will have over 400. So, again, as with the economy, the gap will have grown not shrunk. This may not matter if India is part of a coalition, but that is by no means certain. Plus, other countries will read Indian will and intentions from its capabilities, and the laboured growth to 200 ships will likely not instil great confidence. Indian naval competence is also open to question. The submarine fleet has had a string of accidents over the past 5 years. These are still not accounted for, at least publicly. The new nuclear submarine, *Arihant,* the key leg of its triad, has not been tested much and given that the Russians have helped develop it, it is questionable how good it will be – it has already had problems. The Indian aircraft carrier programme is in line to get US help but is developing slowly and will be easily outpaced by China (which has come to the carrier party 60 years after India).

Put differently, India has three possible balancing roles – soft power projection (the achievements of its economy and political system), soft balancing (its regional and multilateral diplomacy), and hard balancing in the Indian Ocean (its naval capabilities).

Its soft power is declining thanks to its slide into right-wing authoritarianism and its fairly calamitous governance. Its economic growth rates help in terms of soft power, but Indian growth rates are nothing like the spectacular years of China, and the invidious comparison is constantly in people's minds. Also, India's poor record on ease of doing business, trade and investment openness, and manufacturing capacity do not impress. Nor are there any Indian brands or innovations that roll off the tongue.

India's soft balancing – its ability to embarrass, slow down, or otherwise obstruct Chinese designs short of outright military and diplomatic confrontation – will remain as long as it

plays a smart role in the alphabet soup of institutions led by ASEAN – EAS, ADMM+, and so on. If it forgoes RCEP, it will lose an arena in which to soft balance. In the Indian Ocean area, it could and should try to further develop the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), BIMSTEC/Bay of Bengal Community, and various connectivity projects in South and Southeast Asia, particularly in league with the Japan which, given its own vulnerabilities, has both the money and incentive to make a difference. These are all arenas where India can soft balance. Unfortunately, India is still diplomatically preoccupied with traditional interlocutors including Pakistan, China, the Western countries, and international organizations such as the UN rather than arenas and institutions closer to home. FOIP is a potential soft balance disrupter to the BRI narrative, China's historical hegemonic and "legitimate" role in the Asia-Pacific, and its growing role in the Indian Ocean (by virtue of its trade through the Ocean). But India has been slow to exploit its soft balancing capabilities which have to be deployed with sophistication so that New Delhi is not seen as blunt opposition to Beijing.

Finally, India could hard balance in the Indo-Pacific, but its naval power is probably not growing fast enough relative to China to make a big difference in the Pacific or even the Indian Ocean which is a vast area. Close to Indian shores, India has great advantages, but this is not where interdiction, if it ever is needed, will occur. Without a close naval relationship with the US, the Indian navy will have difficulty coping with the Chinese on the open seas.

In short, in the medium term, India's best option seems to be soft balancing, which is more or less the course that New Delhi seems to have settled on. The recent post Wuhan détente with China may reflect a decision in India that given the huge and growing power gap with its northern neighbour and the unreliability and unpredictability of Trump means that this is not a time to challenge China overly. Better to soft balance and to play the Deng Xiaoping game

of keeping a low profile and not give offence to bigger players while gradually building one's strength.

Conclusion

FOIP is at an infant stage and may not develop much beyond a childhood. India, like the other putative partners, has not spent much time in thinking it through – its uses, who is invested in it, and whether it does more strategic harm than good. Its main potential role in FOIP is as part of a larger soft balancing strategy against China. At the moment, New Delhi is downplaying the grouping and concept which given the lack of clarity among key players and its own economic, political, diplomatic, and military capabilities is not surprising. FOIP may not be much more than a cover for greater naval cooperation with the US in particular, and if so, India will continue to be ambivalent about its participation.